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Banned from Qatar World Cup, Russian Football Suffers Isolation and Apathy

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CSKA Moscow's goalkeeper Igor Akinfeyev lets in a goal in a recent Russian domestic match. **Sergei Fadeichev / TASS**

ST. PETERSBURG — Four years after achieving global football celebrity as host of the 2018 World Cup, Russia's exclusion from international competitions in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine has led to declining standards in domestic matches, fan apathy and foreign players leaving in droves.

The Brussels Bar, a sports bar in Russia's second-largest city, has been showing World Cup matches on large television screens since the start of the competition — but attendance has been underwhelming.

"Politics should stay out of sport," bartender Roman said about the decision by football's international governing body, FIFA, to ban Russia from the tournament in Qatar.

Yet Roman, who declined to give his surname, also said his expectations for the Russian national team were low in the first place.

“I think we wouldn’t have made it through the qualifying matches,” he said.

At a different sports bar in the city, Liverpool Bar, soccer fan Pavel expressed resignation when asked about the state of the sport since the invasion of Ukraine.

“Russian football has always been kind of bad,” he said.

“I don’t really notice much difference.”

Indifference toward the football World Cup currently underway in Qatar contrasts with the World Cup that Russia successfully hosted four years ago that saw tens of thousands of fans from all over the globe traveling, carnival-style, to Russian cities to support their teams.

The Russian squad even stunned the world, beating heavyweights Spain and reaching the quarterfinals for the first time in history.

Their impressive showing fostered a new interest in Russian football, with more fans at domestic matches and Russian teams signing foreign players from all over Europe.

But the coronavirus pandemic followed by the international outrage over Russia’s invasion put a damper on the country’s efforts to grow the sport at home — and Russia’s brief football renaissance now seems a distant memory.

In addition to the FIFA ban, the Russian Football Union was also suspended from international tournaments by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), with the UEFA Champions League final in May taking place in Paris rather than its originally planned venue St. Petersburg.

But the hardest blow was probably the national team’s disqualification from the World Cup.

With no one to root for this year, some Russian football fans have switched their allegiance to Serbia, a Balkans nation that shares a common Orthodox faith with Russia and is one of the few European countries that hasn’t imposed sanctions on Moscow over Ukraine.

“Russian fans will be supporting Serbia instead: it is a brotherly nation,” said Alexander Shprygin, a prominent football fan and activist who took part in violent brawls in the French city of Marseille during the Euro 2016 football competition.

But this alternative did not last for long as Serbia crashed out of the tournament at the group stages.

Others are simply not following the World Cup, or believe FIFA made the correct decision.

"I think FIFA was right in disqualifying Russia," said Vladislav, 25, a football fan sitting in the Brussels Bar with two friends.

"That's what our country deserves.”

The Russian national team has only played a few international matches since the start of the war. After an outcry, Russia was forced to cancel a friendly with Bosnia and Herzegovina scheduled to take place the day before the World Cup in Qatar opened. Instead, Russia played friendlies with Central Asian countries Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

In addition to the national team's isolation, the invasion has had major consequences for domestic football, including financial problems and an exodus of talented players from European countries.

"Many [foreign players] left immediately because of the invasion," said Artyom Zavodnik, coordinator of the international department at football statistics aggregator Transfermarkt.

"The level of the league has dropped significantly in the last six months."

Major Russian clubs have been deprived of the cash flow that comes with participating in international competitions and face issues with obtaining sports equipment.

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Despite the problems, some fans believe that the situation will quickly return to normal if Russia can win the war in Ukraine.

"For Russian football fans, the fate of the country is more important than some international matches," said Shprygin.

"It's all in the hands of Russian soldiers now."

Some also hope that Russian soccer can be revived by looking toward Asia, Africa and South America — where condemnation of the war has been less strong.

Russian Football Union head Alexander Dyukov said last month that the country was considering joining the AFC, the Asian equivalent of UEFA.

Nevertheless, Russia's sporting isolation may be about to get even worse.

If the Russian Football Union goes ahead with plans to include football teams from Moscow-annexed Crimea in Russia's domestic league, FIFA and UEFA could decide to change Russia's suspension into permanent exclusion.

"As soon as there is a ban from FIFA, all the remaining foreign players will leave the league and its level will drop even more," Zavodknik predicted.

"That will send Russian football into even deeper isolation."

The Russian Football Union did not reply to a request for comment.

Back at Brussels Bar in St. Petersburg, one of those watching the Brazil-Serbia match said that the invasion of Ukraine and international sanctions have even had an effect on how Russian soccer players perform on the pitch in domestic matches.

“At least when they played in European competitions, Russian soccer players tried their best,” said football fan Kirill.

“Now it’s just boring to watch their games.”

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