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Scorned Football Coach Becomes Man of the Hour

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Anton Vaganov / Reuters

Following two resounding victories from Russia's national team in the World Cup's opening round, overwhelming optimism has replaced initial skepticism.

On the back of a seven-game winless streak, Russia entered the tournament as the lowest ranked side, in 70th place. Sports commentators, fans and media (including this publication) massively downplayed the team's chances.

The team's head coach, Stanislav Cherchesov, bore the brunt of the criticism.

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Pundits pointed to the manager's record: His only success as coach was winning Poland's Premier League with Legia Warsaw in 2016.

"His ego is bigger than the bridge to Crimea, his football is empty and boring," Yury Dud, a

popular blogger and editor of the Sports.ru site, wrote on the eve of the tournament.

He went on to describe the Russian team as “abysmal” and “very weak.”

Now, after trouncing Saudi Arabia 5-0 and and convincingly beating Egypt 3-1, Russia has officially qualified for the knockout stages of the tournament for the first time in over 30 years.The country last recorded victories in the two first games of the World Cup in 1966, when it was still the Soviet Union.

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After nationwide celebrations following Tuesday’s game against Egypt, Cherchesov's familiar moustachioed features were spray-painted on a city intersection. Local artist Artyom Burzh, who started the painting after watching the match, said "we just has to do it."

Russian social media users, meanwhile, took to the internet en masse to express their newfound belief in the national team and its coach.

A social media flashmob under the hashtag #pereobuvayemsa, meaning “now we’re changing our shoes,” — a play on a Russian idiom meaning to change one’s opinion quickly — was launched by Dud on Tuesday and has already attracted thousands of adherents.

“You didn’t believe in Stas [Cherchesov]? Dud has already changed his shoes. Now it’s your turn,” Sports.ru wrote in an Instagram post launching the flashmob. At Russia’s first training session after the game against Egypt, Cherchesov was met with applause by members of the Russian media, some of whom have already crowned him “the best Russian coach.”

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We didn’t doubt our abilities,” Cherchesov was cited as saying by the Sport-Express newspaper.

“The team will continue to work and make the fans happy. Everything is happening as it should be,” he said.

Russia will play against Uruguay on June 25 in its last game in the group stage of the competition. Depending on the result, the team will face Spain, Portugal or Iran in the next round.

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