

# After Euro 2016 Disaster, Can Russian Football Recover?

The ousted coach of Russia's national team has admitted it is "sh\*t." Sports pundits discuss "Why Russian football is f\*cked." What's next?

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Vincent Kessler / Reuters

The ousted coach of Russia's national football team has admitted the team is "sh\*t." Sports pundits discuss "Why Russian football is f\*cked." And a new petition calls for the country's football team to be disbanded.

Russia may be due to host the next FIFA World Cup in 2018, but hope for glory may have already been abandoned. The scale of the team's failure at the Euro 2016 tournament was astounding. Not a single victory. Just two goals. Then a crushing, 3-0 loss to Wales, a

country with just 2 percent of Russia's population. Of the 24 teams in the competition, only Ukraine performed worse.

If that wasn't bad enough, defeat was followed by scandal. Two of the Russian team's most prominent players, Pavel Mamaev and Alexander Kokorin, were filmed at a Monte Carlo nightclub, surrounded by champagne just days after the team was knocked out. Life News, a tabloid, claimed the pair paid 250,000 euros (\$280,000) for 500 bottles of Armand de Brignac.

Russian fans, whose average monthly wage would barely cover a single bottle of Armand de Brignac, were not impressed. Kokorin pleaded innocence: He and Mamaev didn't buy the champagne, he said. But conclusions had already been drawn. Something had gone wrong in Russian football. For whatever reason, players were more interested in luxury lifestyles than winning for their country.

## Pain and Indignation

Just after the team crashed out of the tournament, an upset fan called Artyom Khasanov started a petition on Change.org. "Disband the Russian football team," it demanded. "We want to be proud, not ashamed."

It soon snowballed. On July 11, the day after Portugal beat France in the final, the petition had garnered 850,000 signatures. Together their names covered 21,000 pages.

At the center of their anger is overweening government control and a system that limits the number of foreigners allowed to play at Russian football clubs.

"The whole motivation is broken," says Dmitry Navosha, chief executive of sports.ru. Clubs and players are focused on serving the small bureaucratic clique from which the money comes, he says, while many footballers and managers have multimillion-dollar pay packages and no incentive to change or develop.

Under rules first implemented in 2005, Russian clubs are allowed a maximum of six foreign players in their 11-man squads. Adopted to promote Russian talent, its opponents say the rules encourage mediocrity by sheltering Russians from competition.

Leonid Slutsky, the Russian coach who resigned after the team's exit, is a leading critic of the cap on foreign players. The best Russian footballers are guaranteed a well-paid position at a top Russian club, and have become lazy, he says. "If you could work at 30 percent and still get paid at 100 percent, would you work even at 50 percent?" he asks.

Slutsky was drafted to manage the Russian side last summer, just before the qualifying matches for Euro 2016.

In a long interview in early July, he told Yury Dod, editor of sports.ru, that he soon found many players weren't physically or emotionally able to do what he demanded. He had planned a dynamic strategy, with players fighting for the ball and pushing to attack. Seeing the quality of his squad, he was forced to ditch it.

In the first two matches, Russia lost to Slovakia and drew with England. Slutsky knew the

team had to win big against Wales or be knocked out. So he revived his original attack plan, gambling that the players would rise to the challenge. They didn't. Their performance was so abysmal that Russians were left spluttering. Slutsky said he was "ashamed."

## Starting the Recovery

Few, of course, imagined Russia was about to become a major football power. Even if everything had gone right at Euro 2016, says Slutsky, Russia might have risen to the level of a Slovakia.

Instead, Russian football is coming to terms with a stark new reality. FIFA's new rankings put Russia 39th in the world — taking the country back to its 1990s dog days and putting it a full 16 places lower than Iceland, a country of about 320,000 people. Russia has more than 50 cities with populations larger than that.

Slutsky hopes the low point of the defeat against Wales can be a catalyst for change. In the Dud interview, he described how he and a group of players stayed up until 9 a.m. in his hotel room after the match: "The footballers and I clearly understood our level. In one voice we pronounced, 'We are sh\*t.'"

"This fact must be accepted as an important starting point, as with alcoholics," Slutsky said. "To accept: Yes, I'm an alcoholic. This is fundamental to start the recovery."

His three-point recovery plan includes ditching the limits on foreign players, capping pay at 1 million euros to force ambitious Russian players to leave their comfort zone and play for big European clubs, and better control of clubs' spending.

All well and good, but unlikely to happen.

Vitaly Mutko, the slick bureaucrat who is both sports minister and head of the Russian Football Union, insists that state financing is the only thing keeping Russian football on its feet. Attendance at matches is sparse, and big private sponsors are rare. Ninety percent of football's funding comes directly from the state or from state corporations, Mutko says.

He also supports the limits on foreign players. In fact, it was Mutko who first introduced them, and he tightened them last year. The idea that lifting the limits will solve Russian football's problems is "a fairy tale," he told Match TV, a sports network.

Mutko has, however, joined in the condemnation of Mamaev, Kokorin and the lack of fighting spirit of the Russian team. "Many footballers did not show dedication and motivation," he told the TASS news agency. "These lads just shouldn't be invited onto the team."

It seems the players are being made the fall guys for the Euro 2016 disaster, says sports.ru's Navosha. "So no one thinks to blame anyone higher up."

For the moment, reform is off the menu.

That means Russia's chances of victory at the 2018 World Cup are close to zero. The

team might, of course, rouse itself for a glorious performance. But, says Dud, the journalist who interviewed Slutsky, "if that happens, it will be despite the system."

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