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UK Sanctions Hit Chelsea Owner Roman Abramovich

By Phil Hazlewood and James Pheby for AFP

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Roman Abramovich. **Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency**

Chelsea Football Club's Russian owner Roman Abramovich was on Thursday hit with a UK assets freeze and travel ban, throwing his plans to sell the European and world club champions into disarray.

The billionaire owner of the English Premier League side was one of seven oligarchs slapped with restrictions over Russia's Ukraine invasion, including his former business partner Oleg Deripaska.

Others sanctioned were Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin, whom the British government described as Russian President Vladimir Putin's "right-hand man," and the head of Gazprom Alexei Miller.

Also on the list were VTB bank chairman Andrey Kostin, Transneft president Nikolai Tokarev

and Bank Rossiya chairman Dmitri Lebedev.

London said the seven have a collective net worth of about £15 billion ($19.7 billion, 17.8 billion euros) and described them all as part of Putin's inner circle.

Related article: Abramovich to Sell Chelsea as Oligarch Moves to Sever British Ties

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been accused of delaying action against wealthy Russians, and turning a blind eye to Russian money that has coursed through London since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He called the sanctions "the latest step in the UK's unwavering support for the Ukrainian people."

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss added: "Today's sanctions show once again that oligarchs and kleptocrats have no place in our economy or society.

"With their close links to Putin they are complicit in his aggression. The blood of the Ukrainian people is on their hands. They should hang their heads in shame."

Special license

Speculation has swirled since Russia's invasion of Ukraine about whether Abramovich would be included in the targeted action against Russian billionaires perceived to be close to the Kremlin.

He announced last week that he was selling Chelsea, after buying the English Premier League side in 2003 and bankrolling its successes at domestic and European level.

The British government estimated his net worth at £9.4 billion but said it was mitigating the effect of the sanctions on Chelsea by allowing the club to continue to operate.

A special license "authorizes a number of football-related activities," the government said in a statement.

"This includes permissions for the club to continue playing matches and other football-related activity which will in turn protect the Premier League, the wider football pyramid, loyal fans and other clubs," it added.

Selling the club or transferring players were not included on the list of permitted activities, scuppering Abramovich's plans to offload the club.

A UK sanctions official told reporters: "The license that's been issued right now does not allow for the sale of the club.

"It will be for the Treasury to consider the further application for a license to sell the club," he added, but said no request for that had yet been made.

Johnson's official spokesman told reporters the government was "open" to a sale, subject to a

new license being approved.

But he added: "Under no circumstances would any sale allow Roman Abramovich to profit from that or take any money from that sale."

Shares in Russian steel giant Evraz, of which Abramovich is the major shareholder, plunged almost 12% on the London Stock Exchange Thursday morning until trading was suspended.

Yachts and planes

Abramovich announced last week he had made the "incredibly difficult" decision to sell Chelsea and pledged that proceeds would go to victims of the Ukraine war.

According to reports, Abramovich was still holding out for a bid in the region of £3 billion for the club he bought for £140 million.

Abramovich, 55, was one of the businessmen working in the shadows following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, seizing control of lucrative assets once held by the Soviet state, at bargain prices.

His property holdings include a 15-bedroom mansion in London's exclusive Kensington area. He also owns one of the world's largest yachts, the 533-foot (162-meter) Eclipse.

Abramovich is also subject to transport sanctions, which have banned Russian aircraft from flying or landing in the UK and give the government powers to remove planes belonging to designated Russian individuals and entities.

Russian ships have been banned from UK ports.

Abramovich changed the face and profile of English football when he took over Chelsea, turning the perennial also-rans into a European powerhouse and ushering in the era of mass money in the domestic game.

Chelsea have won 19 major trophies in the Abramovich era, including their first two Champions League crowns and five Premier League titles.

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