

# Yeltsin Freed Russia, But Berezovsky Made It for Sale

By [Owen Matthews](#)

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It's hard to write fiction about Russia. Reality stubbornly keeps all the best plots and characters for itself. No writer could have invented Boris Abramovich Berezovsky: a mathematician who became a billionaire, a boy from a modest Jewish family who became Russia's kingmaker. He was a man who in his exile in London became the center of Polonium-poisoning plots that even Ian Fleming would have found outlandish.

I first met Berezovsky in 1998 when he was at the height of his powers. The setting was the luxurious Logovaz Club, a restored pre-revolutionary mansion in central Moscow filled with Versace furniture and staffed by doe-eyed beauties and unsmiling security men in bad black suits. Berezovsky was in a hurry — he was always in a hurry — speaking fast, hunched forward and fixing his interlocutor with an intense stare. Power in Boris Yeltsin's Russia was a family business, and Berezovsky was consigliere to the inner circle of Yeltsin relatives and allies known as "the Family." He was their political fixer, the key mover in a pyramid of power and patronage whose nominal head — Yeltsin himself — was a near-invalid, rarely seen in public. Berezovsky spoke to Russia's top ministers and generals in patronizing tones,

like a star coach brought in to dredge some talent from the members of a slow-witted, third-division football team.

Our conversation was interrupted constantly by calls on his mobile phone — to which Berezovsky was devoted — and he dismissed his callers after 15 seconds of impatient grunts and a curt instruction. "Sorry, the privatization minister," he said, hanging up, returning to our interview with a exasperated roll of the eyes.

I saw Berezovsky in a Moscow nightclub a few weeks later. His wealth and power seemed to bend the world around him. All eyes followed the small phalanx of bag carriers and bodyguards who scurried after him. He joined a group of fat wealthy men who bent toward him like iron filings around a magnet. For Berezovsky, this was just a 2 a.m. business meeting. His beautiful girlfriend Marina was with him, sitting silent in front of an untouched cocktail. Business concluded, he took her gently but firmly by the arm and led her out. She was his next appointment.

Berezovsky was certainly wealthy. He made his first fortune selling Lada cars, accumulating millions while somehow the AvtoVAZ factory which made them remained mired in debt and dysfunction. In addition, he acquired one of Russia's largest oil companies, a chunk of its national airline Aeroflot, a controlling stake in the country's main television station.

Yet despite his billions, he was always more interested in power than money. When he praised a former mathematician colleague as a genius in a later interview, I jokingly asked, "If he's so smart, why isn't he rich?" Berezovsky angrily responded that making money was "just a talent, a narrow talent, not requiring much intelligence."

More than anything, he was a politics junkie. I once witnessed him locked in conversation with a formidable female Russian journalist, a passionate critic of the regime who hated Berezovsky and all he stood for, yet they were joking and chatting. It could have been flirting. They were two politics obsessives, urgently sharing gossip, regardless of their ideological differences.

Berezovsky was the architect of post-Soviet Russia — not once but twice. His first invention was the devilish Yeltsin-era equation where the rich carved out great chunks of state property, then turned their money into power over and over again. Yeltsin may have made Russia free, but it was Berezovsky who made it for sale: oil companies, television stations and other media, parliament and police were also bought up by rival oligarchs who used their tame ministers, editors and cops to do down their enemies.

But it is Berezovsky's second legacy which we live with today: Vladimir Putin.

Putin was Berezovsky's creation. That sounds somehow controversial now, but none of the key players would seriously deny that Berezovsky was the prime mover in the search for a successor to the ailing Yeltsin, a successor who would be popular with the Russian people yet preserve the wealth and privileges of the Family who selected him. In Putin, once the faithful sidekick and enforcer for the liberal St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, Berezovsky thought he'd found a safe pair of hands. He was, of course wrong. Within three years of coming to power, Putin had put one oligarch, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in jail, and two more, including Berezovsky, had fled for their lives.

Since Berezovsky's departure for London in 2000, he has been demonized by the Kremlin as the antithesis of everything Putin stands for. But the truth is that they were once patron and protege, master and apprentice. Berezovsky was Dr. Frankenstein, whose diminutive monster was a poker-faced KGB officer with a shy smile. "I am a bad judge of people," Berezovsky would say to journalists about his fatal miscalculation. "I thought that Putin was a democrat, but he was just a street punk."

Exile didn't suit Berezovsky. Indeed there was something almost Dantean about the symmetry of the punishment he suffered. The arch-insider was forced outside. Gentility didn't suit him, nor inactivity. Although he was dismissive of money, it was the most powerful, if bluntest, tool for doing what he really loved, which was manipulating people and bending them to his will. In his final years, he faced relative poverty, which for Berezovsky meant losing his power. It was an unbearable price to pay.

In London, where I met him on several occasions over the past decade, he invariably boasted of his latest efforts to depose Putin. I reported in Newsweek in 2005 that Berezovsky told me he was ready to finance revolutionary change in Russia and that "the regime could only be changed through violence." The Kremlin seemed to miss this quote, but when the Guardian reported the same phrase on its front page a few months later the propaganda machine went into overdrive to cast Berezovsky as an evil meddler, the apotheosis of Yeltsin-era corruption that had been slain by Putin. The Guardian's Moscow correspondent Luke Harding also found himself the victim of a sustained campaign of harassment from KGB goons who regularly broke into his house and office.

Death was always very close. Berezovsky survived an assassination attempt in 1994, when 200 grams of TNT were placed in the engine of his Mercedes. The explosion decapitated the driver but left Berezovsky miraculously unhurt. The investigation into the bombing was headed by Alexander Litvinenko, then an officer of the Federal Security Service who later himself defected to London.

I lunched with Berezovsky in London in 2005. Avi, his unsmiling former Mossad bodyguard, was sitting alone at a neighboring table watching the door. During lunch, Berezovsky told me that some old Moscow associates had been in touch and wanted to meet. Berezovsky had been warned that these men planned to poison him with a radioactive substance and had appealed to the British police for protection. I didn't put much faith in Berezovsky's tale. By this time, his conspiracy theories were sounding more and more outlandish as he lost touch with the realities of Moscow life.

It was only when Litvinenko, now living in London in a house owned by Berezovsky, was murdered by a dose of polonium administered in a cup of tea in November 2006 that it became clear what a close shave Berezovsky had had. His friend and business partner, Badri Patarkatsishvili, also died young in London in 2008. Berezovsky was convinced that Patarkatsishvili, too, had been murdered.

Berezovsky loved and admired Britain's legal system. "Britain is a country governed by laws," Berezovsky would often say, "Russia is governed by understandings" — *po ponyatiyam* in Russian criminal jargon. So it is a supreme irony that Berezovsky's final defeat was at the hands of Britain's justice system. He tried to sue his former business partner Roman

Abramovich for more than £3 billion (\$4.5 billion) on the grounds that Berezovsky had transferred his shares of the Sibneft oil company to his friend for safekeeping after he left Russia. Now he wanted them back.

But whatever "understanding" the two men may have had didn't stand up to hard British law. The legal battle was the most expensive in British legal history, racking up lawyers' fees of more than £100 million (\$152 million), and it ended in utter humiliation for Berezovsky. Handing down the judgment last August, the judge "found Mr. Berezovsky an unimpressive, and inherently unreliable, witness who regarded truth as a transitory, flexible concept, which could be moulded to suit his current purposes."

Given that so many of Putin's enemies have ended up dead in mysterious circumstances, it's no surprise that a hazardous materials squad is now combing his Surrey mansion for signs of foul play. But it's equally plausible that Berezovsky committed suicide. He was a gambler of the highest order, and he was never under any illusions that the stakes he played for excluded his own life. In his career, he won and lost billions. He shaped the fate of his country and was equally at ease negotiating with presidents, terrorists and criminals. A life of relative poverty, obscurity and irrelevance would have been inconceivable to him. A small life was a life not worth living. Those were the rules by which he lived. It would come as no surprise that he died by them, too.

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