

Tbilisi Vows to Arrest Former Minister

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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TBILISI, Georgia — Irakli Okruashvili, a former Georgian defense minister living in asylum in France, will be arrested if he returns to the country to join anti-government protesters, the Interior Ministry said Monday.

Police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators Sunday in the capital, Tbilisi, police and opposition leaders said. The clashes came after protesters blockaded the state television headquarters the previous night.

Okruashvili, a former ally of President Mikheil Saakashvili who is now an opposition leader, told Georgian television that he would return on May 25 to join the protests. France granted Okruashvili asylum in 2008 after a court in Georgia convicted him of extortion and sentenced him to 11 years in prison.

Okruashvili faces "immediate" arrest in Georgia, Interior Ministry spokesman Shota Utiashvili said by telephone. The situation in Tbilisi is calm today, Utiashvili said.

Saakashvili, who was swept to power in the Rose Revolution in 2003, has been under pressure since 2007, when protests turned violent as opponents accused him of political persecution and failing to improve living standards. Georgia, which provides a corridor for shipping Caspian Sea oil to market without going through Russia, has sought to strengthen ties to the European Union and NATO under Saakashvili's leadership.

Opposition leaders, including Nino Burjanadze, a former speaker of parliament; Levan Gachechiladze, a presidential hopeful in 2008; and millionaire Kote Gogelia organized a series of protests that began last week. Saakashvili's opponents last staged a major anti-government rally in 2009.

Okruashvili says the charges against him are politically motivated and stem from his split with Saakashvili. The Georgian government says the charges were part of a wider crackdown on corruption by high-ranking officials.

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