

Russia Getting on With World Cup Job as FIFA Fights Scandal

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President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with FIFA president Sepp Blatter during a meeting in St. Petersburg, July 25.

ST. PETERSBURG — As he shared the stage with FIFA's departing president Sepp Blatter, Russian President Vladimir Putin's message was simple. FIFA may be in chaos, but Russia is getting on with the job.

"I'd like to emphasize again that all the plans to prepare for the World Cup will be fulfilled," Putin said, standing alongside the embattled Blatter at Saturday's preliminary draw for the 2018 tournament. "Hosting it is one of our key tasks."

Against the backdrop of Swiss authorities investigating how the 2018 World Cup was awarded to Russia, the draw was held in St. Petersburg, both Putin's hometown and the site of the most troubled of all the 12 World Cup stadiums.

For years, the construction of St. Petersburg's 68,000-seat arena — due to host a semifinal in 2018 — was a costly, repeatedly delayed symbol of Russian state inefficiency, so bad that

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev publicly said it looked "disgraceful."

Finally, almost a decade after construction began, it is close to completion. Estimated at 75 percent ready by project chief Vitaly Lazutkin, much of the remaining work is focused on installing seats and finishing off complex systems such as the retractable roof and movable pitch.

The final stages of the St. Petersburg build coincide with optimism that the 2018 World Cup, while beset by controversies over corruption allegations and racism by fans, will at least avoid the construction chaos that marred preparations for last year's tournament in Brazil.

It's a "relaxing situation," FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke, who expects to leave office in February along with his longtime boss Blatter, told journalists Friday. "Russia is really way on track and I have no concern. The next FIFA secretary general should be happy with the work that I give him because he will have a very organized World Cup."

The Petersburg stadium, provisionally titled the Zenit Arena, is set to cost 38 billion rubles (\$650 million). Until the ruble dropped sharply in value last year against the backdrop of international sanctions and a low oil price, the same ruble budget was worth over \$1 billion, which ranked it among the most expensive football stadiums in history.

Originally planned as a 45,000-seat arena by Zenit St. Petersburg's owner — the Russian state-controlled company Gazprom — Russia's successful bid to host the World Cup brought problems. Hosting a semifinal required an increase in capacity to 68,000, sending the partially built project back to the drawing board.

"The main problem that delayed the construction was that the stadium was redesigned three times," project director Lazutkin said Monday. "That required quite a long time for redesign work and also for rebuilding the stadium."

Since a Soviet-era stadium on the site was demolished in 2006, the Zenit Arena project has seen not only cost rises, but fraud investigations into subcontractors, the death of Japanese architect Kurio Kurosawa and political disputes.

Now the stadium's roof has been fitted and work is under way to put in the seats, Lazutkin says the first games could be held in little more than a year's time. Calling the stadium "disgraceful" is no longer possible, he insists, adding: "Mr. Medvedev said that earlier. Now he has a different opinion, as far as I know."

One of Russia's 12 World Cup arenas is raising concerns, however. Construction is fully under way at every stadium but the one in the western exclave of Kaliningrad, near the Polish border.

That stadium was caught in a political tug-of-war between the regional and federal governments over its location. By the time the regional authorities' costlier plan to put the stadium on an island prevailed, precious time had been lost.

The stadium's design has only been signed off by a federal architecture watchdog in recent days, allowing work to begin. Worries over the stadium lying empty after the tournament also led to a cut in capacity by 10,000 seats to 35,000. Organizers say the reduced size will allow

construction workers to make up for lost time.

"We have absolutely no doubts that the stadium will be ready on time and that everything will be up and running there soon," organizing committee CEO Alexei Sorokin said Monday.

With less than three years to go until the tournament, Russian government revenues have contracted sharply under pressure from the low oil price, meaning that organizers are keen to save money.

A fall in the value of the ruble has meant organizers are swapping costlier imported materials and equipment for cheaper local alternatives, while many hotels and some infrastructure projects have been cut from Russia's plans, reducing the total budget to 631.5 billion rubles (\$10.8 billion). The reason for removing the hotels, organizers say, was fears that luxury establishments could end up lying empty after the World Cup.

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko said Friday that one of Russia's main problems is that organizers don't always know who to talk to at a rapidly changing FIFA. At a time when officials are in custody and Blatter due to leave, Mutko said communication is "somewhat thwarted."

Regarding another key issue — that of the ability of teams and fans to travel between stadiums, some of which are separated by lengthy distances — Russia insists they will not face problems.

FIFA announced the full World Cup schedule Friday, a day ahead of the preliminary draw. Even though no venues are in the Asian part of Russia, some teams will rack up the miles in the world's largest country.

One team in Group D will start in the western exclave of Kaliningrad, near the border with Poland, before heading more than 1,000 miles south to Volgograd and then back north to St. Petersburg for a total distance of 2,064 miles (3,300 kilometers).

Another team in Group G will head from the southern city of Sochi, last year's Winter Olympic host, then Moscow before going east to Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains for a total distance of 1,728 miles (2,800 kilometers). Still, the distances are far shorter than the ones during last year's tournament in Brazil.

Mutko said fans would be able to cope.

"In Russia it's easy," he said. "Communications are very well built, we've actually got air travel, rail travel, car travel, water transport. We don't see any problems here."

The cities of Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara and Sochi will host the quarterfinals as FIFA skips the big cities where the semifinals and final will be played. With the exception of Sochi, all are in central Russia on the Volga river.

Moscow will host two games in the round of 16, one at Spartak Stadium and one at Luzhniki Stadium.

Each of the 12 stadiums will host four group matches, with all seeded teams playing once

in Moscow.

Organizers previously announced the semifinals will be in St. Petersburg on July 10 and at Luzhniki the following day, and the final will be at the 81,000-capacity Luzhniki on July 15.

Host Russia will open in Moscow on June 14, then will play its second Group A match in St. Petersburg and close its first round in Samara, which Mutko called "a major football region."

Some teams are expected to base in cities away from the venues, adding distance to their travels. Base locations suggested by organizers include cities in Russia's volatile North Caucasus region, such as Grozny, the capital of Chechnya.

Russia says the North Caucasus cities are safe despite occasional outbreaks of violence, including an incident in December in Grozny when Islamist militants waged a gun battle with police that left at least 20 dead.

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