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BIE Delegation Assesses Yekaterinburg's EXPO 2020 Bid

By Alexander Bratersky

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A delegation of the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) and Yekaterinburg's EXPO 2020 bid team at work. **Pavel Lisitsyn**

A delegation of the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) visited Yekaterinburg late last week to evaluate the country's chances to host EXPO 2020, while President Vladimir Putin promised state support if the city is selected.

Yekaterinburg, a Urals city of 1.4 million inhabitants, was short-listed as one of the bidders to host the expo along with Izmir, Turkey; Ayutthaya, Thailand; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and Sao Paulo, Brazil. The decision on the winner will be announced in November by the bureau's General Assembly.

Yekaterinburg plans to host EXPO 2020 on an area of 500 hectares three kilometers away from the city, the city's chief architect Mikhail Vyatkin told reporters. Vyatkin said the expo might cost up to $30 billion, according to the "most modest estimates."

Neither Russia nor the Soviet Union have ever hosted any BIE world fairs. In 2002, Moscow lost its bid to host EXPO 2010 to Shanghai.

The delegation members declined to speak to the press, citing the rules of the competition, but noted that the city had been well-prepared to meet them.

"We were presented with Yekaterinburg's bid and given satisfactory answers to all our questions," BIE Secretary General Vicente Loscertales said at a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday, Itar-Tass reported.

The delegation also met with President Vladimir Putin, who promised that the state will help businesses to build infrastructure in the city if Yekaterinburg is chosen to host the expo, RIA-Novosti reported Thursday.

Russian officials have said the expo would give a boost to the development of the city, which has already hosted BRIC and Shanghai Cooperation Organization summits.

"We estimate that hosting such a summit will allow the city to make a giant leap in infrastructure development," head of the committee in charge of Russia's EXPO 2020 bid, Arkardy Chernetsky, told Vedomosti on Wednesday.

Chernetsky said the idea for Yekaterinburg to host EXPO 2020 was supported by residents and local businesses. According to a poll conducted by local officials in October, 66 percent support the expo, while 19 percent are against it.

But local opposition activist Yevgeny Roizman, a former State Duma deputy, said support for the expo was much lower in the city.

"This is a PR stunt that has nothing to do with the needs of the people, who are are complaining about a lack of schools and kindergartens," Roizman said.

He added that the idea, nursed by the Sverdlovsk region's previous governor Alexander Misharin and his successor Yevgeni Kuivashov, had not been explained well enough to the population.

"People have a feeling that half of the money will be stolen," Roizman said.

He said Yekaterinburg's investment climate needed to be seriously improved before hosting events like EXPO 2020.

Last December, Putin criticized Yekaterinburg, along with other cities, for failing to improve their investment climate. He said it takes 360 days for businesses to connect to power grids in Yekaterinburg, compared with 123 days in the less developed Saratov.

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