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Football Supporters Hit the Pitch at the Fan World Cup

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Vkontakte

Ahead of the World Cup, fears of street fights with Russian football hooligans were rife in the international press.

A core group in the Russian fan movement decided to change the perception by organizing a football tournament between Russian and foreign football supporters, set to take place this weekend in St. Petersburg between June 29 and 30.

Generally referred to as the Fan World Cup, the two-day competition is bringing together football supporters from 16 countries, who will play and even live together.

This is the first time a formally organized fan tournament — one that has a draw, group stage and elimination round — will be held during a World Cup.

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“The main goal of this tournament is to create an atmosphere of celebration and unity, based on the principle that football unites us,” said Eduard Latypov, president of the Russia Unites fan organization which is hosting the Fan World Cup.

“We hope that these 200 people who are going to play with us go back to their countries and say that Russia is simply the land of hospitality,” Latypov added. “We value every person who goes back and says nice things about Russia.”

The tournament will be battled out between teams of eight, consisting of players who are 25 years old or more.

Italian fans were the first to sign up for the fan tournament, even though their country is not represented at the World Cup for the first time in 60 years.

“It is not just a football tragedy for all Italians, but a social tragedy. It is very hard for us to understand why we can’t play in the World Cup,” said Francesco Attolini, a St. Petersburg-based artist and member of the Italian fan team.

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“We want to emphasize that we are here, that there are still Italians who want to say to the whole of Russia, ‘There won’t be a national team here, but there will be a team of Italian football fans.’ This team will play to its full capacity and will make our country proud,” Attolini added.

Other teams that are scheduled to participate include Australia, Senegal and Peru.

Mexico’s Ramses Sanchez has been in Russia for a year and a half working on his masters degree in international relations. After hearing about the plans to host a Fan World Cup on social media, he worked to help get the Mexican team involved.

“Sport is a really good way to build bridges,” Sanchez said. “It’s a way to tell people, ‘We are here to play. We are here to have fun. Let’s meet new friends.’”

Russia’s international footballing reputation has been tainted in recent years by incidents of racism at matches and clashes with foreign fans.

One of the most prominent cases was the violent clash between Russian and English fans in Marseille at the Euro championship in 2016. However, not many people remember that Russian and England fans held a friendly match in a Marseille suburb just hours earlier.

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“It was a wonderful day,” Latypov said. “Before the match the captains of the English and Russian teams not only exchanged flags, but also literature. We gave them a volume of

Pushkin in English and they gave us a volume of Shakespeare in Russian. It was beautiful."

Latypov also fondly recalled the Russian friendly against Wales fans at the championship, after which the two teams sat together and sang songs.

In addition to the Fan World Cup in late June, Russia Unites has organized Welcome Matches between Russian and foreign fans ahead of the official matches in host cities.

On Tuesday, representatives of Nigeria, Argentina and Russia squared off in a mini-tournament, which the hosts won 3-0 in the final against the South American side.

Other fan teams, including Mexico, are also looking to the friendly games as a way to create a more positive image of their homeland. "The main point is to celebrate and have a good time here in Russia. But we also want to present an image that the Mexican fans are good," Sanchez said.

"There are many, many stereotypes, not only about Mexicans, but also about fans from different countries," he added. "I think that this World Cup is a huge opportunity to show not only Russia, but to show the world, that Mexico has friendly people."

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