

Georgian President's Top Ally Faces Charges

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 24, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

TBILISI, Georgia — Georgian investigators on Saturday filed criminal charges against a top ally of the president, whose supporters condemned the move as politically motivated.

Pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement lost October's elections to the Georgian Dream coalition led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who became prime minister. Since then, the two men have been locked in a tug-of-war, with authorities launching criminal investigations against Saakashvili's closest lieutenants.

Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava became the latest target of an official probe Saturday, when the Finance Ministry's investigative arm charged him with theft and money laundering. Ugulava and other leading members of Saakashvili's party have rejected the charges as politically driven.

Several hundred supporters gathered outside to express support for Ugulava. Speaking at the

rally, Vano Merabishvili, the secretary general of Saakashvili's party, accused Ivanishvili of initiating the case against Ugulava in order to tighten control over the country. Interior Minister Irakly Garibashvili denied that the probe was politically motivated.

Ugulava refused to testify on charges focusing on the takeover of the independent Imedi television station and the payment of city wages to activists of Saakashvili's party on false employment contracts. He may face more than a decade in prison on each count if convicted.

"We must do everything to preserve the independence of our motherland, and force the new government to act accordingly," Ugulava told supporters after meeting with investigators.

"The United National Movement is a strong opposition force that will continue to tell the government the truth in the interests of the nation," he said.

Saakashvili has accused Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia, of trying to take Georgia back into Moscow's fold. Ivanishvili has pledged to improve relations with Moscow, which were ruptured in a 2008 Russia-Georgia war, but he has rejected Saakashvili's claims that he intends to bring the country into the Russian orbit and reaffirmed the nation's course to integrate more closely into the West. Ivanishvili's party won the election on a pledge to investigate official abuses under Saakashvili and is under pressure from the public to follow through. Saakashvili's term ends in October.

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