

# [***Putin's 'Revenge': Georgia's Jailed Ex-President Urges West to Act***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C2G-KTH1-DY68-14YM-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 1067 words

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**Highlight:** Mikheil Saakashvili told Newsweek that Moscow "has everything to gain" from Georgia passing its controversial "foreign agent" law.

**Body**

Mikheil Saakashvili—once the revolutionary great hope of Georgia's pro-Western groundswell—cannot be a part of the historic showdown paralyzing a nation long caught between Europe and Russia.

The former president—jailed since 2021 on charges he says are politically motivated—told *Newsweek* in an exclusive interview that he must follow [*the latest developments*](https://www.newsweek.com/putin-faction-war-georgia-protests-russia-1901471?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) from afar, having been "isolated to the maximum" from the outside world.

Saakashvili's fellow pro-Western Georgians are engaged in a renewed struggle they see as existential. The Georgian Dream government—said to be controlled by secretive oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili—is, for the second time in two years, attempting to pass a foreign agent registration law that critics say will muzzle democratic opposition and civil society.

Protesters have dubbed it the "Russian Law," due to its similarity with the legislation that since 2012 has allowed President [*Vladimir Putin*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) to further choke domestic dissent in Russia.

Georgian Dream says the measure is needed to fight malign foreign interference. Protesters say the proposal will kill Georgia's [*European Union*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/european-union?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and [*NATO*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nato?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) ambitions and open the door to new levels of Kremlin influence.

"The Kremlin has everything to gain from this law," Saakashvili said. "The law is leading to the isolation of Georgia, and it means it stays at the mercy of Russia."

*Newsweek* has contacted the Kremlin by email to request comment.

**Falling Afoul of Moscow**

Saakashvili, 56, served as president from 2004 until 2013. He led Georgians through the Rose Revolution in 2003, hoping to sweep away the Soviet political vestiges that still gripped the nation.

In 2008, Saakashvili's reformist government slipped into a direct war with Russia, by which Moscow cemented its occupation of some 20 percent of the nation via local separatist proxies. Then, Putin reportedly told French President Nicolas Sarkozy that he would hang Saakashvili "by the b\*\*\*\*."

Living in exile since 2013, Saakashvili was jailed in 2021 following a dramatic effort to return to Georgian ***politics***. He is now serving a six-year prison term—which he says is politically motivated and ultimately orchestrated by Putin—on charges of abuse of power and organizing an assault on an opposition lawmaker.

Saakashvili has suffered severe ill health and weight loss while in prison and told Politico in 2023 that he almost died after being poisoned by Russian agents posing as Georgian security officers.

Saakashvili said that his situation has worsened since the outbreak of anti-government protests in April.

"The authorities doubled down on propaganda attacks on me and also are [threatening] to transfer me back to the solitary confinement prison, where I was poisoned more than two years ago and generally was grossly mistreated," he said.

In the decade or so in which Saakashvili went from president to prisoner, Georgian Dream has enjoyed growing political power.

Rhetorically committed to Tbilisi's long-held and widely popular [*EU*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/eu?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) membership ambitions, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022, has seen Ivanishvili's party drift closer to the Kremlin, even as hundreds of thousands of [*Russians crossed the mountainous border*](https://www.newsweek.com/georgia-batumi-party-town-putin-henchmen-kadyrov-chechens-black-sea-sanctons-1805316?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) to escape Putin's mobilization orders.

Its first attempt to pass the foreign agents bill was defeated by mass protests in 2023. The current push, Saakashvili said, bears Moscow's fingerprints.

"Russia wants to take revenge for the Rose Revolution, which was the first among 'colored revolutions' and also preceded the Arab Spring," he said. "By provoking mass protest and then cracking down on it, they want to show that peaceful democratic upheavals are no longer possible in Russia's neighborhood.

"By isolating Georgia and neutralizing its democracy, Russia can block the alternative energy corridor from Central Asia and Azerbaijan to Europe. It would also stop [*Armenia's drift away*](https://www.newsweek.com/armenia-russia-csto-putin-csto-freeze-1875114?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) from Russia and towards the West."

Georgia's Western partners, the former president added, must wake up.

"The West has ignored warnings signs for too long," he said. "It was perceived by Ivanishvili and Moscow as a sign of weakness. Immediate and targeted sanctions on Ivanishvili and his associates are urgently required.

"We have the example of Moldova, where the U.S. sanctioning of the local oligarch [Vladimir] Plahotniuc have totally reshaped Moldova's political landscape and brought pro-European forces to power."

**Pressure on Tbilisi**

Last year's victory for protesters should gird those now taking to the streets of Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi and other cities across Georgia, Saakashvili said.

"No one had expected that a billionaire that controls over a third of Georgia's gross national product and also treats the national budget as his personal purse, and who is openly backed by Russia, could be so easily defeated," he said of Ivanishvili.

"Especially considering that he had invested so heavily in riot police and also some thuggish groups, ready to crackdown on any dissent. But one shall consider that Ivanishvili openly went against the generation formed after the Rose Revolution, that grew up in the conditions of freedom, and generally against the genetic code of Georgians, that have always strived to join the West."

Besides fearsome people power, there is little to stop the foreign agent bill's adoption. The Georgian Dream-led parliament this week approved the legislation and is soon expected to send it to President Salome Zourabichvili's desk. She has vowed to veto it, but that will only buy the opposition two weeks before parliament can override the block.

October's parliamentary elections are emerging as a milestone in the country's post-Soviet history.

"We must ensure that real elections are held in [the] first place," Saakashvili said. "That's why the Western sanctions now would send a very powerful signal of support to Georgia's civil society and further energize the protests.

"The oligarch's power will disappear in the elections if we create proper pre-conditions for avoiding mass falsifications. As a matter of fact, at least three previous elections had been stolen, with the West looking in the other direction and the government cracking down on the protests.

"This time, the scope of protest is much larger and hopefully the Western reaction will be more supportive for Georgian democracy. So far, things are moving in the right direction, and the pressure should further increase."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2394999/georgians-protest-against-foreign-agent-bill-2024.jpg)

**Graphic**

Georgians protest against foreign agent bill 2024

Nicolo Vincenzo Malvestuto/Getty Images

Demonstrators hold Georgian flags during a protest against the “foreign agents” bill after the Georgian parliament voted through the law on May 15, 2024 in Tbilisi, Georgia. Opponents see the legislation as a Kremlin-sponsored power grab.

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