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## [Marseille: Hybrid Hooligans?](#)



“Okolofutbol”, a Russian word for football hooliganism, seems to have in common as much with football as Putin has to do with the recent events in Marseille. The brutal brawls which occurred around the group stage match between Russia and England in Marseille should not have come as a surprise, at least for those following European football fan culture as well as the ultras and hooligan movement. To describe Russian hooligans as well-organized and seasoned mixed martial arts fighters - characteristics that are often mentioned when claiming that the violent excesses had been carefully orchestrated by Russia - is like saying the ball is round and inflated with a pump. Overall, in Russia, but also in other East European countries, there is not much difference between “ultras” and “hooligans”. However, in Germany for example, the former are classified to be “peaceful” or at most “ready to use violence” while hooligans are clearly willing to turn violent. But as a whole, hooligans nowadays are generally well-organized and demonstrate versatile training in the mixed martial arts, some of them even compete in professional fights. Today’s scene has little in common with the drunkards in battle jackets of the 1980s and 1990s. Quite to the contrary: with the Straight edge subculture gaining popularity many even abstain from drugs and alcohol. Also, the “zachistka” - the Russian word for “clean-up” to describe what happened at the end of the Russia-England match in Marseille - of the English fan sector was more some sort of a “trophy hunt” than anything else. It is quite a habitual thing to pilfer banners, flags, scarfs or other fan gear of the opponent’s supporters before, during or after the matches. These trophies are later used to show off dominance and demonstrate one’s valor. With regard to Marseille, they seem to have been used at least partly as a currency: right after the match someone posted an offer to exchange ten English flags for a Russian passport that apparently had got lost. In this regard, the “unwritten law” not to attack “common” supporters also seems to be rather a myth - remember the group of German thugs which attacked partying Ukrainian fans before the match in the city of Lille.

Furthermore, some of the identified Russian firms such as Music Hall, Sturdy Fighters, Orel Butchers, Funny Friends, or The Aliens, had announced their “Tour de France” in advance. Russian hooligans in general were quite eager to pit themselves against their English counterparts in the French seaport. It is also not a secret that major events such as the European championship are common theaters for street fights - recall Wroclaw and Warsaw in 2012, when the Russian groups were keen on “competing” with the Poles. Although violent clashes could not be prevented altogether, the Polish authorities in general seem to have been better prepared than the French. One reason for this could be that the hooligan issue had been hotly debated in the run-up to the 2012 championship, and to some extent, even overstated with regard to Ukraine. In France, the authorities seemingly prioritized anti-terrorism measures over prevention of hooligan violence.

Russian hooligan violence as such should not be taken as a pretext for more general statements about a specific culture of violence typical for Putin’s Russia. Sure, some official statements from Russian politicians in the aftermath, including Putin’s recent remark about thousands English supporters beaten up by a handful Russians, are characteristic for a political climate in Russia in which chauvinistic attitudes are explicitly endorsed. Certainly, there might be a genuine culture of violence in Russia, but it is quite obvious to state that hooligans are not a Russian phenomenon per se. Take for example, Brigade Nassau, a hooligan group from Frankfurt, which is still being celebrated inside the scene for having held a mass kickboxing event with Saint Petersburg’s awe-inspiring Music Hall. Nevertheless, we need to better understand why the Russian hooligan scene is larger than it is elsewhere. Some of the afore-mentioned Russian groups have existed for up to twenty

years. Therefore, it would be misguided to limit ourselves to conclusions based on short-term horizons. Hooligans existed even during Soviet times.

No doubt, it should be noted that hooligans in Russia and elsewhere can be used for political or even economic purposes. We know, for example, that the Serbian militia leader Raznatovic ("Arkan") actively recruited fighters from supporters of Red Star Belgrade during the Yugoslav wars. In Ukraine, some members of the ultras/hooligans scene joined volunteer battalions to fight against Russian backed rebels in Donbas. On some occasions though, Dynamo Kyiv ultras would even expel members of the extreme Right Sector when they meant to display the symbols of their organization in Dynamo's fan sector. Hooligans tend to stay away from party politics. But staunch nationalism and even right-wing extremism can be ideological factors that in case of violent conflict or even war might trigger mobilization. Therefore, it is not astonishing that some Russian hooligans allegedly went to war in Donbas against Ukraine. On the other hand, Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrates that the Russian scene, despite the widespread nationalist attitudes, is not monolithic, and definitely not unanimously pro-Kremlin - now and then there were "DNR" and "LNR" flags on display in Russian fan sectors. Yet we have also seen that Russian ultras were sympathetic and even showed solidarity toward the Ukrainian scene, with their struggle against the authorities under Yanukovich and their following "fight for liberation". Conflicts with the authorities are nothing extraordinary for the scene. To the contrary: they are legion. Let us just remember the many clashes between Russian hooligans and law enforcement in the past years. The largest riots of the recent past occurred in 2010, when radical right-wing supporters of Spartak were hunting non-Slavic foreigners in Moscow for days. At the same time, there have been violent clashes with security forces, accompanied by accusations that the police failed to investigate the death of a fellow Spartak supporter. The abbreviation "A.C.A.B." ("All Cops Are Bastards") is used by hooligans all over Europe. No doubt, the head of the official Russian supporters group Alexander Shprygin is quite a character. But his role within the overall Russian scene is not entirely clear. It is quite possible that he sponsored tickets and charter flights to France for his "friends" in the scene. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Russian hooligans are entirely dependent on financial support.

In calling the Marseille events an operation orchestrated by Putin we commit a grave error in reasoning about Russia: we grossly overestimate Russian regime efficiency and governance capacity. In the end, we help portray Putin as an omnipotent leader, and quite paradoxically, contribute to perpetuate his public image of a farsighted strongman. But analysts should actually deconstruct this very myth. Even more so as the thesis that the Kremlin planned and organized the Marseille events does not fit the overall picture on how sports is usually politically instrumentalized in Russia. In this realm, Russia invests tremendous effort and resources to appear as a modern, successful and "sexy" sports super power. Only recently, Russia hired the Western PR firm Burson-Marsteller to prevent a ban of Russia's athletes from the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil. Marauding hooligans definitely do not fit this strategy, and the negative media coverage, subsequent prison sentences for three hooligans and deportations were a significant setback for Russia's image campaign. It is therefore not surprising that the Kremlin as well as Russia's sports minister and president of the Russian Football Union Mutko later condemned the violent clashes. Furthermore, it has been reported that the Russian police eventually supported their French colleagues to arrest a group of Russian hooligans. Indeed, it must be assumed that repressions against hooligans/ultras in Russia will increase in the run-up to the 2018 World Cup. As in Western Europe already years ago, football in Russia will undergo safety regulations, stadium policies and commercialization, aiming to create a more family-friendly environment and to attract wealthier customers. The recent Duma decision to set up a black list for football hooligans is a first clear sign in this regard. Last but not least, portraying the Marseille events as parts of Russia's "hybrid war" against the West is not only reducing a meaningful concept to absurdity, it is also disrespectful with respect to Ukraine, a country that actually fell victim to a hot (hybrid) war that was orchestrated by Russia beyond any doubt.

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