

Russia Bypasses Corruption, Racism Accusations Over World Cup

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Members of national football federations attend the preliminary draw for the 2018 FIFA World Cup at Konstantin Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia July 25, 2015.

ST. PETERSBURG — The preliminary round draw for the 2018 World Cup in Russia marked both a first and last step on the road to the finals.

While Saturday's draw was the start of the countdown to the event, the announcement on the same day that FIFA's Executive Committee had endorsed Russia as the host nation was designed to end talk of it being stripped of the finals.

The decision by the heads of world football's governing body bore more weight, officials said, than U.S. and Swiss investigations into how Moscow won the bidding to host the tournament five years ago.

Even with Western governments concerned about Russia's role in the conflict in eastern

Ukraine and human rights groups alarmed about racism in Russian football, it now looks all but impossible that Moscow will not host the World Cup.

"Even if there were any irregularities in the voting, and none have ever been proved or are likely to be, the only body that can take the World Cup away from Russia is FIFA's Executive Committee," a senior FIFA insider told Reuters on Monday.

"I think we can finally put that idea to bed."

Despite cutbacks in the budget for the month-long tournament taking place in 11 cities across the European part of Russia during June and July 2018, work is generally advancing rapidly on stadiums, roads, hotels and airports.

FIFA President Sepp Blatter said the Executive Committee had voted its "trust and confidence" in Russia as the host nation.

President Vladimir Putin seemed to have no doubt Russia would host the event in opening remarks at Saturday's ceremony in the city of St. Petersburg, beamed live to 170 countries.

"We are here to launch a football marathon," he said. "It is a good chance to visit a multi-faceted and open Russia that can surprise and inspire" while promising a "special atmosphere of unity and overwhelming joy."

Racist Chants

That atmosphere was not shared by all because of worries about racism after an incident in which Ghanaian player Emmanuel Frimpong was subjected to racist chants during a match this month and sent off over a rude gesture to the crowd.

Days after the incident, Brazil international Hulk pulled out of Saturday's ceremony in the city where he plays for Premier League champions Zenit St. Petersburg.

Hulk warned it would be "really gross and really ugly" if racism marred the 2018 finals but Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko cautioned against letting the incident become a "big scandal" and said it was being talked about too much.

Russian officials want to ensure the build-up to the World Cup finals is not marred by negative publicity in the same way as preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian city of Sochi were overshadowed by discussion of gay rights, high spending and allegations of corruption — denied by the Kremlin.

The finals start shortly after Russia is due to hold a presidential election in which Putin is widely expected to run and to win a fourth term: he will do all he can to ensure the preparations go smoothly.

But United Nations Anti-Discrimination commissioner, Yuri Boychenko, suggested Russia must do more to fight racism.

"I don't think there is a total denial of racism in Russia but there is certainly a lack of understanding by officials in Russia of what racism is," he told Reuters.

"Too often, officials in Russia only see the problem from their point of view. They do not stand inside the shoes of the victim and see it from his point of view."

Russian officials say there is not a significant problem with racism and Alexey Sorokhin, head of the 2018 organizing committee, told reporters during a tour of the World Cup venues that "everything is on track."

"There are no infrastructure challenges, there are no challenges in terms of our relations with the FIFA administration. We are working very well together," he said.

On Schedule

In contrast to the build-up to the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil, Russia is either on schedule or ahead of schedule in its stadium-building program, except for the one being built in the European exclave of Kaliningrad.

The capacity of that stadium has been reduced from 45,000 to 35,000 and work held up for technical and financial reasons but Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko says it will be ready on time.

"There is no Plan B regarding Kaliningrad. It will be finished on time and part of the World Cup," he told a news conference on Friday.

Other stadiums such as the Kazan Arena in central Russia and the Spartak Moscow stadium in the capital are virtually ready, and the host cities outside Moscow and St Petersburg are advancing with ambitious road, airport and hotel programs.

For some of Russia's less well-known cities it represents a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

Valery Shantsev, the governor of Nizhny Novgorod, which will stage six matches including one quarterfinal, summed up best what the World Cup meant to his region.

"I travel all over the world, and feel offended whenever I am asked 'Where is Nizhny Novgorod?' Well no-one will ever have to ask that question again after the World Cup, that's how important it is for us."

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