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In a Battle With Elite University Students, the World Cup Wins Out

Student's at Russia's most prestigious university didn't want FIFA's fan zone on the doorstep of their campus. No one listened.

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Dustin Taylor / MT

On Monday afternoon in Samara, Russia was preparing to play Uruguay in its final World Cup group stage match. The stakes were high. The outcome would determine which team would finish first in the group and the caliber of their opponents in the next round.

The match started at 5 p.m, but Russians across the country left work early and gathered to watch their home team. By the late afternoon in Moscow, tens of thousands of supporters had filled the FIFA Fan Fest zone.

The fan zone's main attractions include a large screen above a stage for performers and

dozens of beer stalls. It is set on one of the capital's highest points and most scenic locations, Vorobyovy Gory, which looks out over the city center. But it is also located right next to one of the country's most prestigious academic institutions: Moscow State University.

In the months leading up to the tournament, a number of the university's students and professors protested the choice of location. Hordes of bawdy fans would disrupt the end-of-semester exam period, they argued, produce transportation mayhem and cause environmental problems.

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A week and a half into the tournament, the campus residents are divided over whether the zone has been an impediment. Those who actively took part in protests report having faced pressure from authorities. They say that the problems they predicted have materialized. Others now say they have barely noticed the fan zone.

Referring to the nearby noise, a student who asked to remain anonymous said he knew the score of every match. "But, honestly, the music coming from my neighbors down the hall bothers me more."

Reports of pressure

The fan zone was initially going to be on Red Square, not Vorobyovy Gory. That plan fell through, though, because the square could not fit the required 40,000 fans and alcoholic drinks could not be sold there, in violation of FIFA's obligations to its sponsors.

In February, in what looked like an effort to placate students, the university administration announced that exams would be rescheduled so the campus would be empty before the tournament kicked off.

The 34-story main university building is home to several faculties, lecture halls, offices, private apartments and dormitories for 6,000 students — all just 300 meters from the fan zone.

But students protested against cutting the semester short by staging an "Occupy Rectorate" protest in the university building. The university rector capitulated and agreed to move the exam schedule back. But the point, students say, is that their exam schedules should never have been disrupted to begin with.

"*Their pleas were ignored, so protesters collected signatures, staged pickets and applied for protest permits.*"

"There are plenty of other locations the World Cup fan zone could have been held," said Alexander Zamyatin, 26, a recent graduate who is now a municipal deputy in Moscow's Zyuzino neighborhood. "We were never against the event itself."

Students appealed to FIFA's Local Organizing Committee in Russia and proposed VDNKh as an alternative — a giant Soviet-era outdoor exhibition space covering over 13 square kilometers, originally built to host agricultural fairs.

Their pleas were ignored, so protesters collected signatures, staged pickets and applied for protest permits — all of which, Zamyatin said, were denied. Then, in April, when "our campaign had really gathered some traction," Zamyatin said, "the pressure began."

According to Zamyatin, students protesting would regularly be called into the administration's offices and told that they were "undermining operations." He also said the relatives of several students leading the protest received phone calls claiming that their sons, daughters, nieces or nephews were "now working for the CIA."

Some say authorities went so far as to track their movements. Moscow City Hall referred The Moscow Times to the department of Sports and Tourism, which did not respond to a request for comment. Moscow Police, the university administration and FIFA also did not respond to requests for comment.

Artyom Yegorov, a second-year physics student, says that when he went out to collect signatures in front of the university's main building, he was stopped by a policeman and brought to a local precinct. That same policeman arrested him, he said, after he staged one-man pickets in front of the mayor's office and the presidential administration building.

Then, Yegorov says, "something strange happened."

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One night this spring, around 4 a.m, Yegorov and several protesters returned to their dorms after studying. Yegorov says he did not shut his door, and overheard a man outside say, "They've returned to their rooms."

"I thought to myself, 'Sh-t, that's weird, I should record it because otherwise no one will believe it, it's so bizarre,'" Yegorov recounted. "I told the others, 'Take the elevator down and I'll stay around the corner and turn on a recorder.'"

In an audio recording reviewed by The Moscow Times, a man can be overheard saying, "They've gone somewhere." After a few moments he says, "They've gone down."

The problems

Beyond the pressure from authorities, protesters say their worst fears have come true. "From the first day of the fan zone's operation during the opening match, everything turned out worse than we'd anticipated," Zamyatin said.

That day, a Thursday evening, while Russia hammered Saudi Arabia at the nearby Luzhniki Stadium, students and professors say that science labs were evacuated. "For an hour and a half, I answered students' questions outside in rather cold weather," said Mikhail Lobanov, one of the university's mechanics professors.

Even before the World Cup started, however, strict safety codes were put in place for the tournament by a presidential decree from May last year. They included barring potentially dangerous and radioactive chemicals from being brought near World Cup sites, forcing lab students to put their work on hold.

"*I just think that a laboratory is much more important than having a fan zone over here.*"

“Everyone in the chemistry faculty is tearing their hair out,” Zamyatin told The Moscow Times last month. “Suddenly, they have to stop their work because of football.”

The shuttering of labs would do “irreparable harm” to some students’ careers, Yegorov, who works as a lab assistant, said last month. “And I just think that a laboratory is much more important than having a fan zone over here.”

Before the tournament began, campus residents also worried that they would suffer from a transportation collapse due to the volume of football supporters coming to the campus. While they now say that it is manageable, they still say there are problems.

“I have to walk an extra 800 meters to reach the new bus location,” said a 65-year-old woman who has lived in the university’s main building her entire life. “For an elderly person, that’s nothing to laugh at.”

Others worry about environmental issues.

“As a zoologist, I’m scared for the birds that nest on Moscow State University grounds and on the Vorobyovy Gory,” or Sparrow Hills, says Maria Romanovskaya, a student in the university’s biology department. “For most birds, June-July is precisely when fledglings take flight. Constant noise from the fan zone and a practically uncontrollable flow of people on the territory of the park can harmfully affect the birds’ lives.”

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More immediately, hundreds of trees were torn down to make room for the fan fest. “It wasn’t pedestrian here, like VDNKh, with this ready huge asphalt space,” Zamyatin said. Lobanov, the professor, put it more bluntly: “Moscow authorities inflicted a great deal of damage on that unique forest park.”

What now?

During the Russia-Uruguay match, sounds from the fan zone were a dull hum at the main university building. Pavel Ilyin, a fourth-year student whose room faces the zone, said that the noise was par for the course throughout the tournament. “It hasn’t bothered me whatsoever,” he said.

In general, Ilyin said that he was “neutral” to the protests. He added, however, that the protesters had some positive victories, including getting authorities to block entrance to the

campus for tourists. “That would have just led to drunken debauchery all over campus,” he said.

Since the start of the tournament, authorities have had a difficult time managing the crowd at the fan zone. They have capped the number at 25,000, lowering it from the planned 40,000. And in advance of the Russia-Uruguay match, authorities asked supporters to consider going elsewhere.

For Zamyatin, the issue speaks to the poor choice of location. “It’s a wonderful event that as many people as possible should attend, just in another place in the city.”

In the end, he said, he cares most about shining a light on how the authorities acted to get their way.

“Throughout our campaign, the university administration and the administration of the city never once entered into a dialogue with us,” he said. “They are silent, just silent — and that’s outrageous.”

Lena Smirnova contributed reporting.

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