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Deripaska Helps Out Abramovich in Court

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LONDON — Aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska gave a helping hand to fellow billionaire Roman Abramovich on Friday in a London court battle involving three of Russia's best-known businessmen.

Deripaska, whose Basic Element conglomerate owns the world's top aluminum producer RusAl, gave evidence via a video link from New York as Abramovich's witness.

Abramovich, owner of London's Chelsea football club — who, like Deripaska, is one of the 10 richest people in Russia — is accused by former protector Boris Berezovsky of selling, without permission, his shares in RusAl, which Berezovsky says Abramovich held for him in a trust agreement.

Abramovich denies there was a trust arrangement.

The case, which started in early October, is being followed closely by Russia watchers for any new clues into the murky world of the country's business and politics.

Abramovich and Berezovsky were close while making their fortunes in Russia in the 1990s, when a small group of businessmen snapped up shares in former state firms sold off after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They fell out a decade ago.

Much of the hearing, in a courtroom packed with bodyguards and armies of lawyers and aides, focused on a crucial meeting between Deripaska, Abramovich, Berezovsky and two associates in London's luxury Dorchester Hotel in March 2000.

"We did not discuss the combining by Mr. Abramovich and me of various of our aluminum assets; that had already been agreed by the two of us," Deripaska wrote in his witness statement.

"I was not aware of Mr. Berezovsky or [Berezovsky's associate] Mr. Patarkatsishvili having any part of the newly combined businesses. I recall no discussion of Mr. Berezovsky or Mr. Patarkatsishvili having any such interest, nor of any discussion about a 'trust' in their favor," he added.

During the hearing, Deripaska spoke in Russian via an interpreter, but it was clear from his occasional comments on the translation that he understood English.

Deripaska, speaking in a deadpan manner, drew laughter from the audience with his descriptions of Berezovsky and how Deripaska once lent him a large sum of money.

"He was pleading with me, he needed to buy some property, some real estate, and that was really touching. It was quite touching," Deripaska said.

When quizzed by Berezovsky's lawyer about the Dorchester meeting, Deripaska added: "He could have turned up [dressed] in any manner, even in the nude. That would have been quite in his character."

Berezovsky also claims that Abramovich "intimidated" him in 2000 into disposing of a 21.5 percent stake in Russian oil company Sibneft at a fraction of its value. Berezovsky's total claims in the case amount to more than $6 billion.

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