

Russia Dismisses Concern Over Hosting 2018 World Cup

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The  **Moscow Times**

FIFA Executive Committee member Vitaly Mutko of Russia (L) listens to FIFA President Sepp Blatter at the 65th FIFA Congress in Zurich, Switzerland, May 29, 2015.

Russia dismissed concerns on Wednesday that it might lose the right to host the 2018 World Cup finals or face a boycott by other nations after Sepp Blatter's resignation as FIFA president.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Moscow was surprised by Blatter's move, four days after he was re-elected as head of soccer's world governing body, but was pressing ahead with its preparations for 2018.

A U.S. law enforcement official told Reuters that an FBI corruption investigation into FIFA would also cover how it had awarded the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the 2022 event to Qatar. Swiss authorities have also launched an inquiry into the votes.

Earlier, Peskov portrayed things as business as usual for Moscow following Blatter's announcement on Tuesday. "We have no information on what the reason was for this

resignation," he told reporters. "Cooperation with FIFA is going on and, most importantly, Russia is continuing preparations for the 2018 World Cup."

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko said in televised comments: "There is no threat at all [to Russia hosting the finals]."

Winning the right to host the finals was a triumph for Russia and the event offers Putin a chance to polish his image at home and abroad.

Being stripped of the right to host the tournament, while unlikely, would underline the international isolation of Russia, which has had sanctions imposed on it by the European Union and the United States over its role in the Ukraine crisis.

There is also a risk of a boycott by other nations. After Blatter's re-election on Friday, the head of the English Football Association said his organization would support any boycott led by UEFA, the sport's European federation.

But Alexander Zhukov, head of Russia's Olympic Committee, said he did not expect a boycott, explaining that "the sporting community will never do it and won't allow the world of sport to be split."

First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov also dismissed any concern over Russia hosting the event, saying there were no critical delays in the preparations, which include building new stadiums or overhauling others in the 11 host cities.

"We understand that all deadlines will be respected and will not affect the implementation of Russia's obligations to FIFA," Shuvalov was quoted as saying by the RIA news agency.

Putin defended Blatter when he was re-elected last week, and depicted the arrest of several FIFA officials two days before the vote as meddling by the United States, but he offered no comment on Blatter's about-face.

Blatter's departure will deprive Moscow of a man it sees an important ally if pressure mounts to strip Russia of the right to host the tournament.

Mutko urged FIFA not to hurry to name a new president and Russia's Local Organizing Committee for 2018 made clear it expected Blatter to stay in office until a new FIFA election is held between December 2015 and March next year.

"We appreciate the enormous contribution that President Blatter has made to the development of football as head of FIFA at all levels — from grassroots development work to the pinnacle which is the FIFA World Cup," it said in a statement.

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