

No Putin Presence at World Cup Bid

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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From left to right, Britain's David Beckham, Prince William and Prime Minister David Cameron chatting Wednesday ahead of World Cup bidding in Zurich. Vladimir Putin won't be there. **Anthony Devlin**

The country's hopes for winning the rights to host its first World Cup were thrown into disarray Wednesday when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that he would not go to Zurich for FIFA's vote on who would get the 2018 tournament.

Putin linked his decision to what he called a "dirty campaign" against FIFA executives, who he said were being "poured with dirt and discredited."

"I see this as unfair competition in the preparation for the vote," he told a government presidium meeting Wednesday, according to a transcript [on his web site](#).

"Of course, I would have very much liked to go to personally present our bid. But under these conditions, I believe it is better to cancel the trip," he said.

Putin added that he ordered First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov to head Moscow's final

presentation team.

The run-up to Thursday's vote has been mired by corruption allegations against senior officials from FIFA, world football's governing body.

A BBC investigation broadcast Monday accused three voters from FIFA's executive committee of taking kickbacks.

Earlier this month, two committee members were suspended following allegations of wrongdoing made by London's Sunday Times.

The decision will now be made by 22 FIFA voters instead of 24.

The BBC report has caused fears in England's team, which is competing against Russia and joint bids from Spain/Portugal and Belgium/ Netherlands. But it was unclear Wednesday why it would harm Russia's hopes to win over a majority of FIFA's executive committee.

Sports minister and Russia bid chairman Vitaly Mutko — another member of FIFA's executive committee — suggested on Tuesday that Moscow was worried most about potential horse trading, saying any collusion would be unjust.

Speculation has been rife that Spain/Portugal might trade votes with Qatar, which is bidding for the 2022 World Cup, to the detriment of Russia. FIFA will make a decision on the host cities for both championships Thursday.

Much of Russia's FIFA hopes rested on Putin's political weight, with Mutko and other top government officials saying he has been the bid's strongest backer in Russia. It is widely believed that he won the 2014 Winter Olympics for Sochi after personally lobbying the International Olympic Committee in Guatemala in 2007.

Many observers said Putin's decision to stay away showed that he no longer believes Russia will win.

"It will be hard to repeat a triumph like in Guatemala, so he probably decided not to take the risk," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank.

Andreas Gross, a Swiss Social Democrat lawmaker, said Putin was probably just deflecting attention from the bid's weaknesses when he pointed to the corruption scandal.

"This is unconvincing because the allegations harm FIFA but hardly Russia," he told The Moscow Times.

Gross, who is also a member of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly monitoring group for Russia, argued that Moscow's chances looked dim because of uncertainty surrounding the Sochi Olympics.

Construction for the 2014 Olympic Games has been beset with delays, corruption scandals and protests from locals.

"I think FIFA will want to wait to see how Russia manages Sochi before it gives them such a

prize," he said.

But Axel Vartanyan, a prominent football historian, said it was too early to declare the bid failed.

"This is just one version. Another one is that Putin knows that [Russia] will get the tournament and that going all the way to Switzerland is unnecessary," he told The Moscow Times.

Putin himself argued that he would stay away out of respect for the voting FIFA executives. "I decided this so they can make an objective decision without any outside pressure. And I call on my colleagues from other countries to do the same," he said.

It seemed unlikely that his advice would be heeded, however.

British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in Zurich on Wednesday with Prince William and former England captain David Beckham for a last-ditch charm offensive.

Also expected are Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates and his Spanish counterpart, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, to promote their joint bid for 2018. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton led the U.S. delegation bidding for 2022.

Apart from Putin's role, Russia's World Cup hopes rest on the theory that FIFA policy favors countries where football has development opportunities.

"That was why South Africa got the 2010 World Cup — as an investment in the future of its football," Vartanyan said.

Russia's bid includes construction of 13 stadiums and renovation of three more at a projected cost of \$3.8 billion and an operating budget of \$641 million for 2017-18.

The overall cost would likely run into the tens of billions of dollars, but the World Cup would inject more urgency and a stricter timeline into the government's modernization program, UralSib said in a research note Monday.

Critics have said Russia's disadvantages — huge distances between stadiums, poor infrastructure and high construction costs — make the bid a tough sell.

Competitors like England and Belgium/Netherlands argue that they already have well-equipped stadiums, cheap hotels and easy access to playing sites after hosting large-scale tournaments in the past.

Vartanyan conceded that it would be difficult to fill stadiums after the tournament, given low attendance rates at Russian football games.

"Even in the Premier League, stadiums on average have some 19,000 spectators. That is not very much," he said, adding that Russia's early winter and the violent reputation of football fans contributed to the difficulties.

"Ultimately, getting the World Cup it is a matter of national prestige," he said.

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