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Putin Says FIFA Arrests Indicate U.S. Meddling

By The Moscow Times

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FIFA President Sepp Blatter makes a speech during the opening ceremony of the 65th FIFA Congress in Zurich, Switzerland, May 28.

President Vladimir Putin accused the United States of meddling in the affairs of soccer's governing body and hinted that its corruption investigation is part of an attempt to take the 2018 World Cup away from his country.

Putin said in televised comments Thursday that he found it "odd" that a probe into the practices of FIFA, football's governing body, was launched at the request of U.S. officials for crimes that do not involve its citizens and did not happen in the United States.

Corruption charges in the United States were announced Wednesday against 14 people, at least two of whom have American citizenship. Much of the money that allegedly changed hands went through U.S. banks, which is why U.S. officials were able to bring charges.

Seven of the 14 individuals were arrested Wednesday morning in Zurich ahead of a FIFA meeting and Friday's presidential election in which Sepp Blatter is expected to win a fifth term. Both Russia's Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko and the country's Football Union have openly expressed the desire to see Blatter re-elected to the position, the R-sport news site reported Thursday.

In a separate probe, Swiss prosecutors opened criminal proceedings into FIFA's awarding of the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the 2022 tournament to Qatar.

Putin said even if "someone has done something wrong," Russia "has nothing to do with it." He then tried to portray the probe as a U.S. attempt to go after dissenters, likening the case to the persecution of whistleblowers Julian Assange and Edward Snowden.

"Our American counterparts, unfortunately, are using the same methods to reach their goals and illegally persecute people. I don't rule out that this is the case in relation to FIFA," Putin said. "I have no doubt that this is yet another evident attempt to derail Mr. Blatter's re-election as FIFA president. We are aware of the pressure that he was subjected to in relation to Russia holding the 2018 World Cup."

Mutko, who is also a FIFA executive committee member and is in Zurich for the governing body's congress and presidential election, said Wednesday that his country welcomes the investigation.

Since then, the sports minister has turned to the media in a bid to clear Russia's name.

Amid swirling speculation that he would be pulled into the investigation launched by Switzerland's attorney general, Mutko denied in comments to the Russian News Service that he faced questioning in connection with the scandal.

In comments carried by the TASS news agency on Wednesday, he asserted that the arrests of the FIFA officials in Zurich were not tied to Russia's successful bid to host the World Cup in 2018.

Mutko reiterated to the R-sport news site that Russia had won the right to host the 2018 World Cup honestly, insisting that Russia would do "no worse" at hosting the tournament than England, which lost to Russia in its own bid to host the 2018 World Cup.

Russia is currently preparing to host the competition in 11 cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg and Sochi.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev estimated in 2013 that hosting the World Cup would cost the country $20 billion, a sum double what then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin predicted when Russia was awarded the tournament in 2010. Other estimates put the final figure closer to $50 billion, approximately the same sum spent on the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

After the outbreak of the most recent corruption scandal, FIFA spokesman Walter de Gregorio said that Russia would not be stripped of the right to host the upcoming edition of the World Cup.

And despite Putin's insinuations about its own role in perpetuating the scandal, the United

States appears to agree that Russia was not at risk of losing the tournament. The U.S. Embassy issued a statement Thursday saying that the investigation into FIFA launched by U.S. officials had "nothing to do with Russia," and that the country would in fact host the 2018 World Cup.

(AP, MT)

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