

# World Cup 2018 win raises Russian racism fears

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Russian authorities accused of ignoring race-related incidents in football, but World Cup can be catalyst for change.

Russia's football authorities, who will host the 2018 World Cup, have ignored a surge in race-related incidents around the sport, according to campaigners.

Their warnings come amid a rise in racist murders and neo-Nazi activity in the country that could deter thousands of non-white football fans from attending the tournament.

Rafal Pankowski, who monitors racist activity at Russian football matches with the backing of the European football body Uefa, accused the Russian Football Union of downplaying racist chants and far-right activity in its stadiums.

"There is hardly any acknowledgement of racism either inside or outside the grounds by the government and football authorities in Russia, and there is a pattern of denial when the problem is raised.

"Nazi slogans are common in many Russian stadiums. Matches are often interrupted with racist chants aimed at black players," he said.

"I have been in Moscow this week and seen it for myself. There is racist graffiti in the streets. Major bookshops openly sell racist literature. The hate-crime rate is high. Black people are often beaten up by skinhead gangs," he added.

Two weeks ago, supporters of Spartak Moscow abused black players from Olympique Marseille with so-called monkey chants during a Champions League match.

In August, Russian fans abused the striker Peter Odemwingie days after he left Lokomotiv Moscow to join West Bromwich Albion with a banner bearing a cartoon banana and the words "Thanks West Brom".

Russian officials tried to brush off criticism over the banner. A spokesman for the Russian embassy in London told a British newspaper: "We don't see any reasons to dramatise this, since in Russian student slang 'to get a banana' means to fail a test, and Odemwingie was seen by fans in Moscow as not perhaps the best performer."

What was once seen as largely a problem in club games now also influences international matches. During Russia's Euro 2010 qualifier against Andorra in September, a sizeable section of the Russian fans chanted "A tutti! Avanti! Benito Mussolini!" – widely seen as an endorsement of Italian fascism.

Pankowski, head of the newly launched East European Monitoring Centre, which is funded by Uefa, said the World Cup could be used to foster change among fans in Russia.

"It could be a catalyst for some positive change. I think they will have to respond by building a new culture around football. They have eight years," he said.

Russia has some of the highest hate crime figures in the world. Statistics from the monitoring centre show that 80 people were murdered last year and another 411 wounded. Most of these attacks were racist incidents.

More than 150 far-right groups with an ideology of racial, ethnic and religious intolerance are currently active in Russia, according to the interior ministry.

Attacks against foreigners have increased in recent years and are often committed by skinheads. They usually target people from the Caucasus and ex-Soviet republics in central Asia, as well as Asians and Africans.

One Russian nationalist was sentenced to life in prison in October for committing 15 racist murders.

Vassily Krivets, 22, and an accomplice had organised a group in 2007 to commit racist murders in Moscow and its suburbs. The victims came from Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey, prosecutors said.

Piara Powar, director of football's anti-racism campaign Kick It Out, said racism was still the norm at Russian football matches but predicted that the World Cup would force a radical change on Russia's terraces.

"I think that Russia could change very quickly and eradicate much of its overt racism by 2018. We have to remember that there are many people from different cultures in Russia, including a large Muslim population and a Chinese community, and that most Russians are not racist. The government and the Russian footballing authorities have an opportunity to educate fans," he said.

England missed out on the right to host the 2018 World Cup after football's governing body Fifa picked Russia to stage the event for the first time. Russia beat England, Spain-Portugal and Holland-Belgium yesterday to win a ballot of Fifa's 22 executive members in Zurich.

Russia won 13 of the 22 votes in round two of the voting to achieve an absolute majority.

Alexei Sorokin, the chief executive of Russia's bid team, who enraged England by saying that London had a high crime rate and a problem with youth alcoholism, has conceded that racism is a problem in Russia but plays down how much influence it could have over a World Cup tournament.

"Racism is a general not a Russian problem," he told a newspaper last week. "It is a problem that has arisen in all footballing countries at one time or another, including in England."

*<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/03/world-cup-2018-russian-racism>*