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U.K. Court Hears Abramovich Libel Claim Over Putin Book

By Anna Malpas for AFP

July 28, 2021



Sergei Savostyanov / TASS

Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich rejects "lazy inaccuracies" in a book that claims he took over Chelsea Football Club at the Kremlin's behest, his lawyer said Wednesday at the start of a U.K. libel trial.

The billionaire is suing Reuters journalist Catherine Belton and publisher HarperCollins over their 2020 book "Putin's People: How The KGB Took Back Russia And Then Took On The West".

The best-selling book alleges that President Vladimir Putin has overseen a vast exodus of ill-gotten money to spread Russian influence abroad, including the purchase of Chelsea by Abramovich in 2003.

The two-day hearing in London groups claims for libel brought against Belton and

HarperCollins by Russian state-owned energy giant Rosneft, and against HarperCollins by Russian businessman Mikhail Fridman.

Pyotr Aven, the head of Russian lender Alfa-Bank, had also brought a data protection claim against the publisher.

But the High Court in central London heard that HarperCollins had agreed to remove offending material relating to Fridman and Aven from future editions, so their cases were discontinued.

Representing Abramovich, lawyer Hugh Tomlinson said the Chelsea owner did "not bring this claim lightly" but the book "unfortunately repeats lazy inaccuracies about his role in the events described."

He described the book as alleging that Abramovich had been "cashier" to the family of Russia's former president Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, and then "a custodian of slush funds" to Yeltsin's successor Putin.

"The ordinary reasonable reader thinks there is a lot of villainy going on and Abramovich is part of it," the barrister said.

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Abramovich, in a statement released by his lawyers in March, said the book was having "a damaging effect, not only on my personal reputation but also in respect of the activities of Chelsea Football Club".

But representing Belton and HarperCollins, lawyer Andrew Caldecott said the libel claim "starts on the wrong foot".

The book did not accuse Abramovich of being part of the web of former KGB agents in Saint Petersburg who rode to power under Putin, and the claim he was a custodian of slush funds "simply isn't in the book".

"In terms of describing the Putin regime as autocratic and kleptocratic, there are a whole host of facts presented as supporting that," Caldecott added.

The case has renewed criticism over the way wealthy foreigners not resident in the UK use British courts and costly London law firms to pursue claims for defamation.

England has some of the toughest libel laws in the world, and the onus is on publishers to prove that contentious material is factually true or in the public interest.

Successful claims can lead to hundreds of thousands of pounds in damages, as well as punitive legal costs for defendants.

In the House of Lords last month, opposition Labour peer Jeff Rooker condemned a "strategic

lawsuit" that aimed to "silence a journalist."

He slammed the "coordinated, shameful abuse of our courts, which must have started life in the Kremlin."

When Abramovich brought his claim in March, HarperCollins said both it and Belton would "robustly defend the claim and the right to report on matters of considerable public interest".

The publisher said the book was "an authoritative, important and conscientiously sourced work on contemporary Russia, that was much praised on publication by experts in the field."

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