

Berezovsky-Abramovich Slugfest Draws to a Close

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LONDON — Claims that Boris Berezovsky went to meetings in a bathrobe and signed text messages as "Dr. Evil" were invented by Roman Abramovich and his friends, Berezovsky's lawyers argued Tuesday as a lawsuit between the men drew to a close.

Both sides have accused each other of dishonesty and greed during the three-month trial in London. Over the next two days, Berezovsky's lawyers have a last chance to discredit Chelsea Football Club owner Abramovich, 45, as they sum up the \$6.8 billion claim against him to judge Elizabeth Gloster.

"The cynical manipulation of evidence and indeed of the trial process," by Abramovich is one of the factors Gloster should consider, Berezovsky lawyer Laurence Rabinowitz said. Their "smears and innuendo" cast doubt on Abramovich's case, he argued.

Berezovsky, now living in exile in London, claims Abramovich used Kremlin connections to intimidate him into selling stakes in Russian oil and metal companies for far below their real value 10 years ago.

The trial ends this week after hundreds of hours of court time, millions of pounds in legal fees and witnesses ranging from kitchen staff to billionaires such as RusAl founder Oleg Deripaska.

Among the allegations made against Berezovsky was a claim by Deripaska that he arrived at a meeting in a London hotel in 2000 wearing a robe and looking disheveled. That led Rabinowitz to ask Deripaska: "Have you ever seen him in the nude?"

Berezovsky, 65, who built Russia's largest car dealership in the 1990s, fled the country in 2000 after falling out of favor with then-President Vladimir Putin.

Associates of Abramovich also claimed Berezovsky had links to organized crime and fabricated a story about a text message, signed Dr. Evil, sent to intimidate a potential witness, Berezovsky's lawyers said.

During more than 30 hours of cross-examination, Berezovsky said Abramovich wasn't smart enough to succeed in Russia without him. He maintains that he helped Abramovich build up stakes in oil company Sibneft and aluminum assets, which eventually became part of RusAl in return for a share of the companies, and that Abramovich forced him to sell by saying the Russian state would seize his shares unless he did. Berezovsky claims he lost about \$6.8 billion on the sales.

Abramovich said he gave Berezovsky and an associate, Badri Patarkatsishvili, hundreds of millions of dollars for physical and political protection before paying them \$1.3 billion to break off the arrangement in 2001 and 2002.

Any decision by Gloster, who isn't expected to rule for several weeks, could be appealed.

It would have been fairer if the Abramovich-Berezovsky trial had been heard in Russia, Putin said in his annual question-and-answer session in December.

Edward Mermelstein, a New York-based attorney who represents wealthy Russians, said the case had been a disaster for the image of the country's businessmen, including Abramovich.

"At this point, Abramovich has already lost simply because of all the negative press associated with this event," he said, noting that Berezovsky's image was already tarnished before the trial.

"It's a very difficult situation to have the country's dirty laundry aired out in the international press."

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