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Russia Draws 'Advantageous' Group for Home World Cup

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Mikhail Metzel/TASS

The Russian football team's fate in the group stage was decided on Friday as the star-studded World Cup draw wrapped up in the State Kremlin Palace.

As hosts, Russia was automatically placed in the first seeding pot among the tournament's highest ranked teams. It drew Uruguay, Egypt and Saudi Arabia as its fellow Group A teams.

The host team will kick off the tournament with an opening match against Saudi Arabia in Moscow on June 14. It's second match will be against Egypt in St. Petersburg and the final group stage match will be against Uruguay in Samara.

"I don't know any of the teams since we've never played any of them and I've never specifically followed them," head coach Stanislav Cherkesov told journalists after the draw ceremony.

"The only thing that strikes me is that our games get increasingly harder," he added. "Here,

maybe, and I stress the maybe, there is a slight advantage, but everything will ultimately be decided on the field."

The draw is favorable for Russia and some are already looking ahead to the Round of 16. If Russia advances from the group stage, it will play against a team from Group B, most likely 2010 World Cup champion Spain or 2016 Euro champion Portugal.

"I think it is possible to advance from this group," said Russia's star player Fyodor Smolov. "Urugay is one of the leaders in South America, so it's clear to us what to expect from this team."

The draw ceremony took place in the Kremlin Palace with Russia's President Vladimir Putin and FIFA President Gianni Infantino.

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A colorful cohort of Russian pop singers and internationally renowned dance troupes, the Igor Moiseyev Ballet and the Alexandrov Dance Ensemble of the Russian Army, took to the stage before the tense moments of the draw to entertain the guests, which included an impressive lineup of football legends, national team coaches and players.

One of the greatest players in history, Pele, who was taken to the draw in a wheelchair, snapped a selfie with Putin and got a kiss from Argentina's superstar Diego Maradona.

Maradona was on stage to help pull the balls with the team names, along with other football royalty Laurent Blanc, Cafu, Carles Puyol, Diego Forlan, Gordon Banks, Fabio Cannavaro, Nikita Simonyan and Miroslav Klose, who brought the golden trophy to the Kremlin stage.

Together they drew some exciting matches for the first round, including Spain facing off against Portugal in Sochi, 2014 World Cup runners-up Argentina playing tournament newcomer Iceland in its first match, and 2014 champions Germany starting their quest for back-to-back titles against Mexico.

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