

Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili (MS). Interviewer: Milosz Wiatrowski (MW).

MW: I would to start the interview with you introducing yourself very shortly just for the sake of the record.

MS: My name is Mikheil Saakashvili I am the head of the Odesa region [inaudible].

MW: Thank you. I would like to start the interview by asking you about how it was in Kyiv at the first time you lived there, at the turn of the 1980s and 90s.

MW: I came to Kyiv in 1985. And there are several things that I noticed immediately. First of all it was at that moment a totally Russian-speaking city. You could only hear Ukrainian in the families of *nomenclatura* members because some of my classmates were children of the party leadership and they at home spoke Ukrainian. Otherwise Ukrainian was not spoken in the university or at school or in the street with rare exceptions. But the main thing that struck me immediately was that it was still a very different nation than Russia. It was at that time when most Georgians didn't know that Ukrainians and Russians were different. One of the main things that made them so different, the Ukrainians, is that they were very open to other ethnicities. Very different than Moscow. They immediately embraced you and made you feel like you were one of them and it was very easy to integrate into civic circles or public life. That was my feeling that it was a very distinct and strong nation. The other thing I noticed, because I was enlisted in the Soviet army during my first year at university, and of course I was a border guard, was how different were the Soviet officers of Ukrainian origin and the Soviet officers of Russian origin. Of course, I don't want to stereotype everybody, but Ukrainians were much more open, much more supportive and much more human in many ways. The officers with a Russian background had a distinct, imperial old style of looking down on everybody. And so I made a lot of friends with Ukrainian officers, they treated us like equals and they also protected us from the Russian officers, that was very obvious. So that was the other thing we did that I remember. When Ukrainians started to open up, I immediately joined the Rukh movement, which was the first

national movement that was legal. And that is in many ways, I was following the Georgian events, but in many ways [speaks with restaurant staff]

MW: You said that you were also involved with Ukrainian movements at that time of the late-Soviet period.

MS: Yes, I was involved Georgian national movement, at that time just a rank and file member; but I was also involved in the Ukrainian movement. I started to organize some students in Kyiv. Another thing I had in Ukraine, when I was a first year student I was briefly detained by KGB for some kind of ...I was just speaking my mind and read foreign magazine and papers, which was forbidden. Then one of my classmates who was a KGB agent denounced me but I also remember that all the other Ukrainians protected me, they stood by my side and refused to confirm the information of the agent. Then one of them, for instance there was a guy who was an Afghan Soviet war hero, he beat up an investigator who tried to put pressure on him. At that was another thing that I very much remember, that in a society there was this solidarity thing against the Soviets which was very clear. In many ways that saved me because it was when perestroika already started, it was 1986, but the regime was still quite rude and by having the other Ukrainian students stand by my side saved me from the worst. That I was blacklisted, expelled from Komsomol but that is where it ended. They didn't even suspend me from the university, so I was lucky.

MW: Which year did you graduate and which year did you leave Kyiv?

MS: I graduated in 1992. So spent altogether seven years [in Ukraine], including in the army.

MW: That means you were in Kyiv during the Revolution on Granite?

MS: I was Kyiv during the Orange Revolution...

MW: I mean the Granite Revolution, in 1991...

MS: Yes, I was there, of course I was there. And I was very much, as I said I was cooperating with the nationalities council at the national Rukh of Ukraine; I helped organize the Georgian community and organized Georgian events in support of the Ukrainian pro-independence movement. But frankly for me, the events that brought independence to Ukraine came as a surprise. Because the society was in no way prepared for it. I already became aware of the Ukrainian national movement, but it was very much limited to the western part of Ukraine. In Kyiv it wasn't visible that it would come so fast, but it came quite fast. Although this is true that in our student circles the Soviet Union was hated, there was a lot cynicism towards the Soviet Union and communism, but students...when I was there, during my first year, they expelled the entire graduate philosophy faculty because they wrote a letter demanding changes. Then the next year, some students created a mock organization called Sunrays of Chuchke – to make fun of the Soviet Union, and it was very popular at the university. So in many ways things were there, but I didn't think independence would arrive so fast. I thought Georgians and the Balts would get it much faster. Of course they moved faster, but in the end Ukraine, also because of the Moscow events, also sped up the process.

MW: You mentioned the Orange Revolution, and since we don't have that much time I think we will move there, the Orange Revolution happened quite early after the Rose Revolution in Georgia where you were heavily involved. When the events in Ukraine started, when the people started protesting against the elections and the....what were you first thoughts. Did you see the resemblance to the Rose Revolution?

MS: Absolutely, I was involved in the preparation of this project. I came to Kyiv after the Georgian Rose Revolution and I met with all the opposition leaders and helped facilitate dialogue between different opposition leaders. At that moment between Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko, and I talked with Petro Poroshenko, who was then in Yushchenko's camp, on how to prepare for the protests which I thought were inevitable. Most of the leaders had thought the elections would go normally, I thought that the protests would be an essential part of that, and Poroshenko agreed with me. So Poroshenko started to prepare the organization. So, we were

preparing with Poroshenko a year before the Orange Revolution and then when it started Poroshenko was ready and we also put, I was already the President of Georgia, so we put Poroshenko's channel on Georgian satellite which was a big luxury because all of Ukraine that had satellite dishes could watch the opposition channel. Then of course we were in a daily contact with all the leaders throughout the days, I was glued to the television screen and when it happened, I came to Kyiv and spent New Year's in Kyiv with the Orange Revolution leaders. Then we went with Poroshenko and Yushchenko to holidays for one week to the Carpathians, that was the moment when he was supposed to form the government. So I was very much an intimate part of those processes.

MW: And how would you describe the internal dynamics between the leaders. Between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko.

MS: They were very different people during the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko in many ways seemed to have a more mainstream character but Yulia was closer to me in terms of understanding what needs to be done because Yulia was radical. Yulia would call me and ask me to convince Yushchenko to support some of her more radical stances and that I would do. In the end, something in between was more right for Ukraine than just taking one side.

MW: So you would say they were on equal footing then?

MS: No, I think Yushchenko was still a leader, but Yulia was a really important engine behind him.

MW: Okay.

MS: Yushchenko was a symbol, he was a leader. He incarnated some things, in fact the main thing, he incarnated the Ukrainian identity which was very strong in him. I think the first revolution was both about identity and about opening up politics in Ukraine. With freedom. And

making the political process happen. The second revolution was even more about identity, because politics already existed.

MW: How would describe the influence of external actors. In two ways, first of all what was their influence...

MS: When?

MW: In 2004...

MS: Almost zero. At the beginning. But then Poles came in; but nobody anticipated, you know this whole conspiracy theory that Americans and the CIA, you know it is just bullshit. The Americans were against the Rose Revolution, well at least some were... Americans like the ambassador was strongly against it. In the White House there was no policy whatsoever and there were only a few people in Washington that had junior positions, they were my personal friends and I tried to explain to them what was happening. The same in Ukraine. Nobody was relying on anything. That is why the role of Poland was very important when [Aleksander] Kwaśniewski started coming in...he played a major role. Some people said it was controversial, but I think his presence was important. He had to pull Kuchma away from some of the worst steps that he would have taken. I don't think Kuchma was intending to crack down in any way. I spoke to Kuchma several times before that. Kuchma in many ways was also not against these kind of things, he liked Yushchenko personally more than he liked Yanukovych. But he didn't think any of them were working to replace him. So he thought that some kind of uncertainty might have extended some of his control of power, something like that. So he didn't really go against the Orange Revolution but he didn't really help Yanukovych.

MW: So you had an exchange with Kuchma. Did you have any exchanges with Yanukovych at that time?

MS: No, I didn't know him at that time. I met him later when he was the opposition leader. I can tell you that in many ways, of course he was totally unacceptable as a figure, but he had this brutal organizational skills which others lacked in Ukraine. That is why he succeeded in the end. He was like that.

MW: You mentioned Kwaśniewski briefly, but I want to know how he was perceived by Ukrainians? You said he was close to Kuchma...

MS: Yeah, well, at that moment Ukrainians knew very little about Poland. So in many ways it was like a one-way street. Say for instance, Poles knew much more about Georgia than Georgians about Poland. The same for Ukraine. Poles were travelling, Poles were curious. Poles remember certain episodes in history which for instance were totally forgotten in Georgia. The same with Ukraine. That is why there is a lot of misunderstandings with what he said. Something about things, about Ukrainians, and Poles controlling ... but Ukrainians never really gave it a serious thought. So that is why Kwaśniewski's role was important on the diplomatic level. It was important for the leaders because it was a major international crisis. But for the people on the streets, Poland was not as important as it is now. So, my presence was much more connected with the populists. Because they identified themselves with Georgia, they certainly at that moment did not identify themselves with Poland.

MW: And how would you characterize the role that Russia played in 2004? How involved was Russia?

MS: Russia was confused. Putin did not know what to do. He saw the Georgian Rose Revolution as some kind of isolated example, Georgia is just a strange country anyway, and a failed state. Ukraine came as a big and surprising shock. So, he didn't know how to react. He made major mistakes in the process. He generally, Putin always gets lost in a spontaneous situation; he doesn't know how to act.

MW: So you say basically that all actors were surprised, other than you and Poroshenko, you mentioned Poroshenko, but Yanukovych was also surprised. Or would you say...

MS: Yes, he was very surprised and blamed it all on Kuchma. Kuchma wouldn't have changed the course of events, but Yanukovych had foundations to know that Kuchma didn't like him. And Kuchma really didn't like him.

MW: Moving after the revolutions...

MS: However, Kuchma never liked Russians and never like pro-Russians in Ukraine and he never liked Yanukovych.

MW: And he liked Yushchenko?

MS: He kind of did not mind some kind of understanding of Yushchenko, but there wasn't like a real love there, but no aggression at all.

[Inaudible]

MW: Okay moving on from the revolution itself. How was your cooperation as president of Georgia with the Orange Revolution government with Yushchenko after he came to power?

MS: Like I said I was very much a part of the very first days when he was forming the government. He was in an extremely bad health stage. But he tried to do his best. And then after that we were very close; we did the Carpathian Declaration, we formed a common front and then of course Kaczyński came in and then we all together created this common Polish-Ukrainian-Georgian links...

MW: From the perspective of someone who was both an outsider but also very closely linked with Yushchenko and in good contact with them what was your biggest disappointment with what happened after 2004.

MS: They didn't do real reforms. They didn't do any reforms. And the main reason for that was two-fold. First was the old generation of leaders; the leaders were very much from the old Soviet formation and they couldn't overcome this. But I think an objective reason for this was that in Georgia we had nothing to lose. We were already a failed state, with no budget, no income, no nothing. Ukraine had a very good ... that was a time when commodities had started to grow. Ukraine had a good economic growth. The budget was full all the time. Therefore life was beautiful all the time, why make a change? They just changed names, but in the end no fundamental changes happened that improved life for the people.

MW: You would say that this is why they were then defeated and Yanukovych managed to come back.

MS: Not that they didn't fight with each other, and of course that didn't help. But the main thing was that the people saw they fought with each other and nothing was moving and they thought they didn't need a coalition. They thought, of course this guy Yanukovych, they didn't like [him] but he is brutal and he is centralized. And at least we deal with one voice. And that is the cycle in Ukraine. Now there is a coalition, but after there will be again one central government, because people go from these coalitions which they think they always sell them out, but then with one voice you know who you are dealing with.

MW: So the pendulum might swing again. Ok, let's fast forward to 2013.

MS: Yeah.

MW: You also were heavily involved in 2013 and the revolution on the Maidan. What were, according to you, the main reasons behind the eruption of the protests? Was it only the EU Association Agreement?

MS: The EU Association Agreement was only a pretext. It really, really was also ... what made Ukrainians angry was the way how Yanukovych acted, because it was a major show of disrespect towards the Europeans. Because it was a decisive matter. I spoke with Yanukovych for one hour in New York on this subject just one month before that. He was telling me that he was 100 per cent determined to go the European way. And of course he told that to the Ukrainians. And he just lied. And treated them like some fools. But the other thing is that there was major anger against corruption, against mismanagement, against brutality. Against parochialism of these people coming from Donbas imposing their brutal order on the rest of Ukraine; treating it as though the rest of Ukraine is very uncivilized and unworthy of them. So there was a combination of factors and [that is] why they didn't like him. And this was all channelled in this Euro background.

MW: Do you think Yanukovych lied to you when he said he was going to go the European way, or something changed in his mind?

MS: I think something changed in his mind. I think Russians made him an offer that he couldn't refuse, something like that. But the thing is, the Russians had such a leverage over him to make such offers.

MW: Do you think at the early stage, when the people started to protest was it still possible to solve it in a non-brutal way? Just to calm down the ...

MS: If they had called for parliamentary elections, maybe. But they wouldn't have done it because the Russians were pushing him, so really there is no use in speculating. I think it just happened in the way it happened.

MW: Very early on you found yourself at Maidan...

MS: Well I came first to ... you know I was blacklisted in Kyiv. I had double interest. First there were no major European politicians there, so I wanted to gather them. And second, I wanted them to help me enter Ukraine. So I came to Warsaw from New York. And I sat here for a week and gathering them from all around Europe but from here. It seemed the right place. And Buzek was involved and in the end we gathered a major European parliament delegation. We had more than ten European parliamentary members, including the head of the foreign committee Elmar Brok, a few English, a couple Germans, French, and Poles of course. And we went there ... and ... [Russian inaudible] so that is ... what were we talking about?

MW: Members of the European Parliament that you managed to gather in Warsaw.

MS: So, they surrounded me in the airport at Boryspil and then they finally let me through. Somehow the Ukrainians got confused, it was a confusing time and they said OK. So I was basically smuggled in.

MW: Like Lenin...

MS: There were a number of flights, with LOT...

MW: Of course. A great anecdote. So when you arrived, were there already any leaders of the Euromaidan? Or did it feel like the crowd was gathering but it still lacked some type of leadership? And how did it develop throughout the time?

MS: When we came there, a lot of Europeans seemed quite unhappy because they didn't see too large of a crowd. The crowd was small and mostly old people.

MW: When was it exactly?

MS: Beginning of December. And they thought it was going down. I reassured them that it would not. I remembered how the Orange Revolution and I knew how it was. It was all about waves. And of course we had a meeting with the leaders and they were also quite confused. One thing I understood then was that nobody was really leading this; it was happening almost on its own. And that was different than the Orange Revolution. Because somewhere in the process the people need leaders; they needed them; but here they were quite confused on what they were doing themselves. So the leaders were mostly trailing behind the events. Poroshenko again was probably the most current one. When we first had a meeting with all of them, we gave them a few pieces of advice and Yatsenyuk rejected that advice, and Poroshenko turned to him said “look, everything Misha told us in 2003 turned out to be right, so you’d better listen to him.”

MW: So when you arrived as the head delegation with those European politicians. What was the reception of the Ukrainians, those people on the streets? How did they react?

MS: I ran into trouble with the Europeans. Because they went to the stage, and I went to the crowd. And the crowd started to immediately scream and shout my name. And when they [the European politicians] were speaking, nobody could hear them because they were all surrounding me. And I didn’t plan it. I didn’t expect it. But some of the Europeans said that it was all set up by me to let them not be heard, that I did it on purpose. They were envious, even in such situations people get envious of such things.

MW: So other than you, because you said you were received with such enthusiasm. Did the Ukrainians see the Europeans as helping the process or....

MS: No, they were really heard. Especially the Poles. At that stage, Polish [politicians] were also very important.

MW: And as the protests were going for longer and longer, did people feel that the external world was doing enough or was there a sense of disappointment?

MS: This time I think that the West was involved much more directly. And because they were also angry with Russia and the circus with the EU agreement decision, changing; and at that time we still had Barroso and Barroso was a very strong leader. He worked really hard for a strong European position and this time they got involved very directly, unlike the Orange Revolution.

MW: Were there any particular politicians that were very well seen in Ukraine?

MS: For instance McCain was there. From Europe, the Poles were well received. And that changed ...since the Orange Revolution. As I had said, during the Orange Revolution, Polish involvement was just at the elite level.

MW: You said when you arrived in December, the crowds were not huge and expected another wave. Was there any particular event that was seen as a turning point...

MS: Every time that Yanukovych made some stupid mistake. There was the beating of students. And then of course when the violence started. Then the process became irreversible.

MW: What were the protests about? We mentioned corruption...

MS: Lack of respect. Ukraine had long years of economic stagnation. Mega corruption. A sense that the country was not going anywhere. At least in the end it was heading towards Europe, and then this was taken away from it.

MW: But you also mentioned that this time, even more than with the Orange Revolution, it was about identity. Can you elaborate on this? How did you feel that?

MS: Well, yeah because it was about de-Sovietization. In many ways, Ukraine has stayed for all these years a Soviet nation. And monuments of Lenin continued to stand in Ukraine. So, from that standpoint, the fact that people this time, from that generation, had rejected the Soviet legacy was

very obvious. They related it to Russia this time. And in the end it was a period of de-Sovietization of Ukraine which didn't happen after the Orange Revolution; well it happened but not so efficiently; not so openly. This time it happened very brutally.

MW: And what was the role of the media and internet in all this?

MS: I think this time it was the internet. For instance, Poroshenko's TV channel was very careful and they were trying to balance till the end. So this time just small internet stations became very important.

MW: And what was your perception when you were there? Did you feel like it was going to succeed?

MS: Yes, I was sure of it. For a simple reason, when it started it was very obvious that Yanukovych didn't have the force to hold Ukraine together; he couldn't hold such a big country for just those who feel at home in Kyiv or in most other parts.

MW: You mentioned that the leaders were always behind this time. That the people were in front. Was this relationship changing during the protest? Were there moments when the leaders managed to catch up?

MS: You have to remember what happened. In the end, Europeans and the leaders made a deal with Yanukovych, and Merkel was heavily involved in that. It was to keep him for one more year. And then the people took over. And Yanukovych got scared of the people not of this group. And by making this deal it could have destroyed presidential prospects. Because Poroshenko was careful not to take part in it. Of course Klitschko was on the front lines and then in the end what happened is when they saw that Klitschko had given up, they saw he wasn't fit to lead.

MW: Were people from the beginning angry at Russia and perceived Russia as the main threat ...did they see Yanukovych as just being under Russian influence?

MS: Yes. Clearly.

MW: You mentioned corruption. What was the role of corruption in the Ukrainian government, society, from your perspective? How did you see it? From top to bottom, or...

MS: It is still an issue. From top to bottom for sure. But it is institutional. You can't have one million public servants that are not paid any salaries. And that is telling the story. They are embraced by the [inaudible] but they are also invaded by an army of unpaid bureaucrats that are there to get money for existence, for subsistence.

MW: Would you say that there is a possibility of dividing Ukrainian society neatly into those who protest and those who don't? Are there any characteristics of those who protest as compared to those who don't?

MS: I think we are getting to a state when everybody will protest. People are much more aware. What the second Maidan made was that protests are not only in western or central, or in Kyiv. What the second Maidan did was unite Ukrainian public opinion throughout the whole country; it never happened; before there were so many regional distinctions first. Second it made politics universal, not just a matter of elites. And third, people are not expecting anything good from the government. They want to be left alone. So Ukrainians become less leftist, much less paternalistic. So they didn't want to get rid of the government....

MW: Do you fear that this will create a kind of perpetual cycle of protests and revolutions because you said ...

MS: People will protest until the moment that the political elite totally changes. The next one will change it.

MW: Do you see that as a realistic option?

MS: Totally. I think that it is inevitable with the next one.

MW: And what is the role of symbols? Identity is one thing obviously like throwing Lenin statutes, but there are also symbols of Ukrainian patriotism and nationalism. What was the role of Ukrainian national symbols in the protests? That people gathered by them?

MS: I think the second Maidan was much more universal in uniting the Ukrainian nation and I think in the first Maidan Ukraine was a small thing. In the second one, the second Maidan, it was more discussed that Ukraine also has Russian speakers; most of the fighters who are fighting Russia are Russian speakers. On the front you hear much more Russian than Ukrainian. That is one thing. And the other thing that was very obvious for me was that the civil society, you know Ukraine has amazing self-organizing skills, and they are ... they don't really need to go after other things. And it goes without saying. They renamed Moscow Street in Kyiv after Bandera, for some it's a controversial decision but for me the main part is that the Moscow Street is gone. But these things go like second stage, it is background. They are not the main things right now. The main thing is that people are asking for real change. They know that the symbols will not substitute real change. So symbols happened by themselves but I don't think they are real yet. People want something real, something substantial. That is why, for instance, Ukraine is not in many ways a nationalistic society, because they accepted foreigners into the government and no one really protested it. On the contrary, they were generally supportive. They integrate different groups. In many ways it's a very ... [pause]

MW: How do you see your role in Ukraine?

MS: In many ways I am Ukrainian. I lived nine years of my life in Ukraine. It is a lot for an adult life. I am 47, 48 and I really feel that I spent, out of 30 years of your adult life ten or nine in one country is a lot. But it is also not about where you live, it is also about how you feel. And I feel that this is my fight and my struggle. Ukraine is more of an idea than just a nation. And for that I have a very strong affiliation with Maidan.

MW: What are the challenges that you are facing in Odesa?

MS: The main challenge is that ... you know we changed the climate in Odesa. But to produce real quality breakthroughs you need to have a change in guard. What Odesa showed is that we brought very young people, very good people and they got a taste of what ... well mostly frustration of course because it didn't work the way they wanted, but it's good. Because they touched it and they know how to handle it, if they are allowed. And that was my first instinct, to give them a chance to get that. And we changed it. For the first time in Odesa, customs are not corrupt, that never happened before.

MW: Do you see any ways how the experience of Odesa can be transplanted to Kyiv? Do you see your role as trying to transplant this micro experience...

MS: I think there is a critical mass in Ukraine of people who have been reformers outside the government; small numbers in the parliament. But this is something we have already endured in the 1990s. We know how to do it, we know the rules of the game. We just need to get the full command of the game.

MW: To finish the interview, how do you see events in Ukraine unfolding over the next five years?

MS: I think there will be new elections, a new parliament and a new political class. I think Russia will fail to stop Ukraine from real reforms. The issue is not whether Ukraine will join the European Union; the issue is whether Ukraine will do real reforms. If it does real reforms then there will be no question if it joins the EU; of course it will. And so the thing is once we have a new political class, reforms will go very fast. I don't think Russia can implement their military plans. I do not think they are in a position and Ukraine will come out victorious from the war through containment and through reforms. And then Europe will have a new life as a result.

MW: On that positive note, let us finish the interview. Thank you so much.

MS: Thank you.