

The Russia Report

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From the editor

Ukrainian chess grandmaster and author Mikhail Golubev, 51, from Odessa, became an activist campaigning against Vladimir Putin during the 2013-14 Maidan revolution. He is a native Russian speaker who is also fluent in English. After being hospitalised with a stroke in 2019 he reduced his workload and political activities, focusing on teaching chess online to pupils all over the world. But since Russia's invasion on Feb. 24 he has been preparing for "any variation" of attacks on his home city, as he told me using chess terminology in a Zoom interview.



Mikhail Golubev in Odessa with fellow volunteer for the war effort Tamaz Kakabadze

Sitting in front of a Ukrainian flag and occasionally vaping, Golubev held up a mug that he had found in a local market. He said there are now lots of patriotic souvenirs on sale, such as T-shirts with pictures of Volodymyr Zelensky on them, but he liked the mug with the famous phrase “Russian warship go fuck yourself” on it and an illustration of the cruiser Moskva which in the past few days has been hit by Ukrainian missiles and has sunk.

The invasion was more of a shock to people in Odessa who still nurtured ties with Russia and hoped for improved relations than for those who had already recognised Putin for what he was, Golubev told me. “I even didn’t expect that so many people would change their opinion,” he said. “There are still die-hard supporters [of Russia], but not many. People I know changed their attitude radically. Some of my relatives said Putin would never attack Kyiv. We are very united and patriotic now. Better late than never.”

Golubev already saw Putin as a dictator when he took control of the independent NTV TV station in 2001. This view was reinforced after investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead on Putin’s birthday in 2006 and the Russian president said, “I think that journalists should know, and experts perfectly understand, that her capacity to influence political life in Russia was extremely insignificant.” Golubev decided then that Russia was a “fascist state,” he said. “It’s subjective indeed but for me personally these awful comments were beyond the red line and clearly indicated that the Russian state had already by then become fundamentally anti-humanistic.”

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine some people were nostalgic for the Soviet Union; many have relatives in Russia, Golubev said. In 1991 when the USSR collapsed he himself had two great-aunts living in Moscow and it took him some time to accept that Ukraine was an independent country, he said. He accepted it, while others didn’t. “The Soviet Union was a prison, because it was a place you couldn’t leave,” he said. “Only when I was 20 I got a plane ticket to go abroad, to Yugoslavia. They had normal shops, normal cafés. For me it was quite a shocking experience.”

For a chess player the democratic changes were an incredibly good thing, Golubev continued. In the Soviet Union a non-Russian had to be one of the elite such as Vasyl Ivanchuk or Boris Gelfand to play in tournaments abroad. From 1991 Golubev travelled internationally regularly and wrote several chess books in English, as well as articles about chess and politics. He didn’t understand why some people from Odessa, such as journalist Anatoly Wasserman, took Ukrainian passports although they disliked the country. Wasserman explained that he got a passport to fight against Ukraine efficiently. He took Russian citizenship in 2016 and became a Russian MP.

“After Putin came in many people started to destroy Ukraine from the inside,” Golubev said. The mayor of Odessa, Gennady Trukhanov, was seen as pro-Russian and was rumoured to have a Russian passport. That changed in February. “Even the mayor is working on defence. It seems that

he was really shocked,” Golubev said. “I knew that [Putin] was capable of doing something like that, so we had to prepare psychologically for an extremely bad scenario.” Odessa has been hit by missiles, but has so far not been devastated like Mariupol or Kharkiv. “We are not afraid to walk in the streets,” Golubev said. “It isn’t rational for a million people to hide from just one missile.”

About half of Golubev’s extended family, including all the children, have left the city. He and his wife Lyuda are staying “as a matter of principle”. Odessa could be faced with an assault from the sea, or from the direction of Mykolaiv in the east, or from the Russian-occupied Transnistria region of Moldova in the west, Golubev said. “For the moment Odessa stands firmly, but long-term, no one knows. No one knows in Kyiv or Moscow or anywhere. It’s hard to predict the situation.” Golubev is grateful for the Western support but wants more heavy weapons. “We are doing better than I could have expected,” he added. “We must be ready at any time to meet more Russian warships with good fire.”

Golubev is disappointed with the silence of most of the world’s top 20 chess players about the war. “In this war it’s really black and white,” he said. “We are attacked by Russia only for the fact of our existence and wish to live democratically. Neutral positions disappoint me almost as much as Karjakin’s position. For me in a way it’s easier to understand Karjakin, who is just a victim of Russian propaganda, than the world’s top players who say nothing. It’s painful how little morality I find in the position of top players.” Former world championship challenger Sergei Karjakin, who is from Crimea, supports Putin. Golubev also believes it is immoral to have former Kremlin official Arkady Dvorkovich as head of FIDE, the world chess federation.

What Putin is doing to Ukraine is “absolutely inhuman and mad,” Golubev said. “His reasons are not rational – so much hate for Ukraine and our democracy, even our weak democracy. For him human life means less than for us. For him it’s important to be in control of us spiritually.” But as the past two months have shown, Putin is less in control of Ukrainians than ever.

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