

Newsmaker: Usmanov Took Long Road to Become Rich

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Alisher Usmanov **Andrei Makhonin**

There are few former Central Asian jailbirds who can also claim to be popular hate figures among football fans in north London — but they include Alisher Usmanov, who became Russia's richest man and married a gymnastics champion along the way.

Usmanov's fortune, which he amassed through a myriad of investments from iron ore producers to stakes in Facebook, is currently estimated at more than \$18 billion, after it bounced back from \$1.6 billion during the 2009 crisis, according to Forbes.

After the Uzbek-born tycoon spent six years in prison in the 1980s for extortion, alongside the son of a regional KGB deputy, his first successful business foray was into plastic bag manufacturing.

Unlike other modern Russian oligarchs, he did not shoot to fabulous wealth on the back

of privatization deals in the early 1990s but worked his way steadily upward. A key moment was his appointment in 2001 as director of Gazprominvestholding, which raises money abroad for the state-controlled gas giant and directs investments. He is still in the post.

In 2000 the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan ruled that Usmanov's alleged crimes never took place.

Today Usmanov's business interests stretch across multiple continents and range from high-technology firms like Twitter, Groupon and Zynga to mining and metals conglomerate Metalloinvest and British football clubs.

His stake in Facebook, which he bought through Yury Milner's Digital Sky Technologies in 2009, has grown to five times its purchase value. He is in line for a huge windfall in the company's upcoming IPO.

Just this week Usmanov, 58, consolidated his hold on Russia's No. 2 wireless carrier MegaFon in a deal with shareholders that leaves him with a 50 percent plus one share stake in the firm. He was also entangled in the corruption scandal that blew up around Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov last month.

Anti-corruption blogger and lawyer Alexei Navalny accused Usmanov, who has British citizenship, of laundering money for Shuvalov on March 30. "After Usmanov secured the money in the right place," Navalny wrote on his blog, "he began getting on really well in business."

Usmanov controls big media holdings in Russia that include the Kommersant publishing house and news website Gazeta.ru. In December, the editor of Kommersant Vlast was fired for printing an obscene photo involving Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"I am proud that I know Putin," Usmanov said in a 2010 interview with Forbes. "And the fact that not everybody likes him is not Putin's problem."

The oligarch also has a stake in London-based Arsenal. Some Arsenal fans were not ecstatic about Usmanov's investment and gave him the unkind terrace nickname Jabba after the hulking, slug-like villain in George Lucas' "Star Wars."

But Usmanov's interest in sports dates back to his own period as a young fencer on the Uzbekistan national side. Though he no longer fights, he is today the president of the International Fencing Federation.

It was also through fencing that he met his wife, Irina Viner, the famous gymnast and trainer, who has nurtured such Russian stars as Alina Kabayeva. They first encountered each other in a Tashkent gym and were married in 1992.

In an interview with Moskovsky Komsomolets last year, Viner admitted that she and Usmanov were not the sort of couple who brought each other breakfast in bed.

"But when we do see each other it's as if it's for the first time," she said.

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