

Georgian Ex-Minister Arrested After Denouncing President

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Police swoop following former minister Irakli Okruashvili's lurid allegations about the Georgian president. Former Georgian defence minister Irakli Okruashvili was arrested on September 27, two days after dramatically denouncing his ex-ally and boss, President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Okruashvili was detained in the offices of his newly-formed party, the Movement for a United Georgia. He was charged with four criminal offences – extortion, money laundering, abuse of office and “exceeding professional duties”.

According to his lawyer, he denies all the charges.

His driver and several of his bodyguards were also arrested. Police searched Okruashvili's apartment and family home.

Around 200 of the former minister's supporters gathered outside the new party's headquarters to protest against the arrest, and his political allies called for a public protest outside parliament on September 28.

Government critics appeared on a late-night talk-show on the Imedi television channel to declare that Okruashvili was a "political prisoner".

Georgians had long expected Okruashvili, a former interior and defence minister who fell out with President Saakashvili in October 2006, to attempt a return to politics. But few expected him to do it with such publicity and so much venom.

Okruashvili used the televised launch of his Movement for a United Georgia on September 25 to accuse Saakashvili of an extraordinary litany of crimes. The president, he said, had tried to get him to murder political opponents, harmed the Georgian church, covered up the truth about the death of a former prime minister, and blocked a plan to restore government control over secessionist territories.

Saakashvili was responsible for “daily repression, the destruction of houses and churches, robberies, dispossessions, murders and intimidations”, he said.

The TV station he chose as a vehicle was Imedi Television, which belongs to Badri Patarkatsishvili, a businessman close to exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

Okruashvili alleged that in 2005, Saakashvili asked him to kill Patarkatsishvili with a car bomb – as had just happened to Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

“The president still sees Patarkatsishvili as a threat,” said Okruashvili. “Saakashvili told me he should be got rid of the way it happened to Rafik Hariri.”

Another allegation that might just create a more damaging impression among voters is the charge that Saakashvili has built up a large business empire, despite the promises to fight corruption that helped sweep him to power in the 2003 revolution.

His political career has run parallel to that of Saakashvili himself, and they were allies until Okruashvili quit the government.

He served as interior minister between May and December 2004, when Saakashvili made him defence minister. He kept that post until November 2006, when he was shifted over to become minister for economic development, but he resigned from that job and left the government a week later.

He now says that in his time as interior minister, he arrested the president's uncle Temur Alasania on suspicion of extorting 200,000 US dollars, but released him on Saakashvili's orders.

He claimed the Saakashvili family had a business empire worth "billions" and controlled much of the Georgian economy. The president's fight with corruption was only "window-dressing" and "affected only [his] opponents", he said.

He also accused the president of ordering police to punish Valery Gelashvili, an opposition parliamentarian who was subsequently severely beaten in the centre of Tbilisi.

As if that were not bad enough, Okruashvili contradicted the official explanation for the 2005 death of prime minister Zurab Zhvania, who is said to have died in an accident involving carbon monoxide fumes from a faulty stove. Okruashvili said Zhvania was already dead when he was brought to the apartment where his body was found.

Okruashvili made the comments while launching a new political party called the Movement for a United Georgia, and while he was speaking he was flanked by five members of parliament, two former journalists from the Rustavi-2 company, an ex-member of parliament, a former head of the armed forces general staff and a lawyer.

His attack on Saakashvili followed a government crackdown on a number of his political allies in his native Shida Kartli region, including the arrest of local governor Mikheil Kareli and another close comrade Dmitry Kitoshvili.

Many analysts believe Okruashvili launched a pre-emptive strike against the president because he was worried he would be arrested himself. In the event, this fear was self-fulfilling.

Saakashvili has not commented on Okruashvili's accusations as he is out of the country, attending the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Giga Bokeria, the chairman of the Georgian parliament's committee for legal issues and one of the leaders of the parliamentarian majority, was the first pro-Saakashvili politician to respond.

At a hastily-convened press conference, he described Okruashvili's remarks as the "absolute hysterics" of a "small, frightened fantasist".

"The only possible explanation for such behaviour is that the man failed to bear the heavy burden of responsibility that was once placed on him, and that this has embittered and exasperated him. He's been driven crazy by the serious accusations of corruption levelled against members of his clan," said Bokeria.

However, Okruashvili's suggestion that he was willing to cooperate with the opposition parties was greeted with some positive noises.

"Okruashvili has very good start-up capital – good finances, and a lot of information and charm," said one of the leaders of the opposition Conservative Party.

Analysts say that when Okruashvili was in government, he was the leader of the hawks who favoured the use of force to regain control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two regions which declared themselves independent from Tbilisi after conflicts in the early Nineties.

The ex-defence minister made great play of claims that Saakashvili missed a chance to regain South Ossetia in 2005.

"We were only a step away from reclaiming one of our lost territories. If only the president had not been incapable, weak and unable to take a historic political decision," he said. "He was afraid of losing power."

Observers believe Saakashvili's decision to sack him as defence minister in late 2006 was taken under pressure from Washington, which was concerned about rising tensions surrounding the breakaway regions.

Political analyst Gia Nodia suggested Okruashvili was trying to position himself as a nationalist politician who might one day challenge the president.

"A certain section of society, people who are discontented with the current government, will fall for his remarks, even though they are unsupported by evidence," he said. "Okruashvili aspires to become an opposition leader - the main alternative to the president - and eventually to win in a fair election. He has played the radical nationalist card by invoking the church and conflict issues."

Speaking before news of Okruashvili's arrest broke, Nodia said, "I think his tactics will lead him to lose in the long run."

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