

Sports Minister Says Russian Football Fans Could Clash Again 'If Provoked'

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Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko says that he can't exclude further violence from Russian football fans in France due to the “numerous provocations” they face at the Euro 2016 tournament, the TASS news agency reported Wednesday.

“I have no confidence that the clashes involving Russian fans will not be repeated,” said Mutko, who is also the head of the Russian Football Union. “Our fans are being continually provoked. Whatever happens, the Russians are to blame.”

Mutko in particular cited the jeers of English fans during the Russian national anthem. “The Russian national anthem was booed by England, in fact, it could not even be heard,” he said. “But no one is talking about it.”

The minister also spoke out the arrest of 43 Russian fans as they traveled from Marseille to Lille on Tuesday, questioning the legality of the move.

Mutko said that four of the detained fans would be deported from France, the R-Sport news agency reported.

Alexander Shprygin, a leader of the Russian Supporters' Union, said that the arrests were connected to an assault on an English fan in Marseille, who was left in a coma as a result of the attack.

Russia has been given a suspended disqualification from European football tournament, which will be enforced if Russian fans continue to clash with rival supporters within French football stadiums.

The independent UEFA Control, Ethics and Disciplinary Body (CEDB) made the decision following violent incidents during the match between Russia and England on June 11 in the Stade Velodrome in Marseille, France. The committee also issued Russia a fine of 150,000 euros (\$168,000).

The start of the football tournament has been marred by violence after clashes instigated by Russian and English supporters outside the stadium.

Russian fans later broke through barriers inside the arena and attacked English supporters after their match ended in a 1-1 draw.

The international press reported that clashes after the match was triggered by a flare being fired from a Russian section of the stadium. The brawls were eventually stopped by stewards.

At least 35 people were injured as a result of the fan violence with several in serious condition, according to the French media.

England was also warned that they would be disqualified if fans continued to behave poorly.

UEFA's measures against Russia were welcomed by the French Minister of Urban Affairs, Youth and Sport, Patrick Kanner.

"These [violent] incidents inside stadiums involving Russians may result in their team's disqualification. I am very glad. Disqualification is the best way to fight with hooligans," Kanner wrote on Twitter, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

The behavior of fans in France has sparked mixed reactions in Russia. While the Kremlin condemned the violence and urged supporters to comply with the law, a number of Russian officials expressed their support.

When the French Prosecutor called some Russian fans "well prepared fighters," spokesman for the Russian Investigative Committee Vladimir Markin took to Twitter to argue that they were "just normal men."

State Duma Deputy Igor Lebedev, who sits on the Executive Committee member of the Russian Football Union, praised Russian fans on Twitter and told them to "keep it up."

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