

# The Dark Side of the 'Street of Lights'

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**Maxim Shemetov / Reuters**

It begins in the Lubyanka metro station. A middle-aged man in a Mexico jersey runs his hands over my shoulders. His response to my glare is unapologetic. We're two weeks into the World Cup and this is the fifth time I've been physically harassed on the streets of central Moscow.

I'm on my way to Nikolskaya Ulitsa, the site of the unofficial football party that began the day before opening match and shows no sign of slowing.

For many football fans, Nikolskaya has become the epicenter of debauchery: Alcohol flows freely (despite a ban on public drinking) and fans in jerseys from around the world sing in rowdy groups. Some jump on benches, and on the nights of particularly dramatic matches, others climb lampposts.

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For women, it has become a place of heightened risk in a World Cup which is becoming marred by high-profile incidents of harassment. Just this weekend, a Brazilian reporter dodged a man trying to kiss her live on-air outside the stadium in Yekaterinburg.

“Never do this to a woman, OK?” she says in the now viral video. “Luckily, I have never experienced this in Brazil. Over here it has happened twice. Sad! Shameful!” Julia Guimarães wrote on Twitter.

The Sisters Center sexual assault NGO has not registered an increase in calls to their crisis hotline or general requests for assistance since the influx of foreign fans arrived in Russia. Moreover, “We have not received appeals [from fans],” said director Nadezhda Zamotayeva. “But most likely they simply do not know where to turn.”

One especially egregious video from Nikolskaya circulating on social media shows a group of mostly Brazilian men goading a Russian girl to chant a slur about female genitalia. But a night on Nikolskaya shows that sexual harassment is not limited to fans from any one country.

The first 10 minutes on the pedestrian thoroughfare on a recent early evening meant three grazes from wandering fans, beer in one hand and the other free to roam.

In a bar at Nikolskaya during the South Korea vs. Mexico match, two girls are approached by a man from India. “My friends want to talk to you girls,” he declares. “But football *uber alles*. Then we talk to you.”

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The two students are unfazed: “If you behave the right way, there won’t be any problems,” Karina, 21, says. “We have our heads on and we think.”

Over the course of an hour, the women are approached several times by passing football fans. One stops to introduce himself, then theatrically kisses the hand of Kristina, 20. “I thought he would just say hi, but he kissed my hand,” she says, flustered. “I don’t like it. It makes me uncomfortable.”

Overall, however, the girls say the pros of meeting foreign fans outweigh the cons. “Before the World Cup our lives were trivial,” Kristina says. “[Now] we’ve begun to feel united with foreigners.”

With the match drawing to a close, the women take their cue to leave. “[For either] men or women, it’s not safe after the last match,” Kristina cautions, apprehensive of the thousands of fans who will soon descend onto the streets. The football is done for the day, but the party is just getting started.

It is now 11 p.m and the energy levels on Nikolskaya are surging. The police are going easy on public drinking and supermarkets are bending the after-hours alcohol laws to cash in on the 24-hour party.

Closer to Red Square, two teenage Russian girls stand surrounded by a large group of men draped in Tunisian flags. When the young women slip away from the pack, the men trail after them.

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Overall it's fun, the girls tell me, shouting to be heard over the men who have enclosed them in a semi-circle with increasingly loud chants of "olé, olé, olé" and other slogans. But, they say, the crowd is dangerous too because anyone can touch you.

"You push them away and then you leave," says Nastya, 16. "There are always police nearby," adds Anna, 17. "They can help right away."

But at 3 a.m., another girl is slumped on a bench. She can barely pronounce her name and her friends are gone. Over the course of an hour, on and around the bench, a trickle of mostly Russian men approach her saying they are her friend and offering to take her home.

When a kerfuffle breaks out at the end of Nikolskaya between her and several men, two policemen come over. "She said that she's OK," one of them shrugs as they walk away. "We don't need to do anything."

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