

Putin's Tirade Ended Suburban Train Debate – Russian Railways Chief

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Angry criticism and an order by Russian President Vladimir Putin to restore canceled suburban trains has ended a debate over the loss-making service, the head of state-owned Russian Railways wrote on his blog late Sunday.

Vladimir Yakunin said Russian Railways was working to restore the suburban train services and was awaiting a comprehensive financial solution to the situation.

Rolling cancellations of suburban trains began last year amid accusations against Russian Railways that it was blackmailing indebted regional governments. More than 300 routes were scrapped.

As public anger swelled, Putin publicly scolded government ministers on Wednesday, asking them if they were crazy and ordering them to promptly restore the canceled routes.

"The regulation of the situation with loss-making suburban train operators is not within the competency of Russian Railways, the question should be decided at a different level," Yakunin wrote at the weekend. "The interference of the president has, at last, drawn a line under the uncertainty and endless discussions about whether the country needs these suburban trains."

Yakunin previously blamed regional governments for the cancellations, which ignited popular protests and even a threat by angry locals in Zabaikalsky Krai to block the Trans-Siberian Railway.

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Russian Railways is only prepared to pay for half of the suburban trains' annual losses — about 25 billion rubles (\$380 million) — using money it has, in turn, received from the state budget, the head of company's passenger transport services Gennady Verkhovnykh said Friday, Interfax reported.

Under reforms that began in 2011, suburban trains are run by regional operating companies in which Russian Railways and local governments have stakes.

Russian Railways has said that it is working to restore all the canceled suburban trains, which are used mainly by Russia's poorest because of their cheap fares. But it is unclear exactly how long this will take.

Putin's interference was "a temporary solution," said Alexei Malov, a local deputy in the Pskov region where dozens of suburban train routes were mothballed last year.

A key service linking the Russia-Estonian border town of Gdov, which Malov represents, with St. Petersburg has not yet been re-opened, the deputy told The Moscow Times.

The structural problems that caused the crisis over suburban trains remain unsolved, he added. "Putin said they have been restored but I think that in six months we will be in the same situation."

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