

## 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



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."

**K**almykia 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.

Late that morning, it started to snow. I drove slowly past a series of Khrushchevki—the five-story, instantly dilapidated housing blocks built throughout the Soviet Union by Khrushchev, and loathed by all. Fat flakes filled the windshield as I entered the parking lot of the Golden Temple. At sixty-four metres, the shrine is the tallest outside of Asia, plopped into an unusually decrepit scene of provincial Russian life. The temple might belong in Thailand, or India. Maybe Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love. Anywhere but Kalmykia. The main structure, a hulking pagoda with a gilt façade and enormous red lacquered doors, was encircled by seventeen smaller pavilions, each covered in red paint and gold leaf, and trimmed in forest green. They looked like life-size versions of the parasols one often finds in tropical cocktails. Each pavilion represents one of Buddha's seventeen disciples. Scaffolding still covered parts of the main temple, and dozens of men were out in the intense cold, some chopping ice and others slapping on a final coat of paint.

Inside, two hundred people, led by four young monks in saffron robes, prayed to the world's largest plastic Buddha. The figure was made in Russia from "advanced space-age composites," according to one of the monks, and was covered in gold, with a tightly braided coil of black hair wound around the top of its head. The windowsills were painted bright red, the walls pink, and the platform on which the Buddha sat, two metres high, was adorned with a series of large lotus petals—they looked exactly like the red tongues on Rolling Stones albums. New Age music that sounded like water slowly dripping on rocks came from a boom box in the chapel. The spiritual leader of the Kalmyk community, whose given name was Erdne Ombadykow, is a native of Philadelphia, with a weakness for punk rock. At the age of seven, he was sent by his parents to study Buddhism in India, where the Dalai Lama recognized him as the reincarnation of the Buddhist saint Tilopa. He was visiting his family in the United States when I was in Kalmykia, so I met with a pleasant and studious twenty-three-year-old monk named Lobsang Tsultim.

We talked while sitting on the temple's mezzanine, which overlooks the Buddha. Lobsang showed me the library,

which is not yet open, and the sixth floor, which contains a residence reserved for the Dalai Lama—if he is able to return. "When he came before, he stayed in a hotel," the monk said, shaking his head in sadness. "Next time, he can be in a clean place. A Buddhist place." Lobsang spoke of the Dalai Lama and the leader of Kalmykia as if they were of equal spiritual importance. "Our President is the builder," he said. "He supports all religions, all people. Without him, we would have nothing."

Drive along the steppe leading from Elista to the Caspian Sea—a ghostly stretch without buildings, trees, or any other sign of life, except perhaps a shepherd and a few camels—and, eventually, you will arrive in Yashkul, Kalmykia's second city. Even for an unfinished, semi-abandoned creation of nameless Soviet planners, Yashkul is a dark place on the brightest day. Dogs run down the center of Ulitza Lenina, the main drag. Dozens of buildings remain frozen in various stages of construction; the workers left long ago. Ladas made of cheap tin, no doubt manufactured when Leonid Brezhnev was sitting in the Kremlin, rust along the sides of the roads. In most Russian cities, big or small, when Communism fell so did the statues of Lenin that stood in front of every town hall or cultural center and in every city square. Not in Yashkul.

I had arranged to visit a community center, but first there was lunch with the town's mayor, Telman Khaglyshev, at the house of one of his friends. It was a fairly new and solidly built structure with a satellite dish on the roof. Khaglyshev and his friends sat in leather chairs watching an "Animal Planet" episode about young giraffes, on a flat-screen television that made the animals look as if they were in the room. It was lunchtime, and the vodka bottles had clearly been out for a while. The men were making toasts in Kalmyk—a language that few people speak anymore. (Ilyumzhinov, who studied languages at university and speaks Japanese fluently, as well as some German and English, can converse in his native tongue, but not easily.)

Like any fifty-eight-year-old Kalmyk, Khaglyshev was born in Siberia and largely raised there. A bulky man with thick, unkempt tufts of hair that seem

to run randomly across his head, he was gracious but not much of a conversationalist. Most former Soviet-era bureaucrats tend to talk in speeches, and he was no exception. His eyes began to glow. "Would you have come here before he was President, ever?" Khaglyshev asked. He quickly answered his own question. "No. You are here because Kirsan has made us famous. We didn't use to have gas or hot water. Today, we have cable TV." He meant satellite dishes. Yashkul isn't exactly wired. Many Kalmyks still rely on trucks to deliver drinking water, and burn sheep dung to help them make it through each winter. "We live because Kirsan brought us back to life," Khaglyshev said. Murmurs of agreement filled the room. He spoke at some length about the roads—fifty-three kilometres of them—that had been built in the area during the past two years, and about the horses raised there, which bring high prices at markets throughout the world, and, most of all, about how the oil in the Caspian Sea would make Kalmykia rich.

"The special joy in being a Buddhist is that we do nothing bad to other people," Khaglyshev said. "Not like others nearby." He gave me a knowing look. "We are not so far from Chechnya, you know. But we are not like them. Our region is among the quietest in Russia. And, of course, Kirsan built our chess city. You can believe it or not, but the international Chess Olympiad in 1998—with a hundred and ten flags flying over the pavilion—was for Kalmykia its greatest moment." He punctuated each assertion with a shot of vodka, and insisted that his guests join him. By this time, we had stumbled to the lunch table.

"Football is great and we are a great country and we will have chess tourists and jobs." Khaglyshev had started to ramble, and, as if on cue, his wife appeared and began to pass out plates full of food. She did not speak, and Khaglyshev made no attempt to introduce her. She carried bowls of Kalmyk pelmeni—a spicy, Central Asian version of wonton soup—and dishes made of boiled and seasoned lamb, fried dough, and several other staples of a diet that has helped Kalmykia play its role as part of a country with the lowest life expectancy in the industrialized world, where most men are dead by the age of sixty.

After the meal, it was time to see

## AND SOUL

My mother died one summer—  
the wettest in the records of the state.  
Crops rotted in the west.  
Checked tablecloths dissolved in back gardens.  
Empty deck chairs collected rain.  
As I took my way to her  
through traffic, through lilacs dripping blackly  
behind houses  
and on curbsides, to pay her  
the last tribute of a daughter, I thought of something  
I remembered  
I heard once, that the body is, or is  
said to be, almost all  
water and, as I turned southward, that ours is  
a city of it,  
one in which  
every single day the elements begin  
a journey toward each other that will never,  
given our weather,  
fail—

the ocean visible in the edges cut by it,  
cloud color reaching into air,  
the Liffey storing one and summoning  
the other, salt greeting the lack of it at the North Wall, and,  
as if that weren't enough, all of it  
ending up almost every evening  
inside our speech—  
*coast canal ocean river stream* and now  
*mother*—and I drove on and although  
the mind is unreliable in grief, at  
the next cloudburst it almost seemed  
they could be shades of each other,  
the way the body is  
of every one of them and we  
were all moving now—fog into mist,  
mist into sea spray, and both into the oily glaze  
that lay on the railings of  
the house she was dying in  
as I went inside.

—Eavan Boland

some chess. The House of Culture in Yashkul is a two-story white brick building in the center of town. Most of the glass in the blue windows was cracked. A couple of panes were missing completely. The first floor was dark, cold, and unoccupied. But there was a faint sound coming from the floor above. Having spent more time than I should have in Washington Square Park when I was younger, I recognized it easily: chess players slapping their opponent's time clock after

completing a move. On the second floor, there was one occupied room. A placard on the door said "White Rook Chess Club"; inside, a dozen people were sitting at tables. The youngest was a girl of eight, the oldest a man who couldn't remember his age.

Every Soviet cultural center had a devotional wall, usually filled with propaganda about Lenin or Yuri Andropov or the achievements of some local tractor factory. In Kalmykia, the objects of devo-

tion were Kirsan Ilyumzhinov and other leaders of FIDE. There were also photographs or drawings of legendary chess players, from Wilhelm Steinitz, who rose from the coffeehouses of Vienna to become the first world champion, in 1886, through Capablanca, Alekhine, and Tal, to the glowering visages of Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov. The opposite wall had been given over to the women. There were pictures of a steady string of Slavic matrons: Menchik, Bykova, Rudenko. In the nineteen-sixties, they yielded to the era of Georgian supremacy. (Nona Garprindashvili became the first female Grand Master and held the world title for sixteen years, until 1978, when she lost it to a fellow-Georgian, Maya Chiburdanidze, who then reigned for more than a decade.)

A thirteen-year-old girl in pigtails stood by the door, a welcoming smile on her face. Her name was Katya, and she had been playing chess since she was seven. We walked over to one of the tables. Books lay scattered on the floor next to it. One was called "The Queen's Pawn Game"; another analyzed a series of famous matches, which the children are required to copy and learn in school. Katya huddled with a girl who looked like a younger sister. They giggled, bent down, and picked up a chess monograph by David Bronstein, with an analysis of the 1953 Zurich International Chess Tournament. "Do you know him?" Katya asked. I certainly knew of him. Bronstein, who is eighty-two, is widely considered one of the greatest of all chess players. She was studying Bronstein!

A rangy old man in a weather-beaten green vest walked over. He had spiky gray hair, and wore pin-striped pants and glasses with pink frames. He looked like a refugee from the Mudd Club. He introduced himself as Dgilayev Dorzidlandgovich, the girl's instructor, and then talked about chess, reminding me that it was Genghis Khan who brought the game to Russia. He also ran down the official list of virtues—reasoning, patience, order—that chess is supposed to instill in children. I asked him if that was why he played. He laughed and said no. "When Kalmyks lived in yurts, they couldn't read or write, but they could play chess," he said. "When we were all sent off to Siberia, we had no chess pieces

or boards. I'll never forget seeing one man making chess figures out of flour and water."

The epic poem of the Kalmyk people, which has been chanted since the time of the Mongol invasions, is called the Djangar, after its hero. It contains, among many other things, descriptions of a magnificent palace with silver doors and walls of pearl and murals portraying the feats of Djangar's companions, the 6,012 Heroes. Ilyumzhinov doesn't seem to have that many companions, but he definitely has the palace. "Wait till you see Chess City," Berik Balgabaev told me with pride on the flight to Elista from Moscow. "You will never forget it." Balgabaev is the special assistant to the president of FIDE, and Ilyumzhinov's emissary to Moscow on matters of chess. (There is also a separate diplomatic mission, since, as an autonomous republic, Kalmykia conducts its own foreign policy.)

Balgabaev, who met Ilyumzhinov when they were students at the Institute for Foreign Relations, was travelling with a delegation from the Siberian region of Khanty-Mansiysk, which produces about five per cent of the world's oil, more than any other part of Russia. The group was considering building a chess city, like the one in Kalmykia. The delegation was led by the son of the governor—who happened to be the president of the Khanty-Mansiysk Chess Federation and also the region's vice-minister of construction. There were representatives from the department of physical culture, the region's chief architect, and a few women in serious sables. Balgabaev noticed that I was reading "The Defense," Nabokov's novel about a chess prodigy so obsessed by the game that, as he ages, he loses connection with everything else. "That is the worst book about chess you can read," Balgabaev said. I was surprised, since many people think that it's the best book about chess you can read. "It promotes the idea that chess is weird and that people who

play it are crazy." Then, perhaps assuming that somebody writing about chess must be good at it, he asked me what my current ranking was in the United States. (I couldn't bring myself to tell him that my chess career had ended in 1970, when I traded a beautiful wooden chess set I had received as a gift for a copy—autographed by Willis Reed—of the New York Knicks yearbook.)

Except for five armed men guarding the Chess Palace, a pyramid of glass and mirrors shimmering in the frozen sunlight among groups of condos, stores, and bars, Chess City was deserted when I arrived. The city looked like a sort of Olympic Village—at least, one with a Buddhist temple and laid out in the shape of a Central Asian yurt. The most prominent picture on the wall of the palace shows Chuck Norris striding purposefully through the construction site. The palace has an airy, open foyer—like a Marriott Hotel. There were dozens of chess tables, chessboards, and chess rooms. Beautifully carved, super-sized figures sat on the squares—but there was nobody to move them. I walked through the museum, which has keepsakes from many of history's most famous matches, including the 1996 bout between Gata Kamsky and Anatoly Karpov, which Ilyumzhinov, after negotiations with Saddam Hussein, had scheduled for Baghdad. The international response was so harsh, however, that FIDE moved the match to Elista. (That didn't turn Ilyumzhinov away from dictators. He arranged to hold the 2004 World Championship in Tripoli, at the urging of another friend, Muammar Qaddafi.) Ilyumzhinov's famous chess *ukaz* is on display in the museum, as are souvenir pieces from Iran, India, Dubai, Libya, Iraq, Tunisia, Israel, Poland, and other countries. There are chess pieces made of ivory, teak, fake amber, and imitation alabaster; some are shaped like sheep, others like camels, and still others like wandering nomads.

The real cost of Chess City is unknown; Kalmykia doesn't adhere to open principles of accounting. Ilyumzhinov has said that he put forty million dollars of his own into it. "The city was built on investments," he told me. "It's all investments. There is no budget money there. And, if investments are flowing in, I think that's very good—for the republic, for the country, for the people." I asked at



least two dozen people at shopping malls, Internet cafés, and restaurants if they felt they had benefitted in any way from the construction of Chess City. Most refused to answer, not one said yes.

In a republic where people are lucky to earn fifty dollars a month, the project has generated more resentment than revenue. Ilyumzhinov had hoped that the Olympiad, in 1998, would put a spotlight on his domain. It did, but not exactly in the way that he had wanted. On June 8th, just a few months before the participants were scheduled to arrive in Elista, the body of a journalist, Larisa Yudina, was found in a local pond; she had been stabbed repeatedly. Yudina was the editor of *Soviet Kalmykia Today*, the only opposition newspaper in the region. Ilyumzhinov had banned the paper, so Yudina printed it in neighboring Volgograd and then distributed copies from the trunk of her car. She had often accused the government of corruption, embezzlement, and other crimes, and was investigating the finances of Chess City when she was killed.

Moscow officials, showing little confidence in the local police, took over the investigation, and soon arrested two men: both were former aides to Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, both confessed to the murder, and both were convicted. "You think that is so shocking?" Sergey Mitrokhin had asked me in Moscow the day before

I left for Elista. Mitrokhin is a leader of Yabloko, Russia's leading liberal party and one of the few still willing to criticize the Kremlin, and he has openly called Ilyumzhinov a murderer. "He could sue us, of course, but he doesn't want all these stories in public," Mitrokhin went on. "He knows he can't afford to offend the Kremlin. Anything else goes. It's just like Latin America. In Russia today, the main talent is to stay in power."

Running FIDE helps Ilyumzhinov do that. It is the custodian of the game's ancient rules and the body that tabulates world rankings. Last year, Ilyumzhinov replaced the final match in the two-year championship schedule with a more dramatic three-week tournament. He speeded up the game, discarding the traditional format, in which players can spend agonizingly silent hours mulling over their next move, and replaced it with "rapid chess," in which a match lasts fifty minutes.

"You need to attract sponsors," he told me. "But sponsors and investors go where there is a good show, where there are a lot of people watching. It's interesting to watch soccer, right? When people are running around for forty-five minutes, for two halves, right? Or basketball. But with chess, when you have people playing one game for two, three days—who's going to watch that on TV?"

There will be an election for the FIDE

presidency this fall. Ilyumzhinov is running against a Dutch businessman named Bessel Kok. Chess has always served as a barometer of cultural supremacy in Russia, and the most talented people in Russian chess think that Ilyumzhinov is a joke. "Even a dickhead would do a better job than Ilyumzhinov," Anatoly Karpov, the former world champion, said recently, when he was asked whom he supported. "The situation cannot become worse." Garry Kasparov, who may be history's strongest player, has said that Ilyumzhinov's fast version of the game "will end chess as we know it." These days, Kasparov, who has retired and moved into opposition politics, refuses even to discuss the subject. Last month, the British Grand Master Nigel Short weighed in: "It is hard to understate the importance of this election, as the future of chess is at stake. Either FIDE stays a cowboy organization, mired in sleaze and shunned by corporate sponsors, or it becomes a modern, professional sporting body committed to exploiting the game's vast potential."

Ilyumzhinov doesn't seem particularly concerned about the FIDE election. He is far more consumed with international—and intergalactic—politics. During our conversation in his office, he compared George Bush to Genghis Khan, approvingly: "Bush is creating order, conquering countries, territories, new oil wells, he hands them over to rich oil companies, they're rich and getting even richer—that's O.K. Bush has an army, he has a Congress that doles out a supplementary hundred billion dollars, he has a Senate, he has a Court. Maybe soon there's going to be a big American state. I haven't ruled out the possibility that, in our lifetime, we will all be living in an American state. But, as long as there's order and discipline, what's the difference?" Saddam Hussein was his friend. Was Ilyumzhinov not angry about the war in Iraq? "You have American soldiers dying there," he said. "Why are they dying? Are they establishing freedom? Human rights? Well, we'll see." He then returned to his conviction that the human experience might end soon anyway. "Tomorrow, aliens will fly down here and say, 'You guys are misbehaving,' and then they will take us away from the earth. They'll say, 'Why are you fighting down here? Why are you eating each other?' And they'll just put us in their ships and take us away." ♦



*"And to your right you'll see an extremely troubled young woman who thinks she's a tour guide."*