

Is there any way to save the Reunification Championship?

by Mikhail Golubev
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It's strange that the reason for the conflict between Ruslan Ponomarev and FIDE is obscured by arguments regarding time control and FIDE World Champion Ponomarev's privilege of retaining his title in the event of a drawn match versus Garry Kasparov. I don't know whether FIDE hoped to "manage" the opinion of its champion through the assistance of third parties, or if FIDE just did not succeed in showing sufficient respect to the 18-year old World Champion.

From the very beginning (Spring 2002), FIDE erred in keeping Ponomarev away from negotiations regarding reunification. Their second mistake involved their participation in preparations for the upcoming Kasparov vs Computer match. These errors almost deprived the chess world of a chance to reach an agreement, over which it has agonized for some time. As a consequence, the interests of the strongest remaining players were ignored.

As long ago as 2001, the FIDE President (in his speech broadcast worldwide by the mass media) promised whomever would become the 16th FIDE World Champion (Ponomarev subsequently won this title) a match between the strongest human versus strongest computer program. So unification had the purpose of consolidating the two world champions and the highest rated player into one unification world championship cycle. But how can this process be done while treating all parties fairly?

Naturally, Garry Kasparov, the most famous and highest rated chess player in the world, has every right to expect the highest fee in any unofficial match. But ethically, FIDE should not show favoritism in the match negotiation process. Therefore it's astonishing that FIDE supported Kasparov's match demands. Worse yet, the FIDE President is Kasparov's compatriot, and thus should have avoided any hint of double standards regarding these negotiations.

It is possible to excuse a great deal, including the state of euphoria which possibly engulfed FIDE after they had managed to come to a peaceful agreement with Garry Kasparov. After all, he was until then, their long standing opponent. Perhaps this euphoria made FIDE forget about their own FIDE champion.

But should Ponomarev agree to restrict his interests if FIDE fails to respect its leading chess players? Certainly, that's up to the FIDE World Champion to decide. In any case, it is clear that FIDE's persistence and Ponomarev's resistance leave no chance to hope that the contract signed by Ponomarev, under incredible pressure, will have anything to do with the spirit of the chess world unification. Other options, such as a proclamation of Kasparov as a World Champion without any match, or announcement of Kasparov's match versus another opponent, are similarly disastrous. So is there any chance for saving the reunification championship in spite of it all?

After the FIDE Congress (Autumn 2002, in Bled) Ruslan Ponomarev insisted upon the privilege to retain his title in the event of a drawn match versus Kasparov. This accords with chess traditions and gives Ponomarev the same privilege that Classical World Champion, Kramnik, has in his parallel match versus Leko. Ponomarev also stated that his match with Kasparov should be played with the new FIDE time control, used in his victorious 2001/2002 FIDE World Championship. His request follows chess traditions and common sense, but it contradicts FIDE's strategic goal to return to classical time controls. However, FIDE rejected the demands of their World Champion, so the situation creates the impression of an absolute deadlock.

However, there probably is a simple solution to this mess, perhaps even several. But any solution must consider the reality of the current situation, without any radical actions, such as Ponomarev's disqualification or revision of the schedule for the Kasparov vs Computer match.

If FIDE truly supports the Reunification World Championship with classical time controls, rather than giving Garry Kasparov the Championship

title in the quickest possible time, then there should be no obstacles blocking Ponomarev from retaining his title of FIDE World Champion. He should retain that title regardless of the outcome of his semi-final unification match. That's because this match should not have the status of FIDE World Championship until the final unification match has been played. If Ponomarev is defeated by Kasparov, then Ponomarev will lose his title only after the final unification match process is completed (including a return to classical controls). In short, he will then lose his title only when the new FIDE World Champion is announced.

However, if it is impossible to arrange a chess world reunification final match with classical time controls between the winners of the Ponomarev-Kasparov and Kramnik-Leko matches, then FIDE should return to championships with the FIDE time control. Yes, this is the time for FIDE to take responsibility for declaring what will happen after the Ponomarev-Kasparov match, including consideration of the possibility that the winner of the Kramnik-Leko match may refuse to play in the reunification final match. In this case, Ponomarev will not lose his title (with all its consequent rights and privileges), regardless of the result of his match against Garry Kasparov with classical time control. This seems reasonable because Ponomarev won his championship title with FIDE time controls, so he shouldn't lose his title until the transfer to classical time control is fully completed.

One may argue that a Ponomarev-Kasparov match without a World Championship status is senseless. However, quite the opposite is true. A Ponomarev-Kasparov match makes no sense if it is arranged other than as a semi-final unification match. This is because it is unprecedented to grant the highest rated player a right to play against the World Champion without unification of all championship claims.

Therefore, the sponsors must exhibit special care when selecting a title for this official match, in case it does not become a FIDE World Championship. Thus it's necessary to concentrate upon the words "unification" and "classical", but not on the word "semi-final". If it becomes impossible to generate sponsor interest under such

conditions, then the winner of the Kasparov-Ponomarev match can be awarded a special "intermediary" title, for instance, FIDE Classical Chess World Champion. This title will be independent of Ponomarev's current title. Therefore, either Garry Kasparov or Ruslan Ponomarev can win this intermediary title (potentially Ponomarev could hold both titles of World Champion simultaneously).

It should be clearly stipulated that the present intermediary titleholder (FIDE Classical Chess World Champion) will not earn advancement within FIDE if the final reunification match against the Kramnik-Leko match winner fails to occur within the predetermined period of time. In this case FIDE has to return to a FIDE World Championship with a FIDE time control (and the intermediary title should be automatically dissolved after the first championship of that kind).

If the final reunification championship with the winner of the Kramnik-Leko match occurs, then the intermediary title (FIDE Classical Chess World Champion) should be dissolved in favor of the title of FIDE World Champion, which currently belongs to Ukrainian Grandmaster Ruslan Ponomarev.

I have not discussed my suggestions yet with any of the supposed participants of the reunification championship or their official representatives. My solution may seem artificial, but the whole unification process is artificial. Instead we must resist the temptation to destroy rather than to build.

Since this conflict has already reached the public stage, now is the time for independent chess experts, who care about the future of the World Championship, to express their opinions. Perhaps somebody will offer a better solution. If so, I will be happy if their solution is successful. Regardless, the legitimate interests of all parties must be met. Instead, a reunification championship cycle where the status of the current champion is diminished, lays a foundation for future disunity within the chess world.

Edited by Steve Ham

The Corus Tournament and the Ponomariov-FIDE conflict

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The super tournament that opened the chess year has already seen ten rounds completed, thus leaving only three games remaining before the final result is known. Judit Polgar, representing the gentle sex in the chess elite, outpaced a group of five pursuers by a point, and now occupies a clear second place in Wijk aan Zee. As such, only Vishy Anand, FIDE ex-champion, has outscored Judit by a half-point.

It seems that everybody tired of writing about Anand's unique chess crisis. In 1998, Vishy played better than any other player on Earth, only to subsequently weaken and drop rating points. But nowadays, Anand has returned to winning super tournaments. Certainly, the Indian chess player still enjoys both the game itself and his own creative work. One might assume that a probable consolidation of world championships into a single generally accepted version would help Anand to obtain the ultimate goal, which his talent deserves.

So, returning to The Netherlands, it is impossible to overlook Anand as a number one contender for victory. After all, a leader is always a leader. Therefore, predicting Anand's victory isn't unfair to Judit Polgar, who now shows no evidence of any crisis in her career either. Polgar's previous defeats at the hands of Kasparov, Kramnik and Anand, plus the licking she got in the match against Shirov, are all behind her now. A new era began for Judit following her first victory over the 13th World Champion at the Russia vs The ROW summit, held in Moscow in 2002. Still, the forthcoming game between Anand and Polgar might decide the final outcome of the Wijk aan Zee tournament. But if the leaders play unsuccessfully in their two other duels, someone else from the group of five who now share third place may win first place (Kramnik, Ivanchuk, Van Wely, Radjabov and Bareev).

It is common knowledge these days that Ruslan Ponomariov has to fight not only chess adversaries, but also FIDE, which threatens to deprive him of his title. Fortunately, this second front slackened, at least by the time that this review was being prepared. The latest news was of an unofficial message regarding a possible transfer of the forthcoming Presidential Council from New York to Europe at the beginning of February. This was done so that Ruslan Ponomariov may attend it.

We hope that FIDE would not go so far as to exclude Ponomariov from the world championship. That would result in Ponomariov bringing legal action against FIDE. It seems that the final steps in this direction have not yet been taken. Meanwhile, Vassily Ivanchuk, whom FIDE views as Ponomariov's compulsory replacement, has not expressed his position publicly. So we hope that all of the parties officially involved in this very complex situation can reach a compromise.

Let's analyse how the chess world entered this difficult crisis. After all, FIDE's motto is: "GENS UNA SUMUS" ("We are one family"). Almost every family experiences quarrels which remain unresolved until their true causes are clarified. It is clear that such a quarrel recently arose in our chess family - so all family members should now have the right to express their opinions. But a genuine conflict can't occur in the absence of earlier unfortunate and illogical happenstances. Therefore we should not be surprised that this conflict's foundation was laid unconsciously by those who are not directly involved in the situation now.

In 2001, a grandiose Online World Chess tournament was announced (later transformed into the Prague tournament) and a list of participants was immediately made public (current information is that Grandmaster Timman was responsible for this list). The list included all of the world's strongest players, but it omitted the name of Ruslan Ponomariov, the highest-rated junior player. His high rating in the international ranks justified inclusion onto the list, regardless of his junior status. But even prior to this time, the organizers of the largest tournaments of 2001 preferred players other than Ruslan, for unknown reasons. So the Online World Chess tournament

announcement caused a shock within Ponomarev's team. Being an Internet activist, I was asked to contact the organizers, and an exchange of email ensued. One vacant place remained in the tournament lineup, and the organizer's response suggested the possibility that Ruslan could still be nominated, an action which is something more than a polite come-off. However, quite soon the entire Online World Chess project (related, by the way, to Kasparovchess), as it was initially composed, came to an end. We dwell upon this episode primarily because we are convinced that a small error on the part of the organizers, has, together with all the rest, predetermined Ponomarev's opposition to the system of breaches of sporting principles, and to the endless protectionism that existed in chess for many years.

The manner in which the events unfolded is now common knowledge, but it is advisable to recollect them once again. In the same year of 2001, FIDE's President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov announced to the whole world that the next FIDE World Champion would play a match against the strongest chess program. In January 2002, eighteen year old Ponomarev became the FIDE champion, having won the Final match against the other Ukrainian, Ivanchuk. Ponomarev won and his victory placed him at the intersection of all chess related interests. Subsequently, complications with the Linares tournament organizers followed. This led to press conferences and Ponomarev's eventual participation in the tournament, where he won second place behind Kasparov.

Yasser Seirawan authored proposals that favored unification of the chess world. His plan called for bringing together Ponomarev, classic chess champion Kramnik, and the rating leader Kasparov, within the framework of a reunification championship to be played with classical time controls. A super tournament was organized in Prague with the participation of 16-chess players. Concurrently, the Prague unification summit meeting was held, but Ponomarev was the only top player who wasn't represented. This time he was invited, but no mutual understanding with the organizers was reached. So the Prague unification summit took place in Ponomarev's absence.

Long-time FIDE opponent, Kasparov, who did not agree to participate in any of the two parallel championships (FIDE and Classical) within the

existing formulae, was now ready to cooperate with FIDE. However, Kramnik's classical chess championship had already scheduled an event to determine his future contender, so this process had to be honored. Following difficult negotiations, it was decided that Kramnik would play as originally scheduled against the winner of his qualification tournament, while Ponomarev would play against Kasparov. The winners would meet in the unification final. The participants at the summit, along with the entire chess world, entertained the false belief that FIDE either represented Ponomarev, or somehow controlled his opinion. The necessity of inviting Ponomarev as an equal (!) to approve of the summit resolutions, was completely ignored.

As a consequence, a group of leading players found themselves thrown overboard from the consolidation ship, and (at least for some time) without FIDE regular championship prizes. They wrote an open letter of protest, but without any real consequences. Peter Leko subsequently won the qualification tournament, thus gaining the right to play against Kramnik. Ruslan Ponomarev split with his sponsors, who had made efforts earlier to establish working contacts with FIDE. Mikhail Ponomarev became Ruslan's chief coach again. Ruslan Ponomarev received an offer from Boris Alterman to play a match against the software program "Deep Junior", for a fee that is less than modest for a World Champion. Ruslan rejected the offer. But then Garry Kasparov, with FIDE's participation (!), was offered a match against the same program for a fee that was ten times greater. Kasparov agreed. Ruslan Ponomarev gave an interview, and the complete computer match story was made public. Mikhail Ponomarev criticized the Prague agreements in the press, making the strain between FIDE and the Ponomarevs appreciable. By the end of September, Mikhail Nikitovich Ponomarev suffered a sudden stroke and died, never seeing the FIDE Congress in Bled where the Prague agreements were to be discussed. This was the heaviest blow for the world champion, who considered his homonym and coach to be his second father. Ruslan lived many years with Mikhail Ponomarev's family.

The Chess Olympiad and the FIDE Congress took place later in Bled. Staying almost alone, Ruslan Ponomarev entrusted Silvio Danailov, Veselin Topalov's coach, to represent his interests

(he cooperated with both of them during the FIDE world championship). At the Congress, Danailov declared Ponomarev's terms for playing the unification match against Kasparov - Ponomarev wins in case the match ends in a draw (Kramnik enjoys the same advantage in his match against Leko), and retention of the faster FIDE time control, which was used when Ponomarev became FIDE World Chess Champion. Ponomarev's terms were not accepted. At approximately the same time, it was announced that Yasser Seirawan, the pioneer of world chess championship consolidation, may become the head of one of FIDE's divisions. Following the Bled Congress, the situation entered a period of long and fruitless talks between Ponomarev's representative and FIDE. Danailov announced in public that Ponomarev will agree to play in the next championship, starting from its earliest stage, in accordance with the old knockout formula. Meanwhile, Kasparov's match versus Deep Junior was transferred from Jerusalem to New York, due to the lawsuit brought against Kasparov in Israel. The Ukrainian Chess Federation became involved in the process. They contacted FIDE and requested the Bled Congress documents and resolutions regarding the world championship. On the day of Ruslan Ponomarev's departure for Wijk aan Zee, the Ukrainian Federation published its summation, clearly indicating at last that no agreement exists at all. Ponomarev was unwilling to sign FIDE's drafted contract. FIDE's response was to deliver an ultimatum to Ruslan: either sign the contract or there will be an announcement of a match between Ivanchuk and Kasparov. FIDE's representatives came to Wijk aan Zee, and the "negotiations" ended with Ponomarev's open letter to Ilyumzhinov. Several days later, FIDE issued a tough press release signed by Omuku, which stated that FIDE's patience came to an end and that it is ready to take action. Ilyumzhinov commented on the situation for the TV media. The Ukrainian press published a communication that Ponomarev was ready to defend his rights in court.

The entire story of the emergence and management of FIDE by an extraordinary leader, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, reminds one of a fairy-tale, though not necessarily an Eastern one. I believe that many of you saw the movie "*Lady's Visit*" starring Vasilyeva and Gaff [a well-known USSR

movie, based on Duerrenmatt's famous story "*Besuch einer alten Dame*". M.G.]. Once having experienced previously unseen financial opportunities, decent citizens go out of their minds, if not out of their consciences. And all that was once human, becomes soaked with cynicism. It is similar to what has happened in the chess world lately. To make an even greater similarity, there was no visible victim until now. If no compromise is reached, then it is FIDE World Champion, Ruslan Ponomarev, who unfortunately risks becoming this victim (thankfully not to the same radical extent as Gaff's hero). In reality, should no real unity occur, the victims will be all those who still love chess.

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