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# Georgia : Mikheil Saakashvili, the man who lost it all

By Nick Allen  
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When he burst on to television screens across the world last week, speaking perfect English, Mikheil Saakashvili looked every inch the charismatic New York-trained lawyer that he is.

Known to friends as "Misha" the cosmopolitan 40-year-old is unquestionably brilliant, speaks half a dozen languages and has a Dutch wife he met in Paris.

But Mr Saakashvili has handed Russia a victory it could scarcely have dreamed of - his decision to invade South Ossetia has left his army humiliated and he could soon be fighting for his political life with no prospect of any meaningful help from his Western allies.

How did he make such a catastrophic blunder?

The answer appears to lie in Mr Saakashvili's own character. While supporters praise him as a passionate and patriotic leader, whose drive and energy have transformed Georgia, critics say he is bombastic, impulsive and confrontational and his suave exterior hides a burning nationalist pride.

His abject defeat will hurt further still because it means the loss of long personal battle with Vladimir Putin.

A few years ago a document titled Mikheil Saakashvili: A Psychological Study, origin unknown, was circulated among Western journalists.

The now discredited paper claimed Mr Saakashvili's behaviour was narcissistic, paranoid, egocentric and hysterical and showed "psychiatric disturbances".

There is no doubt that Russia has been trying to undermine Mr Saakashvili for years.

According to diplomatic sources Russia stepped up its campaign to provoke him into a rash move in South Ossetia or Abkhazia - the two breakaway provinces of Georgia - over the last two weeks. There were occasional clashes and Russian jets entered Georgian airspace.

Mr Putin, it seems, knew just which buttons to push and Mr Saakashvili took the bait.

Friends of Mr Saakashvili claim he is neither a nationalist hothead, nor a political ingenué, and has instead simply been naïve.

Scott Horton, an expert on the region who taught the Georgian president at Columbia University, New York in the 1990s, told the Daily Telegraph: "He's not a hothead, that's Russian propaganda. That's the way they would like to see him portrayed in the West.

"But I think it was a mistake for him to act as he did and the better policy would have been to show restraint. Did he make a tactical blunder? The answer is almost certainly yes, but I don't think it was more than a tactical blunder.

"I think he knew the Russians were looking for an opportunity or a pretext to seize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He felt he had a last opportunity to consolidate South Ossetia because the Russian plan was already laid."

Mr Saakashvili often speaks fondly of his time in the US, reminiscing about attending New York Knicks basketball games and walking in Central Park.

He later worked for New York law firm Patterson Belknap Webb and Tyler as an associate advising clients investing in the former Soviet Union.

Mr Horton said: "He was a quite amazingly polished figure even then, just an incredible polyglot, and also had great charm and facility with dealing with people.

"He was very political and he was a strong advocate of open society, democracy free market economics but I wouldn't say he was a nationalist. He was very concerned about Georgia and what was going to happen to Georgia."

But critics say Mr Saakashvili grew into a populist demagogue with a ruthless lust for power after he returned to Georgia in October 2000 as justice minister under the then president Eduard Shevardnadze, who had met him in New York.

He ousted his former mentor in the bloodless Rose Revolution of 2003 and was greeted by the West as a hero who would spread democracy and freedom in the region. After becoming Europe's youngest president he moved his country toward membership of Nato, led a successful crusade against corruption and saw Georgia praised globally as a beacon of democracy.

But now his critics will say his impetuosity triggered a crisis of Cold War proportions.

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