

Is there any way of saving the Reunification Championship?

by Mikhail Golubev 16 January 2003

The text below is part of a review of rounds 1-4 of the Corus Tournament, prepared on the 16th January 2003. It relates to latest developments regarding the World Championship. To a large extent it represents more than just my own personal thoughts, is the outcome of my extensive correspondence with colleagues - grandmasters and chess journalists from many different countries who are also concerned with the situation.

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It is very strange that the gist and hidden motive of the conflict between **Ruslan Ponomariov** and **FIDE**, which seems obvious, is still obscured by an argument about time control and FIDE World Champion Ruslan Ponomariov's privilege (or lack of privilege) to retain the title in the event of a draw. I don't know whether FIDE had hopes of "managing" the opinion of its champion with the assistance of third parties - or if FIDE just did not succeed in showing sufficient respect for the 18-year old World Champion. (Everything in history happens once for the first time, and we then learn by trial and error. Never has the World Champion been so young), but all the signs are that **from the very beginning** (since spring 2002) **Ruslan Ponomariov has, in practice, been kept away** from negotiations on reunification. **The second mistake made by FIDE**, i.e. the **participation of the world chess organization in preparation for the upcoming Kasparov vs Computer match**, was fatal and almost deprived the chess world of a chance for an agreement, which has been so agonizing to reach.

The balance of the strongest players' interests was completely destroyed

As far back as 2001 the **FIDE President** (at least, **in his speech broadcast worldwide by the mass media**) had promised the further, 16th FIDE World Champion (later it was Ponomariov who

won this title) a match against the strongest computer programme. The unification had the purpose consolidating the two world champions and the player with the highest rating into one unification world championship cycle. How was it possible not to take into account the interests of all these chess players equally?

At the end of September Ponomariov lost his chief coach, whose health could not withstand the stress, restriction of his pupil's rights, pressure on him personally and the reticence and long wait for FIDE Congress.

...Of course, Garry Kasparov, the most famous chess player in the world, has every right to the highest fee in any unofficial match. But **from an ethical point of view FIDE should not have taken part in it!**

It is also astonishing that FIDE supported Kasparov's match as the **FIDE President being the compatriot of one of the opponents should have avoided any hint of double standards regarding the participants.**

It is possible to understand and excuse a lot, including the state of euphoria, which possibly engulfed FIDE after they had managed to come to a peaceful agreement with Garry Kasparov, their, till then, long standing opponent. And that for some time this euphoria made FIDE forget about their own champion.

But should Ponomarev agree to further restriction of his interests if the international federation fails to restore the status quo with respect to its attitude to the leading chess players? Certainly, it's up to the FIDE World Champion to decide. In any case, it is impossible not to conclude that the development of the situation; persistence of the international federation representatives and Ruslan Ponomarev's strong resistance, leave no chance to hope that the contract signed by Ponomarev (under incredible pressure) based on principles suggested by the international federation so far, will have anything to do with the spirit of the chess world unification. Other options (such as proclamation of Kasparov as a World Champion without any match or announcement of Kasparov's match against another opponent) are similarly disastrous.

Is there any chance of saving the reunification championship in spite of it all? **Since the FIDE Congress** (that took place in Autumn 2002 in Bled) Ruslan Ponomarev has been insisting on the privilege to retain the title in the event of a draw in his match against Kasparov (It would not be a contradiction to chess traditions and it would give Ponomarev the same privilege that Classical World Champion, Kramnik, will have in the parallel match against Leko). In his second demand Ponomarev stated that his match with Kasparov should be played with the new FIDE time control, used in 2001/2002 FIDE World Championship, which brought Ponomarev the title of the World Champion. This requirement is more than in line with chess traditions and common sense, but it contradicts FIDE strategic idea of coming back to the classical time control.

FIDE does not accept the demands of the World Champion, at least not all of them, and the situation has been giving the impression of an absolute deadlock for a long time.

At the same time there must have been a **normal solution**, and probably even more than only one such solution. The solution,

which will take into consideration the reality of the current situation, without any mad approaches such as Ponomarev's disqualification or revision of the schedule for the Kasparov vs Computer match that is currently being fulfilled in New York.

If FIDE does not intend to just support Garry Kasparov in obtaining the WCh title in the quickest possible time (because if it does, what is currently the matter of worrying in the international chess community, the situation is really hopeless and there is no normal way out), but, instead, has a purpose of a **Reunification World Championship with the classical time control**, then, for instance, there should have been no obstacles for Ruslan Ponomarev to retain the title of the World Champion **regardless** of the outcome of the semi-final unification match (**this match should not have the status of FIDE World Championship**) until the final unification match has been played.

If, for example, Ponomarev is defeated by Kasparov, then Ponomarev will lose his title **only after the final unification process and return to the classical control is completed**, i.e. **after the final reunification match ends** - when the new (if it is not Ponomarev, of course) FIDE World Champion will be announced.

If it is impossible to arrange the already promised chess world reunification final match with the classical time control (i.e. a match between winners of the Ponomarev-Kasparov and Kramnik-Leko matches), FIDE should, in such a case, **return to Championships with the FIDE time control** (yes, now **this is the right time** for FIDE to take responsibility for the things that will happen **after** the Ponomarev-Kasparov match, including taking into consideration the possibility that the winner of the Kramnik-Leko match can refuse for any reason to play in the reunification final match). ...In this case Ruslan Ponomarev will **not** lose his title (with all the consequent rights and privileges) even for a single moment regardless of the result of his match against Kasparov with classical time

control. It is reasonable because Ponomariov won his Champion title with the FIDE time control and nothing should make him lose this title unless the transfer to classical time control is **fully completed**.

An opinion exists that a Ponomariov-Kasparov match without World Championship status has no sense. But quite the opposite is the truth - **A Ponomariov-Kasparov match has no sense if it is arranged in another way than, first of all, as a semi-final unification match**, because the unprecedented decision to grant the player with the highest rating the right to play against the World Champion can be approved only if all existing championships are unified.

Without any doubt, the interest of the sponsors require special care in selecting a proper title for the official match in case it is not a FIDE World Championship (which, in my view, is the right decision). It is necessary to concentrate on the words **“unification”** and **“classical”** (implying time control) but not on the word **“semi-final”**. *If it is impossible to meet sponsor interest even under such a condition, the winner of a Kasparov-Ponomariov match can be awarded a special “intermediary” title, for instance, **FIDE Classical Chess World Champion**, the title that will be absolutely independent (!) of the current title of Ruslan Ponomariov. Both Garry Kasparov and Ruslan Ponomariov can win this intermediary title (so, Ruslan Ponomariov will be able to obtain both titles of World Champion at the same time).*

*It should be absolutely strictly stipulated that the present intermediary title (**FIDE Classical Chess World Champion**) will not be given any advancement within FIDE in case the final reunification match against the Kramnik-Leko match winner **has not taken place** (for any reason) within the predetermined period of time. In this case FIDE has to come back to a FIDE World Championships with a FIDE time control (and the intermediary title should possibly be*

automatically abolished after the first championship of that kind).

*If the final reunification championship with the winner of the Kramnik-Leko match **has taken place**, the intermediary title (**FIDE Classical Chess World Champion**) should also be automatically abolished (and in this case this is absolutely critical) immediately after the final reunification match **has been played** and the winner (Ponomariov, Kramnik, Kasparov or Leko) has obtained the most honourable title of **FIDE World Champion**, which currently belongs (and will belong until the end of the final reunification match in accordance with all I suggest above) to Ukrainian grandmaster Ruslan Ponomariov.*

This is my suggestion that I have not discussed so far with any of the supposed participants of the reunification championship or their official representatives. This suggestion might seem artificial, but ... artificial is the whole process of unification (and especially, the currently critical match between Ponomariov and Kasparov). Unfortunately, from many points of view, it is always more "natural" to destroy than to build.

It is my view that, after the conflict has recently reached the public stage, now is the time for independent chess experts, those who are not indifferent to the future of the World Championship, to express their opinions. Someone can possibly offer a better scheme, I will be happy if such an attempt leads to success. In any case **the balance of interests has to be met**. To enter a reunification championship cycle with the status of the current champion diminished would lay a foundation for new disunity in the chess world for many years ahead. ...

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