The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Georgian Known for Shooting Off His Mouth

By Paul Rimple

June 26, 2011



In a Russian documentary titled "Caucasus 2 Metastasis" shown on Channel One, former Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili said Georgian intelligence has been "actively keeping contact" with North Caucasus militants and that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili provided a special escape corridor for Achimeziu Gochayev, the alleged mastermind of the 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgadonsk.

"I was a witness of the fact," Okruashvili said.

To the uninitiated, this is a damning testimonial, but the "star witness" is no more than a vindictive fugitive known for making audacious statements, even when he was one of the "good guys."

Okruashvili held the posts of governor, prosecutor general, interior minister and defense minister — all by the time he was 31. While he started an offensive against South Ossetia in

2004 that kept the region in an increasingly heated state of tension for the next four years, he was best known for shooting off his mouth. He once boasted that Russia would lose in a shooting war with Georgia and pledged to resign if Georgia failed to restore control over breakaway South Ossetia by Jan. 1, 2007. In response to a Russian embargo on Georgian wine he said, "You could export feces there, and the Russians would still buy it."

As he began to make a name for himself as the most unlikable guy in the administration, people began to wonder what was happening to all that money in his ministry. The defense budget had swelled to $218 million by 2006, while unknown millions were sitting in something called the Georgian Army Development Fund. Set up as a nongovernmental organization, the fund wasn't subject to the same public disclosure rules that govern the state budget. His Defense Ministry never revealed exactly what the cash was spent on.

Okruashvili was demoted to economic development minister in November 2006. He resigned a week later, started an opposition party and denounced Saakashvili, accusing him of corruption and plotting to kill oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili, and hinted that Saakashvili was behind Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's death.

Okruashvili was immediately arrested for tax offenses, jumped bail, and received asylum in France, where he continues to direct Saakashvili's overthrow.

He promised to return to Georgia on May 25 to "put an end to the regime," but nobody in Georgia took him seriously. Nobody in Russia ought to either.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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