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Capello on the Brink With Russian Football in Crisis

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Fabio Capello

Even if FIFA scandals were not placing Russia's right to host the 2018 World Cup under scrutiny, Russian football would still be in crisis.

National team coach Fabio Capello is on the brink of being fired, the national football federation is leaderless and fans are turning away from the game, with Premier League attendances dropping to levels last seen in the chaotic and poverty-stricken 1990s.

On Sunday in Moscow, exactly three years before the first game of the World Cup, Russia slumped to a 1-0 defeat to Austria. The World Cup host has just two wins from its last 10 games — one against tiny Liechtenstein, the other awarded by default when a match was abandoned due to crowd trouble. Its last competitive goal was scored eight months ago.

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko has said Capello could be fired this month, but that is not quick enough for two fans who have started an online campaign to oust him by unusual means: They are collecting money online to buy out his contract.

"We think that anyone who isn't indifferent to the fate of football in Russia has been deeply disappointed by our national team's performances recently," write Anton Danilkovich and Vladislav Shunayev. "We've all had our souls spat on."

The crowdfunding bid, entitled "Fabio, go home," received wide media coverage in Russia on Tuesday within hours of its launch, though it's not clear how much has actually been raised.

The reason for the fundraising is a generous contract extension handed to Capello last year, reportedly worth 7 million euros ($7.9 million) a year with a clause specifying over 21 million euros ($23.5 million) in compensation if he is fired. With the Russian Football Union deeply in debt and losing money, it is hard to see how it could afford to fire Capello, so the fans have decided to do it themselves.

Mutko, the sports minister and chairman of the World Cup organizing committee, has said he expects a decision on Capello's future by July 10 at the latest, but signaled some support for the beleaguered Italian. "I'm not a fan of blaming everything on departing coaches," he told the R-Sport agency on Tuesday.

If Capello does leave, the likely successor would be Leonid Slutsky, who won the Russian Premier League title with CSKA Moscow in 2013 and 2014 and guided the team to a second-place finish this season. He would be Russia's first non-foreign coach since 2006.

The situation is further complicated because the RFU is in chaos. Its president Nikolai Tolstykh lost a vote of confidence last month and until a successor is elected, the organization is temporarily in the hands of 88-year-old former player Nikita Simonyan, the acting president.

The RFU's financial problems are long-running and so serious that Capello went unpaid for more than seven months until February, when billionaire businessman and Arsenal part-owner Alisher Usmanov loaned the RFU money to clear the overdue wages. In recent weeks, the RFU has again been unable to meet Capello's wages, Russian media reported.

Fans are unhappy with Capello, but they are also increasingly turning away from football completely.

The Russian Premier League's average attendance this season was just 10,151, far below even the second tier of English football. As well as the Russian weather, fans must contend with Soviet-era stadiums that are reaching the end of their useful life, while poor pitch maintenance means matches are regularly moved to cities hundreds of miles away in search of a playable surface. Moreover, an RFU crackdown has meant more matches being played behind closed doors as punishment for fan racism.

"Games are played late in the fall, or in the spring, when it's not comfortable," says Russian Fans' Union leader Alexander Shprygin.

"The stadiums have got old and there aren't very interesting matches at the moment, there's some unusual refereeing going on and a complex of problems, which could, let's say, cause problems for spectators."

The Russian Premier League argues the lack of fans is a temporary problem that will be solved when the government's World Cup spending gives teams a raft of new arenas, plus a refurbished 81,000-capacity national stadium — Luzhniki in Moscow.

The massive program of World Cup construction is proceeding apace and largely on schedule as Russia readies 12 new or refurbished arenas in 11 cities. Unlike in Brazil last year, Russia's problems are away from the construction sites.

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