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Abramovich Settles Claim with 'Putin's People' Author Belton Over Chelsea Buyout Allegations

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Publishers HarperCollins and author Catherine Belton have settled a defamation case brought by Roman Abramovich. **Mike Egerton / PA Wire / TASS**

Russian billionaire and Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich has reached a settlement with journalist Catherine Belton in a defamation lawsuit brought against her and her publisher over claims in her 2020 book "Putin's People."

In a statement issued Wednesday, publishers HarperCollins said they had "settled their dispute with Roman Abramovich over certain passages in Putin's People," acknowledged that the book contains "some inaccurate information," and agreed to amend sections in a new and updated edition.

Some 1,700 words will be deleted or added to the new version of the book.

The settlement brings an end to a months-long legal saga that could have seen HarperCollins

and Belton liable for significant financial damages had they lost. The publishers said the cases "had been resolved with no damages or costs payable by HarperCollins."

In lieu of damages, the publishers have agreed to make a charitable donation of an undisclosed amount, a spokesperson for Abramovich said in a statement issued by Chelsea Football Club.

Abramovich launched the suit in response to allegations made by Belton in the book that he had bought the London football club under instruction from the Kremlin — a claim which became the focus of the lawsuit launched in London.

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"HarperCollins has amended the text concerning the reasons for Mr. Abramovich's purchase of Chelsea Football Club. While the book always included a denial that Mr. Abramovich was acting under anybody's direction when he purchased Chelsea, the new edition will include a more detailed explanation of Mr. Abramovich's motivations for buying the club," the publishers said.

Abramovich has repeatedly denied the claims that he bought Chelsea under instruction from the Kremlin.

"We are pleased that HarperCollins and the author have apologized to Mr. Abramovich and agreed to amend the book, removing several false claims about him. These statements lacked evidence and were indeed false. This follows the English High Court's determination that the book did indeed include several defamatory claims about Mr. Abramovich," a spokesperson for the Chelsea owner said in a statement sent to The Moscow Times.

"Mr. Abramovich's ambition with Chelsea Football Club has always been clear and transparent: to create world-class teams on the pitch and to ensure the club plays a positive role in all of its communities," the spokesperson added.

In its statement, HarperCollins also said that "there is no evidence, beyond the statements of the individuals themselves, supporting claims made to the author by Sergei Pugachev and two other unnamed individuals about the purchase of Chelsea Football Club."

Pugachev — a key source for Belton's book, which details President Vladimir Putin's rise to power and the people who have helped him maintain and tighten his grip on the country over the last three decades — is a serial investor and former member of Putin's inner circle. After falling out with the Kremlin, he now lives in exile, has been involved in a number of legal disputes over his assets with Russian authorities and has said he has been politically targeted by the Kremlin.

HarperCollins and Belton, a special correspondent for Reuters and former reporter for the Financial Times and The Moscow Times, also issued an apology to Abramovich in the statement.

"This last year has felt like a war of attrition in which HarperCollins and I have been bombarded from all sides with lawsuits from four Russian billionaires and the Kremlin's oil

champion Rosneft," Belton said on Twitter.

Those comments were echoed by HarperCollins, which said in a separate statement that the book and Belton had been "under attack" from oligarchs and companies with "vast resources at their disposal."

It defended the "highly regarded and critically acclaimed work" and praised Belton's "knowledge, tenacity and bravery" in putting the book together.

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Belton also agreed to change sections of the book detailing Abramovich's relationship with Boris Berezovsky, the former Russian oligarch who became an early critic of Putin and was found dead in his home in Britain in 2013.

Belton had alleged that Berezovsky was an owner of Sibneft — the large oil company which was linked to Abramovich and Berezovsky since it was privatized in the mid-1990s, became embroiled in the Yukos saga which brought down Mikhail Khodorkovsky and was eventually sold by Abramovich to state-run gas giant Gazprom.

"Statements in the book that Boris Berezovsky had in fact been an owner of Sibneft have been corrected to make clear that, although this was a widely held view in Russia, this was found to be untrue by a U.K. High Court following an extensive trial in 2012, which (as the book always noted) found Berezovsky to be an 'inherently unreliable witness,'" HarperCollins said.

The book's sections on the creation and sale of Sibneft have also been corrected or deleted as part of the settlement, Abramovich's spokesperson said.

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