

Boris Berezovsky died bankrupt and almost certainly by his own hand. As the battle over what remains of his estate hots up, *Mark Franchetti*, with access to close family and friends, charts his extraordinary downfall

THE LAST DAYS OF AN OLIGARCH



When he walked into the restaurant of the Four Seasons hotel in Park Lane, London, shortly after 5pm on Friday, March 22, 2013, Boris Berezovsky, Russian oligarch par excellence and the Kremlin's public enemy No 1, had just 16 hours to live. Dressed in an old, black turtleneck, a jacket and the same pashmina police were to find around his neck the next day, the former multibillionaire strolled past Arab businessmen doing deals as the restaurant pianist played.

Shadowing the Russian was Avi Navama, his loyal ex-Mossad bodyguard, the solitary security detail of what had once been an impressive armed force of former French Foreign Legionnaires. Waiting for Berezovsky was a reporter who had flown in from Moscow to interview him — but the former oligarch had already changed his mind. He curtly asked the journalist to switch off his tape recorder and warned he would only talk off the record. The man once dubbed the Godfather of the Kremlin had become a shadow of his former self. Gone was his unmistakably manic manner of speech. He seemed absent, spoke slowly and at times his hand was shaking.

He told the stunned reporter, Ilya Zhegulev, that at 67 he had no idea what to do with his life and hinted that he wanted only to be allowed back to Russia. An obsession with removing the Russian president from power had consumed Berezovsky — and part of his fortune — ever since he fled Moscow for exile in London in 2000. "I've lost the meaning of life," he told Zhegulev. "I should never have left Russia." His return, however, would depend on his arch-enemy, Vladimir Putin.

When Zhegulev pressed Berezovsky on how he had gone from being worth £2bn to the verge of bankruptcy in little more than a decade, he looked uneasy, and cut short the interview, saying he was running late for a meeting. "His state made a strong impression on me," recalls Zhegulev. "He seemed very distressed, a broken man. I couldn't believe how he'd changed."

The next morning, in a Costa Coffee in Earl's Court, the reporter met Yuli Dubov, a close friend of Berezovsky of 41 years, who also lived in exile. He told Dubov he thought Berezovsky could be suicidal. "I was dismissive," recalls Dubov. "I told him not to worry, that Berezovsky liked playing things up. I said that Boris was down in the dumps, but was a fighter. He'd bounce back."

Unbeknown to the two Russians, Berezovsky had already been dead since 9.30am. His bodyguard, Navama, found him at 3pm that day, at the £20m mansion near Ascot, Berkshire, that belonged to Berezovsky's second ex-wife. The oligarch had been a guest there for eight months, since his staggering financial problems had forced him to sell the Surrey mansion that



TATYANA YUMASHEVA AND VALENTIN YUMASHEV

Yeltsin's daughter and her husband, a former Kremlin chief of staff. Berezovsky was friends with the power couple



GALINA BESHAROVA

Berezovsky's second wife. Their divorce cost him £100m. He was found dead in her Berkshire mansion

had been his home since 2001. Navama had spent the morning running errands that Berezovsky had given him the previous evening. "He looked at me with low, tired eyes. Like he doesn't know what to do," Navama later said of the last time he saw his boss alive. When he went looking for Berezovsky after he failed to turn up for lunch the next day, he found his mobile phone by his bedside table with several missed calls. Alarmed, Navama checked the en-suite bathroom but found the door locked from inside. "Mr Boris?!" he called, but after receiving no answer, dialled 999 and kicked down the door.

Clad in a black T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, Berezovsky's cold, stiff body lay on the floor. A torn length of his favourite black pashmina was tied around his neck. His face was a deep purple. There were no signs of a struggle or forced entry. When a

BADRI PATARKATSISHVILI
Berezovsky's larger-than-life business partner and closest friend — pictured in a traditional Georgian hat — died in 2008, throwing his finances into disarray



ALEXANDER LITVINENKO
Exiled former Russian spy, poisoned in London in 2006. Berezovsky paid him to uncover corruption at the Kremlin



BORIS YELTSIN

Appointed Berezovsky — a former mathematician — to Russia's powerful security council

paramedic responded to Navama's call his radiation alarm went off, triggering fears of a repeat of the polonium murder in 2006 of Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB officer and Putin critic whom Berezovsky had employed. But the device was found to have a battery fault and extensive tests detected no radioactive substances. Police found a fingerprint on the shower rail that they were unable to match. Nonetheless, Scotland Yard believes Berezovsky's death was a suicide and a pathologist ruled out murder.

A German forensic scientist hired by the dead man's family told the inquest that the strangulation marks were inconsistent with suspension, and that the oligarch's purple face was something he had "never seen before" in a suicide hanging. He suggested that several assailants had killed the former billionaire and staged the hanging. The coroner dismissed this theory, saying he had



ROMAN ABRAMOVICH

The protégé he fell out with and unsuccessfully tried to sue in a £3.2bn lawsuit that left Berezovsky's reputation in tatters



VLADIMIR PUTIN

Berezovsky helped Putin to power, but lost his favour. In exile, he used Britain as a base to try to oust the Russian president



WENTWORTH PARK

The £25m Surrey mansion that was Berezovsky's home from 2001. He had to sell it in 2012

ELENA GORBUNOVA

Berezovsky's long-standing girlfriend, with whom he had two children. She sued him a year before he died



NETWORK BORIS
MONEY
SEX
POWER



ANNIKA ANCVERINA

The 25-year-old student was one of Berezovsky's last girlfriends



ANDREI LUGOVOI

The man accused of murdering Alexander Litvinenko was a former security adviser to Berezovsky and Patarkatsishvili. He is being protected by the Kremlin from extradition and prosecution in Britain

KATERINA SABIROVA

One of many mistresses. She had been due to go on holiday to Israel with him two days after he was found dead



ASLAN MASKHADOV

The rebel president of Chechnya (centre) when the region was at war with Moscow. He had many dealings with Berezovsky when the oligarch was deputy secretary of Russia's security council

heard "compelling evidence" to suggest the Russian had committed suicide, but that, in view of the German's distinguished reputation, he had to record an open verdict.

Elizaveta Berezovskaya, the oligarch's daughter from his first marriage, told the coroner that she could not believe her father had taken his own life, but confirmed earlier statements she had made that he had spoken of suicide and that she had feared that he would kill himself. "But the more I thought about it the more doubts I had. My gut feeling is that he was poisoned," she said. "I can think of many people who were interested in my father's death." Asked by the coroner if she knew who these people were, she replied: "Yes, I think we all know," hinting at the Kremlin.

It is only fitting that conspiracy theories should linger around the premature death of a figure so controversial, flamboyant and

murky as Boris Abramovich Berezovsky. His name continually popped up, indirectly, during the lengthy public inquiry into the murder of Litvinenko, which came to an end last month. As well as keeping Litvinenko — who had become a paid MI5 and MI6 source — on his own payroll for years, the oligarch had also had many dealings with the ex-KGB spy's alleged killer, Andrei Lugovoi, a security consultant. Traces of polonium allegedly left by Lugovoi were found in Berezovsky's Mayfair office. One theory is that Russia's security services ordered Litvinenko's death to frame the oligarch. To this day, Moscow accuses Berezovsky of killing Litvinenko, but has never provided a shred of evidence to back its claims.

So how did the epitome of the Russian oligarch lose his fortune and meet his own end? The former Soviet mathematician's single greatest political mistake was helping

Putin to the presidency. His second was thinking he could take him on when the two fell out. Both miscalculations were down to hubris and ego, and his determination to involve himself in politics.

Badri Patarkatsishvili, his closest friend and business partner, ran their empire, which spanned oil refineries, car plants, media and Aeroflot, the national airline. "Boris was useless with money," says Yuli Dubov. "He didn't know how to earn it, but was brilliant at blowing it. He was an ideas man, not a manager. Badri was in charge of the cash and the books; Boris strategised. When he needed funds he asked Badri."

From the early 1990s, Putin and Berezovsky enjoyed friendly relations and the oligarch reportedly contributed to his presidential campaign. Crucially, he gave Putin the support of his media empire. He revelled in his image as the Kremlin's ➤➤➤



THE DARK KNIGHT
Berezovsky dressed as Batman in his Mayfair office, holding the flag of the Russian Federation. “That’s how Boris liked to see himself in exile, as a superhero — Batman on a mission to save Russia,” says his friend Rafael Filinov

grey cardinal. The honeymoon was short-lived as the new president quickly sought to end the oligarchs’ political influence. Berezovsky began to publicly criticise Putin, attracting a string of fraud and embezzlement investigations into his businesses.

In 2001, facing arrest, Berezovsky fled Russia and eventually settled in Britain. To the Kremlin’s fury, he was granted political asylum in 2003. He and Patarkatsishvili, a larger-than-life Georgian, lived lavishly. At the height of the oligarch’s flamboyance and notorious womanising, there were reports of him spending £1m a week and of Patarkatsishvili sending his private jet to Georgia to fly takeaways from local restaurants to Britain.

Berezovsky would spend the next 12 years boisterously seeking to oust Putin. A tongue-in-cheek photograph of the oligarch taken in his Mayfair offices a year before his death shows him straight-faced, dressed in a Batman costume and holding Russia’s flag. “That’s how Boris liked to see himself in exile, as a superhero — Batman on a mission to save Russia,” says Rafael Filinov, a friend, former trouble-shooter and business associate of the oligarch.

Berezovsky’s downfall began on February 12, 2008, when a massive heart attack killed Patarkatsishvili, at the age of 52, at his mansion in Surrey. The pair had never signed any papers to regulate their multibillion-pound fortune.

Deals were verbal, gentlemen’s agreements that, according to Berezovsky, split all their assets equally.

But the Georgian left a disputed will and scant information about where he had hidden his assets away from the eyes of Russian investigators. For Berezovsky, years of expensive asset searches and litigation with Patarkatsishvili’s estate and widow followed. “It caused a lot of problems,”

Berezovsky told me in 2012. “Badri controlled all our business. When he died, it turned out he didn’t protect me. I was shocked by the mess he left. I never expected him to die before me.”

Friends and relatives unanimously believe that Berezovsky would still be alive today had Patarkatsishvili not died prematurely. “He was lost without him,” says a source close to both billionaires.

To raise funds in 2009 Berezovsky sold his £200m superyacht, Darius, which had seven decks, two swimming pools and a military water cannon powerful enough to sink a boat 100 yards away. But his coffers were hit the following year by a record £100m divorce settlement with his second wife, Galina. Next, the combative oligarch embarked on one of his most ill-judged battles: taking to court his former protégé, Roman Abramovich, the billionaire owner of Chelsea Football Club, in a record £3.2bn lawsuit.

“Almost everyone told him not to go to court, but Boris couldn’t be swayed once he’d made up his mind,” says Egor Schuppe, Berezovsky’s former son-in-law. Schuppe, a London-based businessman, was one of the last of Berezovsky’s confidants to speak to him, and the first to publicly break the news of his death. “He was absolutely sure he’d win the case,” Schuppe tells me, in his first interview about Berezovsky’s death.

“Getting money from Abramovich was important, but it wasn’t the main point,” says

Yuli Dubov. “Boris relished the chance to inflict pain on the Kremlin. He thought the revelations from the court case would embarrass Putin. This would be his triumph.”

The oligarch spent a few days in Israel before the court passed its verdict. Before flying back to London, Berezovsky, an orthodox believer, went to church in Jerusalem to pray for victory. “After church, he also went to pray at the Wailing Wall and then asked me, as a Muslim Tatar, to do the same in the city’s main mosque, to have the three main religions covered,” recalls Filinov. “That was classic Berezovsky.”

The judge who heard the case didn’t hear Berezovsky’s prayers and ruled against him. In a devastating blow for a man who had spent years and millions trying to build up his reputation in Britain, she described him as “an inherently unreliable witness” whose evidence was at times “deliberately dishonest”, and who regarded truth as “a flexible concept”.

Berezovsky later told me that he was “astonished” by the ruling and “most of all by the personal attack the judge launched on me”. “The reputational damage — far more than the money — is what hit him hardest,” says Schuppe. “From then on, it was downhill. He was like a fighter pilot who’d been blown out of the sky.”

Everyone who was close to the former billionaire — even those who do not believe he committed suicide — agree that he “changed radically” and became deeply depressed after losing the case.

“It happened at once,” Katerina Sabirova, 25, a model and girlfriend of the oligarch at the time, tells me. “He said that he didn’t know how to go on living. We stopped going out, he didn’t want to see anyone. He hardly ate and suffered from insomnia. He’d stay in bed until 1pm and often didn’t want to get up. He lost weight and would smoke several packets a day.”

The financial consequences of the case were disastrous. He was also saddled with a £100m legal bill for both sides. Desperate to raise cash, he sold Wentworth Park, his Surrey estate, for £25m.

Sabirova recalls once asking him for cash to go shopping in London with a friend. He said he was cash-strapped and that they had to be careful with money, as he gave her £1,000 in cash. “Usually he’d give more,” she says. “I said we should save, that I should ➤➤➤”

“The reputational damage from the Abramovich case is what hit him hardest. He was like a fighter pilot who’d been blown out of the sky”

put some of that £1,000 aside. He said, ‘No, next time I’ll think of something.’”

Adding to his financial woes, Elena Gorbunova, the oligarch’s long-standing girlfriend and mother of his two youngest children, began suing him, leading to the freezing of his few remaining assets. “Her suing was a knock-out blow for Boris,” says his former son-in-law. The oligarch’s debts are estimated to have reached nearly £300m — £46m of them owed to the British taxman.

Berezovsky’s estate was declared insolvent last year. But his many creditors are locked in a battle to try to recoup some of their losses from a few assets the oligarch is thought to have still had. Insiders say there is a row hotting up between his ex-wife Besharova and his girlfriend Gorbunova, over a multimillion-pound property on the Côte d’Azur that was seized by French authorities. “The whole thing’s a mess, and given the dire state of his financial affairs it’s all a bit unseemly,” said a source familiar with the dispute.

After the Abramovich case, relatives say Berezovsky began to spend days in his room with the blinds drawn, and was treated for clinical depression in Israel and Britain. He rejected in-patient treatment and was dismissive of counselling. For a while he took antidepressants, but stopped when they caused him severe liver problems. The change is thought to have contributed to his wild mood swings.

“He could be really down in a dark hole one moment, and the next be his old self — energetic and full of plans,” recalled Schuppe, who is deeply critical of the way the oligarch’s ex-wife and girlfriend took him to court over money — effectively cutting off his cash flow. “He lost his confidence. Worst of all was his loss of status, not being a player any more. It paralysed him and he wasn’t capable of looking after his own interests any more.”

Friends and relatives also say Berezovsky became bitterly disillusioned with the West and felt betrayed by the British legal system. He suspected an improbable political conspiracy to appease the Kremlin was behind the scathing verdict in the Abramovich case.

Three months before his death, he reportedly wrote a letter to Putin asking for forgiveness, conceding he had been wrong and pleading to be allowed back to Russia. After Berezovsky died the Russian president confirmed receiving it, but some of those closest to the oligarch still doubt he penned such a letter. Other sources claim it was passed to Putin by Roman Abramovich and another intermediary.

“He often talked with me and many others about taking his own life,” Navama, the bodyguard, told British authorities investigating his boss’s death. On one

occasion the oligarch stood with a steak knife in his hand, asking: “Where should I cut?” On another occasion he asked: “What is the best way to die?” The tycoon asked both his son and his bodyguard to demonstrate how he could choke himself. Schuppe recalls his father-in-law once asking him from a fourth-floor balcony if a fall from that height would kill him.

In early March, Berezovsky changed his will, cutting out his two ex-wives. In a sign that he thought he would not live much longer, he added his 88-year-old mother, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Yet, in the last few days before his death his spirits seemed to improve. He spent much of Monday, March 18, 2013, planning a 10-day trip to Israel with his model girlfriend, Sabirova, which he had been due to take two days after he was found dead. He spoke to Schuppe, who paid for his and Sabirova’s tickets — she was to join him from Moscow. Schuppe, a wealthy web entrepreneur, told him he would pay for his bodyguard and other expenses until the end of the month, then he could no longer afford to support him.

The same day, Berezovsky called his friend Filinov in Moscow to ask him to lend him \$3,000 in cash to give to Sabirova as travel money. “Is she looking good?” he asked. He also phoned a former business partner in Latvia, asking him to join him on the Dead Sea, as he had an idea he wanted to share with him. Berezovsky spent the next day at home. He spoke with Dubov, who says his mood seemed to have improved.

On Wednesday, three days before he died, Berezovsky was driven into London by his bodyguard to meet Vladimir Gusinsky, formerly one of Russia’s most powerful oligarchs, who also fled Russia after falling out with Putin. In the 1990s the two tycoons had been both allies and bitter foes. Sources say that Gusinsky had agreed to lend the beleaguered Russian money and the two men were to meet again in Israel. “He felt he was no longer in the game and had lost his way... but he said he was ready to fight,” Gusinsky said later.

Berezovsky spent much of his last day — Friday, March 22 — at his ex-wife’s Berkshire mansion. In the morning he spoke to Mikhail Cherney, an Uzbek-born tycoon living in Israel, who had lent him several million pounds to help fight the Abramovich case. He asked Cherney to book a hotel. “He was

He stood with a steak knife in his hand, asking: “Where should I cut?” He also asked his son and his bodyguard how he could choke himself

going to stay in Tel Aviv for three days, then Jerusalem, then the Dead Sea. He said he was coming,” Cherney said.

After lunch, Berezovsky was driven to the Four Seasons to meet the reporter Zhegulev. Following their conversation, the Forbes reporter accompanied him to his Mercedes. “‘Don’t let me down,’ he said to me,” recalls Zhegulev. “‘I’m not one of your friends,’ I quipped back. Given his state, I worried I’d been too tough on him and texted him to say so. ‘Good luck,’ is all he messaged back.”

On his way back to Ascot, Berezovsky spoke on the phone to his ex-wife Besharova. He is also thought to have spoken to Gorbunova, with whom he had recently had a deeply upsetting row over their daughter’s decision to study in America, which Berezovsky opposed.

He then called his daughter Ekaterina — Schuppe’s ex-wife — to congratulate her on her 40th birthday. He sent her flowers, but did not go to see her. That evening he made several other calls. One was to Annika Ancverina, 25, a Russian student living in London and a long-standing mistress who had spent part of Thursday with him in and around the capital.

Schuppe was on a business trip in Kiev when he last spoke to his father-in-law via Skype, less than 10 hours before he died and long after the former oligarch had retired to his bedroom after giving his bodyguard his errands for the next morning. Berezovsky was lying on his bed. The two spoke for more than an hour, about the Israel trip, and how whistleblower websites were empowering ordinary people against governments. “He was absolutely normal. We had a stimulating conversation,” said Schuppe. “He was in the mood of someone about to leave for a trip to Israel. I had seen him at rock bottom, when I’d really feared for him. But now I thought that maybe we’d seen the worst and we’d manage to pull him out of it.”

Hours later Michael Cotlick, Berezovsky’s assistant, and Navama called Schuppe in Kiev to tell him that Berezovsky was dead. Schuppe flew back to London and drove straight from the airport to the morgue to see Berezovsky’s body. “I had to say goodbye and I had to see him with my own eyes, because I just couldn’t believe it. I know Boris could have taken his own life, but two years later I still don’t know if he really did. I still can’t get my head round it.” ■