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Zenit Fans Demand All-White, Non-Gay Team

By The Moscow Times

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Fans of two-time defending Russian champion Zenit St. Petersburg are calling for non-white and gay players to be excluded from the team.

Landscrona, the largest Zenit supporters club, released a manifesto Monday demanding the club field an all-white, heterosexual team. It added that "dark-skinned players are all but forced down Zenit's throat now, which only brings out a negative reaction" and said gay players were "unworthy of our great city."

The club, which is owned by state-controlled natural gas giant Gazprom, told the R-Sport news agency that it supported tolerance and picked players on athletic ability alone, insisting that "the team's policy is aimed at development and integration into the world soccer community, and holds no archaic views."

Zenit had been the only top-flight Russian team never to have signed a black player until this

summer, when it acquired Brazilian striker Hulk and Belgian midfielder Axel Witsel for 80 million euros ($105 million). French midfielder Yann M'Vila declined a move to the club in August after receiving death threats.

Fans insisted that "we are not racists and, for us, the absence of black Zenit players is just an important tradition that underlines the team's identity and nothing more."

Russia has struggled to deal with racism and violence at its stadiums as it prepares to host the World Cup in 2018. Black players are frequently the targets of monkey chants and some, including Anzhi Makhachkala's Robert Carlos and Christopher Samba, have had bananas thrown at them by fans.

Officials have at times shown little enthusiasm for targeting racism. When Lokomotiv Moscow fans held up a banner in 2010 thanking an English team for signing their black striker Peter Odemwingie with a picture of a banana, the head of Russia's World Cup bid awkwardly claimed they were referencing a quaint, little-used Russian expression meaning "to fail an exam."

Zenit's fans have long been the country's most problematic. Dick Advocaat, the team's former Dutch manager, once admitted that "the fans don't like black players" and that it would be "impossible" for Zenit to sign one.

Several black players have also singled out Zenit's fans as particularly racist. Former Russian top scorer Vagner Love told a Brazilian newspaper in April that Zenit was "the most racist team in Russia" and the only one whose fans had abused him in his seven years playing for CSKA Moscow.

Five years earlier, Krylya Sovetov Samara's former Cameroon international Serge Branco told a local newspaper that Zenit's management was "the real racists" for not combatting the problem, adding that "in a civilized country they'd smack them down to the third division for their fans' behavior."

Zenit's fans have also come under the spotlight recently after one of them threw a firecracker that injured Dinamo Moscow's goalkeeper during a match in November. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, himself a Zenit fan, called for violent spectators to be banned for life from attending matches. Parliament has drafted a bill that would ban hooligans for a year.

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