The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

After Russia's Shock World Cup Run, Fans Ask: 'Where Was Putin?'

By Reuters

July 10, 2018



Sergei Karpukhin / Reuters

As Russia's World Cup dream ended with defeat to Croatia, some football fans noted the absence from the stadium of President Vladimir Putin, who attended only one match in Russia's best World Cup run since the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Putin was at Russia's opening game against Saudi Arabia but skipped the following four — despite the national side, the tournament's lowest-ranking, defying expectations and reaching the quarterfinals.

"Where has the president got to?" asked Nezygar, a popular news channel on messaging service Telegram.

"Tell Putin our guys would have won if he'd come to the game!" fan Pavel Gondarev wrote on social media to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who attended the shootout defeat.

Online news site Znak.com wrote that Russians on social media are "tying themselves up in knots trying to guess where Vladimir Putin might have got to."

Related article: Putin Says World Cup Has Broken Stereotypes About Russia

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Reuters on Monday Putin had only ever been scheduled to attend the opening and closing games of the tournament. He was minimizing attendance because matches "happen when he is at the height of his working day".

"He doesn't play football himself, but naturally like the overwhelming majority of Russians he is a fan. Of course he isn't obsessive — because he can't permit himself this — but he likes interesting football," Peskov said.

While Putin sat out the Russia-Croatia quarterfinal, his Croatian counterpart, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, was in the stadium, wearing the red and white of the Croatian flag. French President Emmanuel Macron will fly in for the semifinal between France and Belgium, which Putin has no plans to attend.

Competing theories in Moscow swirled as to why Putin appeared to have stayed away. Putin, a black belt in judo, is an avid ice hockey fan and The Bell, a Russian media outlet, cited a high-ranking official as saying the reason for Putin's absence was a simple lack of interest in football.

One Moscow-based political analyst speculated the real explanation was the wish not to be associated with a Russian defeat, the prospect of which loomed larger as the side faced higher-calibre opponents in the knockout stages.

"Vladimir Putin likes to be associated with victories and triumphs, but doesn't like to be associated with defeats and losses. He's always had this trait and it has grown with time," political analyst Valery Solovey said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attended Russia's two elimination matches — its win over Spain, which prompted wild partying in the capital, and the quarterfinal loss to Croatia.

Peskov said Putin had watched the games remotely. Following the loss, Putin invited the Russian players and coach to discuss the World Cup with him and called them heroes, Peskov said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/07/10/after-russias-glorious-world-cup-run-fans-ask-where-was-putin-a62183