The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Putin, FIFA's Blatter Brush Off Controversy for World Cup Countdown

July 22, 2015



Sepp Blatter

ST. PETERSBURG — Russian President Vladimir Putin and FIFA's president Sepp Blatter will put aside their troubles when they take center stage and kick off the countdown to the 2018 World Cup on Saturday.

Putin has been cast as a villain in the West because of Russia's military involvement in Ukraine, while Blatter's presidency is ending next year in the wake of a huge scandal over alleged FIFA corruption.

But any doubts that Russia will host the World Cup because of alleged vote-rigging in their winning bid five years ago now appear irrelevant, with huge construction programs going on in all 11 venue cities and this draw heralding the official start of the countdown to the finals in 2018.

A worldwide TV audience of around 100 million people in 170 countries will watch as the two men open proceedings at the draw for the qualifying round of the competition which has

involved 206 of FIFA's 209 member nations.

Security at the Konstantin Palace, built in 1715 and now used as Russia's National Congress Palace, some 35 km (20 miles) outside St. Petersburg, will be re-doubled, not just because Putin is attending, but also because Blatter was the target of a stunt at FIFA headquarters on Monday when he was showered with fake money by a British interloper before the start of a news conference.

Russian Culture

The draw has become something of an extravaganza in its own right.

Played out against a background show of Russian culture, the real business will be conducted by FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke, assisted by a number of FIFA ambassadors including Brazilian international forward Hulk, who plays for the Russian champions and local side Zenit St Petersburg.

On Monday, Hulk spoke out against racism in Russian soccer, but politics and controversies of all kinds will take a backseat on Saturday when the draws for preliminary round matches in Africa, North & Central America and the Caribbean, South America, Oceania and Europe are made.

For the first time, including hosts Russia, all 209 FIFA members entered the World Cup, and although Zimbabwe and Indonesia were later banned because of infringements, 183 countries are still in contention to head to Russia and the 32-team finals in three years time.

The qualifying competitions started earlier this year in both CONCACAF and Asia so the third round of the CONCACAF zone will be drawn, but not the next round of the Asian competition as the second round has not yet been completed.

There will be plenty of attention on the European qualifiers as ever, with world champions Germany among the nine top European seeds along with Belgium, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, England, Spain, Croatia and Wales, among the top seeds for the first time.

Intriguingly Germany could be drawn in the same group as Italy, who are in pot two, and are the only country Germany have played more than once in competitive matches and never beaten.

They have failed to beat them eight times, including the 1970 World Cup semi-final in Mexico which Italy won 4-3 yet acclaimed by German fans in a nationwide poll in 1999 as their "match of the century" even through they lost it.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/07/22/russias-putin-fifas-blatter-brush-off-controversy-for-world-cup-countdown-a48455