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Villagers, Billionaire Tussle Over War Statue

By Alexander Bratersky

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Vladimir Yegorov standing at a World War II monument that he and other Voronino villagers say has irked Agalarov. **Alexander Bratersky**

VORONINO, Moscow Region — Sixty-five years after World War II ended, a new village monument to honor the fallen soldiers has became the center of a new battle between local residents and a billionaire who wants to tear it down.

"They have defended the country with their lives. If this monument is taken away, we will bring them down along with the authorities," said Vladimir Yegorov, a resident of the Moscow region village of Voronino whose father, Alexander, is one of the 14 soldiers listed on the monument erected last month.

Locals say the billionaire, Aras Agalarov, who wants to expand his luxury estate and golf course, has forced Central Asian guest workers in his employ to petition the local authorities, complaining that the monument is in danger of collapsing and should be removed.

“But one of workers later came and put flowers on the monument and apologized to us,” said a resident who only gave her first name, Yelena.

A battle over Voronino, located 22 kilometers northwest of Moscow near the prestigious Novorizhskoye Shosse, has been dragging on for five years, and residents say they raised the monument in an attempt to maintain the village's rustic atmosphere despite a harassment campaign to make them move out.

Agalarov, a leading developer of elite real estate with a fortune estimated by Forbes at $1.1 billion, acquired some of the land in and around Voronino in the early 2000s, planning to build a posh 150-house gated community and an 18-hole golf course.

The businessman, best-known as the owner of the gargantuan Crocus City mall just outside Moscow, has previously called the gated community a “kind of Utopian social experiment, but without poor people,” and said he planned to live there himself.

His company acquired 11 of the 34 houses in Voronino and wanted to buy out the rest to develop the golf course. But work stalled amid protests from locals, who have rejected all offers since 2005 and complained of pressure by Crocus representatives.

“We, the residents of Voronino village, do not intend to sell our plots of land and are ready to defend our rights in all possible institutions,” they wrote in a letter sent to the Moscow's region prosecutor's office in 2005.

Other complaints about ongoing construction near the village were sent to the Kremlin and the Moscow region government. In 2008, regional prosecutors opened an investigation into Crocus, which was eventually fined $20,000 for environmental violations during the construction. Another investigation is ongoing.

The land in the area is expensive, with prices reaching $1 million per hectare, according to data by the Inkom real estate company, but residents say money is not the issue.

Yegorov, 70, recalled a conversation with Agalarov in 2008, when the businessman arrived at the village surrounded by bodyguards and promised him a new house if he would pack his bags. Yegorov said he has refused.

“I don't need any house from him, even one made from gold,” he said angrily.

Another resident, Alexander Morozov, said Agalarov's people offered his family $5 million for their house, but he has refused to leave.

“He believes that I am hoping for a higher price. He just doesn't understand that not everything can be bought with money,” Morozov said. "I just want to live in this place because my roots are here."

After the investigations, Agalarov backed away from attempts to force Voronino residents to sell their houses, but he has not given up entirely, Morozov said.

“They have calmed down since that time but changed their tactics,” he said, adding that now the area around Voronino that Agalarov owns is being made ever less suitable for normal

living.

He said one example was dormitory-style housing for Crocus employees built nearby. Their inhabitants, most of them guest workers, are noisy and put fences around the buildings, Morozov said.

In 2009, the local administration said the village would be turned into a recreational zone but promised not to allow any additional construction, said Morozov's wife, Galina.

“But even that promise was not kept,” she said, speaking over the rumble of heavy KamAZ trucks lugging construction materials past the village.

She said Crocus has since constructed a hunting and a fishing lodge in the area. Yegorov said the local Belyana Lake, once a recreation area, might also become off-limits for locals because of a new construction project.

“We are ready to start a dialogue, but the other side is not ready,” said Morozova, whose upper-middle-class house has been turned into the headquarters of locals campaigning to preserve Voronino as they know it.

At a meeting attended by a Moscow Times reporter, a longtime resident, Raisa Novik, even read a self-written poem describing the villagers plight and calling Agalarov an “unkind man who overpowered nature.”

Agalarov's office and Crocus representatives declined to speak to The Moscow Times about the Voronino issue. The businessman has said the problem is mostly financial. “Their appetites have grown,” he said about the villagers in an interview with TV Center television in 2008.

Agalarov opened the country's biggest mall, the $540 million Vegas, in southeastern Moscow in June and promised to build two more similarly sized malls in the capital over the next three years.

The fate of the Voronino war monument, meanwhile, hangs in legal limbo. Its construction was endorsed by Nadezhda Mikhareva, head of the Obushkovsky district where Voronino is located, but no legal permission was obtained to raise it.

Now the Moscow regional government's architecture watchdog must review the monument to rule whether it violates any construction rules. It was unclear Wednesday when regional authorities would make a decision on the case.

Galina Morozova said the monument has became a symbol of the residents' fight with big business and pledged that Voronino residents would not give up.

“Our war is already longer then World War II,” she said. “Of course, our strength is not comparable to theirs, but we are glad that we have many people who care around us.”

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