

Moscow's World Cup Face-Lift Is Only Skin Deep (Op-ed)

Russia is determined to use the World Cup to polish its tarnished international image.

By [Marc Bennetts](#)

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Tatyana Makeyeva / Reuters

As the Russian and Saudi teams warmed up for the opening match of the 2018 World Cup, there was a carnival-like atmosphere outside Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. Russian and Saudi fans exchanged handshakes and hugs, and Mexican supporters in national costume posed for photos. Groups of smiling Russian volunteers were on hand to offer directions and assistance. One volunteer's sole function seemed to be to hold up a giant artificial hand with which to offer passing fans high-fives.

Moscow was always going to put on its most welcoming face for the World Cup, a showcase

event for President Vladimir Putin's Russia. But amid warnings of racism, hooligan violence and whip-wielding Cossacks, no one really knew exactly what that face would look like. So far, defying many expectations, it's been dominated by one big grin.

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Even the country's feared football hooligans have apparently been feeling the love. "I want to shake the hands of fans from all over the world," said Yakov, a Lokomotiv Moscow fan who is one of almost 500 alleged hooligans barred from attending World Cup matches, to The Moscow Times. "I want people to stop thinking of my homeland as an aggressive nation."

Russia's national side, dubbed the country's worst-ever team by state-funded television ahead of the tournament, has also been doing its best to win friends, surprising everyone with a 5-0 win over Saudi Arabia. Russians greeted the victory — the largest in a World Cup opener since 1938 — in remarkably reserved fashion. True, there were some celebrations in central Moscow, but this was nothing like the scale of the impromptu street party after Russia's famous victory over the Netherlands at Euro 2008. Perhaps Russian fans were just too stunned to rejoice properly?

There have been plenty of other surprises. Not least the transformation of Moscow's notoriously no-nonsense police force. As I strolled near Red Square last week, I saw an exuberant group of Uruguayan supporters unfold a large banner reading "Rey de América" (King of America). In an adjacent street, Peruvian fans danced and chanted, oblivious to the curious stares of locals, including smiling police officers. The feel-good factor soared.

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Nothing unusual in all that, you might think. Yet amid all the World Cup joy, it's worth noting that anti-Putin activists have been dragged away from these very same spots for staging public gatherings without permission. Others have been arrested for holding up, as a civil liberties experiment, blank pieces of paper to see if they would be arrested. They were.

These are no ordinary times in Moscow. The city has been scrubbed and polished for FIFA's festival of football and state employees have apparently been ordered to be polite and smile at foreign fans. No surprise then that so many people were fooled when Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader, [quipped](#) on social media that even the city's jails had been spruced up with painted bars, goalposts in the exercise yards and food "better than in restaurants" — just in case any English fans were locked up. His comments were reported by a number of media outlets before he confessed he'd been joking.

It's not only the authorities in Moscow who are anxious to exploit the World Cup's massive PR potential. Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of Chechnya, lost no time in posing for photographs with Muhammad Salah, the Liverpool star, when his Egypt side arrived at their training camp in the southern Russian republic. It later emerged that Salah, who is recovering from a shoulder injury, had been given permission to skip Egypt's first training session, but had been woken up at his hotel by Kadyrov who then drove him to the stadium. If Salah didn't know much about Kadyrov, who denies multiple allegations of murder and torture, before the

photo, the resulting media storm means he almost certainly does now. And we all know a little bit more about how determined Russia is to use the World Cup to polish its tarnished international image.

Marc Bennetts is a journalist and author of "Football Dynamo: Modern Russia and the People's Game." The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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