

Russian Football Players' Arrests Help Divert Attention From Putin's Problems

By [Andrew Osborn for Reuters](#)

October 19, 2018



Pavel Mamayev (Anton Kardashov / Moskva News Agency)

Two football players arrested over violent attacks in Moscow are not the first rich and famous Russians to get into trouble after mixing alcohol and strippers.

But their harsh treatment and public shaming after an outcry over the attacks is highly unusual and some critics of the Kremlin say it is using the case of Alexander Kokorin and Pavel Mamayev to deflect attention from bigger problems.

With the glow of President Vladimir Putin's March re-election win gone, his ratings hit by an unpopular pension reform and the buzz of hosting the football World Cup over, the Kremlin has the difficult task of trying to distract and appease what polls show is an increasingly disgruntled populace.

Kokorin and Mamayev, who both play in Russia's top league, will be held in custody for two

months over the attacks and both could face lengthy jail terms.

CCTV footage circulated by Russian police shows a man being kicked and punched by a group of people and another incident in which two civil servants appear to be assaulted in a cafe.

The two players were present at both incidents after celebrating a decade of friendship in a Moscow strip club where they said they had been drinking beer.

Mamayev has admitted committing assault, but denied the more serious charge of hooliganism. "As regards the assault I apologise and ask the forgiveness of the victims," Mamayev told a judge on Friday.

Kokorin has also apologised. His lawyer has not challenged the assault charge but is contesting the more serious charge of hooliganism.

"I repent," Kokorin told a court on Oct. 11. "My behaviour was unacceptable and I will do everything to deserve forgiveness."

Related article: [Russian Footballers Charged With Hooliganism, Risk Up to 7 Years in Jail](#)

The story overshadowed embarrassing Western accusations about failed Russian spies for several days.

"The footballer hooligans carried out a priceless public relations service for the Kremlin," wrote Alexander Plushev, a presenter on the Ekho Moskvyy radio station, which gives air time to speakers who are critical of the authorities.

"It's like the protagonists of this scandal have been chosen by a great director: famous footballers, but not from the Russian team side that we liked so much at the recent World Cup. Arrogant guys who are not poor -- the ideal target for the man in the street's displeasure."

An opinion poll conducted by state pollster VTsIOM showed that 86 percent of Russians had heard of the scandal, and that 55 percent of those who knew about it considered the two players guilty, and that only 6 percent of those asked thought they should not be punished.

The case has given people the illusion that their opinion counts, Ekho Moskvyy's Plushev wrote in a column, saying people had been given the impression they could decide the men's fate.

Dmitry Bykov, a prominent writer, said the Russian public had enjoyed the show.

"The people are rejoicing," he wrote in Snob magazine. "They're rejoicing in the same way they do when there's a battle against privileges when their own life is not improving one, but when some really public figure is being publicly brought low and trampled upon."

When asked if it had orchestrated a media campaign around the case and whether the scandal had proved a useful distraction from other more serious problems such as Kremlin candidates losing regional elections, the Kremlin did not respond.

Related article: [Putin Awards State Officials Beaten by Footballers in Moscow Cafe](#)

Glass Cages

Kokorin, 27, and Mamayev, 30, earn millions of dollars a year in a country where the average wage is \$8,000 per annum.

Zenit St Petersburg, where Kokorin plays as a forward, has said it is considering how to punish him. Mamayev's club, Krasnodar, has said it is exploring how to end his contract.

Police ordered the players to turn themselves in or be put on the country's wanted list.

State television broadcast footage of them being questioned, investigators opened a criminal case and a court jailed the pair for two months pending trial. The players were shown sitting in glass cages reserved for defendants in Russian court rooms.

If found guilty of charges of hooliganism and assault, they face up to seven years in jail.

Three days after the incident, Putin signed a decree giving the two civil servants attacked in the cafe top state awards. One of the men, a senior civil servant with Asian roots, has accused the players of racially abusing him.

Lawyers unaffiliated to the men say their treatment has been unusually harsh and unlike other cases of alleged wrongdoing by prominent members of society who critics say largely enjoy impunity.

When the head of parliament's international affairs committee was accused of sexual harassment this year, an allegation he denied, the Kremlin questioned the integrity of his female accusers and parliament cleared him.

More serious cases, including when the defense minister's son ran over and killed a woman on a pedestrian crossing in Moscow in 2005, have also been swiftly closed.

The Kremlin often declines to comment on such cases but has condemned the players' behaviour.

"We've seen the pretty unpleasant video footage," Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for Putin, said of the players' case. "There were obviously a lot of witnesses and it was captured on video. Law enforcement authorities will have no trouble getting to the bottom of what happened."

Asked by Reuters whether the Kremlin had told state media and the police how to handle the case, he did not respond.

"They need to be made an example of and locked up," Vladimir Solovyov, a high-profile journalist, said of the case. He called for a five-year jail sentence.

"There won't be any girls, champagne or hookah pipes in prison," he said.

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