

What Russia's World Cup Would Look Like if Hit by a European Boycott

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Calls for boycott are customary when Russia hosts an major international sporting event, as was the case for the Sochi Olympic Games in February.

Amid international tension over the conflict in Ukraine, voices in the West are clamoring for Russia to lose the right to host the 2018 World Cup. While this is realistically highly unlikely, a boycott of the tournament by European nations would certainly be welcome news for some of the other teams, who might have a better chance of bringing home the elusive trophy.

German politicians said earlier this week that FIFA should reconsider Russia as host of the next tournament. The football association of the Netherlands, a country that lost 193 of its citizens when Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 was shot down over Ukraine last week, said a discussion about Russia's hosting of the World Cup would be opened "at a later moment, once the investigation into the disaster has been completed."

Calls for boycott are customary when Russia hosts an major international sporting event, as was the case for the Sochi Olympic Games in February. But boycotts of the World Cup are virtually unheard of: Uruguay boycotted Italy's 1934 World Cup, upset at poor attendance by Europeans when it hosted the previous tournament, and four years later, Uruguay and Argentina refused to play in France because they were irate that a second successive event would be held in Europe instead of in South America.

"If more sanctions are imposed on Russia, if relations with the West do not improve, then the worst thing that could happen is that the tournament will be moved to another country," said Dmitry Navosha, editor-in-chief of Sports.ru, a prominent Russian sports news website. "If things calm down, I think everything will be fine with Russia as a host."

Russia still has plenty of time to redeem itself in the eyes of Europe and North America. But if it continues on its current path and FIFA — often impervious to the political nuances of host nations of the World Cup — rules that Russia will still host, what will the tournament look like? There are certainly several squads that would benefit from a Europe-free World Cup.

Don't Cry for Me, Argentina

The runner-ups of this year's World Cup would be certain to make an appearance in Russia. Earlier this month, President Vladimir Putin rubbed elbows with his Argentinian counterpart Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Buenos Aires when the countries signed a nuclear energy cooperation agreement. The leaders demonstrated their blossoming friendship further when they announced that the Spanish-language service of RT, a state-owned Russian television network, would be broadcasting in Argentina on a 24/7 basis, with almost the status of an Argentinian state channel. In March, de Kirchner openly sided with Putin over Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, denouncing double standards in Western foreign policy.

The 2018 tournament would be a chance for Argentina to redeem itself after its loss to Germany in this year's final. The mighty Mannschaft, in this scenario, would not be playing on Russian turf.

BRICS Brother Brazil

Although Russian officials have promised that their country's World Cup will surpass Brazil's, the fun-loving Brazilians did not seem to take offense. As BRICS brothers, Russia and Brazil foster warm relations. Putin's recent official visit to the country was marked by the signing of economic cooperation agreements in a variety of sectors. Brazil will inspire Russia's preparations for the 2018 World Cup, and Russia's Sochi experience will serve as a model for the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games.

Without the German and Dutch squads standing in its way, if the Brazilian squad could improve its defense in the next four years, it could be a contender for the ultimate prize in world football.

Algerian All-Stars

Russia crashed out of this year's tournament early on, while its fellow group member Algeria

went on to the round of 16, where it was eliminated by Germany, the eventual winner. Russia's coach Fabio Capello blamed Russia's early exit from the tournament on Algerian fans who directed a laser pointer in the eyes of goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev before an equalizing goal. But bad blood does not run deep between the two countries.

The Soviet Union provided military and technical assistance to Algeria during its 1954 to 1962 independence war, and the countries have expanded their trade ties in recent years. There is no reason Algeria would snub Russia.

Chinese Challengers

The Chinese squad currently ranks 94th in FIFA's world rankings. But if the 36 European teams in the top 94 were scratched, China would be a serious contender to qualify for Russia's tournament.

China would no doubt be elated to play on Russian turf at a tournament hosted by its BRICS partner and another non-Western center of power.

And with a \$20 billion, 20-year gas deal inked with Russia's Gazprom in May, Team China will definitely not run out of gas.

North Korean Wild Card

North Korea has made two World Cup appearances in its history, most recently in 2010, when it finished last.

As the West feuds with Russia, Moscow has been cozying up with Pyongyang. North Korea was one of the 11 countries that voted against the United Nations' draft resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity, and in April, the State Duma agreed to write off nearly \$10 billion of North Korea's debt from the Soviet era. North Korea's remaining \$1.09 billion in debt will be managed by Russia's state development bank, Vneshekonombank.

Kim Jong-un would no doubt be pleased at the prospect of qualifying for a Russian tournament devoid of European teams.

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