

# Prince William spearheads UK campaign against FIFA, targeting Russia

Robert Stevens  
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The heir to the British throne, Prince William, made an extraordinary intervention Saturday, aimed at putting further pressure on FIFA's President Sepp Blatter. This follows last week's arrests and 164-page FBI indictment, on charges of corruption, of seven officials from world soccer's ruling body.

On Saturday, in a speech before the FA Cup final—the showpiece event of the UK's soccer calendar—the prince said, “There seems to be a huge disconnect between the sense of fair play that guides those playing and supporting the game, and the allegations of corruption that have long lingered around the management of the sport internationally.”

The speech was an unprecedented intervention for a senior member of the Royal Family, as he openly sided with those leading the investigation into FIFA. The prince said, “Those backing FIFA, such as sponsors and the regional confederations, must do their bit to press these reforms—we are doing football and its fans no favours if we do not.”

Prince William supported the decision by David Gill, vice-chairman of the English Football Association (FA), who refused to attend the first meeting of FIFA's executive committee following Friday's re-election of Blatter. The arrests of the FIFA officials were part of an overt attempt to prevent the election of Blatter.

Speaking of the role of the FA, William said, “Over the next few years, if we want credibly to influence the debate on reform in FIFA, we must continue to strive for excellence in our own organisation. It's not easy to do so, but it is worth it—and, to that end, I commend the process you are on, and I'll be watching it closely.”

Referring to previous allegations of corruption that hit the International Olympic Committee, William said, “The events in Zurich this week represent FIFA's Salt Lake City moment, when the International Olympic

Committee went through a similar period of serious allegations. FIFA, like the IOC, must now show that it can represent the interests of fair play and put the sport first.”

As president of the FA, William was part of a team, along with Prime Minister David Cameron, who helped to spearhead England's bid to host the 2018 World Cup. The bid was lost to Russia, and William said he had been “bitterly disappointed” by FIFA's decision.

As the FIFA arrests were being carried out in a dawn raid, the Swiss authorities announced an investigation into corruption at FIFA in which the decision to award Russia the 2018 and Qatar the 2022 World Cup will be scrutinised.

Blatter said the move against the FIFA officials was “an attempt to interfere with the congress.” He added, “No one is going to tell me that it was a simple coincidence, this American attack two days before the elections of FIFA. It doesn't smell right. This has touched me and FIFA. There are signs that cannot be ignored. The Americans were the candidates for the World Cup of 2022 and they lost. The English were the candidates for 2018 and they lost, so it was really the English media and the American movement.”

William was backed by Greg Dyke, the chairman of the FA, who he sat next to him during the FA Cup final. Following the arrests of the FIFA officials, Dyke said that England would consider boycotting the 2018 World Cup. He told the BBC's Andrew Marr on Sunday, “I was talking to him [Prince William] about it at the FA Cup final on Saturday. He is obviously upset by what's happened and he feels quite strongly about it.”

Dyke said he did not think Blatter would last out his four-year term, and that last week's events were “the beginning of the end.” He called on European

football's ruling body, UEFA, to support a boycott and said it "would be ridiculous" for the English FA "to try to do it on your own because all we'd do is pull out of the World Cup and everyone would say 'well done' and they'd forget all about us. We've got to do it alongside other large footballing nations."

The English Premier League is the most lucrative soccer competition on the planet, with its broadcasting rights sold in 212 countries. In February, the Premier League signed a three-year contract worth £5.1 billion with the Rupert Murdoch-owned Sky Sports. Each game broadcast will be worth £11 million. Once international rights are factored in, the contract is likely to top £8.5 billion over three years.

Setting out a possible battle strategy, Dyke said, "Only the smaller countries would have voted for [Blatter] because they rely totally on FIFA for their income... We, at the FA, we don't need FIFA. We don't need them at all. We can say what we like. And I understand he is now saying 'I forgive, but don't forget.' Well, let me tell him back, we neither forgive nor forget either."

William's call for sponsors to act to "press" for "reforms" is significant in the campaign against Blatter, as sponsors are the lifeblood of FIFA. In the four years up to 2014, FIFA's six top-tier "Global Partners"—Adidas, Gazprom, Hyundai-Kia, McDonald's, Budweiser, Coca-Cola and Visa—paid a total of \$177 million annually, or around \$30 million a year each.

On the same day the arrests were carried out, Visa issued a statement saying FIFA should "make changes now," and should it "fail to do so, we have informed them that we will reassess our sponsorship."

At this stage, only the Russian gas conglomerate Gazprom has said the move against the FIFA leadership will not influence its agreement.

The campaign to destabilise FIFA targets Blatter because he is most closely connected to the decision to grant Russia and Qatar hosting rights to the most lucrative sporting event on the planet. It is part of the geo-political manoeuvres of the United States and its imperialist allies against Moscow in particular.

Prime Minister David Cameron has already called for Blatter to stand down as FIFA leader. Speaking on Sunday to the BBC, Andy Burnham, the lead candidate to be the next leader of the Labour Party,

made an explicit connection between the importance of changing FIFA's leadership and the need to oppose Russia.

He said, "I've long had my doubts about Russia holding the next World Cup. I voiced those doubts when the situation developed in Ukraine. I said I couldn't see how it was possible that the whole world could just go to Russia as if nothing had happened."

He added, "[W]ith all these new allegations swirling around FIFA ... there is a pretty overwhelming case for England taking a stand and saying we should not participate in the next World Cup..."

The FA "should be a bit stronger and should say ... it's not acceptable ... when you look at both of these situations, the corruption within FIFA and the situation between Russia and Ukraine. We have had a country here whose FA's sovereignty has been breached. How can the football world just say that doesn't matter?"

Burnham stressed, "If enough people take that stand and follow our lead, then we will see new arrangements for the 2018 World Cup which I believe is what we need."

Asked about Qatar being allowed to host the 2022 tournament, he said, "Qatar too—but that's an issue that's further down the line."



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