

Amid Concerns of Terrorism and Hooligans, Russia Puts In Place ‘Ring of Steel’

The Kremlin has imposed stringent security measures. But is its World Cup safe?

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

With Russia hosting a massive influx of tourists in 11 cities across the country, the question on many people's minds is: Is it safe?

Russia is well aware that the world's attention is fixed on the country this summer and it is eager to show that it can easily accommodate the more than one million foreign fans expected to descend on the country during the World Cup.

Ensuring that the tournament's matches go ahead without a hitch is a matter of supreme importance to the Kremlin, and the government has spared no expense: Official estimates claim that more than 30 billion rubles (\$479 million) have been spent solely on security.

Related article: [Video Drones to Identify 'Aggressive Fans' at 2018 World Cup](#)

Most foreign fans will be concerned about the threat of terrorism or potential encounters with Russia's infamous football hooligans — far right groups known for promoting and participating in violent skirmishes at matches.

Russia's terrorist threat

During the Sochi Winter Olympics four years ago, the Russian authorities named their extensive security measures around the city “the Ring of Steel.”

Before they began, the Caucasus Emirate (CE), an Islamist extremist organization based in the volatile North Caucasus region, threatened to attack the games in nearby Sochi.

In the months running up to the event, Russia experienced [several suicide-bomb attacks](#) in Volgograd — another World Cup host city — at tram and bus stations. However, thanks to the Russian authorities' tight security, the Olympics did not see any violent incidents.

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The terrorist threat in Russia has evolved since then. After 2015, most of the CE's members pledged allegiance to Islamic State, a terrorist organization banned in Russia, and many have traveled abroad.

Nevertheless, IS militants have on multiple occasions threatened to attack the World Cup and have threatened President Vladimir Putin personally.

The high-profile nature of the tournament makes it an attractive target for militants intending to draw international attention to their cause. To mitigate this, the Russian authorities are attempting to replicate the Ring of Steel across all 11 host cities this summer.

In short: Expect a heavy police presence, metal detectors and checkpoints.

Cracking down on the hooligans

After the violent clashes between Russian and British fans at the Euros in France in 2016, many are bracing for a repeat at the World Cup.

However, since then, there has been a marked change of government policy towards the “hooligans,” whose activities the authorities previously appeared to tacitly approve (former Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko, for example, occasionally appeared with well-known hooligan leaders in public.)

Related article: [The Kremlin Won't Tolerate Hooligans at Its World Cup \(Op-ed\)](#)

Many of the hooligan leaders have been blacklisted from attending matches, with facial-recognition technology introduced at host stadiums to ensure that they cannot enter and prompt any unrest.

Moreover, the authorities have taken extensive measures to ensure that the games are secure, from introducing Cossack cavalry brigades and deploying drones to monitor the crowd for signs of disturbances, to installing physical measures such as concrete anti-ram barriers near stadiums and metro stations.

Streets around the stadiums have become pedestrianized and metal detectors have been installed on most major railway and train lines.

Petty crime

Urban centers like Moscow and St. Petersburg are natural hubs for criminal activity, given the large concentrations of people convening there, particularly foreign visitors.

While overall crime levels in the country are declining — the Interior Ministry in 2017 noted a 4.7 percent decrease year-on-year — petty crime is still likely to pose a risk to foreign fans.

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Railway and metro stations during peak hours, as well as underpasses, are all key locations for pickpockets to target foreigners. Many areas around stations and sometimes even stadiums are poorly lit at night.

The usual precautions apply: Avoid vulnerable situations such as public intoxication or visibly displaying large amounts of cash. Note that cities like Samara, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Kaliningrad, Saransk, Volgograd and Yekaterinburg do not have any experience with hosting events of this magnitude.

Even with a veritable army of student volunteers, medical personnel and the Cossack brigades, reporting a stolen wallet or asking for directions in Samara will not be the same as checking into an international hotel in Moscow.

Weapons and wildfires

Each of the host cities has slightly different security concerns. While places like Sochi and Volgograd are closest to the North Caucasus, the region of Rostov-on-Don abuts rebel-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russia rebels are pitted against Ukrainian government forces.

Given the multiple military bases in Rostov-on-Don, there is a significant number of weapons circulating in the area, meaning that should conflicts occur — for example, between fans — they could violently escalate without warning. In an attempt to mitigate this, Putin on May 25 issued a moratorium on citizens carrying service weapons or hunting rifles in host cities. Those who violate the rules face a heavy fine.

Related article: [Putin Threatens Ukraine Against Military Action in East During World Cup](#)

There is also a serious risk of wildfires during the summer months, a routine security issue that Russia deals with every year.

While the Emergency Situations Ministry is on full alert, most of the fire safety resources — including fire fighting planes equipped with water tanks — have been deployed to the western part of the country where the host cities are located. There are concerns that this could leave forested areas of the Far East under-resourced and unable to appropriately respond to wildfires.

Consular complications

Diplomatic relations between Russia and the West have soured in recent years, prompted by Russia's annexation of Crimea, military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and allegations of Russian involvement in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016.

In the wake of the poisoning of former British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Britain in March, the U.S. expelled 60 Russian diplomats in a show of solidarity for its ally. More than 20 EU countries followed suit.

Related article: [Russia Will Expel U.S. Diplomats in Response to Washington](#)

In a tit-for-tat response, Russia expelled diplomats from the countries and closed down the U.S. consulate in St Petersburg. As a result, many consulates, particularly those of the U.S., are now operating with reduced personnel and have warned that in the event of an incident involving their citizens during the World Cup, they may not be able to offer swift assistance.

This includes diplomatic intervention should one of their citizens be detained in Russia and the procurement of medical and passport services.

Despite these obstacles, Russia has a good track record of ensuring security at large events, not least the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 and the FIFA Confederations Cup last year. Both of these events took place peacefully, indicating that Russia is likely to have sufficiently strong police capabilities and resources to pull off an event of this magnitude without significant issues.

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