



Kirsan's War on Chess

Observing Kirsan Ilyumzhinov's FIDE these days recalls the saying 'a pessimist is never disappointed.' We expect the worst and we get it, over and over again. But the saying can be taken in a more subtle way, as a warning to those who look for bad news and therefore always find it. Therefore we should endeavour to hope for the best and let the facts speak for themselves.

A good case was the June announcement by Ilyumzhinov that FIDE was forming a 'Foundation for Modernization of FIDE.' A title to inspire the imagination! There is no shortage of areas requiring overhaul in FIDE today. Perhaps they might start with mass resignations? Unfortunately not, but surely there must be some reaction to the catastrophe of the current world championship cycle, the spate of computer-assisted cheating, and the collapse of the London world championship sponsorship deal. The overall health of the chess world must also be considered, with big events in Linares, Sofia, and Mainz cancelled this year.

In Ilyumzhinov's announcement he acknowledged these problems and then reached the conclusion that chess was beyond hope, that the game must be destroyed once and for all. Unable and unwilling to develop the sport, classical chess will simply be discarded! Apparently it is just too much effort even to pretend to care about the game FIDE is supposed to

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represent to the world. Ilyumzhinov has been poisoning the roots of chess since he took office, a steady campaign to trivialize the game and its players. Time controls shortened, zero tolerance for late arrival, match play eliminated, host sites removed to obscurity, dozens of wild initiatives and millions of dollars promised without results, and, the crowning achievement, FIDE itself is now best known for having a president who enjoys the company of dictators, madmen, and aliens.

When there is a crisis with no obvious solution, a little experimentation is a good and necessary thing. You must, however, learn from your experiments. Sixteen years of Kirsan's failures and now we are told things must be radically changed? More member federation dues squandered on outlandish schemes? Naturally, the

members of the modernization commission include Kirsan and just about every one of the crowd that created the current disaster. Here I must admit to pessimism. You don't put a convicted arsonist in charge of the fire department just because he knows a lot about fires.

Kirsan's line of defence, that 'the market has spoken' and classical chess cannot be financed, is nothing more than an admission of his failure to promote the game. Opera and ballet continue to grace our world despite not filling stadiums with hundreds of thousands like rock shows. La Scala did not shutter its doors when The Beatles came along. The game itself is not the problem, those who run it are. The few sponsors who do come forward soon refuse to have anything more to do with FIDE, or even with chess. It takes either supreme insolence or unrivalled delusion for Kirsan to say he is 'sick and tired of gathering money for champions' when it's the champions who gather money for him! The memories of past world championship glory are all that maintain waning public interest and yet Ilyumzhinov's FIDE is doing everything it can to erase every aspect of those traditions. If he is sick and tired of chess and chess players, let him retire to raise sheep.

The proposal to increase the frequency of the publication of the rating list to monthly is welcome and long overdue, as is the rating of rapid and blitz games. As I proposed in 2002, the rating list has the potential to be a highly marketable and globally unifying force in the chess world. My 'World Chess Rating' plan also included the idea of a unified list that combined every rate of play with weighted values. The goal must be to include every single chess player, and every game of every speed, on the planet. That means online play as well, though Ilyumzhinov's lack of understanding of the Internet is revealed by his statement that Linares was a failure because there weren't many spec-

tators in the playing hall. Even popular stadium sports earn far more from viewers at home than those who attend in person.

Ilyumzhinov's response to cheating is to speed up the game so much that the players won't have time to cheat, akin to the famous French cure for dandruff, the guillotine. Imagine how he would solve the concerns of other sports. Not enough scoring in football? Eliminate the goalkeepers! Rallies too long in tennis? Throw away the net! This is not exaggeration; Kirsan's director of special projects, David Kaplan, recently proposed chess without kings. This is both literal and a metaphor for how Ilyumzhinov sees a powerful world champion as a threat to his unchallenged authority. This is the same Kaplan of the mysterious 'CNC,' whose corroded website is an adequate symbol of its motivations. This was the group that FIDE handed all rights to games and events to without a vote of the General Assembly. As usual, the real business of Kirsan's FIDE takes place behind closed doors. As for the clear and present danger of cheating, it is not necessary to provide ultra-high-tech electronic countermeasures for every tournament. Simply make it clear in the rules of every FIDE-rated event that a single cheating violation will result in a lifetime ban.

The status quo is always dying, that is undeniable. My call to save classical chess is not an attempt to still the hands of time. Chess survived

umzhinov talks of as the weaknesses of chess are in fact its strengths. Chess is a touchstone of intellectual prowess throughout the world not because the game is fast and random or because there is no real champion. Chess is not a simple pastime. It will never be tennis, or poker. But it can and must still be chess, with all its complexity and beauty.

Instead of killing the patient, we need a program of growth and renaissance. The Karpov campaign's platform was a good beginning – eliminating federation dues, cultivating corporate sponsorship, rating system reform, enhancing the Candidates' matches and world championship, and investing a million dollars a year to grow our audience with direct development around the world. This is what was lost in Khanty-Mansiysk.


Kirsan's statements end with characteristic lunacy about chess clothes for the beach and beauty contests. By this point, the chess community cannot say any of this comes as a surprise. Kirsan fulfilling his campaign promises means the eventual destruction of the game of chess. The battle lines have never been more clearly drawn. Either those who value the traditions of our game band together to save it or we watch as Ilyumzhinov and his gang continue to destroy it. ■

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and thrived during the advent of radio and television and now it should be immensely strengthened by the power of the Internet. We must evolve, yes, but in Darwinian fashion we have to adapt positively. What Ily-

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