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Russian duo begin court battle over fertiliser giant

Alexander Gorbachev is suing Andrey Guryev for the return of his claimed share in PhosAgro

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Witanhurst estate in Highgate, north London, is one of the assets owned by Andrey Guryev, who is an ally of President Putin. Lawyers for Alexander Gorbachev think their client could end up with the property if he wins his case

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Two Russian businessmen, one of whom fled the country to claim asylum in the UK and the other a sanctioned billionaire, started giving evidence in a London court showdown yesterday as part of a billion-dollar battle over a chemicals business.

Alexander Gorbachev, no relation to the late Soviet leader, is suing Andrey Guryev for the return of his claimed share in the Russian fertiliser giant PhosAgro. If successful he could end up owning Witanhurst, London's largest private house after Buckingham Palace.



Alexander Gorbachev fled Russia to claim asylum in the UK

The feud stems from an alleged handshake agreement between Guryev, a sanctioned Russian oligarch, and Gorbachev, which granted the latter a share in Guryev's fertiliser business. Through a series of mergers and consolidations, this business eventually became PhosAgro, which for a time traded on the London Stock Exchange.

Gorbachev briefly served as chairman of this larger company until a Russian government campaign against the other partner in the business, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, prompted Gorbachev to flee to the UK, where he was eventually granted asylum.

Gorbachev has claimed that while out in the cold in London, he was offered only \$30 million for his share of the business.

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When he rejected the offer, he was told by Guryev that he had no entitlement to any share of PhosAgro, prompting him to sue in the UK to wrest back his alleged holdings.

Guryev has few known assets in the UK and representatives of Gorbachev expect that if they are successful, one of the assets they would be entitled to is [Witanhurst estate in Highgate](#), north London, with 25 bedrooms.

Guryev's ownership of Witanhurst was disclosed in 2015 by The New Yorker, which stated that a controversial "underground village" had also been built beneath the property, containing a 70ft swimming pool, cinema, massage rooms, sauna, gym, staff quarters and parking for 25 cars. It added that he had also sought planning permission to extend an underground "servants' passage". Guryev is also said to own a penthouse apartment in Vauxhall near the MI6 headquarters.

Because Guryev is sanctioned in the UK, a High Court judge will travel to the United Arab Emirates to take evidence from him.

Both Guryev and Gorbachev have requested that the trial judge in the PhosAgro case, Mr Justice Pelling KC, appear at the Dubai International Financial Centre as a special examiner to hear evidence from Guryev.

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Guryev's solicitors will be responsible for shouldering the costs of the judge's flights and accommodation.

Other assets reported to be linked to the sanctioned oligarch have also proved difficult to seize.

Alfa Nero, a superyacht that the US Office of Foreign Assets Control identified as belonging to Guryev, was put up for auction by the government of Antigua and Barbuda after the multimillion-dollar yacht was abandoned in Antigua's Falmouth harbour soon after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Eric Schmidt, the former chief executive of Google, attempted to buy the yacht for £54 million, only to withdraw because of complicated legal battles, when Guryev's daughter, Yulia Gurieva-Motlokhov, sued claiming that she was the only beneficiary of the trust that owns the yacht — delaying the sale and causing the small island nation to spend thousands every day since on the upkeep of the vessel.

Speaking to The Times in June last year after the suit was announced, Darwin Telemaque, chief executive of the Antigua and Barbuda Port Authority, said: "We're caught in a geopolitical space that at times does not take into account the impact on the resources of small islands like ours ... I just want to see it gone."

Representatives for Gorbachev declined to comment. Representatives for Guryev were contacted for comment.

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