



Slow Progress

Incidents of discrimination in football in
Russia 2014/15



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A monitoring report from the Fare network and the Sova Centre

Introduction

Our first monitoring report on cases of racism and discrimination in Russian football *Time for Action*, which looked at the 2012 to 2014 seasons, sparked much needed debate on an issue that we think continues to give rise to serious cause for concern in Russia.

This current report covering the Russian domestic season ending in May 2015 is based on the same methodology. We have used open and publicly available sources alongside closed discussion groups and fan forums to acquire evidence of discriminatory incidents.

The report lists many serious incidents that will revisit concerns but it should not be assessed according to the number of incidents alone; the types of discrimination reported and the reactions to them from various stakeholders are the important elements. We know from anecdotal evidence that many incidents, often as serious as those we have noted, remain unreported.

Responses to our first report

When earlier this year one of the biggest football portals in Russia, Sports.Ru, conducted a poll of 16,000 readers asking if there was racism in Russian football, 75% of respondents replied yes. The subject of the poll was relatively new to Russia and its overwhelming findings are indicative of the growing debate within the media, general public and football authorities. The hope must be that this new public discourse can result in real changes.

One sign of greater awareness is that the topic is now more often addressed by mainstream Russian media who examine incidents within domestic leagues more frequently and with more insight than has been seen before; it is fair to say that many people are becoming attuned to understanding the abuse hurled at Caucasian fans and black players.

Importantly, ethnic minority players themselves seem to feel more empowered to talk about the issues and react to abuse than before. The examples of incidents faced by Christopher Samba, Hulk, Guelor Kanga, Sekou Oliseh and Emmanuel Frimpong who have all experienced racism have been telling in both the way they used their voices but also the unsatisfactory resolution of their complaints.

Russian FA response

Following the 2012–14 report the Russian Football Union (RFU) took the step of developing a number of initiatives, some of which have been useful.

The RFU called an international meeting in co-operation with the United Nations Office of the Commissioner of Human Rights over the summer, which included speakers from the Russian government including Sports, Internal and Foreign Affairs Ministries, stakeholders within Russian football, FIFA, members of the Fare network, supporter groups and other actors.

The FA also announced the establishment of an 'anti-racism inspector' shortly after our report was published, this was a new role and one that we saw as positive. However the impact of this intervention is far more difficult to measure, it certainly has not curtailed what can only be described as the mishandling of some cases of discrimination by the RFU disciplinary body.

In a recent move, the Russian Football Union announced the inspector would have a direct role in Disciplinary committee decisions which should contribute to better handling of discrimination-related offences by the body.

We have also noted tentative steps amongst the Russian Premier League to identify neo-nazi symbols inside stadiums, we hope this will continue.

Russian state responses

More troubling have been the reactions of Russian state authorities who have sought to downplay the problem, or accuse the authors of the report of a lack of objectivity.

Many policymakers tend to interpret any attention to internal problems as part of a dis-information campaign against Russia, which leads to defensive and dismissive comments by some in the leadership.

What such reactions overlook is the fact that dealing effectively with issues of inter-ethnic hate and intolerances of all kinds is beneficial for Russia, a society which is home to more than 100 nationalities. Abuse directed at minorities inside stadiums, denigrating chants at North Caucasian fans or monkey chants directed at black players are indicative of very real tendencies in society.

Wordplay or a lack of understanding?

Commenting on the problem of discrimination, some Russian football and state officials go as far as to claim "there is no racism in Russia". We have also heard officials saying Russia is not unique in facing the issue of racism in football, as if it made any difference to the fact that these issues exist.

Officials seem to downplay racism in the game based on the understanding of racism solely as oppression or abuse of black people. When international bodies speak about forms of discrimination, well accepted definitions set out by the UN in which discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability are included. Fare has been highlighting and tackling racism and discrimination across Europe and beyond and there is no particularity in highlighting these issues in Russia. What matters is how the same problems are being addressed and dealt with.

Part of the explanation of the confusion around terminology appears to be within the history of migration in Russia and the way the debate on ethnic minorities evolved in the Soviet Union and later in the Russian Federation.

While the movement of people inside the Soviet Union was relatively free between the republics, the state restricted any migration from outside of its borders and Russia has never had the same type of colonial history that many of the major Western European powers have in their past.

African, Asian and Latin American students attending Russian universities during the Soviet era received a warm welcome in the spirit of 'friendship between peoples'. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration patterns changed during the 1990s with more African and Asian students arriving, while the public debate and concern in Russia was focused on pressing challenges during this turbulent period rather than on how groups could live together.

Recommendations for action

Earlier this year we published a list of actions that we feel would have a positive impact on the situation if implemented by the Russian authorities, these are reproduced again below. Following our observations this year we feel the following areas require increased focus:

Improving disciplinary action

The actions of the disciplinary committee of the RFU on cases of discriminatory abuse in the past season were confusing to say the least. Despite having necessary regulations in place that follow guidelines issued by FIFA and UEFA in 2013, the Russian disciplinary body has a very mixed record of dealing with incidents.

During the 2014-15 football season we saw some clubs sanctioned for fans' neo-Nazi displays while supporters of the opposition team displaying the same symbols at the same match were ignored.

We have also seen ethnic minority players banned for reacting to racial abuse from the stands while the perpetrators went unpunished because of what was described in at least one case as a 'lack of material evidence'.

These actions demonstrate a lack of understanding and inability to provide justice to the victims of racial abuse as well as serious flaws in the way the disciplinary system operates in collecting and examining evidence. The players suffering racist abuse receive no protection or even understanding from referees or other match officials and often end up being sent off and disciplinary bans imposed for reacting while referees ignored their duty to act to stop the abuse.

Steps should be taken to sensitise administrators across the system from referees and match delegates to stewards and disciplinary investigators on the issues and a functioning system of recording and reporting incidents of discrimination established.

Challenging far-right dominance in fan scenes

A development of the 1990s Russian football scene that was overlooked by football authorities and remains a dynamic today was the infiltration of fan groups by far-right and neo-Nazi ideologies, often copied from Western European countries where they were in full force at that time.

The terraces of Russian clubs remain dominated by such groups, the prevalence of which leaves little space for positive alternatives.

The interconnections between football fan scenes and neo-Nazi (sometimes terrorist) groups such as BORN (the Combat Organisation of Russian Nationalists), responsible for a number of murders of migrants and anti-fascist activists in the 2000s, is well documented. Fan forums feature multiple stories of how North Caucasian supporters were pushed out of active supporter sections including those at major Moscow clubs.

A telling example that shows the mechanics of infiltration of the far-right into fan scenes is the story of the current president of the All-Russian Supporters Union, a fan organisation holding official status with the Russian Football Union and Sports Ministry, which organises support at Russian national team matches. There are numerous photographs of Alexander Shprygin paying homage to Adolf Hitler, using the emblem of the Nazi SS Totenkopf division and performing Nazi salutes alongside the front man of a notorious Russian far-right rock band. He is one example of the type of fan leader that is unfortunately all too common in Russia.

Some observers believe that whilst the fan scenes of Russian clubs continue to be dominated by far-right hooligans, no qualitative change is likely to take place in terms of making stadiums a more welcoming place for minorities. We think this is an area for urgent action.

Improving cooperation between the RFU and law enforcement agencies

Russia already has both a legal framework and regulations at the RFU level to prosecute and isolate leaders of far-right groups and perpetrators of racist offences inside stadiums. Despite this, law enforcement agencies seem to ignore what happens inside grounds as if 'inciting interethnic hatred' as defined in the penal code is different on the streets than inside football stadia.

Co-operation needs to be improved between law enforcement and the Russian Football Union in order to prosecute and ban perpetrators of discriminatory offences during matches, there could also be greater focus on hate speech coming from leaders of far-right groupings inside fan scenes.

Promoting diversity and encouraging positive action by supporters

In order to contribute to positive change, Russian football and state authorities need to both send clear messages to encourage more diversity in the stands and ensure minorities are protected both inside and outside stadia. There has been a sign in recent years that progressive fan groups will emerge if they are given enough encouragement and support. In our view supporting positive fan cultures through working with fans and their clubs should be an urgent priority.

Development of an action plan with clear steps and outcomes by the RFU

We have noted some of the positive developments at the Russian Football Union, but it remains difficult to see a clear action plan with specific steps to address and prevent discriminatory incidents at football venues ahead and beyond the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.

Standing recommendations for action in Russia:

1. Development of a national action plan

The government of the Russian Federation should develop a comprehensive national action plan for dealing with discrimination in football in all of its guises. A programme to tackle xenophobia and racism in society should be a priority with educational programmes for schools and universities using football as a tool for intercultural understanding.

2. Combatting far-right hatred

The Russian Football Union (RFU) should develop a national programme to tackle organised far-right groups among football fans using ideas and techniques endorsed by international football governing bodies that have been successful in countries where similar forces were previously in ventional, such as Germany, France and the UK.

3. Encouraging progressive fan movements

Clubs should stimulate the development of progressive fan groups to tackle far-right extremist elements in their following and as a means of developing a supporter base that is in keeping with positive social values.

4. Effective disciplinary measures

The RFU needs to give clearer leadership direction on tackling xenophobia and other forms of discrimination by maintaining the independence of its disciplinary body and applying sanctions for discriminatory incidents consistently and according to UEFA and FIFA resolutions against racism.

5. Welcoming non-Europeans and the LGBT community

The government should plan a programme of support and welcome for international visitors to the World Cup who are not European in appearance or are members of the LGBT community. The safety of foreign fans who may be vulnerable to attack by organised groups or individuals must be a priority.

6. Promoting diversity and tolerance in World Cup host cities

The local organising committee of the FIFA 2018 World Cup should develop an action plan in cooperation with FIFA, anti-discrimination organisations, schools and other civil society groups to actively promote diversity and tolerance in host cities. As part of this there should be support for migrant groups with activities designed to increase social cohesion and understanding.

7. Host city protocols

All eleven host cities for Russia 2018 should have in place clear protocols for dealing with incidents of discrimination inside and in close vicinity to stadiums. Without a step change in the way in which such incidents are seen it will be difficult to ensure the safety of visitors and the effects of negative developments in Russian football.

Statistical analysis of incidents 2014 – 2015

This report presents the results of monitoring of the manifestations of racism, inter-ethnic hate and other forms of discrimination in Russian football in the most recent football season from May 2014 to May 2015.

For the most part manifestations of racism, incitement of inter-ethnic hatred and other forms of discrimination in and around Russian football in the 2014-2015 season concentrated on the demonstrations of various far-right and neo-Nazi symbols during football matches and racist chanting directed at black players.

The quantity of discriminatory incidents recorded is higher compared to the previous two seasons, in part due to greater attention paid to incidents in the media and social media. What stands out for us is the more than two-fold increase in anti-black racist incidents in the form of monkey noises and other chants directed at black players.

Part of the explanation might be that groups among Russian fans have seen the lack of action by football disciplinary bodies and policing authorities. The fact that black players are getting booked with red cards and banned for reacting to such abuse may be taken as a signal that such incidents are not significant.

Most of the symbols are associated with the ideology of Nazi Germany, ie. the swastika and the runes (Tyr, Odal, Sig, Algiz, and Tiwaz). Of course, the runes, in and of themselves, are not Nazi symbols, but in this context they are clearly associated with the Third Reich. These runes were used in the insignia of various military units of Nazi Germany and gained popularity among football fans with proliferation of right-wing ideology. Fans also use symbols relating to right-wing Slavic neo-paganism (Kolovrat) and modern ultra-right movements (the Celtic Cross).

It is worth noting that the use of runic letters in seemingly regular banners is not accidental but the choice of runes is driven by ideological motivation to demonstrate adherence to far-right ideas in a symbolic form. Some far-right football fans try to justify the use of runic letters by claiming to 'continue pagan traditions of the old Slavic literacy'. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the runes used differ significantly from what has been historically used by the Slavic peoples and has to do more with Nazi Germany rather than Slavic literacy.

During matches, radical fans demonstrate racist tattoos, pins and stickers in addition to banners; they wear clothing decorated with the above-mentioned symbols, which can be openly purchased in fan shops and other online stores catering to nationalist / neo-Nazi clientele.

Ultra-right wing and messages of hate at games also take the form of songs by openly neo-Nazi rock bands, such as Kolovrat – in the course of our monitoring we encountered their song 'Moscow Skinheads' being performed for this purpose. In fact, radical right-wing rock bands have long become another avenue for the far right to exert influence over football fans. Right-wing hip-hop artists, as contradictory as it might sound given the roots of the form in urban America, are fairly numerous in Russia at this time and also enjoy popularity among the fans.

Racist and discriminatory incidents were observed during matches at all levels, even during international events. For example, on June 26, during the Russia v Algeria match of the FIFA World Cup in Brazil, supporters of FC Ural unfurled a banner featuring the Celtic Cross – the fact was noted by FIFA but no disciplinary measures taken. Earlier during the World Cup Russian fans displayed a banner which belongs to a Dynamo Moscow far-right group featuring the emblem of the German Nazi SS division 'Totenkopf' and a Celtic cross. Such displays are a common sight at domestic competitions.

For the most part, discriminatory incidents in football have been linked to organised football fan groups – one of the widest-reaching youth subcultures in contemporary Russia. Of course, not all football fans are racist, but, unfortunately, many of them are sympathetic to these ideas because xenophobic attitudes are fairly widespread in general.

A significant overlap between the fan scene and right-wing radicals has been quite evident. Not surprisingly, at a recent trial of members of the notorious neo-Nazi terrorist group BORN, at least two of the defendants (Yuri Tikhomirov and Mikhail Volkov) self-identified as football fans. Nikita Tikhonov, a member of the same group, sentenced earlier to life in prison for the murder of lawyer Stanislav Markelov, had participated in fan brawls on more than one occasion.

A number of far-right fans from Russia were also involved in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and participated in different forms including in military activities both on the side of Ukrainian government and on the side of the DPR and LPR. Regardless of the positions or sides taken in the conflict in Ukraine, we find it necessary to highlight the threat posed by ideologically motivated far-right football fans who received combat experience and access to firearms upon their return to Russia.

During the season under review, we again noted that online fan forums were continuously raising funds to support 'white heroes', ie. neo-Nazis convicted of racist murders or attempted murders.

It is important to emphasize that discriminatory insults against players have been voiced not only by racist football fans, but also by management. During the 2014-2015 season, there were two cases of football officials – a coach and a referee – making xenophobic remarks against black players. One Russian Premier League referee – Alexey Matyunin was accused of hurling racist comments at players twice – against Caucasian player Albert Gadzibekov in 2011 and Zenit star Hulk in 2014. Despite testimonies from both players, Matyunin was cleared on both occasions and receives regular appointments at the top level of Russian football.

Such incidents indicate the blurring of boundaries of what is permissible in the public space, and of course they are unacceptable for someone holding an official position within the sport.

Traditionally, hatred is directed against natives of the Caucasus region or people with darker skin – that is, against those visually different. However, in the last season, we noted that fans were also observed making homophobic and sexist statements, previously not commonly displayed.

As for overt racist violence, fortunately, there were almost no attacks that we have information about during the season. The only notable case was an attack by right-wing football fans against people from the Caucasus for dancing a folk dance called Lezginka in the city of Krasnodar on September 28, 2014. Such a decrease in openly aggressive behaviour most likely has to do with, on the one hand, increasing police pressure against radicals in preparation for the forthcoming World Cup in Russia, and, on the other hand, with focus on the events in Ukraine, which diverted attention of fans as much as other Russian citizens.

Summarizing all of the above, it is clear that racial prejudices are still prevalent in the Russian football world, as evidenced by the increasing number of discriminatory incidents and disappointing way they were dealt with by football authorities.

Although these incidents are not numerous in absolute terms, they present a threat, especially given the aggressive nature of the fan environment in Russia. The decline of violent manifestations of racism during matches has been a positive development. However, this decline might just be temporary, since it resulted from the 'crackdown' by law enforcement on far-right political activists and the shift in attention to events in a neighboring country, and not from any systematic work with football fans.

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Racist and far-right manifestations in Russian football in May 2014 – May 2015

By type of action

Banners and other visual displays	82
Discriminatory chants and sounds	10
Discriminatory statements by football officials	2
Physical attacks	1
Total:	95

By type of discrimination

Far-right and neo-Nazi symbols	78
Displays against natives of the Caucasus region	5
Displays of racism against people of African heritage	10
Homophobic	1
Displays of sexism	1
Total:	95

* These figures do not include online sales of merchandize with Nazi insignia and fundraising in support of imprisoned neo-Nazis.



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