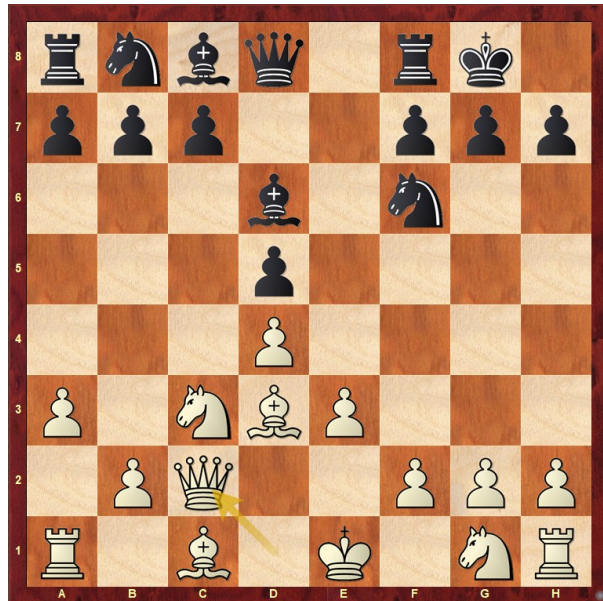


The opening round of the Junior World Chess Championship in Petrovac provided the spectators with an abundance of fighting games and upsets despite a significant difference in Elo and experience on most of the boards.

One of the tensest games of the first round happened on board 3. One of the pre-tournament favorites GM Aleksey Grebnev representing FIDE faced a FIDE Master from Albania Mateu Boci.

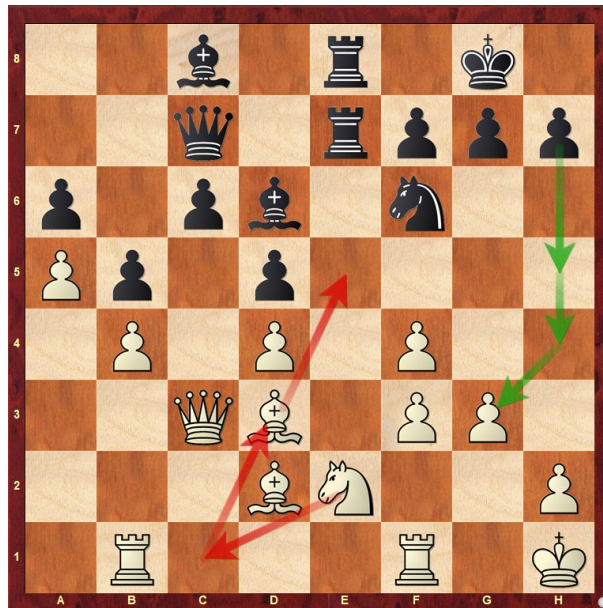
The game started with the Nimzo-Indian defence with Aleksey opting for a sub-variation of the Rubinstein system recently popularized by Richard Rapport.



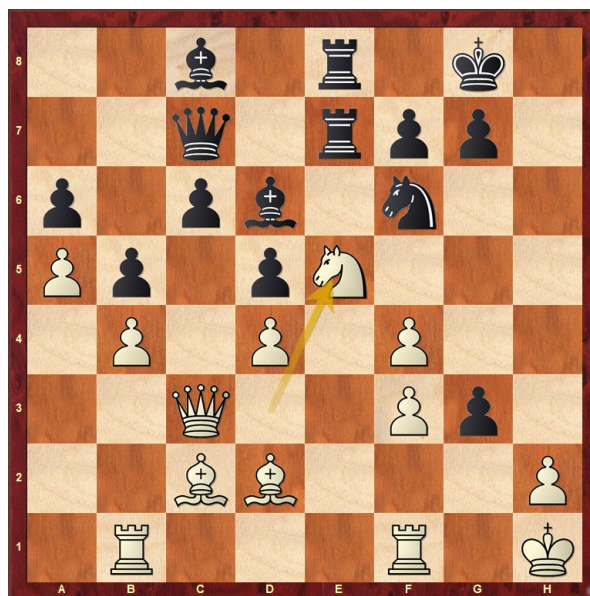
Black did not react in the most principled way and proceeded to develop in the Kollé - Zukertort reversed fashion. Objectively White got a small positional advantage helped by the fact that the f3-pawn was effectively restricting Black's minor pieces. However, the position remained mostly unclear and full of life.



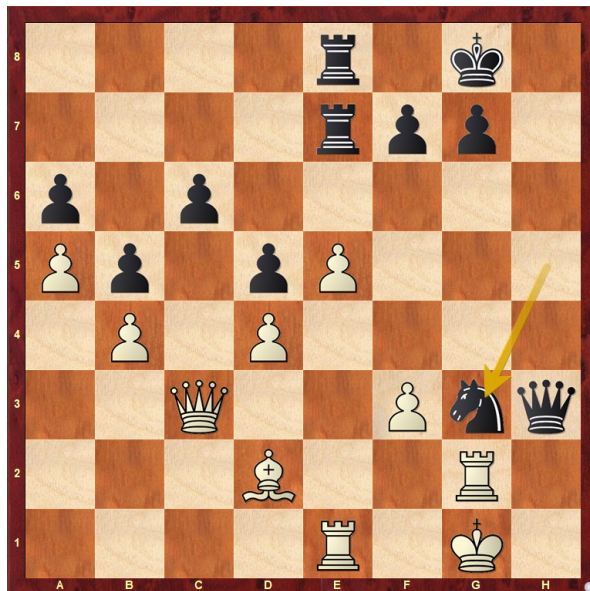
A few moves later Grebnev went for an interesting pawn structure transformation with a long-term plan of transferring the passive e2-knight to a glorious central outpost on e5.



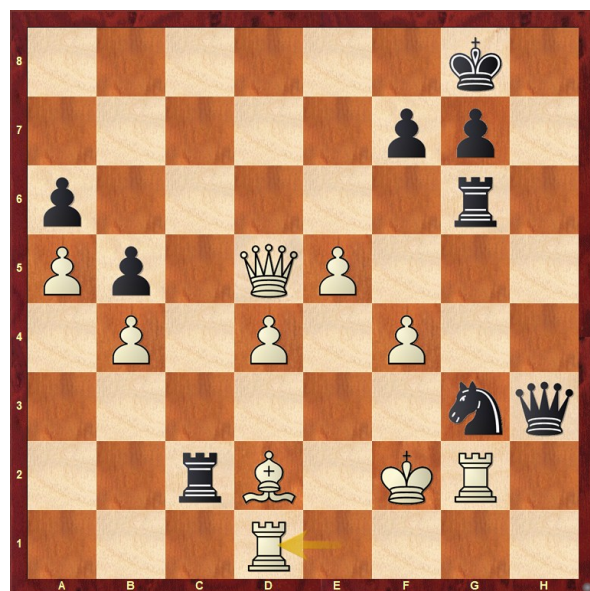
However, this plan takes a long time to execute and Mateu managed to create sufficient counterchances on the kingside with a help of typical AlphaZero-ish h-pawn dash.



The position was getting increasingly sharp and complex with White finally achieving his strategic goals but severely weakening his king in the meantime. The first critical moment came on move 35 when in mutual time trouble Grebnev went for a greedy all-in approach with 35. Qxc6 – a decision which should have backfired. Instead, 35. Rh2 could enable White to continue the fight on equal terms albeit Black is probably to be preferred in a practical game.



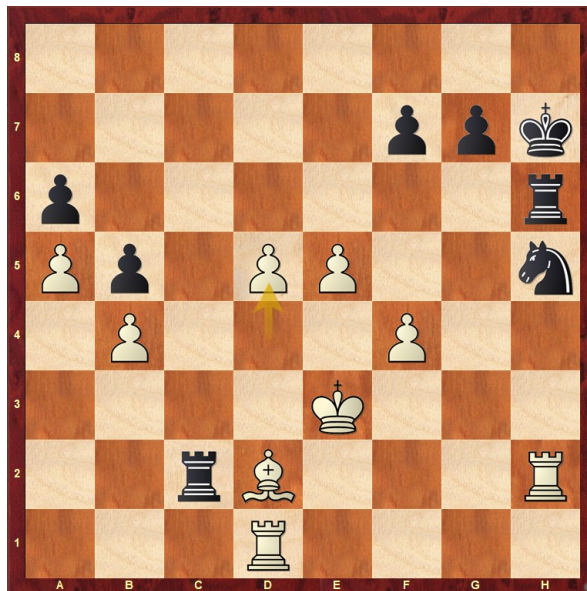
The young Albanian player reacted energetically and strongly, activating both rooks and putting his opponent on the verge of crushing defeat. Objectively, Black's attack is more than enough to decide the game.



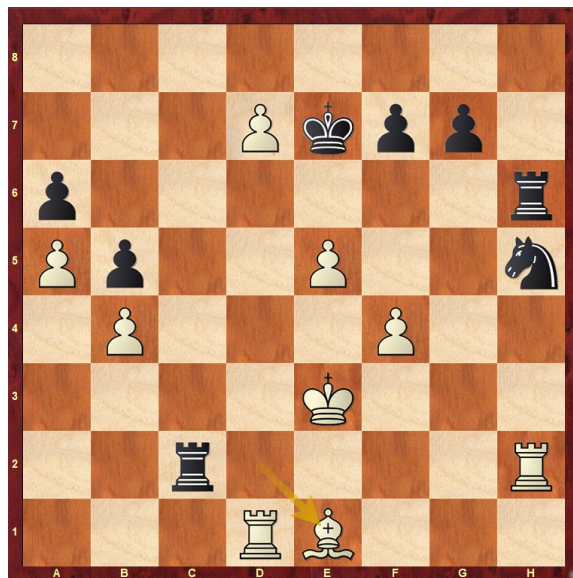
Perhaps, at this point the nerves finally got to Black and he did not consider a professional decision to first repeat the position a couple times to reach the time control with 39...Nh1+ 40. Kg1 Ng3 41. Kf2. With 30 extra minutes on the clock Boci was very likely to crown his attack with a victory. In fact, the cold-blooded 41...Rb2 puts White in zugzwang as 42. Qf3 or 42. Qa8+ Kh7 43. Qf3 is met with Nh1+ -+.

Instead, disaster struck and Black blundered with 39...Qh5?!, missing 40. Qa8+! Kh7 41. Qf3! +-, when suddenly Nh1 is no longer of any help because of Ke3! Aleksey was quick to capitalize on his lucky chance, Black had to exchange Queens and the resulting endgame was hopeless for him due to a very strong passed d-pawn.





Grebnev went on to convert without too many difficulties, finishing the game with a nice tactical shot.



Without a doubt a heartbreak for FM Mateu Doci who played an inspired game against a very strong adversary. Still, if he continues to perform at the same level, more Grandmaster scalps will be coming his way soon. And for GM Grebnev such a start may very well boost his confidence. After all, you cannot be a champion without some luck involved.