

Play football, stop torture



Aside from being a sporting event of global significance, this is major PR victory for president Putin and his entourage



ALEXEY KOVALEV

Have you enjoyed the first week of the 2018 World Cup? Good. Some of the games have certainly been very exciting!

Now read the words of Dmitry Pchelintsev as they appeared in MediaZona, a small independent online publication focused on police brutality and the prison system in Russia: "The man in surgical gloves cranked the DC generator with wires attached to my toes. The calves of my legs started contracting violently, I was paralyzed with pain. They threw me on the floor, pulled my underpants down and tried to attach the wires to my genitals. I clenched my teeth so hard that my mouth was full of blood and shards

of broken teeth."

Pchelintsev, a 26-year-old anti-fascist activist from the industrial town of Penza, told his lawyer about this in February — and then, he has said, he was tortured again to make him disown his statement.

He is part of what his torturers — Russia's main intelligence agency, the FSB — allege is a conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism during the World Cup to provoke "popular masses for further destabilization of the political climate in the country." Nine young men have been charged in the case with "creating a terrorist cell." One managed to flee the country; the others have been arrested, tortured and made to confess to being part of an underground terrorist organization called "the Network." There's no evidence that any such organization or plot existed.

Things get even weirder: A seamstress in Kazan, one of the World Cup host cities, says she was framed by a police officer who pretended to be a customer with a very specific

request to make a life-size doll of Zabivaka, the 2018 World Cup's mascot — and then charged her with violating FIFA's copyright rules.

None of this should come as a surprise. President Vladimir Putin has given the Russian security services free rein in the lead-up to the World Cup. In a speech to senior law enforcement officials in February, he asked them to ensure that the World Cup is hosted "at the highest level and, first and foremost, ensure maximum security for both the athletes and football fans."

Russia's national team has been performing well. In the World Cup's opening match, they annihilated Saudi Arabia 5-0. On June 19, in what came as a surprise to many fans, the Russians beat Egypt 3-1. The mood in Moscow couldn't be more jubilant. Millions of Russians and guests from abroad are partying in the streets and in front of their TVs. State television has declared the tournament "an event of historic proportions."

You can prevent unfavorable coverage by not doing any of the things you are accused of doing. Don't torture people. Don't take away their livelihoods. Don't bulldoze over their lives to make room for your international show.

Even the grumpiest Russia watchers agree: The World Cup has been a smashing success so far. It's Russia's big moment on the international stage, the moment the country has been craving for so long. Moscow, which has gotten a series of very expensive makeovers in recent years, is an extremely pleasant place to

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Signals of change in M

The Presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador is offering stru



IOAN GRILLO

In this arid farming town in central Mexico, a crowd packed the plaza under a punishing sun to hear the leftist presidential hopeful Andrés Manuel López Obrador promise to end the corruption that plagues the nation.

"They have even said that corruption is part of Mexican culture," he said to a chorus of supportive shouts. "That is a falsehood. A big lie. In our people, there is a great reserve of values, cultural, moral, spiritual, in the families, in the pueblos, in the communities." He pointed upward. "The problem is above. The rulers always set a bad example."

López Obrador went on to promise cuts in government expenditures, including a reduction in the president's salary and the selling of the executive air fleet. He said he would redirect money

to the poor through pensions, scholarships, apprenticeships and free fertilizer for small farmers, a vow greeted with raucous cheers.

His message — that he will overturn what he calls "the mafia of power" and replace it with an austere bureaucracy that invests in communities — is proving appealing as the July 1 election nears. According to the Bloomberg Poll tracker, López Obrador has the support of over 50% of voters, twice that of his rival Ricardo Anaya, of the center-right National Action Party. If these numbers translate to votes, it will give the 64-year-old López Obrador the most decisive victory in a Mexican presidential election since 1982.

The colossal lead comes as a surprise, considering that in his previous two bids for president, in 2006 and 2012, López Obrador won no more than 35% of the vote. His message has changed little over the years — some of the phrases I hear at his rallies are almost identical to ones that I wrote down when I covered his speeches 12 years ago. What

has changed are his expressions: He looks happier, more relaxed, less angry.

Back in the 2000s, leftist politicians were sweeping Latin America. Now, conservative-leaning leaders have made a comeback in countries like Argentina and Peru. López Obrador appears to be bucking the trend.

So why is he finally surging? The main reason is that confidence in Mexico's established parties has nose-dived in the last five years amid rising prices and brutal crime alongside horrendous corruption scandals. In this environment, his message resonates louder. For many who are struggling, his words promise hope.

"We are tired of the same people in power, the same dinosaurs — we want them out," said José Sampedro, a 52-year-old builder at the Actopan rally. "We want it so Mexican citizens don't have to go to the United States to work, so they don't have to be mistreated" by the Trump administration's policies. Sampedro, like many in this area, has traveled north for work — in his case, construction



Obrador addresses supporters in Mexico City.

jobs in Florida.

Anger against the Mexican establishment is especially focused on the ideologically nebulous Institutional Revolutionary Party, known as the PRI, which ran the country for most of the 20th century and is the party of the

current president, Enrique Peña Nieto. The PRI has been plagued by dishonesty,

with a handful of its former state governors facing criminal charges. In the most high-profile case, the former governor of Veracruz, Javier Duarte, is in jail

accused of skimming up to \$3 billion of public money. Meanwhile Peña Nieto was himself caught in a conflict of interest scandal when journalists discovered his wife in a \$7 million mansion provided by a company with government contracts.