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Report: No High-Speed Rail Lines for World Cup

By Roland Oliphant

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Russia might abandon plans to build high-speed rail lines for the 2018 World Cup.

Citing a source "close to deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov," Vedomosti reported Thursday that current thinking is that high-speed rail lines are not essential to the smooth running of the championship and building regular lines and modernizing existing ones should be sufficient.

Funding for the 5.6 trillion ruble ($175 billion) project, which was meant to slash journey times between Moscow and St. Petersburg and Moscow and Yekaterinburg, will not be included in federal spending plans between 2013 to 2015, the newspaper reported, citing several officials.

Since Russian Railways' did not include the high-speed network in its own investment program to 2020, this could mean the end of the project.

A spokesman for High-Speed Rail Lines, the Russian Railways subsidiary, refused to comment on what he called "rumors and gossip" propagated by the paper's anonymous sources.

"The government will make a decision in September, after that decision a date for the tender will be set," he said, adding that the project's continuation depends on that government decision.

A plan to build high-speed rail lines between Moscow and St. Petersburg and Moscow and

Yekaterinburg to carry fans between match cities was unveiled shortly after Russia won its World Cup bid in 2010. Construction work was scheduled to start next year.

The 660-kilometer Moscow to St. Petersburg line, with a price tag of 1.12 trillion rubles, is meant to allow trains between Moscow and St. Petersburg to move at speeds of up to 400 kilometers per hour, making the trip in 2 ? hours.

The second line, linking Moscow to Yekaterinburg via Nizhny Novgorod and Kazan, would cut journey times between the capital and the Urals from 26 to just 8 hours.

The original funding model envisaged the project would be 70 percent financed by the state and 30 percent by a concessionaire.

Several foreign firms had expressed interest in bidding for the project, including Siemens, Hyundai, Alstom and CRCC of China.

Siemens was unable to respond to requests to comment by close of business Thursday. Calls to Alstom went unanswered.

The 2018 World Cup Russia Organizing Committee said that all preparations were "on time and match the commitments that were delivered at the bid stage" and that it is working with the Olympic Games Transport Directorate and the Transportation Ministry to develop a "transport services concept" for the event.

"During the bid stage, Russia committed to use the existing rail links between the host cities after any necessary upgrade to increase comfort and decrease travel time for passengers," the committee said in an e-mailed statement. "Very high-speed rails (over 300 kilometers per hour) were not part of the Russia 2018 bid book," it added.

Besides Moscow, 13 cities are competing for the right to host matches in 2018, including St. Petersburg, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg.

Other candidates in the Volga region include Saransk, Samara and Volgograd. Krasnodar, Sochi and Rostov-on-Don in the South, and Kaliningrad in the West, are also in the running.

The final list of host cities will be announced in late September or early October.

Although the High-Speed Rail Lines spokesman insisted that the ambitious five-year construction schedule is perfectly feasible, some analysts have warned that the costs make it untenable.

"At a time when rail passenger numbers are falling, it would not have been profitable even in the long term. You're looking at a period of about 50 years for the government to make back its investment," said Andrei Rozhkov, transportation and infrastructure analyst at Metropole.

The fastest rail option between the two cities is currently Siemens' Sapsan trains, which operate on the regular Moscow to St. Petersburg railway line, where they are limited to speeds of 250 kilometers an hour. The trip takes about 4 1/2 hours one way and costs between 1,840 rubles and 6,040 rubles ($59 to $193).

It has proven a hit with business and leisure travelers, and is proof that high-speed rail can compete with air travel in certain circumstances.

"A similar link to the Volga basin — cities like Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan and maybe Samara —could also be competitive," said Rozhkov. "But Yekaterinburg is too far."

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