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Russia to Launch Football League for 'Friendly' Occupied, Separatist Territories

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Football fans in annexed Crimea. **Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP / TASS**

Russia will launch a football league for "friendly" Moscow-occupied and separatist territories in Ukraine and Georgia, a sporting official said Monday.

The league will consist of clubs from annexed Crimea, the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhask People's Republics and the Russian-held Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in southern Ukraine, as well as the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia's Deputy Sports Minister Odes Baysultanov said.

"Taking into account the positive experience of the Crimean Football Union, the plan is to create an organization based on this structure that will ensure the holding of a unified championship," the Kremlin-backed RT network quoted Baysultanov as saying.

Baysultanov said the league, as a separate initiative of Russia's Sports Ministry, will remain

independent of Russia's Football Union, "which is, in fact, a member of FIFA and UEFA."

The first championship is scheduled to take place from March-November 2023.

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The move is the latest example of Moscow seeking to assert its dominance over these territories, especially in newly captured areas of southern and eastern Ukraine.

Russian forces have captured swathes of territory in southern and eastern Ukraine in the months since President Vladimir Putin ordered the country's troops to invade its western neighbor in late February.

Bringing football clubs in these areas under the purview of Russia's Sports Ministry would resemble the events of 2014, when Russia's Football Union sought to absorb Crimean clubs shortly after Moscow annexed the peninsula from Ukraine.

That move was met with backlash from Ukraine's Football Federation, prompting Europe's football governing body the UEFA to remove Crimean clubs from the Russian leagues — which may explain why Russia's "friendly republics" cup will remain independent of Russia's Football Union.

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