

Russian billionaire’s wife wins six-year battle to have divorce claim heard in England

Legal clearance to take on sanctioned oligarch said to be worth £15bn ‘open gates to divorce tourism’



Natalia and Vladimir Potanin seen in 2010. The legal battle over a divorce settlement began in England in 2019

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A Russian billionaire’s wife has won a six-year battle to have her divorce claim heard in England.

The legal battle between [Natalia Potanina and her former husband Vladimir](#), who is estimated to be worth around £15.7bn, started in England in 2019.

On Thursday, Mrs Potanina won a Court of Appeal hearing to bring a multibillion-pound claim against the sanctioned businessman in London, marking what could become the highest-value divorce case in English history.

It has led to warnings it could result in “no limit to divorce tourism”.

She received only £30.9m – less than 1 per cent of the couple’s total assets – following their formal divorce in 2014, lawyers said.

Now Mrs Potanina wants to bring a claim for financial relief, which includes half of the value of her ex-husband’s shares in Norilsk Nickel, a Russian metals and mining firm, half the dividends on the shares since 2014, and half the value of a Russian property known as The Autumn House, on which they spent around £111m.

Lawyers for the chief executive of Norilsk Nickel, the world’s largest palladium producer and a major producer of refined nickel, opposed the appeal, saying his ex-wife had received around £63m.

Mrs Potanina had asked the Court of Appeal to rule that her financial claim could be heard in England after a High Court judge previously dismissed her case in 2019, warning that if it were to be allowed to proceed, “then there is effectively no limit to divorce tourism”.



The Potanins seen at a new year’s party in 2009

In July, her legal team had told a hearing that she had earned her share of the family’s wealth after years of marriage and being the “main carer” for their three children.

Lawyers for Mr Potanin – said to have in his spare time [played ice hockey with Vladimir Putin](#) – opposed her appeal, saying his ex-wife had no connection to England.

However, in a ruling on Thursday, Lord Justice Moylan, Lady Justice Falk and Lord Justice Cobb found that Mrs Potanina “would probably be able to argue that she is/was ‘fully entitled’ to a wide range of financial relief consequent upon divorce, without any discount or special factor limiting her claim”.

The ruling also said there was evidence that Mrs Potanina had “very largely severed her ties with Russia” and that “her connection to her former home country was increasingly tenuous”.

It said: “The discrepancy between her award of the marital assets and the husband’s retained share was significant; the discrepancy between what she had recovered in Russia compared with what she would have recovered had the case been heard in this jurisdiction was equally significant.”

Responding to the latest development, family lawyers said that the case could pave the way for aspiring divorce tourists.

Jennifer Headon, the head of the international family law team at Birketts LLP, said: “The decision of the 2019 High Court was given with a warning that if Mrs Potanina’s claim was allowed to proceed that the level of ‘divorce tourism’ in the courts of England and Wales by spouses dissatisfied with the outcome of litigation in courts of other jurisdictions could be limitless.”

Sarah Jane Lenihan, a partner at Dawson Cornwell, said: “Few expected this outcome. The question now is whether it will open the door for others who have divorced overseas to seek a second bite at the cherry in England.”

Sital Fontenelle, the head of the family law team at Kingsley Napley LLP, said: “Although today’s decision is, of course, fact specific, the key point is that the door is still open; it reinforces our reputation for being divorce capital of the world and importantly there was no narrowing of the test for other potential claimants who have the appetite to bring litigation here. We will therefore remain an attractive jurisdiction for divorce cases.”

Peter Burgess, partner at Burgess Mee, also said: “Aspiring ‘divorce tourists’ may appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate connection to this country at the substantive hearing, rather than at an earlier stage.”



Natalia and Vladimir Potanin's wedding day

The pair married in Russia in 1983, where they lived throughout their married life, and have three adult children.

The businessman claims the couple separated in 2007, with a Russian court granting a divorce in 2014. Mrs Potanina argues that they did not separate until 2013.

In June 2022, Mr Potanin, who was then described as Russia’s second richest man and the owner of the Interros conglomerate, was hit with US and UK sanctions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The case has already spent years in the UK courts. Mr Justice Cohen first dismissed Mrs Potanina’s case in 2019, but this was overturned by the Court of Appeal in 2021.

Appeal judges were told in 2021 that Mrs Potanina is seeking around £5bn from her ex-husband following the breakdown of their marriage.

Mr Potanin then took the [case to the Supreme Court](#), which in January last year ruled with a three to two majority in his favour and sent the case back to the Court of Appeal for reconsideration.

At the Court of Appeal hearing in July, Charles Howard KC, Mrs Potanina’s barrister, said Mr Justice Cohen had been “inconsistent and illogical” in the way he dealt with Mrs Potanina’s connection with England.

He said the judge had fallen into the trap of Mr Potanin repeatedly saying his ex-wife was a “divorce tourist”.

In written submissions, Lord Faulks KC, for Mr Potanin, had said: “These former spouses had no connection with this jurisdiction during the marriage and the wife had only recent and modest connections when she applied for leave.”

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In a written judgment, Lord Justice Cobb said that he believed the judge was “wrong” and that he was “satisfied” that Mrs Potanina “had substantial grounds” to pursue her claim in England.

In response to the ruling, Frances Hughes, from Hughes Fowler Carruthers, which represents Mrs Potanina, said: “The decision of the Court of Appeal is a second vindication of our client in making her application in 2019.

“Our client is grateful for the consideration given by the court to her case and is delighted that the Court of Appeal has recognised, for the second time, the merits of her application.

“She very much hopes that her case can now be resolved and can be concluded without further delay.”