

Central Asians Braced for More Football Trouble

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Many hopes and fears are resting on the Russian national team's performance in the European football championship.

Central Asians living in Russia are awaiting the start of the 2004 European Football Championships on June 12 with a mixture of excitement and concern for their safety.

Many fear a backlash if the Russian team is knocked out early, recalling the riots in Moscow that blighted its exit from the 2002 World Cup. But others will be following Russia's progress in Portugal with as much fervour as their Russian neighbours, having given up hope of their own teams ever reaching the closing stages of such an international competition.

After struggling to qualify for the tournament, Russia has been placed in Group A alongside the host team Portugal, Spain and Greece – all of whom are considered to be very strong teams.

"Most probably Russia won't get through the group stages and into the quarter finals, as this has been the case in all major competitions in the past 12 years," said Igor Amelin, who works at a Moscow bookmaker.

"And if they don't progress, I can't rule out the possibility of riots in Moscow similar to the ones that took place two years ago," he added.

More than 8,000 enraged football fans rioted in Moscow city centre in June 2002 after their team was knocked out of the World Cup at the group stage by Japan.

Hundreds of people – including many Central Asians – were injured as the louts ran amok in the city, smashing up Japanese cars and destroying all Chinese and Japanese restaurants in the Kremlin area.

The destruction was blamed on the Moscow city administration, which chose to broadcast the crucial game live on a huge screen set up on Manezhnaya Square, near the Kremlin. Eyewitnesses reported that the watching football fans had been tense and aggressive during the match, and that they had consumed large quantities of alcohol bought from nearby shops. When the Japanese team won 1-0, the crowd erupted with fury and immediately began to target anything Asian.

Following the 2002 riots – the worst in the city in more than a decade – the authorities are taking measures to lessen the chances of such an incident happening again. When Russia takes to the pitch for their first game of the tournament, against Spain on June 12, the encounter will not be relayed on giant public screens.

"When the Russian team is playing, extra police units will be on duty and patrolling the city to give extra security," a city administration official told IWPR.

This news may come as a relief to many city dwellers, but it has been greeted with dismay by a good number of Central Asians living and working in Moscow, who are often harassed by the law enforcers.

"An increase of the number of policemen on the streets is a double-edged sword," argued Kyrgyz businessman Bolotbek Jumanov. "The more policemen there are, the more I will be stopped in the street and in the metro.

"In any case, the city laid on extra security measures during the World Cup two years ago, but in the end, it made little difference."

Moscow's many sports bars are expected to be packed to capacity during the tournament, and some managers seem little bothered about the consequences of selling alcohol to the fans.

"Of course our customers will be drinking alcohol, and while the majority represent no danger for society, we cannot guarantee that all will remain peaceful. Who knows what drunken people might do if the team loses?" said Moscow sports bar manager Gennady Gleyzer.

"During such days, people who have no interest in football might be better off staying at home, for security reasons."

As a result, many Central Asians will elect to stay at home to avoid any potential trouble should the Russian team lose. However, if that proves to be the case, a large number will be every bit as upset and demoralised as their Russian neighbours.

Since they gained independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asians have continued to support the Russian football team. Some out of nostalgia, but most because they say there is no hope of a national team from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan or Kazakstan ever competing at such a high profile sports event.

“It might take as long as 50 years for a Tajik team to be able to compete at this level, so I root for the Russians instead,” admitted market trader Mustafa Alimov, a Tajik who now lives in Mytishi, a town near Moscow. “I also cheer them on because I have lived here for nine years, and anyway, we used to be part of the same country.”

“But I plan to watch the games on television at home – it’s much safer that way,” he added.

Astana businessmen Ibragim Aslanov told IWPR that he’s backing Russia, but will also be supporting Latvia – only the second former Soviet country to reach the final stages of the European championship – out of a feeling of solidarity.

However, he is not unduly concerned about the possibility of hooliganism. “Such incidents only receive wide coverage during major tournaments,” he shrugged.

“I am sure that many Russian championship matches end in a beating for some unfortunate visiting fans, but this is not reported to the police,” he continued, adding that the Russian football scene has long been a magnet for the skinhead groups who are notorious for their violent tendencies across the former Soviet Union.

While Central Asians may be hoping for a Russian victory, the omens are not good. Bookmakers across the country claim that the lack of confidence in the local players is so serious that many gamblers are putting their money on Portugal and Spain to beat Russia in the group stages. “Not a single fan is betting on victory for the Russian team,” said one bookmaker.

Perhaps sensing the public’s low expectations, the Russian Football Association has offered the national team a bonus of two million dollars if it progresses through the group stages and into the quarter-finals and beyond – half the amount that the body will earn for taking part in the championship.

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