

France wins football World Cup

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On Sunday, the French team won the final of the football World Cup, held this year in Russia. It was only the second World Cup championship for France.

This World Cup competition, marked by many surprise eliminations of top teams, ended with a match between two countries, France and Croatia, that were far from the favorites to win.

For the first time in the history of the World Cup, none of the three traditional football powerhouses—Brazil, Argentina and Germany—made it to the semi-finals. The reigning champion, Germany, was widely feared. Brazil was also a heavy favorite, and Argentina, with its offense directed by Lionel Messi, was considered a top contender.

None of the semi-finalist teams in 2018 (France, Croatia, Belgium and England) had made it to the semi-finals in 2014, when Germany, Argentina, Brazil and the Netherlands fought it out for the championship. Such a turn of events had not happened since 1966.

England, which took fourth place, put in a surprise showing in the World Cup after not reaching the quarterfinals since 2002. Belgium, which took third place, eliminated Brazil in a spectacular match before narrowly losing to France, 1-0.

It will be remembered that this World Cup saw Panama's first ever goal in a World Cup. The tournament also included a wild see-saw France-Argentina match (4-3), and a Russia-Croatia match in the quarterfinals that ended with tie-breaking penalty kicks.

The final match was rapid and intense, with a Croatian team whose strong offense, led by playmaker Lukas Modric, relied on attacking up the sides. Modric, the winner of four Champions Leagues with his club, Real Madrid, was elected best player of the tournament. The Croatian team had played 90 minutes more than the French team over the course of the tournament, because three of its matches went into overtime and

were decided by penalty kicks.

France relied on its defense, which had managed to hold off a strong challenge from Belgium in the semi-finals, and on counterattacks led by the agile Kylian Mbappé, who plays for the Paris-St Germain club. Thus, while Croatia held an overwhelming advantage in terms of possession of the ball, France managed for the second time in its history to win a World Cup despite facing an aggressive and talented Croatian side.

As is often the case in high-level football matches, the initial goals (two for France, one for Croatia) came on free kicks or penalties. The third goal for France, by Paul Pogba on a pass from Antoine Griezmann, broke the momentum of the Croatian team, which then suffered a fourth goal scored by Mbappé. The Croatians narrowed the score to 4-2 after an error by the French goalkeeper at the 69th minute.

The World Cup struck a blow against the propaganda against Russia and its population in the international media. The relentless effort to demonize Russia is bound up with NATO interventions targeting pro-Russian governments in Syria and Ukraine for regime-change, the former to date unsuccessful and the later accomplished in a fascist-led putsch in 2014.

The coup in Ukraine and ensuing revolt in the eastern, Russian-speaking part of the country served as a pretext for large-scale military maneuvers by NATO on Russia's borders. These maneuvers have gone hand-in-hand with incessant propaganda branding Russia as an aggressive, violent and xenophobic power.

Over a dozen Russian cities hosted Cup matches, from Moscow and St. Petersburg to more faraway, mid-sized cities such as Saransk and Krasnodar. Yet there were no incidents between local inhabitants and foreign fans, and the competition unfolded in a general atmosphere of friendliness and good cheer.

Hundreds of thousands of South American and European fans went to Russia as families or couples to

see their national teams play and many stayed to see other teams continue the tournament.

“It’s a big party,” Aracely, who had come for a week to Russia from Chihuahua in Mexico, told French media. With her husband Juan, their son, and her sister and brother-in-law, she had traveled from Mexico to Rostov to see the Mexican team play South Korea, before stopping off in Moscow. “We went to see the France-Denmark match because our little one is a fan of Pogba. He even had a French jersey on,” Aracely said.

Robbie Lyle, a well-known blogger from the Arsenal football club in London, said: “I want to thank the Russian people, they’ve been brilliant. They’ve been so hospitable. We heard so many things before we came here. There’s going to be fighting, there’ll be ultras, police will beat you up, all this rubbish. The Russians have been so hospitable. I’ve met so many good people out here, so many brilliant people. The tournament itself, the games have been great. The fact that you had so many people from all these different nations around the world. The weather was great. This has been one of the best world cups ever.”

The Federation internationale de football association (FIFA) decision in 2010 to allow Russia to host the 2018 World Cup had provoked outrage among the NATO powers. It set into motion a vast propaganda offensive to discredit the 2018 World Cup, which served to complement the military encirclement of Russia carried out by NATO on the orders of Washington and Berlin.

In 2015, the FBI began investigating allegations of corruption, bribes and electoral fraud in connection with FIFA’s attribution of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar, respectively. This led to the arrest of nine top officials of FIFA and five CEOs on US Department of Justice-based charges tied to 47 criminal offenses, ranging from racketeering to electronic fraud and money laundering.

A few months before the holding of the World Cup, several countries, including Sweden, called for a boycott of the event.

The anti-Russian propaganda reached new levels of hysteria beginning last March in connection with the Skripal Affair. Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, and his daughter were poisoned in the United Kingdom under murky circumstances. Without furnishing any

serious or probative evidence, British Prime Minister Theresa May blamed the poisoning on Russian President Vladimir Putin. All of the NATO countries expelled Russian diplomats.

The personality of Putin, the head of a regime that emerged from the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism, does not evoke any broad popular sympathy. Indeed, the Kremlin tried to use the media’s focus on the World Cup to discreetly impose a pension cut that attacks the Russian working class. But for masses of people around the world, the hysterical anti-Russian propaganda of NATO has no real credibility.

The English team, which took fourth place in the Cup, “has been very well treated by everyone,” asserted coach Gareth Southgate. He added, “I was here last summer for the Confederations Cup. It was exactly the same thing, there were a lot of stories going into the tournament that I knew weren’t going to be true, as was the case here.”

He concluded, “People have spoken a lot about the problems of relations between our two countries, but from the point of view of personnel, we could not have been greeted better. We had a great experience and I think all our fans did, too.”



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