



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on May 9, 2013

Death of an Oligarch: Russian Billionaire Berezovsky Dies “Penniless”

Boris Berezovsky (shown), once considered the richest man in Russia and one of the wealthiest moguls in the world, was buried in Surrey, England on May 8 — near destitute and in exile. The body of the 67-year-old oligarch was discovered by his bodyguard on March 23 in the bathroom of his home. As Berezovsky had survived previous murder attempts and, according to former Russian FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko, had been targeted for assassination by the FSB (formerly known as the KGB), his death automatically sparked suspicions of foul play. A Bloomberg Businessweek report on April 4 stated:



Nikolay Glushkov, a longtime friend of Berezovsky and a fellow Russian exile, suspects foul play. “The idea that he would have taken his own life is bulls—,” Glushkov told the *Guardian*. “Berezovsky had a lot of powerful enemies,” says Mark Galeotti, a professor at the Center for Global Affairs at New York University. One name that’s mentioned repeatedly is Putin’s.

Statements from the police thus far have supported a verdict that he died by suicide.

[The Thames Valley Police reported](#) on March 25:

The results of the post-mortem examination, carried out by a Home Office pathologist, have found the cause of death is consistent with hanging. The pathologist has found nothing to indicate a violent struggle.

Further tests will now be carried out, including toxicology and histology examinations, the results of which are likely to take several weeks.

The *Daily Mail*’s May 8 report on the Berezovsky funeral noted that the police investigation “remains underway,” and also noted that “Russia has denied its secret services targeted Berezovsky.”

Some news reports cited statements by friends that Berezovsky was depressed over his recent financial setbacks, which may have led him to suicide.

In 2011, Berezovsky was [ordered by a British court to pay out](#), reportedly, over \$155 million in a divorce settlement with Galina Besharova, one of his ex-wives. It was by far the largest divorce settlement in British history.

Last year he lost a bitter court battle with fellow oligarch Roman Abramovich, an erstwhile business partner with Berezovsky in the Russian oil giant Sibneft. Berezovsky charged that Abramovich had conspired with Putin to force him to sell his Sibneft stock at a fraction of their value, costing him billions. Not only did Berezovsky lose his suit, but he was saddled with over \$50 million in legal bills. He may not have been penniless, but according to one report, he had recently been in the position of



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having to borrow \$5,000 from a friend, a sum that, in better times, he would have considered pocket change.

“Godfather of the Kremlin”

Berezovsky first caught world attention when he debuted on *Forbes* first list of Russia’s richest tycoons, in 1997. His wealth then was listed at over \$3 billion. The previous year he had been the subject of a scathing article by *Forbes* investigative reporter Paul Klebnikov, entitled “Godfather of the Kremlin.” In 2000, Klebnikov expanded his article into a book, *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*, which detailed the massive corruption and mafia-style violence that were endemic among the Yeltsin-Berezovsky circle of associates who were dividing the spoils and running the “new Russia.”

Berezovsky was a top power broker, a kingmaker and kingbreaker. He helped engineer the succession from Yeltsin to Putin. However, Putin, the KGB/FSB chief, was determined to be *the* power broker in Russia and was not about to brook competition from the nouveau superrich magnates who had become known as Russia’s “oligarchs.”

One by one, the oligarchs who didn’t fall into line behind Putin either went to prison, fled the country — or were murdered. Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev are two of the most well known Russian *former* billionaires languishing in prison. Shabtai Kalmanovich was gunned down in Moscow. Berezovsky is one of the best known examples of the oligarchs who fled Russia — most of whom sought asylum either in England or Israel. Berezovsky left Russia for England in 2000 and has lived with the knowledge that the Kremlin’s assassins could still reach him, despite his bodyguards and the security measures of his huge estate.

A couple of Berezovsky’s fellow Russian expatriates living near him in Surrey also died “mysteriously.” [Bloomberg Businessweek reported](#):

In December 2007, Georgian billionaire Arkady “Badri” Patarkatsishvili—who, like Berezovsky, initially supported Putin and went into exile after Putin’s election — told the *Sunday Times* there was an assassination plot against him orchestrated by the Kremlin. He died a little more than a month later at his Surrey mansion of what pathologists concluded was a heart attack. In November 2012, Russian whistle-blower Alexander Perepilichnyy, who had been helping Swiss authorities uncover a money-laundering scheme by Russian officials, dropped dead while jogging outside his Surrey home, also of an apparent heart attack.

Of course, the KGB has great expertise and long experience in the art of assassination by “natural means,” including poisons that can cause a heart attack, while being very difficult to detect. This was first brought to light in 1961, when KGB assassin Bogdan Stashinskiy defected to the West and revealed that he had killed Ukrainian emigré writer Lev Rebet in 1957 and Ukrainian emigré leader Stepan Bandera in 1959. Both of the men had been killed in Munich and both hits had been made to look like heart attacks. Many refinements and variations in the “process,” it can be presumed, have been developed since then.

“The Party’s Gold”

Putin’s brutal campaign to bring the oligarchs to heel has followed the playbook developed by Stalin, as we [reported](#) in 2009:

There is good reason to believe that many of the murders of (and murder attempts on) Russian



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oligarchs and crime bosses may be part of the larger Putin effort to take back state control of assets that were privatized in the 1990s. It can be likened to Stalin's re-nationalization of wealth that had found its way into private hands during Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP was a massive deception run by Lenin's Cheka (also known as the NKVD — forerunner of the KGB) to lure Western aid and investment. Communist Party officials posing as Russian "businessmen" went into partnership with Western companies, and for a number of years gave the appearance that capitalism was replacing communism in Russia. In order to make the ruse convincing, the communist "capitalists" had to be given some latitude. Many of the newly minted business elite quickly became seduced by the wealth and lifestyles that came with their assignments; they began building impressive dachas and stashing gold, foreign currencies, and other valuables. Stalin put an end to that. He instructed Genrikh Grigoryevich Yagoda, NKVD chief and People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, to ferret out all the secreted wealth of the "corrupt" comrades, including their secret Swiss bank accounts. This Yagoda did, and Stalin then had the offenders purged (usually tortured and killed). However, Yagoda had made one particularly startling omission in his otherwise thorough investigation: his own Swiss bank account. Stalin, not trusting anyone, had had his own personal secret inner intelligence service investigate Yagoda. He confronted Yagoda with his own theft of "the People's" property. Yagoda himself was executed in the same manner as those he had executed.

The new wave of oligarchs who have replaced Berezovsky's generation are even more fabulously wealthy — and even more extravagant in their displays of conspicuous consumption. With oil, gas and other natural resources posting huge price gains over the past decade, Putin-friendly oligarchs have made astronomical fortunes from "the people's" assets, the state monopolies that were gifted to the privileged few in what has been a phony "privatization." Berezovsky's arch-nemesis Abramovich recently set new standards for "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" with his purchase of the world's biggest and most expensive tricked-out superyacht, the [Eclipse](#). Price tag: over \$1 billion! Banking oligarch Dmytri Rybolovlev recently beat out Bill Gates and Madonna in a bidding war for a [private Greek island](#) — for a paltry \$100 million.

Abramovich, Rybolovlev, tech wizard [Yevgeny Kaspersky](#), and [Mikhail Prokhorov](#), the flamboyant owner of the NBA's Brooklyn Nets, are typical of the new wave of oligarchs who bow to the power of Putin and their Kremlin masters. They know that their mega-wealth is really "the Party's gold." And if they forget ... they may die "mysteriously" of natural causes, or more spectacularly in a public "hit" — depending on the message intended to be sent by the powers-that-be.

Photo of Boris Berezovsky: AP Images

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