

FOOTBALL FANS IN RUSSIA AS A WOULD-BE YOUTH MOVEMENT

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"There is a creative force deep inside a man, which is able to create what there has to be, which will not leave us in peace and quiet until we express it in one way or another."

Goethe

In contemporary Russia, just as in many other countries, sport plays a special part in the lives of young people. It is one of the forces of socialization, which shapes personal norms and values, fosters one's physical development and provides a solution for the problem of what to do in one's spare time.

Currently football is one of the most popular sports among youth. More and more football matches are shown on TV and the number of young people of both sexes supporting their teams at the stadiums is constantly increasing. Russian cities nowadays host numerous pubs where one can watch football matches and sports shops sell all sorts of football paraphernalia. All these changes allow us to observe that football is very popular among young people and that interest in football is growing.

This growth of interest in football among young people in Russia has brought about a totally new social phenomenon, "football fanaticism." The main trends in the development of world football and the development of fan movements in the West, as well as steady coverage of fan activities by the mass media, all served to stimulate the emergence of a fan movement (fan-dvizhenie) in Russia. Currently the Russian fan movement is growing, and this growth is accompanied by the emergence of a number of social problems: scuffles among opposing fans during football matches, fights between fans of different clubs, post-match street disorder and other negative consequences of the "football industry". Besides, the fan movement in Russia is a loose social cluster that lacks a clearly defined ideology; I consider that it therefore presents a promising environment for the dissemination and advancement of different political ideologies. Despite its social significance this problem has not been the focus of

serious sociological research yet; on the contrary, the topic has been neglected by the Russian sociological community.

Having become interested in the youth football fan movement during my research practicum, I carried out a pilot research project that was aimed at testing my interview questions (I plan to undertake more extensive research later).¹ My major goals during this pilot investigation were two-fold. First, I wanted to sketch a social profile of a football fan on the basis of their self-representations. Second, but just as importantly, I sought to pinpoint the typical and atypical practices of football fans.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the Russian fan movement (just as, I believe, its Western counterpart) is not homogeneous in terms of its make-up. Instead, it is divided into a great number of various fan groups: football hooligans, supporters, separate semi-organized groups of fans, etc. Therefore the data collected in the course of this study will not be representative; fans from different groups within the fan movement demonstrate different sets of collective practices. Football fanaticism in Russia in itself is a complex social phenomenon which has to be carefully examined before we can offer any generalizations.

Curiously enough, many fans do not belong to any fan groups. At the same time in contemporary Russia, the football fan subculture is rather widely dispersed and pervasive; it can currently boast of an elaborate and fully-fledged system of norms and values, which distinguishes fans from the majority of people. Besides, football fans represent a fairly inclusive social group, linked to the larger society through a bunch of communication channels (like the internet, TV, and print media). Thanks to intensive intra-group social interactions, solitary fans satisfy their need to establish a sense of identity through joint actions and participation in fan practices, thus fostering their affiliation with a certain fan group. That is why most fans prefer to have a very loose affiliation with any single fan gang. Most fans, for instance, travel for "away" matches in a group of reliable friends.

¹ This research took place in January-February 2008 as part of Sociology coursework, and under the auspices of a collaborative research project, "Youth organizations, voluntary service and the restructuring of social welfare in Russia," led by Julie Hemment (UMass, Amherst), and Valentina Uspenskaya and Mr. Dmitry Borodin of the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies at Tver' State University.

Irina (19 years old): "Well it is not a fan gang, it is just a group of soul mates or friends. I first used to go to away matches on my own, then a girl from the same fan group joined me, and then we started to get to know everyone who was traveling along. Now, we are all... well, if not friends, then good acquaintances; even if I have to travel from Tver' all alone I will surely meet someone I know and we'll reach our destination together."

Thus, it can be argued that the fan movement in Russia appears to be essentially heterogeneous in terms of its makeup; it includes both well-organized and loosely organized groups actively participating in its life.

Having analyzed the data collected during my research, I came to the conclusion that making of the football fan is a gradual process associated with the acquisition of certain experience and psychological features by means of active participation in the fan movement; this elusive process of initiation typically starts with a remarkable event (like a very special football match, or a first trip to an away game) and goes on for an infinite period of time. It is no wonder then that most interviewees could not say when exactly and for what reasons they became football fans.

Pavel (20 years old): "First, I started watching football on TV, gradually getting more and more interested, but without any fanaticism or anything... then I happened to go to the "Locomotive" stadium when our national team was playing there and it was there that I realized I'd have to return. In 2004 I went there for the match versus Monaco FC, so that's how it all started."

Vitaly (19 years old): "To cut a long story short, I gradually started to follow this team's performance. That's how it all happened, and then... well, here I am, I have watched virtually every game."

Alexandra (17 years old): "...then I started watching other foreign football championships, and shortly after that I gradually succumbed to Russian football."

Xenia (21 years old): "The most important thing to understand is that I first became a supporter and then it all grew into fanaticism. Well, actually you can't become a fan right away. First you just support a team, you don't know the slogans, don't travel for away matches, but just occasionally go to the stadium to watch football... and then supporting just grew into fanaticism... I didn't notice when it happened."

Many interviewees emphasized their first experience of watching a game at a stadium as one of the key factors that determined their decision to join the fan movement. They all pointed out that this experience invoked new emotions, great excitement and left unforgettable impressions.

Vitaly (19 years old): "Yes, I do remember, it is just not possible to forget. The first match, yeah, it was something. I liked everything, especially the result. Spirits were high, it was sort of euphoric; it was something special. I realized that I would come back there more than once."

Alexandra (17 years old): "I liked the atmosphere. I lost my voice right away. And I still remember the emotions I had before and during the match: I was excited, almost euphoric, full of passion for the game."

Thus, football fanaticism is characterized by high degree of emotionality, euphoria, a sense of group belonging, excitement, passion and similar feelings. It should be pointed out that in this state of mind an individual typically loses his or her ability to critically assess their actions. Therefore we can postulate that fans constitute a risk group, which can be ideologically (or otherwise) manipulated.

According to most respondents, a football fan is an individual who actively supports his or her favorite team. A fan constantly participates in the life of the football club, attends all its matches (even the matches of the youth team), does his or her best to travel to away matches with the team, organizes firework shows at the stadiums and participates in fights after the match to uphold the club's honor.

Zhenia (21 years old): "For a fan the team is the most important thing, the club colors, upholding the club

honor, supporting the team always and everywhere.”

In this regard, the interviewees identified a number of features which distinguish a fan from a supporter. One of the major differences is that supporters feel their affiliation with the supported club less strongly, and regard football as just one of their hobbies. They rarely go to the stadium, preferring to watch football matches on TV. Finally, they do not keep track of club news. These differences are still more perceptible in the interviews. Being asked to reflect on the changes that occurred in their lives after they had become football fans, the interviewees insisted that the changes were radical:

Alexandra (17 years old): “I’d say my life has completely changed! Now I live from match to match; all the important events in my life are now related to the dates of football matches.”

Pavel (20 years old): “The pace of life has become really frenetic. I always follow the news on our news web page and the media in general in order to keep updated about the club news. There’s practically no chance that I will miss a match our club plays in Moscow or in any nearby towns.”

Vitaly (19 years old): “Well, of course my life changed at that point. To be a fan means to be with your team always and everywhere...to support it, to live for it.”

Thus, in contrast with a supporter, a fan is supposed to be closely affiliated with the team. S/he has to actively participate in the fan movement, and to follow a certain lifestyle, which involves unquestionable loyalty to the club and depends on its performance.

The Russian fan movement typically incorporates people of the same age group, namely those aged between 16-27. According to the interviewees, individuals within this age range have enough freedom to actively participate in the fan movement’s activities, as their personal autonomy is hardly limited by any external factors (such as a family, job, etc).

Vitaly (19 years old): “Yes, in our gang there are only young people.

Age matters... the older you get, the more conformist you become, though it is not true for everyone, the average age, I believe, is 16 – 27.”

Pavel (20 years old): “The average age is between 16 and 30.”

Xenia (21 years old): “Well, if someone is on the wrong side of their thirties, they are unlikely to actively participate ... the age bracket is from 16-17 to 25-27. Well, on rare occasions it could be 30 if we speak about the most active fan..., although those who have been supporting the football team since 1982 are real movement celebrities.”

Due to the specificity of contemporary Russian society, one’s class status is not regarded as a key factor determining an individual’s admission to a fan group or her/his further participation in its activities. At the same time, most interviewees acknowledged that among fans, there are virtually no people belonging to the upper or most affluent class. Most fans come from families whose incomes are not exactly high, and are normally part-time employed students, secondary school students doing odd jobs, or recent university or college graduates who are still at the bottom of their professional hierarchy.

Vasiliy (25 years old): “Speaking in terms of class, most fans come from the middle class. Everyone has to do odd jobs, a student can’t boast affluence, there are only few well-off students and they usually have different interests.”

Vitaly (19 years old): “Personally, I currently can’t afford to go to away matches, because I don’t have a job at the moment and traveling is not cheap. Besides, not everyone has the money to travel, and those who have it are few in number. Most fans are hard up students who have to do odd jobs to earn money to pay for travel. Go and see for yourself, there are a lot of people at the stadium in Cherkizovo² and only a few traveling with the team for away matches.”

² Home stadium for “Locomotive” FC (Moscow).

Fully aware of the money issue and the instability of peoples' incomes, most fans strive to curtail or even overcome the existing social distance, that is, the status differences among certain fan gang members, and endorse such values as mutual assistance and support:

Irina (19 years old): "Once a friend of mine who is a "Dynamic"³ went to the Leningradsky station to see off some "stallions"⁴ who were leaving for Peter [St. Petersburg] and they dragged him into the carriage through the window when the train had already started moving! He was lucky to have his ID⁵ with him, but as for money... I'd rather not say!"

It should be mentioned that an increase in social distance might result in social tension, which might in turn cause overt hostility and provoke street riots and clashes between the fans of different football clubs.

One of the most illustrious examples of street riots was the pogrom in Manège square in Moscow, which occurred on June 9, 2002 after the World Cup match Japan vs. Russia. The Russian national team lost the game, which provoked the anger of numerous fans watching the match on the big TV screens installed in the center of Moscow. According to the official statement, fans' discontent with the national team's poor performance was the only cause of the street violence. However, as BBC journalists pointed out, the fact that the riot broke out in the city center, in immediate proximity to the Russian State Duma and the Kremlin was quite telling.⁶ There might have been an element of social protest too, as fans set several luxury cars on fire.

It is not clear so far whether there is any political agenda in the present day Russian football fan movement, but one can clearly detect explicit interest towards the movement on the part of some political actors. For instance, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of Liberal-Democratic Party (LDPR) is said to have tried to improve his standing in opinion polls by means of financing "Dynamo" FC (Moscow) fans' trips to away matches and publishing translated foreign literature for the fan movement. These things did not go unnoticed and some of the interviewees were well aware of Zhirinovsky's attempts:

Vitaly (22 years old): "In the late 1990s LDPR was trying to establish some ties with "dynamics", but I do not know it has worked".

Therefore, speaking about the relations between football fans and politicians, one can note at least a unilateral interest on the side of political parties.

But do the fans themselves have any political beliefs and preferences? Curiously enough, most interviewees claimed that in contemporary Russia football fans are either apolitical, or have a radical right wing orientation, that is they do not support the pro-Putin United Russia's policies. The fans I interviewed pointed out that only an insignificant number of football fans actively took part in other youth movements or organizations. It should also be mentioned that football fans most frequently belong to radical organizations such as the Russian National Unity (a fascist organization officially banned in Russia), the National-Bolshevik Party or Anti-Fa (a radical anti-fascist organization); however, pro-state youth organizations like *Nashi* (Ours) or the Tver'-based "Active Youth Union" (*SAM*) were hardly mentioned at all.

Vasiliy (25 years old): "Nashi or SAM – they are all just scum, there are no such people among the fans. Well, may be there are but they do not stand out. They are hooligans and nationalists."

This observation deserves some elaboration. If hooligans are nationalists, then, in principle, everything they do is clear and quite logical in terms of this ideological stance. At the same time, fans representing less radical currents in the fan movement are rather pessimistic in their assessments of the existing political regime or at best express their indifference to politics:

Vasiliy (25 years old): "I don't think that any of my buddies voted for Putin or Medvedev. In the existing political system we're apolitical, or to be exact, we have no rights."

Vitaly (19 years old): "Politics? I hate it! There is a joke which illus-

³ A "Dynamo" FC (Moscow) fan.

⁴ The nickname for CSKA FC (Moscow) fans.

⁵ In Russia you need ID to get a train ticket; besides it can be checked by the police when you are on train.

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid_7047000/7047232.stm

trates what our politics is all about. It goes like this: the morning after the presidential elections (newly elected President) Dmitry Medvedev calls his parents:

- Morning, mom, how are you?

- Oh, dear, you know, we could not sleep all night, we were so anxious about the results...

- Oh, come on, don't **you** tease me about that, mom!

Well, personally I don't have any specific political preferences. In the election I voted for Zhirinovsky - there was nobody else I could vote for. And what's the point? I began surveying my friends; of fifty people, not a single one voted for Medvedev! Then I just got weary of surveying...and he still was the winner. In my view, it's obvious what really happened. People would vote for any other candidate to avoid voting for Medvedev. And the result is still the same."

gain authority among its participants. In my view, due to the specific characteristics of contemporary Russian society, we should expect that the amorphous fan movement will one day split into several youth movements of different political orientations. The long-term consequences of this split are still hard to predict, but as of now it is evident that the fan movement has become a significant aspect of life in contemporary Russian society.

Thus, one can draw the conclusion that in contemporary Russia the football fan movement consists of politically indeterminate young people aged 16–27, who have no stable source of income, who are at times unable to critically assess their own actions and who strive to participate in the life of the fan movement. In this regard it seems quite productive to reflect on the likelihood of several (or alternatively just one) youth movements emerging on the basis of existing fan groups. It should be taken into account that there are currently numerous means via which political actors could put ideological pressure on fan movement participants. First, it is quite possible to impose a certain ideology on teenagers as well as to manipulate their consciousness, keeping in mind that within a few years they will become fully fledged voters. Second, fans' eagerness to participate in the fan movement coupled with their lack of money might be exploited by all sorts of "sponsors" to achieve their own goals. At the same time, despite the fact that many fans oppose Putin and Medvedev's policy, their active involvement in any "velvet (oppositional) revolutions" is hardly possible. In my view in the near future the football fan movement might well be used by political actors to advance their interests.

In the more distant future, I speculate that Russian football fans may well become a more serious political force and influence state policies just like their brethren in Italy. It is because of this potential that some contemporary Russian politicians demonstrate their sympathy towards the fan movement and try to