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Northern Ireland Win 1-0 to Slow Russian Charge to Brazil

By The Moscow Times

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BELFAST — Russia's charge to the 2014 World Cup hit a major bump in the road on Wednesday with a 1-0 defeat to Northern Ireland in Belfast.

Russia could have overtaken Portugal at the top of Group F with victory at Windsor Park but instead were undone by a sublime 41st-minute header from Martin Paterson.

It leaves Fabio Capello's men two points adrift of the Portuguese, though still with a game in hand, while the Irish pick up their first win of the campaign to move to six points and fourth place.

The gulf in ball-playing ability was apparent from the start as Russia carved their opponents open seemingly at will. Roy Carroll had to be sharp on three occasions to intercept through balls from Roman Shirokov and Alan Dzagoev.

At the other end Niall McGinn of Aberdeen tried to walk the ball into the net after beating four Russian players down the right flank, but was thwarted in trying to get a shot away.

Zenit St. Petersburg forward Alexander Kerzhakov went close with a low shot that nearly ricocheted over Carroll off a defender's leg.

The hosts came a whisker away from opening the scoring five minutes before half time as Jamie Ward smashed a 25-yard shot against Igor Akinfeev's left-hand post. The CSKA Moscow goalkeeper was perfectly positioned to gather Paterson's follow-up.

But luck couldn't save Russian moments later, and Paterson rose magnificently to power home McGinn's snap cross from the right.

At half time Russia had to respond, and Capello duly introduced the Russian league's top scorer Artem Dzyuba and Real Madrid winger Denis Cheryshev to breathe some life into the visitors, although the latter's contribution lasted just five minutes after he pulled a hamstring and was replaced by Alexander Samedov.

The Russians started to dominate possession but were unable to find a useful opening. Dmitry Kombarov blasted over with his left foot.

The visitors got demoralised and the Irish, spurred on by 18,000 at Windsor Park, capitalised, upping the work-rate to close their visitors down faster.

Capello tried to liven up the attack by directing Samedov and Vladimir Bystrov to switch flanks, but the move bore little fruit and Northern Ireland held on for a deserved win.

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