

Putin to Attend Major Sports Convention in St. Petersburg

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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ST. PETERSBURG — Sports officials from around the world are descending on St. Petersburg for a major industry convention where wrestling will bid to remain an Olympic sport.

The SportAccord convention will also host President Vladimir Putin, underlining his drive to restore the country as a major sports power.

The convention formally opens Tuesday, but some organizations were holding preliminary meetings on Monday. In all, some 1,500 delegates are expected.

The spotlight will be on meetings of the International Olympic Committee's executive board, which is to hear presentations from eight sports seeking inclusion at the 2020 Olympics. In February, the IOC dropped wrestling as a core sport after the 2016 Games, but it is one of the eight sports to pitch in St. Petersburg for the open position.

The other contenders are squash, sport climbing, karate, roller sports, wushu, wakeboarding and a combined baseball-softball bid. The IOC board will announce which sports made the shortlist after the presentations at SportAccord, but the final decision will come at a full IOC meeting in September.

Aiming to make the sport more appealing to spectators, wrestling's international federation FILA made an array of rule changes this month at a special congress in Moscow. That location emphasized not only the importance of wrestling for Russia, long a world power in the sport, but of Russia's growing prominence in world sports.

The Soviet collapse and the ensuing economic troubles severely weakened the sports establishment once called "The Big Red Machine." But Putin has made revival of sports a priority and hosting the SportAccord convention adds to Russia's newly burnished image.

Putin's major success in sports was winning the right to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi despite the need to build all the venues from scratch and concern about Russia's often-shabby transportation and complex visa regime. He is to meet with IOC president Jacques Rogge on Thursday at the St. Petersburg gathering for discussions likely to include the progress of preparations with the games just nine months away.

The Sochi organizing committee meanwhile will use the convention to unveil its design for the Olympic medals.

Since the Sochi bid, Russia scored another huge win by being awarded the football World Cup for 2018 and has tallied other world-class events including stepping up at short notice to hold the 2011 figure skating world championships instead of Tokyo after Japan's massive earthquake and tsunami.

Russia also is hosting the track and field world championships this year in Moscow and next year holds the world swimming championships in Kazan.

The IOC executive board also is to hear presentations from the three candidate cities for the 2020 Summer Olympics — Madrid, Tokyo and Istanbul.

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