

## **Saakashvili warns of Odesa region's importance to Ukraine**

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**Saakashvili: "Odesa's Black Sea port] is a major center also for all kind of smuggling, trafficking; our estimate is that annually something between 500 million and one billion euros is being diverted from the state budget, that's to say stolen by corrupt officials, by customs officers, by law enforcement, and of course it is also related to crime."**

From euronews: Mikheil Saakashvili was appointed governor of Ukraine's Odesa\* region in February, to fight corruption. The former Georgian president might even be considered for higher office. We talked to him in the major Black Sea port city. **Sergio Cantone, euronews:**

**"Many people in Ukraine are asking why did Saakashvili become the governor of Odesa when there are so many things to do against corruption in Kyiv?"**

Mikheil Saakashvili, Governor of Ukraine's Odesa region: "Odesa is strategically amazingly important, both for Ukraine, but unfortunately also for the country that invaded Ukraine: Russia. And the problem here is that Putin's vision of his project, 'Novorossiya', includes Odesa as his linchpin. So, first of all we need to safeguard and make sure that Odesa stands, that it doesn't fall. Because if this region falls, then I think Ukraine will be in major trouble and the whole region might go, not only Ukraine but all the Black Sea, Caucasus and the others.

That's why we need to safeguard Odesa. And second: the way to safeguard is also to

develop it. And so we need to do things here." **euronews: "There are two problems here. One is that there are a lot of pro-Russian people in this region, a huge number, and secondly a huge problem with corruption and with crime related to the sea port. What are your projects in order to crack down on these huge problems that sometimes, maybe, are also connected?"**

Saakashvili: "I don't think that Odesa is by itself pro-Russian. I think what is true here is that they speak Russian, they have Russian cultural heritage. This is true, and this is not a weakness, this is a great strength. Odesa is a major international brand. It's also a very important thing both for the Ukrainian and Russian cultures, their histories, and I think that's something we should capitalize on. "Now, with regard to corruption, yes it's a major issue. This very sea port, this customs [post] that is here, which makes one of the biggest ports on the Black Sea and basically the biggest of Ukraine. It is a major center also for all kind of smuggling, trafficking; our estimate is that annually something between 500 million and one billion euros is being diverted from the state budget, that's to say stolen by corrupt officials, by customs officers, by law enforcement, and of course it is also related to crime."

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