

New rift looms with Putin as Russia's 'most wanted' oligarch seeks asylum in Britain

By WILL STEWART and JASON LEWIS

One of Russia's richest and most wanted men has secretly applied for political asylum in Britain, fuelling the ongoing row between president Putin and Gordon Brown.

Mikhail Gutseriyev, former head of massive oil and gas firm Russneft, is understood to be in hiding in the UK and appealing for Government protection.

He fled Russia with a reputed £1.5 billion after a warrant was issued for his arrest on major fraud and tax evasion charges.

But the 49-year-old billionaire - a bitter rival of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich - claims he was hounded out of his business by the Kremlin for political reasons.

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A former member of the Russian parliament, Mr Gutseriyev disappeared from Russia several weeks ago and is understood to have been smuggled to Britain where, Whitehall sources said, he has made an asylum application to the Home Office.

The Government received the paperwork in the past two weeks and it is understood that it is being rushed through.

His presence in Britain is likely to deepen the rift with Russia.

Relations are already at a low over Moscow's decision to block the extradition of the prime suspect in the murder of former KGB man Alexander Litvinenko in London last year and Britain's protection of Boris Berezovsky, who has declared he wants to oust Mr Putin.

The Russian interior ministry says Mr Gutseriyev was involved in "illegal activities committed by an organised group on a grand scale".

He was charged by a Russian court on May 4 after a ten month investigation into his firm.

Now the Moscow-based prosecutor general's office says it has applied to put Mr Gutseriyev's name on Interpol's international wanted list.

Interpol is understood to be considering the case.

Last week his Moscow lawyer Alla Yaminskaya said: "Gutseriyev is an honest man who follows the law, an upstanding person. All court decisions relating to this issue are illegal and will be appealed."

Mr Gutseriyev apparently incurred the Kremlin's wrath by buying assets from Yukos, a rival oil company, before its bankruptcy last year and by refusing to sell his own company to Mr Putin's allies.

Mr Putin has used Yukos's assets to build Rosneft, the state-run petroleum company, into the country's largest producer of crude oil.

Yukos, the one-time market leader, was bankrupted and dismantled through a series of forced auctions after the state claimed more than £15 billion in back taxes.

Its former owner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, was jailed for fraud and tax evasion.

He has said he was punished for opposing Mr Putin. Mr Gutseriyev has been labelled "the second Khodorkovsky".

The latest twist comes after the mysterious death of Mr Gutseriyev's Harrow-educated son Chingiskhan, 22, in Moscow last August, after crashing his Ferrari.

Forensic tests for the family are said to have concluded that his death was "not accidental".

Friends say Mr Gutseriyev was unable to attend his son's funeral for fear he would be arrested.

Last night the Home Office refused to confirm or deny that Mr Gutseriyev was in Britain and asking for asylum.

But a spokesman added: "The Government is committed to providing protection for those individuals found to be genuinely in need, in accordance with our commitments under international law."

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