

Saakashvili: How the West Sold Out Georgia

Author: [Vazha Tavberidze](#)

The international community blamed for a succession of events that led to the 2008 conflict.

Ex-Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili has accused his former allies in the West of “an appeasement policy towards Russia” in a wide-ranging and at times explosive interview on the anniversary of the 2008 war.

The controversial politician made clear that he blamed a succession of international leaders for the events that led to the five-day August war and the Russian invasion of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Saakashvili, who is wanted in his own country on multiple criminal charges he contends are politically motivated, argued that these international failures served as the test case for Russia’s further aggressions in Ukraine and Syria.

ALSO SEE:

Exclusive Interview: "I Should Have Screamed More" - Saakashvili on 2008 War

Saakashvili opens up over the disappointments, betrayals and deals made in the run-up to the 2008 war.

Once considered a darling of the West - with Georgia hailed as a regional beacon of democracy - Saakashvili now blames his erstwhile partners for what “went wrong in Georgia and especially in 2008... it was an appeasement policy towards Russia, turning a blind eye to whatever they did”.

“I miscalculated Putin because we thought Russians would never go for Tbilisi,” he said, noting that all Georgia’s Western partners had assured him that this option was not on the cards.

He described Condoleezza Rice, then US secretary of state, as a prime example of the West’s poor understanding of Moscow’s intentions.

“Everyone said the Russians would never invade us; Condi Rice always said that,” he continued.

As for-then President George Bush, “in Tbilisi in 2005, he said, ‘Misha, how does it feel now, that you can now tell Putin, I’m next to this big guy, come and get me?’”

Saakashvili singled out current German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier as a rare leader who had an accurate assessment of Russia’s plans. In 2008, Georgian politicians, he recalled, had asked Steinmeier - at that time Germany’s foreign minister - to help introduce international peacekeepers into the areas of conflict.

“Steinmeier told us there would be an invasion... [he] tells us, ‘Guys, what peacekeepers are you talking about? You’ll soon have a large-scale war here.’”

Nonetheless, Saakashvili also blamed Steinmeier and other German leaders for failing to deliver a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia at the Bucharest summit in April 2008. This gave the Russians the opportunity to act aggressively, he contended.

“The Germans gave Russians some leeway to do what they did,” he said, arguing that Berlin had favoured Moscow due to their reliance on Russian energy.

The so-called Tagliavini Commission, an EU-funded international fact-finding mission convened a month after the war ended, was “a Steinmeier game, backed by Merkel, to dilute Russia's blame”.

Saakashvili was equally excoriating about the French role in the war, despite having often described former president Nicolas Sarkozy as his close friend over the past decade.

Sarkozy negotiated and mediated the ceasefire that ended the war, but Saakashvili claimed that he was influenced in the terms he laid out by the prospect of selling Russia Mistral-class amphibious assault ships.

Directly after the war, Russia began negotiations with France on the purchase of the Mistral system to deploy in the Black Sea, causing further alarm among regional NATO members particularly Georgia.

"Sarkozy behaved like a clown... He sold the ceasefire plan for Mistrals," Saakashvili claimed.

And when, following the Bucharest summit, Putin and Bush met in Sochi on April 6, Saakashvili said that the US president had failed to respond to his Russian counterpart's insistence that offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia was a combative move.

Putin "started screaming that there'd be war in Georgia... Bush's silence gave the Russians some kind of a semi-green light," Saakashvili said, while reserving particular ire for the former defence secretary Robert Gates, who he accused of "hating us".

Following the 2008 war, the US - and Israel - ceased sales of military equipment to Georgia, which some Georgians claimed amounted to a de facto embargo.

"Robert Gates was really disgustingly cynical and was against our integration to NATO, he sabotaged our military training, was one of the initiators of the military embargo," Saakashvili said.

Although the current Georgian government blames Saakashvili for instigating open conflict in 2008, he categorically denied that as president he allowed himself to be goaded by Russia into war.

Saakashvili described the total lack of preparedness for war in the summer of August 2008, with nothing beyond "conservative defensive strategy plans prepared for some kind of local conflict".

He continued, "We were under threat of full annihilation. There was this moment when Condi Rice reached Lavrov on the third day of the war. She asked him what's your goal in Georgia, the answer was - full annihilation."

Asked about the mistakes he himself made in the 2008 war, Saakashvili said only that "I should have not put too much trust in the West, perhaps".

Despite the controversies surrounding him, Saakashvili remains Georgia's most influential opposition leader and has made clear that he intends to return to political life there.

Having left Georgia in 2012 and taken Ukrainian citizenship in 2015, he was appointed as governor of the Odessa region. However, two years later then-president Petro Poroshenko stripped him of citizenship and he was subsequently deported.

Current president Volodymyr Zelensky restored his Ukrainian citizenship, and Saakashvili returned to Ukraine in May this year.

Vazha Tavberidze is an IWPR contributor in Georgia.

Location: Georgia

Topic: Elections

Focus: From the Borderland to the Steppes

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/saakashvili-how-west-sold-out-georgia>