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## LETTER FROM RUSSIA

## PLANET KIRSAN

*Inside a chess master's fiefdom.*

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

Kirsan Ilyumzhinov is not your typical post-Soviet millionaire Buddhist autocrat. He is the ruler of Kalmykia, one of the least well known of Russia's twenty-one republics. He also happens to be president of the Fédération Internationale des Échecs, or FIDE, the governing body of world chess. Ilyumzhinov functions a bit like the Wizard of Oz. Instead of a balloon, though, he uses a private jet. In Kalmykia, a barren stretch of land wedged between Stavropol and Astrakhan, on the Caspian Sea, you can't miss the man: his picture dominates the airport arrivals hall, and billboards all along the rutted road that leads to Elista, the capital, show him on horseback or next to various people he regards as peers—Vladimir Putin, the Dalai Lama, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II. At the local museum, an exhibit called Planet Kirsan displays gifts that he has received from visiting dignitaries. Another exhibit, devoted to his chess memorabilia, is on view at the Chess Museum, which is housed on the third floor of the Chess Palace, in the center of Chess City, which Ilyumzhinov built on the outskirts of the capital—at a cost of nearly fifty million dollars—for the 1998 Chess Olympiad.

Ilyumzhinov was the Kalmyk national champion by the age of fourteen, and he is convinced that, with his authority as the president of FIDE, he can turn a nearly empty desert the size of Scotland into a chess paradise. He sees Kalmykia as the crossroads on a modern version of the Silk Route, with hordes of chess players replacing caravans of Khazars and Scythians. "Everything here comes from my image," he told me, with a shrug, one afternoon not long ago. "I am lifting the republic up."

Many people dispute the last part of that assertion, but nobody questions the first. Ilyumzhinov was elected President in 1993, at the age of thirty-one. He immediately abolished the parliament, altered the constitution, and lengthened his

term of office. He finds little beauty in democracy and readily concedes that his republic is corrupt. ("Who was it that they arrested last week?" he said to me. "Something having to do with the inspection of the lower courts—for bribes, or something. Anyway, while money exists, while there is government, beginning with the Roman Empire, and in the thousands of years since—it's always been a problem.")

Ilyumzhinov has clashed many times with the Kremlin—most famously when, in 1998, he threatened to sever ties with Russia and turn Kalmykia into an independent tax haven, like Luxembourg or Monaco. Kalmykia is only a few hundred kilometres north of Chechnya, which has been attempting, bloodily, to secede from Russia for three hundred years. Moscow does not joke about those issues, and in 2004 Putin put a stop to the direct election of regional leaders. The new rules looked certain to end the flamboyant young Ilyumzhinov's political career. Yet, last June, Putin flew to Elista and spent an hour alone with him. Nobody revealed what was said, but when the two men emerged and posed for pictures a glimmer of delight shone in Ilyumzhinov's deep black eyes. Putin looked stiff, dour, and paternal. When the time came to name a new leader, Putin nominated the old one. The choice was ratified instantly by the parliament that Ilyumzhinov had created to replace the one that he had dismissed.

Ilyumzhinov called his autobiography, published in 1998, "The President's Crown of Thorns." (Chapter titles include "Without Me the People Are Incomplete," "I Become a Millionaire," and "It Only Takes Two Weeks to Have a Man Killed.") In the book, he describes growing up in Elista. After high school, he worked in a factory and served in the Soviet Army. He then attended Moscow's Institute for Foreign Relations, where he met people like Brezhnev's

grandson and Castro's nephew, establishing connections that proved useful in the waning days of Communism, and even more so afterward. Ilyumzhinov profited greatly from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Like many other ambitious *biznesmeny* who found themselves in Moscow in the early, lawless days of post-Soviet capitalism, he walked away with millions—nobody really knows how much—by, among other things, trading automobiles, and he has said that he owns a stake in fifty companies, including some banks.

Oddly for a chess player, Ilyumzhinov seems incapable of sitting still for more than five minutes (perhaps that is because he is also a former Kalmyk boxing champion). He is a stylish man—tall and wiry—and, in a part of the world where “dressed up” often means wearing clothes with buttons, Ilyumzhinov prefers well-tailored dark suits, crisp white shirts, and boldly patterned rep ties. His brown penny loafers are shiny and European. Ilyumzhinov's chess gig keeps him on the road much of the time, but when he is in Elista he moves around town in a white Rolls-Royce, followed closely by a Range Rover and a Cadillac that he bought sixteen years ago in Vienna. He keeps a black Rolls in Moscow to use on his frequent trips there. It has often been said that Ilyumzhinov owns ten Rolls-Royces. He denies it. “I never had ten,” he said. “Six, but not ten. It's a good car. Well made, dependable. By the way, they are not the government's. They're my cars. I paid for them and I drive around in them. The republic didn't pay anything.”

With as much as seventy per cent of the labor force unemployed and a huge regional debt to Moscow, Kalmykia doesn't have the kind of economy that can absorb the purchase of many luxury cars. Ilyumzhinov may be wealthy, but his people certainly aren't, and few believe that chess will do much to change that. For thousands of years, Kalmykia's rich black earth provided an ideal environment for raising sheep and other animals. In the nineteen-fifties, the Soviets decided to capitalize on the grazing opportunities there and brought in more than a million new sheep, but the topsoil was thin, and there was not enough grass to feed that many animals. In addition, agricultural officials in Moscow had decided that only merino sheep would do.



*Kirsan Ilyumzhinov says of Kalmykia, “Everything here comes from my image.”*

Their wool is soft, but their hooves, sharpened by life on jagged mountainsides, cut like razors through the delicate soil. Kalmykia became Europe's first man-made desert, officially recognized as an environmental disaster area by the United Nations. In satellite photographs, it looks like the moon; only the largest stretches of Central Asia compare in bleak expanses of emptiness. The sheep population, while still the main source of income, has been devastated, and attempts to raise camels on the desert terrain have been only partly successful. When Ilyumzhinov first ran for President, in 1993, he said that he would resolve this problem. He also promised each shepherd in Kalmykia a mobile phone—his version of a chicken in every

pot. It was a novel idea, and people were excited, but the cell phones did little to alleviate poverty.

I was supposed to meet with Ilyumzhinov for the first time on a Saturday, when I arrived at his office, however, his press secretary explained that some rich people had suddenly flown in from Moscow “on a private plane” and the President had taken them wolf hunting. The meeting would have to wait. Rich people are flying in more frequently these days, because Kalmykia has oil and gas and an even more important resource: the sea. Ilyumzhinov has made an agreement with a group of German investors and Iranian oil producers to develop a port on the Caspian, at Lagan. The plan is to ship

oil through the republic to India, which needs it badly. Kalmykia—or, at least, Ilyumzhinov—stands to earn millions. “We don’t want to herd sheep our entire lives,” he told me when we finally met. “We also want to develop, to civilize. For some reason, in America the people think they’re entitled to live well. We also want to live well! We want to build a port. We want to develop trade. We want to create jobs. We want Kalmykia to become a commercial crossroads.” Ilyumzhinov punched a silver bell on the conference table in his office. A secretary appeared instantly. “Coffee?” he asked. “Tea?”

Ilyumzhinov is capable of doing or saying nearly anything; a soccer fanatic who lavishes millions of dollars on the local team, Uralan, he announced in 1996 that he had bought the World Cup star Diego Maradona—which would be a bit like signing Derek Jeter to play baseball in Montenegro. Maradona never came. Ilyumzhinov worships Bobby Fischer, the loopy, anti-Semitic American exile, who in 1972 defeated Boris Spassky for

the World Championship of chess. Fischer played brilliantly and acted like a spoiled brat. The acrimonious match, which was held on neutral ground, in Iceland, reverberated with dark echoes of the Cold War. Fischer can no longer return to the United States; he is under indictment for violating sanctions against the former Yugoslavia by playing a rematch against Spassky there in 1992. Ilyumzhinov calls Fischer a “star in the history of civilization,” and compares him to Newton, Einstein, Copernicus, and the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. In 1995, Ilyumzhinov turned up in Budapest carrying a bag with a hundred thousand dollars in it. He handed the money to Fischer and said it was compensation for the fact that the Soviet Union had never paid royalties for Fischer’s book, “My Sixty Memorable Games.” Ilyumzhinov insists that he “takes seriously what the stars or the sorcerers say,” and he often comments on his ability to communicate with aliens. In 2001, he told journalists that he had recently been on board a U.F.O.: “The ex-

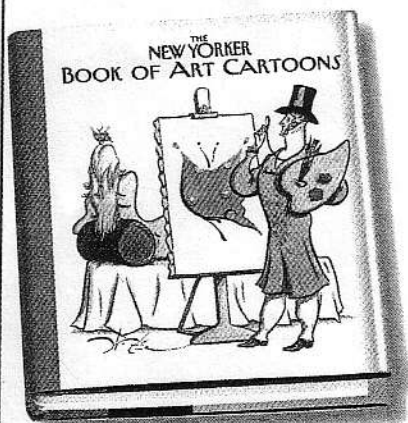
traterrestrials put a yellow spacesuit on me. They gave me a tour of the spaceship and showed me the command center. I felt very comfortable with them.” Ilyumzhinov relies heavily on the services of a Bulgarian astrologer named Vanga, who told him that he would become president of both Kalmykia and FIDE. She also said that he would build an oil pipeline and a “wool-scouring factory.”

So far, she has been right about everything but the pipeline. Soon after he became President, Ilyumzhinov issued a directive, Ukaz 129: “On Government Support for the Development of a Chess Movement.” Since then, the study of chess has been required of every student in the first three grades and strongly encouraged for others. Clubs have sprouted, and youngsters talk about the intricacies of the Nimzo Indian Defense and the Queen’s Gambit the way American teenagers might ponder the implications of story lines on “The O.C.” The effort has proved successful: seventeen students from the tiny republic have received official rankings from FIDE in the last decade, a remarkable feat for a place with three hundred thousand residents. (For Moscow, by comparison, a city of eight million and still the world’s true chess center, the number is a hundred; for St. Petersburg, forty-eight.) “Chess disciplines children,” Ilyumzhinov told me. “They get better grades. They perform. They are focussed.”

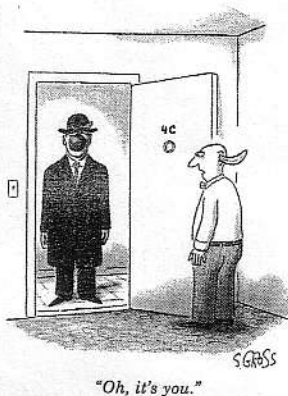
Ilyumzhinov rarely stays out of the news for long. Russian leaders have debated what to do with Lenin’s Tomb since the fall of Communism. A few months ago, he came up with a solution: he would simply buy the tomb, for a million dollars, and then build a mausoleum in Elista to hold it. Most Russians laughed and shook their heads, as they often do at his schemes. There are times, though, when laughter doesn’t quite work. Ilyumzhinov spent a lot of time in Baghdad during the nineteen-nineties and considers Saddam Hussein a friend. A few years ago, he offered Saddam a four-hectare plot of land in the Kalmyk capital. “In twenty, thirty, fifty years, history will have its say,” Ilyumzhinov told me when I asked how he felt about Saddam now. “He did hold it all together. In Iraq, you have the Sunnis, the Shiites, the Kurds. So many problems. But it was quiet then. You had to negotiate with



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him, but that's politics. Of course, I'm a Buddhist. When there's torture going on and blood flowing, I don't like it."

Kalmykia is the only Buddhist region in the territory of Europe. The people, whose language is derived from Mongolian, are descendants of nomads who first roamed the steppes of Central Asia nearly eight hundred years ago, under the leadership of Genghis Khan—who, as it happens, is one of Ilyumzhinov's heroes, along with Fischer and the Dalai Lama. The only art I ever noticed in the deserted corridors that lead to his office was a giant, scrolled lime-green portrait of the thirteenth-century warlord. There is another in the office itself. "I don't understand when people call him a dictator," Ilyumzhinov told me. "If there is order, if there is law, if there are established rules of the game, everyone has to abide by them, otherwise we will turn into animals. And even animals have a certain order of their own—the wolves, the sheep. There has to be order and discipline everywhere. Whoever violates it must be punished, of course, and whoever's working, well, let him work. Genghis Khan had order, discipline; he created a state, he improved the lives of his people—it was fine."

Genghis Khan's empire eventually fell apart. Most of the nomads remained in Central Asia, but one group migrated toward the Caspian Sea and settled what became Kalmykia—*kalmyk* is the Turkish word for "remnant." It has been rough going ever since. Peter I permitted the Kalmyks to build temples and practice Buddhism in exchange for defending the southern borders of Imperial Russia. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Catherine the Great had forced the Buddhist kingdom into subjugation. More than a hundred thousand people fled across the Volga. Most died. In the nineteen-thirties, the Soviets simply took the nomads from their tents and settled them on collective farms—as they did with millions of others. It was a disaster, but much worse was coming: Stalin suspected the Kalmyks of supporting the Nazis during the Second World War, so he deported them all. Even for Stalin, it was an epic act of genocide. Beginning on December 28, 1943, the Kalmyks were loaded into cattle cars and shipped to Siberia; many died before the trains arrived.

Thousands more died during the ensuing years of exile. They were not allowed to return to their homes until 1957, after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin. By then, there were fewer than seventy thousand Kalmyks; most of their houses had been expropriated by Russians after the war, and every Buddhist temple had been destroyed.

Ilyumzhinov decided to rebuild every one. And more. "Thirteen years ago, when they elected me, there wasn't a single Buddhist temple in Kalmykia," he said as we sat in his office, staring out at the recently completed Golden Temple. Construction took six months, and it opened on December 27th, in time to commemorate the anniversary of the day that Stalin deported the Kalmyks. Ilyumzhinov had hoped to have Chuck Norris (who had been there before) and several celebrity Buddhists on hand—he had mentioned Steven Segal, Richard Gere, and Sharon Stone. None made it; but the Royal Nepalese Ambassador to the Russian Federation was there, as were representatives of Buddhist communities from Tuva, Mongolia, and Tibet, and the special representative of the Dalai Lama (who had visited in 2004 and consecrated the site). "In thirteen years, we've built thirty-eight Buddhist temples—thirty-eight! We've built twenty-two Orthodox churches. We built a Polish Catholic cathedral and a mosque. And I want to emphasize this: it wasn't Russia that built it; it wasn't Moscow that built it, not the investors, not the sponsors. It was all built with my own personal money, and given to the people." (He made the decision to build the cathedral after a 1994 meeting with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican—even though, he said, there was only one Catholic living in Kalmykia.) Ilyumzhinov put fifteen million dollars into the cathedral and far more than that into the Golden Temple. "The entire temple was built with my money. Just now, the construction minister came by and I gave him another six million rubles"—about two hundred thousand dollars—"to pay the salaries."

The day after I arrived in Elista seemed unusually cold, even by the standards of the steppe—where winds can roll unimpeded, gathering strength, for hundreds of kilometres. Perhaps that explained why so few people were on the street.