

World Cup Bid Rests on Putin's Persuasion

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The  **Moscow Times**

Russia will draw on Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's powers of persuasion to try to lure the 2018 World Cup to the world's largest country for the first time.

Putin was largely responsible for Sochi's successful bid to win the right to host the 2014 Winter Olympics when he traveled, as Russia's president, to Guatemala in 2007 to meet members of the International Olympic Committee.

The prime minister "has already done a great deal to help our bid," bid chairman Vitaly Mutko, Russia's sports minister who sits on FIFA's executive board, said in a recent interview.

One of Russia's strongest points is full government backing, with both Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev throwing their weight behind the bid.

Earlier this year, Putin personally signed all the government guarantees, then promised to drop entry-visa requirements for players, officials and fans with valid tickets.

But Mutko, a close friend of Putin, did not reveal whether the prime minister would go to Zurich for the Dec. 2 vote to make his pledge in person.

"All [Putin's] plans have been kept secret up to now, but of course we're all hoping he'll be there," Mutko said.

A year ago, just a few steps from Red Square with the Kremlin walls in the background, Mutko revealed an ambitious bid to bring the world's greatest sporting event to a country that spans from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean.

The plan calls for the use of 13 host cities with a total of 16 stadiums in four geographical clusters — with four stadiums in or near Moscow alone.

That plan could see fans traveling distances of more than 3,000 kilometers from the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad in the west to the most eastern location, Yekaterinburg on the Europe-Asia border in the Urals.

FIFA has cited Russia's enormous size as its main drawback.

"The country's vastness and its remoteness from other countries ... would put pressure on the air traffic infrastructure, potentially causing transfer challenges in view of the lack of alternative means of long-distance transport," the world governing body said in its technical report issued last week.

Mutko conceded that Russia's size was a concern for FIFA, but said all challenges would be met.

"We have our minuses, just like all the other candidates. Our risk zones are the [insufficient] infrastructure, transport and [lack of modern] hotels and airports," he said. "But Russia is a dynamic country with huge economic potential and no one should have any doubt that everything would be built on time."

Russia also has to battle against a negative impression about racism among the country's fans.

There have been a number of high-profile incidents widely reported around Europe over the last year or so, and Alexei Sorokin, the bid's chief executive, did not help the cause by criticizing England's bid in October.

That required a personal apology to England's officials, while FIFA took a dim view of the incident.

Despite those blemishes, the Russia bid is believed to be strong, with bookmakers making it the favorite ahead of England, Spain/Portugal and Netherlands/Belgium.

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