

Saakashvili escapes capture after being accused of working with Russia **Ukraine**

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Analyst: "The U.S. State Department condemning the administration in strong and unequivocal terms on Dec. 4 could turn out to be a game-changer. We could be witnessing the beginning of the end of the Poroshenko administration as the Ukrainian public is not going to re-elect a president who is openly rejected by the Western establishment.

KYIV, Dec 6, 2017 - Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of the Rada Maidan protest in front of Ukraine's parliament, escaped arrest by law enforcement on Dec. 5 with the help of his supporters, who pulled him out of a car transporting him. Concorde Capital informed clients in an online advisory today. Saakashvili took shelter at Rada Maidan tent city, where he continued to speak on its stage and call for the removal of the Poroshenko administration. This morning, Ukrainian special forces stormed the tent city in order to arrest Saakashvili, who was declared wanted and under search by law enforcement the same morning. Several of his supporters were bloodied. However, Saakashvili reportedly avoided capture again by taking shelter in a nearby hotel. He then returned to the tent city stage this morning and gave another speech denying the government's accusations against him, particularly that he has ties to the Yanukovich entourage and Russian security service (FSB). At a Dec. 5 press conference, Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko accused Saakashvili of taking financing for his protest movement from Serhiy Kurchenko, who is widely recognized as the frontman for the business clan of former President Viktor Yanukovich. The Yanukovich entourage is currently scattered around the world, many of which are in Russia. In his accusations, Lutsenko said Kurchenko and his associates enjoy direct ties to the FSB, implying that Saakashvili is also acting on the FSB's orders. Lutsenko gave Saakashvili 24 hours to surrender to law enforcement in order to appear for questioning, receive his summons and appear in court. He said the government has no plans to deport him at the moment. Lutsenko demonstrated for reporters' audio recordings in which a voice alleged to be Saakashvili agrees to have his representatives meet with those allied with Kurchenko, the other alleged voice in the recording. "Good, then our person awaits contact with your person and we await him in the hotel," said the voice alleged to be Kurchenko in the recording, which didn't indicate any illegal activity directly. Lutsenko also promised to produce a 30-minute film exposing Saakashvili's ties to Russian-aligned interests. In response to the audio recordings, Saakashvili told his supporters from the Rada Maidan stage that they are fabricated. He said he didn't know who Kurchenko is until he was accused of taking money from him, estimated by Lutsenko at half a million dollars. Concorde analyst Zenon Zawada added: "With these dramatic events, Ukraine has entered into a risky political crisis that will extend until the next elections, which are scheduled for 2019 or but may occur sooner, if it's determined that the Poroshenko administration has lost control and early elections are needed to restore stability. The Poroshenko administration already lacks legitimacy among the Ukrainian public as its approval rating has consistently hovered around 10% for the last two years. "If we are to believe Lutsenko's claims that Saakashvili is truly working with the Russians and their allies, then we would have to believe that Saakashvili has abandoned all his ties to Western leaders and institutions, as well as his access to Western resources. We would have to believe that he has also abandoned

any ideological commitment to Western ideals of rule of law and liberal democratic institutions. And we would have to believe that Saakashvili is a strict opportunist looking to make a quick buck off the latest protest movement in the post-Soviet sphere, regardless of where the money comes from. "Naturally, we don't believe any of this and we believe Saakashvili maintains close ties to U.S. authorities. We believe the Prosecutor General's Office invented the accusations (as well as the audio recordings, which are easy to fabricate with modern technology) in order to discredit not only Saakashvili, but the entire Rada Maidan protest movement. The Poroshenko administration understands that the way to defeat protest movements is not by physically destroying them (as the Yanukovich administration had attempted), but by destroying their credibility among the Ukrainian public. "However, the Poroshenko administration itself lacks credibility with the public and we don't expect the Russian-collaboration accusations against Saakashvili will achieve the desired goal of delegitimizing the Rada Maidan. Instead, we believe it's a tactic that is already beginning to backfire against Lutsenko and Poroshenko themselves. The Kurchenko/Russia narrative and audio recordings are an act of desperation as the Poroshenko administration tries to exhaust, intimidate and delegitimize the Rada Maidan protest instead of using violence to disperse it (which would be even less effective). "The U.S. State Department condemning the administration in strong and unequivocal terms on Dec. 4 could turn out to be a game-changer. We could be witnessing the beginning of the end of the Poroshenko administration as the Ukrainian public is not going to re-elect a president who is openly rejected by the Western establishment. Instead, they will be looking for a candidate who has strong ties with Western governments and institutions. "So among the key questions at this point is whether the Poroshenko administration is able to maintain power until 2019, or if early elections are needed. And another question is in what way will the Russian government take advantage of this chaotic situation in Ukraine's capital, particularly with its campaign of military aggression in Donbas."

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