

Putin Promises Visa-Free World Cup

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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A police officer passing a poster with Russia's World Cup bid slogan, "Ready to Inspire," at Luzhniki on Tuesday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

When FIFA officials decide who will host the 2018 World Cup in December, the seemingly worst candidate just might beat European football giants like England, Spain and the Netherlands.

That candidate is where most stadiums do not meet FIFA requirements, where vast distances must be traveled and decent roads, airports and affordable hotels are scarce. In short: Russia.

But Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Tuesday threw his weight behind what at first seemed a long-shot bid to host the world's biggest sporting event, promising to waive visas for footballers and fans.

"We are ready to extend extra, government guarantees on visa-free entry for participants and guests of the World Cup," he told visiting FIFA officials, according to [a transcript](#) on his web site.

Russia waived visas for the thousands of fans who attended UEFA Champions League finals in Moscow in May 2008 — the first time it had ever lifted visa requirements on such a scale.

Putin on Tuesday praised Russia as a force to be reckoned with in world football. "We have about 6 million people who play football and, naturally, many more fans. That is precisely why we decided to launch a bid for hosting the 2018 championship," he said.

He also stressed that because the World Cup has never taken place in Eastern Europe, a Russian win would be "extra important for that part of the world."

Moscow has launched a double bid for the World Cup, in 2018 or 2022, along with Britain, the United States, and joint bids from Spain/Portugal and Belgium/The Netherlands.

The 2014 World Cup will be held in Brazil, and football's world governing body, FIFA, will decide the 2018 and 2022 hosts on Dec. 2.

The 2018 tournament is tipped to take place in Europe, while the one in 2022 is slanted for Asia, having bids from Japan, Qatar and South Korea.

Visiting FIFA officials also met in the city's Luzhniki stadium with Mayor Yury Luzhkov, who gave them a personal tour of the field.

The 80,000-seat stadium south of the city center is thought to be Russia's only arena that meets FIFA's World Cup requirements.

Analysts say the country will probably have to build 10 football stadiums from scratch and spend billions of dollars to refurbish crumbling infrastructure if it wants to host the World Cup.

Moscow's bid envisages 16 stadiums in 13 cities, assembled in four separate geographical clusters — all situated in European Russia except for one in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg.

The FIFA delegation on Monday visited the site of the new 60,000-seat Zenit stadium under construction in St. Petersburg. From Moscow, the officials will travel to Sochi and Kazan, which both have plans for brand-new arenas.

Construction costs for a single stadium are estimated at \$70 million to \$300 million.

Putin promised on Tuesday that stadium construction would go ahead regardless of whether Russia hosts the World Cup. The stadiums are "just for the development of sports, for the development of football," he said.

But if Russia gets "this honor," everything will be done in time and according to FIFA's requirements, he said, adding that funds would come from federal and private sources.

First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov said earlier this year that private investors would fund most infrastructure projects for the World Cup bid.

Andreas Herren, a spokesman for Russia's bid, would not specify any figures but said it might be cheaper to build stadiums from scratch than refurbish existing ones.

The biggest plus for the bid is the comprehensive guarantees given by Putin personally and the fact that Eastern Europe has never hosted the World Cup before, Herren told The Moscow Times. "This is virgin territory for FIFA," he said.

All other European bidders have hosted a World Cup before.

Putin's personal weight has proven a winning strategy before. His English-speaking part in Sochi's presentation to International Olympic Committee members in 2007 was judged crucial in swinging votes for the city's winning bid for the 2014 Winter Games.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has said he cannot meet the FIFA delegation personally when it travels to London next week because he will be on vacation.

With more than 26 billion television viewers globally, the World Cup is far bigger than the Winter Olympics, which have between 4 billion and 6 billion viewers, Herren said.

President Dmitry Medvedev, who is on a working vacation in Sochi this week, is expected to meet with the FIFA officials.

Analysts said Russia's chances were high given FIFA's preference for giving the World Cup to developing football nations rather than developed ones, including its decision to award this year's cup to South Africa.

"They are trying to go into countries that looked totally hopeless a few years ago," said Alexander Rahr, a Russia expert at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Russia, he said, offered a key geographical position in being both an Asian and a European country. "They can be the bridge to Asia," he said by telephone from Berlin.

The lack of infrastructure might be Russia's "weakest point," but the ensuing investments could boost the economy by up to 1.5 percent, said Nikolai Podguzov, an analyst with Renaissance Capital, an investment bank.

"The impact on gross domestic product could be between an additional 0.5 and 1.5 points," he said, adding that it would contribute to economic diversification and stability.

But Georgy Bovt, a co-leader of the opposition Right Cause party, warned that many of the stadiums built for a successful World Cup bid might end up left idle after the games were over.

He said construction for the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow had been on such a grand scale that no major sports construction occurred in the Soviet Union for years afterward.

He also said the World Cup bid showed that the government was unable to modernize the economy from within.

"It is typical for Russia that it needs external stimulus for reform," Bovt said.

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