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Russia Parties as Spain Win Keeps World Cup Dream Alive

By Reuters

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Maxim Shemetov / Reuters

Moscow partied late into the night on Sunday as the World Cup hosts booked a place in the quarterfinals, defeating Spain on penalties at Russia's flagship stadium.

Russia had already defied expectations by reaching the World Cup last 16 for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union but after victory over Spain fans now believe the tournament's lowest-ranked team could go all the way.

"This is unreal, no-one thought it could happen. And now people are starting to believe," said Yulia Gordinskaya who had Russian flags painted on her cheeks.

"Of course we can win the World Cup! We just need a bit of luck," she said after the game.

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Street celebrations broke out almost immediately on a central Moscow square where a band erupted in a rendition of the Russian anthem as passing cars tooted their horns and men staggered out of a nearby bar waving Russian flags.

As darkness fell on the capital, fans leant out of car windows waving flags as crowds danced in the street in front of traffic policemen.

"This is a great victory for us, for the whole country, the soul of the country," Mikhail Sitner, 34, from Moscow, said.

With celebrations in full swing, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said President Vladimir Putin, who did not attend the game, had watched it remotely from start to finish. President Putin then congratulated Russia's team for its win over Spain in a phone call to the manager.

The unexpected success of the national team has been a political boon for Putin but the Russian president has attended only Russia's opening World Cup match.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who attended Sunday's game with his wife, posted a photograph of himself and Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Mutko clapping and celebrating with Russia's players.

Igor Akinfeev was the name on fans' lips in the capital after the Russian goalkeeper and captain saved two penalties in the 4-3 shootout, including Spain's final effort which he stopped with a trailing foot.

"We cheered so hard. Igor Akinfeev is just a legend," said Gleb Lonshakov, as his friend shouted "man of the match!"

So low were Russia's expectations going into the tournament that a satirical song mocking the team went viral online, garnering more than nine million views on YouTube.

"Honestly, before the tournament I had very low expectations, everyone was just hoping to God that we would get out of the group stage. And then we drew Spain, I thought everything would end," said Sitner.

"This morning I was very nervous but now it is time to celebrate."

Sergei Galunenko, 51, a construction worker, went further: "This is the birth of our national team, that's what this victory means for us."

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