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Most Russians Not Interested in Football, Poll Shows

By Jennifer Monaghan

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As the country gears up to host the next World Cup tournament, interest in football has hit an all-time low in Russia, with most people saying they don't watch the game, state-run pollster VTsIOM showed Monday.

Seventy-three percent of Russians said they were indifferent to football, the pollster found, compared to 52 percent in June last year. A further 19 percent said they were interested in football "from time to time," down from 31 percent in June 2014.

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The findings come as Russia prepares to host the 2018 World Cup tournament, organized

by world football's governing body FIFA. Billions of dollars have been set aside to develop stadiums and infrastructure in the 11 cities chosen to host World Cup matches.

Meanwhile, Swiss authorities recently launched an investigation into the awarding of the tournament to Russia and the 2022 tournament to Qatar, with allegations that bribes were paid to secure the hosting rights to the prestigious competition.

Russia — currently ranked 26th in the world, according to FIFA's rankings — turned in a disastrous performance in last year's World Cup finals, failing to win any of their group matches and crashing out of the tournament before the knockout stages.

Since then, coach Fabio Capello has come under increased pressure to turn around the fortunes of the national team ahead of next year's European Championships in France. Russia currently sits third in its qualifying group, and faces an uphill battle to qualify for the tournament.

After losing a recent qualifier to Austria, Capello — whose contract runs through the 2018 World Cup, and is worth an estimated $11 million a year, according to Forbes — held talks on his future with the Russian football union (RFU), the TASS news agency quoted an RFU executive committee member as saying in late June.

Any moves to dismiss Capello would likely be welcomed by the majority of Russian football fans. The VTsIOM pollster found that 53 percent of Russians want Capello removed from his position as head coach, with just 19 percent giving him their backing.

The VTsIOM poll was carried out from June 20-21 among 1,600 respondents in 46 Russian regions. The margin of error was no greater than 3.5 percent, the pollster said.

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