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Chichvarkin Finds Hope in London and Tbilisi

By Howard Amos

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Chichvarkin and then-Mayor Yury Luzhkov attending a forum in April 2008. **Igor Tabakov**

LONDON — Yevgeny Chichvarkin, one of London's big-name Russian exiles, sees no prospect for a return to his homeland, despite the Investigative Committee's closure of its case against him in January and the annulment of the warrant for his extradition.

Tall and strikingly broad in the shoulders, with a large, gold, skull-shaped ring on one hand, the founder and former chairman of mobile phone retailer Yevroset said he would "like to return to a free country that is growing and developing."

"I don't expect that I will return to Russia soon," he told The Moscow Times.

Chichvarkin arrived in Britain for what he called a New Year's vacation in late 2008, but never used his return ticket. The Investigative Committee announced in January 2009 that he was wanted on charges of extortion, kidnapping and smuggling in relation to his time at Yevroset.

From his British exile, Chichvarkin, 36, has been an outspoken critic of the Russian government. He said, with a smile, that he was "playing the role of society's conscience."

After more than two years living in London, the oligarch has gained some perspective on his homeland, even seeing elements of Georgia's modernization that he feels could be emulated by Russia. Though he's learned to speak his mind freely and remains cynical about the 2012 elections, he does not see himself as a political leader.

His whereabouts was unknown until June 2009 when he was spotted by a reporter during a gala concert at London's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden.

"Unfortunately [returning to Russia] is dangerous for me," Chichvarkin said, speaking in Russian at a restaurant in central London during a one-hour interview. "The people who wanted to confiscate my property and put me behind bars still wield power, perhaps even more power than before."

Chichvarkin fingered employees of the Interior Ministry's "K" department for high-tech crimes as leading the campaign against him and his business interests. During a video post on his blog he referred to them as "werewolves in epaulettes" — a term popularized during anti-corruption campaigns in the mid-2000s.

In a further disincentive to return, Chichvarkin's mother was found dead in her Moscow apartment in April 2010. Chichvarkin has said she was murdered. A police investigation is ongoing.

Boris Levin, former vice president of Yevroset, and eight other employees of the company were cleared by a Moscow City Court in November 2010. Chichvarkin said he was surprised by the decision.

He has not done much to immerse himself in British life. He lamented the quality of his spoken English and said he generally socializes only with Russians. He owns a "dacha" in Surrey, a county that borders London, where he bathes in a banya, keeps horses and grills shashliks.

Despite a growing bald patch, Chichvarkin has even maintained his trademark "mullet" haircut — long in the back and short on the sides — which in London marks him as either a fan of the 1980s or a Russian.

He has, however, toured the countryside a little, visiting sites like Hever Castle, the home of Anne Boleyn, the executed wife of British monarch Henry VIII; and Lennoxlove House in Scotland, most famously associated with Lady Hamilton, the mistress of Admiral Nelson.

Chichvarkin complained repeatedly about the quality of British customer service and remembers being astonished by the sight of Prime Minister David Cameron, then the leader of the opposition, cycling past a Kensington cafe where he was sitting.

Chichvarkin has little nostalgia for his former life in Moscow which, he said, consisted of "an hour in an unnecessary traffic jam there, and an hour in an unnecessary traffic jam back, the office, nerves and phone calls."

And he feels safer in London. "Compared with what is possible in Moscow," he said, "I have absolutely no fear of local hooligans who might steal your bankcard." In Russia his family employed eight bodyguards, but in Britain they only use security at their dacha.

That is not due to a fear of assassination. "We have Gypsies next door," Chichvarkin said.

Chichvarkin, who does not use e-mail, maintained that he has very little to do with former business partners in Russia and the current management of Yevroset, though he remained in touch with close friends and family.

Some acquaintances had, however, "re-established contact precisely on the day on which accusations against me were officially dropped," he said with some amusement.

Chichvarkin downplayed media reports that he would assist Yevroset with an initial public offering in London this year. "I do not want to participate," he said, "but I am not opposed to rendering assistance if this is necessary."

He also said his lawyers were examining the options for legal action against those who investigated Yevroset.

Chichvarkin said he would not, however, enter into any court proceedings if he did not think victory was assured.

Asked about the conditions for business in Russia, Chichvarkin was scathing.

"The business climate gets worse every month," he said. "The state is dishonest, and civil servants interfere in all spheres of the economy."

When talking about the changes he would like to see in his homeland, Chichvarkin praised Georgia. Citing improved transparency and honesty in economic affairs, he said Russia should strive to emulate some of the legislative efforts of President Mikheil Saakashvili's government.

He said that while high-profile cases like that of Sergei Magnitsky, the Hermitage Capital lawyer who died in pretrial detention in 2009, tend to dominate the headlines, there are many other instances of state interference. As an example, he cited the problems of the jewelry store chain Altyn, currently caught up in an FSB contraband investigation involving the arrest of top managers.

Chichvarkin was also clear about who he thinks has the upper hand in Russia's ruling tandem.

"At the last election, all Russians believed that if they chose Medvedev there would be tax reductions and more democratic freedom for individuals and society — that was the promise," Chichvarkin said. "We believed and we voted, but Putin did not hand over power."

He doesn't think the outcome of the 2012 presidential election will be any different. "With the high price of oil, Putin will again be lucky and become president for life," he predicted.

Though he attended a demonstration last August outside the Russian Embassy in London,

Chichvarkin shunned the idea of a formal opposition party.

"As we can see by the situation in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the concept of a 'party' is not a real concept — a party and its leader may or may not be at the center of a [major] power shift."

Routinely ascribed the moniker "flamboyant," Chichvarkin said he was forced to become a critic of the Russian government because politics intruded on his business activities. He said that before his departure he could only vent his frustrations "with close friends somewhere deep in the banya."

If Chichvarkin has any closely held political convictions, these center more on a belief in the importance of individual freedom, rather than the efficacy of large-scale opposition movements.

He said that growing up in the Soviet Union had given him a "very sharp perception of when people try to interfere in my private life."

"The freedom of one person ends when the freedom of another begins," he said.

Chichvarkin is critical of high taxes and does not believe in the state provision of education, nor in compulsory medical insurance. He slammed Britain's taxpayer-funded welfare system.

"Let people work and not be lazy," he said. "Some say, 'I've got a pain in my back, or I have a headache, give me money, give me money!' — but then there are those who go to work and pay 50 percent tax so that those [expletive] can sit and whine that they have a pain in their back."

Chichvarkin is not a London resident who has difficulty making ends meet.

He sold Yevroset to billionaire Alexander Mamut for a reported $1.25 billion, including about $850 million in debt, in September 2008 — three months before he left the country. He said at the time of the sale that the financial crisis had forced his hand.

Chichvarkin lives in the plush Kensington area of the British capital alongside many other wealthy Russians. He has the second home in the countryside and sends his children to prestigious private schools.

He said that in London he has "no professional life." A businessman at heart, however, he would "like to do something involving trade." He does not see himself as a politician.

Indeed, Chichvarkin confided that his ambition is to open a small shop in London some day.

"I understand that most money is made off of the greedy, the poor and the uneducated — but I don't want to do this," he said. "I want to be in competition for shoppers of taste and intellect."

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