

Russia and Ukraine Could Be Kept Apart at World Cup, FIFA Says

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An exterior view shows the Zenit Arena soccer stadium, which is under construction, in St. Petersburg, Oct. 16, 2014.

Russia and Ukraine will be put into different groups at the 2018 World Cup finals if the Ukrainians qualify and relations between the two countries do not improve, FIFA president Sepp Blatter said on Tuesday.

"You can be sure about this," said the head of world soccer when asked by R-Sport agency whether the two teams would be kept apart given the current poor political climate with Kiev accusing Moscow of backing Russian separatists in the east of Ukraine.

Blatter, who was on a visit to Moscow for the unveiling of Russia's official World Cup emblem, said political situations around the world should not have an impact on sport. There have been calls to move the 2018 tournament to a different country due to Russia's conflict with Ukraine.

"A boycott never achieves anything and does not have a positive effect. FIFA is fully supporting the World Cup in Russia," said the 78-year-old.

"When we received letters from North America, we answered that this is football. We believe in the country (Russia) and their government.

"The mass media should help us with this. We have experienced such things in the past at the Sochi Olympics. However, during and after the (Winter) Games there was not one bad word written about the event.

"Russia is the world's biggest country. You know, Russia is in the focus of the world press. Football cannot only unite Russia, but can also show the whole world that it is stronger than any protest movement," he said.

Praise for Preparations

Blatter said he was pleased with Russia's preparations for the tournament.

"In comparison with Brazil's preparations for the 2014 World Cup, Russia is well ahead of them with four years to go."

He said the third place playoff will be kept despite calls from teams to abolish it.

"We will not be getting rid of it. It's very important. If there was no third place playoff then the head of (European body) UEFA, Michel Platini, would never have taken home a bronze medal. These games are always well fought," the Swiss said.

The exact tournament dates will be confirmed no later than the start of 2015. At present, it is expected to be held from June 8–July 8, 2018.

"At the moment, we are finishing our work on the scheduling of the tournament. I think over the next few weeks, the question could be solved," said FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke, who flew into the Russian capital with Blatter.

"Maybe the dates will become clear in November when FIFA will meet with the Local Organizing Committee in Sochi. The latest date when we will come to a decision will be at the start of next year."

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