

CROATIA V TURKEY

Clash of lightweights

AFP, Vienna

Croatia may go into Friday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal as favourites but Slaven Bilic's men are wary of being caught out by Turkey's reputation as the comeback kings.

The Croats made it to the last eight as comfortable winners of Group B with a perfect score of three out of three after wins against co-hosts Austria, heavyweights Germany, and debutants Poland.

Turkey in contrast only snatched their quarterfinal place after Nihat Kahveci's last ditch double for a come from behind 3-2 win over the Czech Republic.

After losing their opener to Portugal and beating Switzerland with a dramatic injury time winner that was sufficient to assure them the runners-up spot in Group A.

Ironically though it was Croatia, with Bilic in defence, who produced the late killer blow when the two teams met at Euro 96 scoring the only goal four minutes from time.

Both are making their second appearances in the quarterfinals. Croatia in 96 and Turkey in 2000, the teams going on to lose their matches to Germany and Portugal respectively.

Portugal coach Luis Felipe Scolari is a big fan of the comeback kings, comparing their style of play to a South American side, and 39-year-old Bilic has warned his players not to drop their guard at the Ernst Happel stadium.

"We'll be cautious and we'll be prepared because they've come back twice, but of course I'd like us to score first."

He added: "They play good football, they're very aggressive, they have some players with great

skill and some good strikers of the ball from distance.

"We've been following them from the first game, but it's not easy to communicate the information to our players. It's easier to talk to them about (Michael) Ballack or (Fernando) Torres. Then again, Turkey won't know much about our players either because we don't really have world-class names."

Turkey coach Fatih Terim, whilst not underrating Friday's rivals, feels his team have nothing to fear.

"Croatia are a good side, they beat Germany, but we are a good team too and we will get better as each day passes," said the man known as the emperor.

He added: "They have a young team, they play well, but as far as we are concerned we will go to Vienna and let's hope we stay there, it's winner takes all now."

"We respect all teams, but we fear none."

Turkey are beset by injury concerns and suspensions, though, that has been slightly offset by the fact every member of the squad has been awarded a bonus of 150,000 euros each by their federation for reaching the last eight.

Keeper Volkan Demirel misses this game and the semifinal should they win after his late sending off against the Czechs, with veteran Rustu Recber making his Euro 2008 debut.

The 35-year-old Besiktas stopper -- who will win his 117th cap -- is one of the few surviving members of the Turkey side that reached the 2002 World Cup semifinals.

Defender Emre Gungor is out of the tournament after picking up a calf injury in that game and there are question marks over fellow defenders Servet Cetin and

Gokhan Zan.

Terim's troubles don't end there as Emre Asik received a nasty head injury against Switzerland and midfielder Mehmet Aurelio is definitely out as the 30-year-old Brazilian-born player picked up a second booking in the Czech match.

Emre Belozoglu -- like Rustu a member of the 2002 vintage -- and Tuncalpin Metin are also struggling with hamstring and groin problems and may not figure much either.

On the Croatian side defender Dario Knezevic's Euro is over after injuring knee ligaments against Poland.

Midfield duo Dario Srna and Ivan Rakitic are expected to be fit despite picking up slight injuries to their calf and knee respectively.

Croatia's path to the quarterfinals has produced one of the most stirring stories of the competition with the fairytale return of kidney transplant patient Ivan Klasnic.

The 28-year-old, who underwent the surgery in March 2007 after his father donated his kidney, capped his comeback with the goal against Poland.

Klasnic's teammate, winger Ivan Rakitic, reflecting on that strike, said: "That was not only important for him, it was important for the whole country."

"You could see how the crowd reacted to him. It was the best of days for him."

He will be hoping for another one on Friday if not for himself for his country.

The winners of this game will meet either Portugal or Germany in the first semifinal in Basel next Wednesday.



Turkish players jog during a training session in Krems on Tuesday ahead of their Friday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal against Croatia.

PHOTO: AFP

Spain look for revenge

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish press on Thursday stepped up the pressure on Italy ahead of their Euro 2008 quarterfinal, talking of a sporting "vendetta" in which Spain would

Tassotti in the quarterfinal of the World Cup in the United States, a match Spain lost 2-1.

The incident, which the referee said he never saw, and the images of Enrique in tears with blood on his face, he reportedly lost a pint of

appeal for a "vendetta" was widely reported by the Spanish media Thursday.

"Spain will not forget that episode and can make amends by eliminating the world champions" in the quarterfinal match in Vienna on Sunday, the ABC newspaper said.

Enrique, 38, hopes that Spain's star striker David Villa, who like him is from the northwestern region of Asturias, will "take revenge for the elbow jab."

Villa is the tournament's top scorer so far, with four goals, including a hat-trick in the 4-1 defeat of Russia.

Tassotti, 48 and now an assistant coach at his beloved AC Milan, told Marca he was "tired" of talking about the incident, but said he had "never intended to hurt" Enrique.

blood, left the whole of Spain in shock -- Tassotti was to later be suspended for eight games which cost him his place in the World Cup final line-up.

This time "we will have the advantage because Tassotti will not be playing," said Enrique, whose

TODAY'S MATCH			
Teams	Time	Venue	
Croatia v Turkey	12:45am (Saturday)	Vienna	

take revenge for its 1994 World Cup exit.

"Luis Enrique calls for a vendetta," headlined the sporting daily Marca.

Spanish midfielder Enrique had his nose broken by an elbow jab from Italian defender Mauro

Press pretty pleased

AFP, Moscow

Russian newspapers voiced their delight Thursday with their national team winning a Euro 2008 quarterfinal berth for the first time in over 20 years.

"Thank you, (coach Guus) Hiddink! Even his compatriots did not expect in vain that he would bring Russia into quarterfinals," the official Rossiyskaya Gazeta exulted in a front page report headlined "We broke through the Swedish wall."

Russia beat Sweden 2-0 at Innsbruck, Austria on Wednesday, to earn a spot in the knockout stage of a major tournament for the first since the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991.

They will play Holland in the quarterfinal in Basel, Switzerland,

on Saturday -- a repeat to a certain extent of the 1988 final when present Dutch coach Marco van Basten scored in the 2-0 victory over the Soviets.

Hiddink, also Dutch, guided Holland to the 1998 World Cup semifinals where they lost to Brazil in a penalty shootout.

"Now, Dutch, you tremble!" Rossiyskaya Gazeta added.

"The wait is over!" the Sport Express daily screamed at the top of its frontpage, adding its faith that "now we can wait impatiently for what will come, because this team will never again be afraid."

"It can lose, but it will never surrender. Least of all to the country that bore the man that presented us with this magical evening, and, we hope, will make many more such presents," the daily wrote.

Thousands of Russian fans flooded the streets late Wednesday, screaming and honking their delight and even briefly blocking Moscow's chief thoroughfare Tsvetskaya Street before dispersing at the request of police.

"We go on!" the Sovetsky Sport daily echoed, its commentator recalling wistfully the last time he saw Russia enter the Euro quarterfinals in 1988.

"Who would have said then that it would be the last serious tournament that would see us win out of the group," Sergei Pryakhin recalled of the first big match he saw in his life.

"But let us not fall into euphoria. Not now, at least. We have only made the first step toward catching up with the rest of the world, which has gone far ahead of us since 1988," Sovetsky Sport warned.

Croats plan to invade Vienna

AFP, Zagreb

At least 100,000 Croatian supporters are expected to descend on Vienna for Friday's Euro 2008 quarterfinal with Turkey with only 5,400 tickets for the match having been sold in the country, according to the local press.

"All roads lead to Vienna. The first estimates are that some 100,000 Croats will be there on Friday," cited the daily newspaper Slobodna Dalmacija.

Another daily, Vecernji List, raised the stakes even further by giving a figure of 200,000 supporters would travel to the Austrian capital to witness their adored 'ardents' (the team's nickname) try and book their ticket in the semifinals for the first time.

The majority of the supporters will travel by car, Vienna being just four hours by road, though, many will leave on Thursday evening to avoid the inevitable traffic jams on Friday.

The Croatian Football Federation (HNS) did ask UEFA for a bigger ticket allocation but were told there were no more to be had and none would be on sale on the day of the match.

Several dozen fans appealed for tickets through the newspapers but were quoted prices of between 600 and 1000 euros.

According to local media several travel agencies offered trips to Vienna with a match ticket included for 2000 euros.

Others offered a trip on a 'special supporters train' to Vienna but without a match ticket for 90 euros.

Expansion on UEFA's agenda

AFP, Vienna

European football's governing body UEFA will make a decision on whether to enlarge their flagship tournament the European championships by the end of the year announced their general secretary David Taylor on Thursday.

"We're going to consult our 53 associations in the next couple of months," said Taylor.

"We're going to take a decision for the 2016 tournament in the second half of this year."

France -- who hosted the Euro in 1984 and the World Cup in 1998 -- has already said it intends to bid for the 2016 edition.

Poland and Ukraine surprisingly won the right to co-host the 2012 renewal, which will remain at the present 16 teams, but a UEFA delegation led by president Michel Platini is set to visit the two countries in July to assess how much progress is being made as there has been heavy criticism of the tardiness of the preparations.

Guus's Russian revolution

AFP, Innsbruck

Russia's Euro 2008 quarterfinal with Holland will be a very special moment, said the Russians' Dutch coach Guus Hiddink on Wednesday.

The 61-year-old Dutchman -- who guided Holland to the 1998 World Cup semifinals where they lost to Brazil in a penalty shootout -- was speaking shortly after Russia beat Sweden 2-0 to clinch their place in the last eight at the expense of their opponents.

"It is a very special date for me," admitted Hiddink, whose side will play the Dutch in Basel, Switzerland, on Saturday.

"I know the players well, I know the coach (Marco van Basten), and a lot of the coaching staff with whom I worked seven years ago."

"We play like them beautiful football, so it should be a spectacular match."

Hiddink, who also guided South Korea to the 2002 World Cup semifinals when they co-hosted the global showpiece with Japan, said he was extremely proud of the way in which his young team had played in a match as important as that against a Swedish side loaded with experience.

"I am very proud of the team and also the progress that we have made over the match, in several days, and in training," said Hiddink, whose side lost 4-1 in their opening match against Spain but then beat titleholders Greece 1-0 to end the Greeks reign.

"This evening (Wednesday) we played really well, we tried always to score."

"After half-time, the Swedes pushed more."

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played really well, we tried always to score.

"After half-time, the Swedes pushed more."

Hiddink, who also guided Australia to the second round of the

2006 World Cup finals where they lost to a contentious penalty by eventual champions Italy, only had one criticism of the team, a similar one to when they played Greece.

"The only criticism I would

make of us is that we didn't score as many in comparison to the amount of chances we created."

"We should have had them beaten a lot earlier, but despite that, the team has made enormous progress. This team loves to play football, you saw it and I am really proud of that."

Hiddink, who has also proved himself at club level and has coached Real Madrid and PSV Eindhoven among other teams, said he had been pleased by the way that playmaker and Russian footballer of the year Andrei Arshavin -- who scored their second goal -- had performed after coming back from suspension.

"He is a player who can choose his option really quickly, he can create danger, direct play on the right and on the left... he is a really intelligent player."

"He wasn't in great condition because he hasn't played a lot of matches recently."

"But I selected him for the squad because he can change the course of a match. He knows how to get the team playing well, and the other players love to play with him."

"The Swedes love to play against two strikers, so that they can then counterattack through their central midfield."

"But they don't like it when a player is placed in between their defence and their midfield, just as Arshavin is."

"That's what I wanted to do. What is more the other midfielders played an intelligent game so it liberated him."



PHOTO: AFP

WHAT'S UP HIS SLEEVE: Russia's inspirational coach Guus Hiddink celebrates after his team's progress into the quarterfinals of the Euro 2008 at the Tivoli Neu Stadium in Innsbruck on Wednesday.

Media slams Lagerbaeck

AFP, Stockholm

Sweden coach Lars Lagerbaeck became the country's public enemy number one on Thursday following his ageing side's unceremonious exit from Euro 2008 at the hands of an impressive Russia.

Sweden began the campaign with a victory over Greece, but following a 2-1 reverse to Spain they finally ran out of steam against a Russia side in need of a win to secure their ticket out of the group stages and into the quarterfinals.

"Swedish football has no future with Lagerbaeck," and "Lagerbaeck must go," were some of the headlines in the Scandinavian country a day after Sweden's 2-0 defeat to Russia at Innsbruck, Austria on Wednesday.

"The ride lasted for 90 minutes, and when it was over, the Swedes stumbled out, dizzy, surprised, debased and humiliated," the Expressen daily wrote, blasting Lagerbaeck for choosing older, familiar players for the tournament.

"For Lagerbaeck, the best team will always be made up of players who are closer to retirement age than driver license age," added the

report.

"For Sweden, the good years are over," said a report in the respected Dagens Nyheter newspaper, describing the team as "the Euro's oldies but not goodies."

That report however laid most of the blame for Sweden's exit on Lagerbaeck's defensive strategy, pointing out that it was older, experienced players who had helped Sweden win the (2006) Olympic gold in nice hockey.

"Lars Lagerbaeck's greatest mistake was that he could not stop the players from believing they had a world-class team just because they had Zlatan Ibrahimovic on board... But without good organisation, a disciplined defense and flawless concentration Sweden can go nowhere," added the report.

The Svenska Dagbladet daily meanwhile compared the Swedish team to extras standing idly by as the Russians provided all the action.

"The people's verdict will be harsh. Many of the players looked old and tired," the paper wrote.

"Is Lars Lagerbaeck really the right man to take responsibility for an inevitable changing of the guards?"

Ironically, Sweden's next match will be an August 20 game against France, which exited the championships after a 2-0 defeat to arch-rivals Italy.

Ribery out for two months

AFP, Munich

French midfielder Franck Ribery will be out of action for up to two months after he had to go off injured in his country's Euro 2008 loss to Italy on Tuesday, his club doctors said Wednesday.

Bayern Munich's Dr Hans-Wilhelm Muller-Wohlfahrt said playmaker Ribery, would be on the sidelines for "seven to eight weeks" after he was stretched off having twisted his ankle early in the 2-0 defeat which sent France packing.

According to Muller-Wohlfahrt, who is Bayern's and the German national team's doctor, Ribery, who had to go off after just ten minutes in a huge blow for Les Bleus, has torn a ligament above his left ankle.

Medvedev salutes the heroes

AFP, Moscow

Russian president Dmitry Medvedev joined in the country's Euro 2008 celebrations Thursday by saluting the team's entry to the quarterfinals of the tournament for the first time.

Russia overcame some early group campaign jitters to score a crucial 2-0 win over Sweden on Wednesday, ending the Swede's hopes while securing Russia's ticket for the quarterfinals alongside group rivals Spain.

After a meeting with Spain's King Juan Carlos, who was on a visit to the Kremlin, Medvedev said both teams had done their countries proud.

"We can both congratulate ourselves on making the quarterfinals after starting out in the same group. It was a great performance," said Medvedev.

Some Russian media now believe Guus Hiddink's team, who will meet tournament co-favourites the Netherlands in a quarterfinal this Saturday, can go all the way.

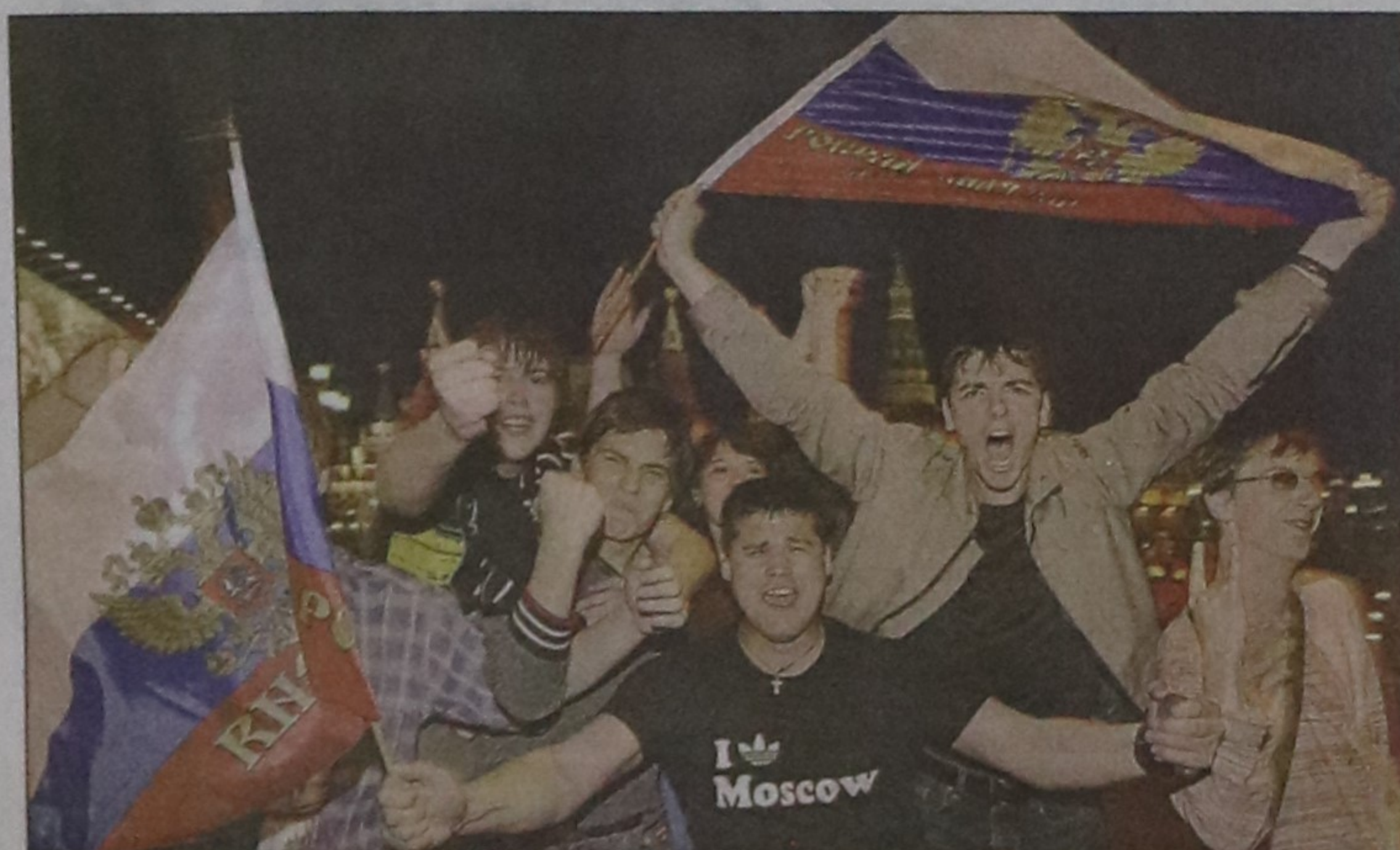


PHOTO: AFP

Russian fans celebrate their national team's stunning 2-0 victory over Sweden early Thursday near Red Square in Moscow.