

For Russia, Will Desperation Be the Mother of Football Invention?

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Football may soon provide a gauge of the extent by which reason governs political decision-making in Russia.

Anatoly Vorobyev, the general secretary of the Russian Football Union, recently floated an idea in which Russia's national football squad would play as a team in the Russian Premier League during the 2017-18 season.

“It is clear that we can only compete on the highest world level through teamwork,” the TASS news agency quoted Vorobyev as saying. “In this situation, it is necessary to look for a possible competitive advantage.”

Vorobyev's proposal is rooted in the fact that Russia, as the host of the 2018 World Cup football tournament, is automatically included in the 32-team field, thus its national team does not have to face the rigors of the qualifying round. The Russian squad could prepare by playing lots of international friendlies, but the concern is that foreign squads often don't put their best players on the field for such exhibition matches.

Another important component behind Vorobyev's idea is that President Vladimir Putin is on record as stating that he wants to see the national team advance deep into the tournament; anything short of making it to the semifinals would be deemed a disappointment, the master of the Kremlin has hinted.

Russia's performance during this summer's World Cup tournament in Brazil offered a textbook definition of mediocrity, with sloppy playing and a failure to advance out of the group stage into the knockout round. So it's understandable that top Russian football officials are willing to embrace unorthodox means for preparing for 2018: After all, it's clear that their jobs are on the line.

Football experts in Russia with no governmental connections tend to think Vorobyev's plan is folly — impractical at best, harmful at worst. "It's a stupid idea and ill-conceived," said Grisha Yenikoplov, a football writer for the Interfax news agency.

Vorobyev's plan would require Russian clubs to loan their best players to the national team during the 2017-18 season. Then the national team would play against these same clubs, which would be playing with diluted rosters. One potentially harmful side effect is that the plan, if implemented, could impact which teams qualify for European club tournaments, such as the UEFA Champions League, and it would presumably leave most, if not all qualifying clubs shorthanded in international competitions.

Other observers question whether playing against mediocre competition in the Premier League would sharpen the skills and improve the team chemistry of the national team. Domestic clubs wouldn't pose a sufficient enough challenge to the national team to enable it to improve its performance on the international stage, according to the consensus among observers.

The plan also doesn't account for potential national team players affiliated with foreign clubs, such as Denis Cheryshev, who currently plays with Villarreal in Spain. Foreign teams are unlikely to comply with a Russian loan request, said Iacopo Savelli, an Italian football commentator.

Ultimately, observers worry, no matter how bad the idea of placing the national team in the Premier League, politics may get in the way of common sense. Alexei Shunayev, a football analyst for Metro Russia, lamented that the decision-making process is increasingly politicized.

"The thing is Russian sports are returning to Soviet times," Shunayev said. "There are no rules at all. People who represent the interests of authorities are in all structures, and they follow every step to be made in accordance with the ideas of government."

Ultimately, if Putin can be convinced the idea has merit, there will be little anyone can do to

stop the plan from being implemented, Shunayev said. “The fact that clubs would suffer is not important,” he commented. “If Putin or his representatives agree with the idea, all others will change their minds and agree that 'yes, it's genius.'”

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