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Garry Kasparov Aims for Top Chess Job

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Garry Kasparov speaking at a Moscow press conference in August 2012.

Garry Kasparov, a Russian who became the youngest world chess champion in 1985 at age 22 but quit the profession two decades later, wants to return as the head of the governing body of chess, challenging its longtime president in a campaign that already has both camps in attack mode.

The bid for leadership of the World Chess Federation in August elections also has a political edge with Kasparov being a vocal critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin and of Russian action in Ukraine. World Chess Federation head Kirsan Ilyumzhinov is close to Putin and appeared chummy with him on Monday at a children's chess event in Sochi, site of the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Kasparov, who has been called visionary and ambitious, is the only challenger to Ilyumzhinov, a wealthy businessman who had led Russia's predominantly Buddhist region of Kalmykia and has presided over the federation, known by its French acronym FIDE, since 1995.

In an interview with The Associated Press in South Africa, Kasparov displayed his combative

side when asked about the challenge of promoting chess in Africa, where many people struggle for basic resources.

"The whole question is wrong. I am not going to tell you that playing chess would replace lack of clean water or bread," Kasparov said during his visit in which he picked up the endorsement of South Africa's chess federation.

Kasparov has described Putin as an arrogant dictator and, in the AP interview, criticized Ilyumzhinov for "working with Russian oligarchs in the Kremlin."

The chess federation's own web site described a cozy encounter between Putin and Ilyumzhinov.

At the Sochi chess event, a smiling Putin instructed the federation chief to make a symbolic opening move on a chessboard, after which Ilyumzhinov moved a pawn and told the president: "Your mission is completed," according to the website. Applause followed, and the two men then held a meeting in an adjacent room.

Ilyumzhinov, who has been widely reported as saying that aliens took him to a spaceship in the late 1990s, visited Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi in 2011 as he was fighting NATO-backed rebels who eventually killed him. The next year, the chess chief met President Bashar Assad in Syria as fighting escalated there, boosting speculation he was an unofficial representative for Russia, an Assad ally.

Supporters of the chess federation president, in turn, have said Kasparov is too political for the job and that his advocacy of human rights is insincere.

While Ilyumzhinov says he has poured his own fortune into chess development, Kasparov contends the chess leadership has failed to attract corporate support and that he would address this "fundamental problem" if he wins the votes of most of the world's 160 chess federations. At stake, Kasparov says, is the profile of an ancient game that has struggled for mass appeal at times despite the growth of Internet chess and school programs.

"This could be a breakthrough moment because there is no shortage of sponsorship money or charitable donations in the world," Kasparov said in the interview last month.

"You do not expect Western corporations" to go to Ilyumzhinov with sponsorship deals, added Kasparov, who recently obtained a Croatian passport

The two camps have accused each other of financial skullduggery. Kasparov's camp has accused Ilyumzhinov of channeling federation resources to his election campaign and other corrupt practices. In a May letter to African chess officials, Lewis Ncube, a FIDE vice president from Zambia who supports Ilyumzhinov, said Kasparov was using "military contacts" to pressure national federations into supporting his bid to become president "by hook or by crook."

In May, 56 national federations nominated Ilyumzhinov's presidential ticket, more than double the number that nominated Kasparov, according to the FIDE website. Last year, Ilyumzhinov said he would run again for president even though he was not desperate to do so. He said his administration was clean and that he had spent more than $70 million of his own

money on chess.

"I am ready to spend more of my personal funds for chess. I do not regret anything," he said. Ilyumzhinov was among Russian tycoons who quickly amassed wealth and, in some cases, political power during the privatization that followed the fall of the Soviet Union.

In 2010, Ilyumzhinov defeated challenger Anatoly Karpov, another former world champion, in a FIDE election marked by fraud allegations.

Since then, some voting procedures had been revamped to make the process more transparent, said Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, editor of New In Chess, a Netherlands-based magazine. He said the election, to be held alongside the Chess Olympiad in Norway, is likely to be tight.

"It is always good for a worldwide organization to have a new head from time to time, and to have some fresh blood," ten Geuzendam said in a telephone interview.

Fred Waitzkin, author of "Mortal Games: The Turbulent Genius of Garry Kasparov," remembered Kasparov at the height of his professional career as "a larger-than-life figure" who was both pragmatic and impetuous. He had lunch with the former champion a year and a half ago.

Waitzkin said of Kasparov: "I had the sense that he was a little sad and he was looking for a place to put this tremendous energy and genius."

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