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Rinat Akhmetov: "Shakhtar was always pro-Ukrainian, always patriotic"



The Guardian has published a rare interview with Rinat Akhmetov, founder of SCM and president of Shakhtar Donetsk, conducted in person at his home outside Kyiv. The journalist travelled to Ukraine to mark the 90th birthday of the football club and 30 years since Mr Akhmetov became its president.

The interview took place the morning after one of russia's heaviest aerial raids on Kyiv in months. Throughout the war Mr Akhmetov has remained in Ukraine, supporting the country's defenders and civilians, and he used the conversation to reaffirm his confidence in a free and democratic future.

He spoke first about the club that has become an ambassador for Ukraine since being forced to leave Donetsk in 2014. "Shakhtar was always pro-Ukrainian, always patriotic," he said, recalling how the club adopted a Ukrainian-style emblem back in 2007. His lifelong devotion to the game was unmistakable: "If you take football away from me, you rip my heart out without anaesthesia."

On the occupation of Donbas, Mr Akhmetov was clear. "The entire occupied Donbas region is in the same miserable state," he said, contrasting today's hardship with the prosperity the region once knew. He recalled standing in the Donbas Arena in 2014 and telling the Kremlin marionettes: "You're good for nothing, you're terrorists." His steelworks in Mariupol, Azovstal, became the city's final bastion of resistance in 2022, and the Heart of Azovstal project he founded continues to support the plant's defenders and their families.

Mr. Akhmetov drew a clear line between the values of European football and those he wants for Ukrainian business. Shakhtar, he noted, "play by the most civilised European rules. Similarly, I always wanted Ukrainian businesses to play by such rules."

He was equally clear about the contrast between Ukraine and the aggressor. "There are lots of problems in Ukraine: sure, but in a free and democratic state nobody tries to conceal them," he said, adding of russia: "how much does russia invest in technology? Zero. They are less prepared for tomorrow's battle. They put a lot of money into this war against their neighbours, even though we have never posed any threat to russia."