

Putin Visits Still-Unfinished Olympic Stadium

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December 01, 2013



Two stadiums are illuminated in Sochi's Olympic park: the Olympic Bolshoi stadium and the Iceberg stadium. **Lesya Polyakova / AP**

President Vladimir Putin visited Sochi's main Olympic stadium near the Black Sea coast on Friday only to see construction workers and equipment still spread around the venue, which is still unfinished just more than two months before it will host the opening ceremony of the Winter Games.

Originally supposed to be done in time for ceremony rehearsals to start in August 2013, Fisht Stadium's completion date remains unclear. The venue, which is the biggest of six newly built Olympic facilities in the so-called "coastal cluster," is still surrounded by cranes, its construction having been delayed due in part to multiple changes in its design.

The delays leave opening ceremony organizers little time to rehearse inside the 40,000-person stadium. Preparations for the opening show are being led by Konstantin Ernst, general

director of the powerful state-owned Channel One, who is under pressure to create a grandiose ceremony that will showcase the achievements of the new Russia under Putin's leadership. The exact contents of the show have been kept a closely guarded secret, but it is expected to be watched by hundreds of millions of people around the world.

During Putin's inspection of the venue Friday, he was accompanied by Ernst, on whom he seemed to place responsibility for its design, calling him "in many ways the real architect of the stadium."

"Because the stadium was made in accordance with your scenario of opening and closing ceremonies," Putin said, pointing to the huge temporary roof that spans the two sloped sides of the venue.

"This is a unique stadium that has almost no precedent in Europe," Ernst replied, standing in front of the spot where Putin will deliver his opening speech.

"This is no longer a stadium but a venue that can also be used for large-scale circus performances, such as Cirque du Soleil and Formula One shows," Ernst added.

At a meeting chaired by Putin on Thursday with a small group of high-ranking officials directly responsible for the Olympics, the president referred to the fact that Fisht Stadium was not yet finished.

"We still need to talk more carefully and in more detail about, for example, the main Olympic stadium where the opening and closing ceremonies will take place," Putin said. "This is because the equipment needs to be installed, and all the necessary preparatory work has to be done."

The exact completion date for the stadium is unknown. According to a report aired Friday on Channel One, the stadium will be finished in December. Ilya Dzhus, a spokesman for Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, who is in charge of Olympic preparations in the government, said by phone Friday that the stadium would be completed "soon."

Dzhus deferred to Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov for more details. Peskov could not be reached for comment by phone on Friday.

On a recent evening visit by a Moscow Times reporter to the giant construction site, it resembled a space launch site, with bright lights aimed in various directions amid building equipment and incomplete structures.

The area, which is located in the Imeretinskaya Valley, one of the few plains at the bottom of the Caucasus Mountains, appeared to be filled with mist, which on closer inspection was in fact a huge and expanding cloud of dust.

Each of the six coastal Olympic venues — the Shayba Ice Skating Arena, the Bolshoi Ice Dome, the Ice Cube Curling Center, the Adler Arena Skating Center, the Iceberg Skating Palace, and Fisht Olympic Stadium — came into view occasionally, distinguishable by its color scheme.

Groups of workers, most of them young men, roamed the newly built but still unlit streets,

which were freshly paved with dark asphalt. Many of them stood on the sides of the roads smoking and drinking canned beverages.

Workers from Serbia, Korea, CIS countries and other nations, as well as from within Russia, have assembled in a largely uncoordinated effort to help make Putin's Sochi vision a reality.

"It is a complete mess down here," said Ivan, a construction worker from the Stavropol region, who refused to give his last name due to fear of dismissal.

Ivan and several colleagues said they were sent to Sochi to help build a ski resort developed by state-owned gas giant Gazprom. In reality they were not doing much of any work at all, they said, while the subcontractor was still paying for them to be in Sochi.

"It is a corruption scheme, but at least we can see the country," Ivan said.

While some construction workers have little to do, Putin has made clear that plenty of work remains for Olympics organizers.

"We have the festive season, New Year's Eve and Christmas ahead of us," Putin told officials on Thursday. "I wanted to tell you, even though it is clear anyway: For you, the New Year will be on the last day of the Paralympic Games, March 17."

"You will meet the New Year on March 18 — you and everyone working on Olympic sites," he said, while the officials sat frozen in silent approval.

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Original url:

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