The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Fabio Is Finally Gone – But Who Is Next for Team Russia?

By Jennifer Monaghan

July 14, 2015



Conflicting rumors were rife as to who would take on Russia's football team after Italian coach Fabio Capello's long-anticipated departure was announced Tuesday, but pundits were agreed on one thing: The new coach should be a Russian.

A brief statement published Tuesday on the website of the Russian Football Union (RFU) confirmed rumors that had appeared a day earlier in the country's press, saying that Capello had ended his three-year tenure "by mutual consent."

"Capello worked honestly and responsibly. But sport is a cruel thing. You always have to have results," Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko was quoted as saying by the TASS news agency.

The Russian team currently occupies the precarious position of third place in its Euro 2016 qualifying group — in which only the top two teams advance to the tournament automatically. A much criticized 1-0 defeat in June to group leaders Austria is believed to have speeded up the Italian's exit.

Fueling talk of his departure was an ongoing dispute with the RFU, which struggled for months to pay Capello's salary — worth 7 million euros ($7.7 million) a year, according to the Novaya Gazeta newspaper, which in April published details of the contract.

The lucrative contract — which made him one of the highest-paid coaches in the world — became a weapon to use against Capello when results were unsatisfactory, said Max Senatorov, who works as a football pundit for Russia's NTV Plus channel.

"[People] were breaking their calculators trying to convert from euros to rubles the amount of compensation [stipulated] in his contract, and deep down they envied him," Senatorov told The Moscow Times.

Capello, who had another three years left on his contract, will receive about 930 million rubles ($16.4 million) as part of a severance package, the R-Sport news site reported Tuesday, citing an unidentified source involved in the discussions.

No More Foreigners

Capello, 69, became the third consecutive foreign coach to head the national football team when he took over from Dutchman Dick Advocaat in July 2012, who himself succeeded his compatriot Guus Hiddink in July 2010.

Initially Capello, a strict disciplinarian, seemed exactly what the country needed. The Italian ensured the team qualified for the World Cup 2014 at the top of its group, after which the RFU extended his contract until 2018.

But the team's showing in the 2014 World Cup was a disaster: After two draws and a loss, it crashed out of the tournament before the knockout rounds. Since then, results have been distinctly underwhelming.

"Russian people can accept spectacular failure, but dull failure is the worst sin you can commit in football. Capello's resignation was just a matter of time and money," Ivan Kalashnikov, deputy editor of the Sports.ru news site, told The Moscow Times.

With Russia set to host the FIFA World Cup in 2018, the search is now on for a replacement for Capello. After three foreign managers, pundits all agreed that the time was right for a Russian-born coach to take up the mantle.

"We need a local, a Russian specialist," Nobel Arustamyan, a football commentator for NTV Plus, told The Moscow Times.

"I think this era of foreign trainers in Russia has finished for now. Maybe in the future — say in five years' time — we will again return to foreign trainers. But for the next three or four years, it will be a Russian," he said.

Sports Minister Mutko confirmed this position, telling the TASS news agency Tuesday that the football union "had no option other than to appoint a Russian."

The RFU's acting president, Nikita Simonyan, has since released a list of names that the union is considering for the role, the Championat sports news site reported Tuesday. All of the

candidates are Russian.

Leonid Slutsky

All of the experts polled by The Moscow Times on Tuesday agreed that Leonid Slutsky, who currently coaches the CSKA Moscow football club, is one of the front-runners for the job.

He was also one of the five coaches on the list released by the RFU, according to Championat, along with Stanislav Cherchesov, Alexander Borodyuk, Yury Syomin and Kurban Berdyev.

Slutsky, 44, joined CSKA Moscow in October 2009, leading his team out of the Champions League group stages for the first time in the club's history that same year. The team has also won two Russian Premier League titles under his tenure.

"The most obvious candidate is Slutsky. He has been the most successful trainer during the past five years, earning success both in Europe and in Russia," said Arustamyan.

Senatorov agreed, noting that Slutsky has already worked with many of the key national team players during his tenure at CSKA, including goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev and central defenders Vasily Berezutsky and Sergei Ignashevich.

"[CSKA] does not have a large budget compared to other teams in the Russian Premier League, but [Slutsky] knows how to communicate with the players and get the most from them," Senatorov said.

Some pundits had expressed doubt that Slutsky would be willing to trade in the stimulation of weekly action in the Russian Premier League for the comparatively slower pace of national football. But the RFU will allow any new coach to continue working part-time at a championship club, executive committee member Sergei Stepashin said Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Stanislav Cherchesov

Another candidate whom the RFU has said it is considering is Cherchesov, a former goalkeeper who guided Dynamo Moscow to a fourth-place finish in the Russian Premier League last season.

Cherchesov, 51, joined Dynamo last April but after little more than a year in the job his contract was terminated — also by "mutual consent" — on Monday.

This could make him an appealing target for the RFU, which won't have to worry about paying compensation to his former club for poaching him.

"Cherchesov is a good trainer and motivator, and I think he would be a good candidate. Plus he is now free after leaving Dynamo. Overall, I think he would be the most suitable figure," Vladimir Stogniyenko, a commentator with the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, told The Moscow Times.

Cherchesov himself has hinted he would be willing to take the top coaching job, telling the Sport Express newspaper that he was "open to all suggestions" when asked Monday if he

would consider the position.

Alexander Borodyuk

Another name on the RFU's list is that of Borodyuk, who is not currently aligned with any club but has several years' experience working with the national team as an assistant coach.

Borodyuk, 52, first joined the national set-up in 2002 working as an assistant to manager Georgy Yartsev before taking the reins as an interim manager from December 2005 until June 2006, when Hiddink took charge.

Under Hiddink, Borodyuk returned to working as an assistant and continued in the same position under Advocaat until 2012. He also coached the Russian under-21 side from December 2005 to October 2006.

Borodyuk also had a chance to gain experience in Russia's top flight after overseeing Torpedo Moscow's promotion from League One when he was manager during the 2013-14 season, but a disagreement with the club's leadership meant that he left without having overseen a single premier league match, said Senatorov.

He has not coached in the two years since, and that has to be considered as a black mark against him, the sports commentator added.

Capello's successor will be named within the next two weeks, Sergei Anokhin, who sits on the RFU's executive committee, was quoted as saying by Interfax on Tuesday.

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