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Convicted Russian Football Fan Warned Against World Cup Violence

By Reuters

May 31, 2018



Tatyana Makeyeva / Reuters

A Russian football fan leader jailed over clashes with England supporters at the 2016 European Championship said he and other fans had been warned by police against engaging in violence at the upcoming World Cup in Russia.

Sergei Gorbachev spent seven months in a Marseille jail over the clashes before Russia's match against England at the tournament two years ago in France, where punches were thrown, bottles flung and smoke bombs detonated.

Russian authorities, hoping to expunge memories of the Marseille brawls, have pledged to curb violence at the World Cup, to be held from June 14 to July 15 in 11 Russian cities.

Gorbachev, who heads the supporters' association of Arsenal Tula, a Russian Premier League club, said police regularly dropped in on fans known to authorities, even though they are not

officially banned from attending sporting events.

He said he had also taken part in meetings with police in which fans were told not to engage in stadium violence.

"The guys who are now in the fan world, they are feeling the effects of what the authorities are doing to ensure the World Cup is held without any trouble, including from the Russian fans," said the 35-year-old.

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At a bar in Tula, an industrial city about 170 km (105 miles) south of Moscow, Gorbachev is greeted by patrons and called the "star of Marseille" by the barman.

He said English fans travelling to Russia for the World Cup have nothing to fear - if they behave themselves.

"If they behave in a civilized way, I will shake their hand," added Gorbachev, who said he studied French and read the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mikhail Bulgakov while serving his sentence at Marseille's Baumettes prison.

"I would want the same from them. I wouldn't want to see same attitude and behaviour I encountered in Marseille."

'Police every 20 meters'

In the run-up to the World Cup, Russia has increased fines for violent stadium behaviour. In some cases, fans are asked to make a written pledge that they will not organize or participate in fights.

A senior interior ministry official told Reuters there would be "a policeman every 20 metres" in host cities to prevent petty crime and drunken fights.

Officers have been told to pay special attention to English fans, who they fear could spark "mass fights, riots and provocations," the official said.

Moscow and London have been exchanging information to prevent another Marseille scenario, with Russian authorities visiting England to watch football policing in action and British officials travelling to Russia to discuss tactics. Gorbachev said he trusted that Russian police would crack down rapidly on any troublemakers. Russian fan groups, he said, would resist provocations and any calls for a Marseille rematch.

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When asked if Russian fans could take matters into their own hands if they encountered violent behaviour from other groups, he shrugged.

"I think our law enforcement will do their jobs," he said. "It's not just for me to serve a sentence in France under their laws. English (who misbehave) should serve time here under ours."

Gorbachev has yet to apply for a World Cup fan ID, a document needed to attend matches which proves that a ticket holder has been vetted by Russian authorities. He plans to do so in the coming days.

His name does not appear on an interior ministry blacklist that bars more than 400 people from attending sporting events, including for offences committed in Russia such as lighting flares and public drunkenness.

Reuters found earlier in May that a blacklisted fan had been granted a World Cup fan ID, and that several other blacklisted fans had regularly skirted the ban.

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