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Patriotism Abounds After Russia Exits World Cup

By Daniel Kozin

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Tears, pride and regret were the dominant emotions after Russia's dramatic exit from the World Cup on Saturday.

In the rollercoaster match against Croatia, the team was on the cusp of progressing to the semifinals of the competition for the first time since 1966 but had its fairytale run cut short in a penalty shootout, after tying the game 2-2 in overtime.

Despite the bitterness of Saturday's defeat, Russian officials and fans commended the unlikely progress that the team had made in the tournament and the devotion with which they played.

"We're proud of team Russia!" Russia's Sports Minister, Pavel Kolobkov, was cited as saying by the RBC news website.

“They played excellent football. Great job!” he added.

Russia went into the World Cup as the tournament’s lowest ranked side but steadily won skeptical fans over with a series of committed performances and victories.

After the defeat in the quarterfinals, many of the players struggled to hold back their emotions.

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“Our whole lives we’ve wanted … people to be proud of us. We wanted to prove that football is alive,” Artyom Dzyuba, Russia’s star striker, told a reporter after the game, before breaking out in tears.

“Our hearts are shattered,” he added.

“There is an emptiness in my soul,” midfielder Yury Gazinsky wrote on Instagram after the match.

“Thank you TEAM! Thank you FANS! I’m proud to be part of this Great Country!” he added.

“We leave the tournament with tears in our eyes, but with our heads held high,” the team’s official Twitter account wrote in a post that was shared thousands of times.

After the match, President Vladimir Putin reportedly called the players “heroes” and congratulated them on their performance.

“Our [team] lost in a fair and very beautiful game,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was cited as saying by RBC.

“But they still did a great job. [They’re] heroes. They died on the field. We’re proud of them!” he added.

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According to the spokesperson, Putin invited team coach Stanislav Cherchesov and the players to a meeting to discuss the results of the tournament and its legacy.

Cherchesov, who is widely expected to continue in his role as the team’s coach after his success at the tournament, said that his players had worked hard to win over the country’s fans.

“We believed in ourselves. We could only prove our worth by working hard,” Cherchesov told reporters at a press conference after the match.

“Not only did we [get people to believe in us], but the country even fell in love with the team,” he added.

Meanwhile, Cherchesov said he regretted not being able to continue playing in the tournament.

“We’re like soldiers who were called up for the army,” he said.

“We were demobilized, but, to be honest, we wanted to continue fighting … We would have gladly served our country until July 15, but unfortunately, it didn’t work out.”

At a meeting between members of the team and supporters at the Vorobyovy Gory fan zone in Moscow on Sunday, Cherchesov said he was already getting ready for the next tournament.

“We’ll be even better in four years in Qatar,” he said. “But it’ll be hard without you. So see you there.”

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