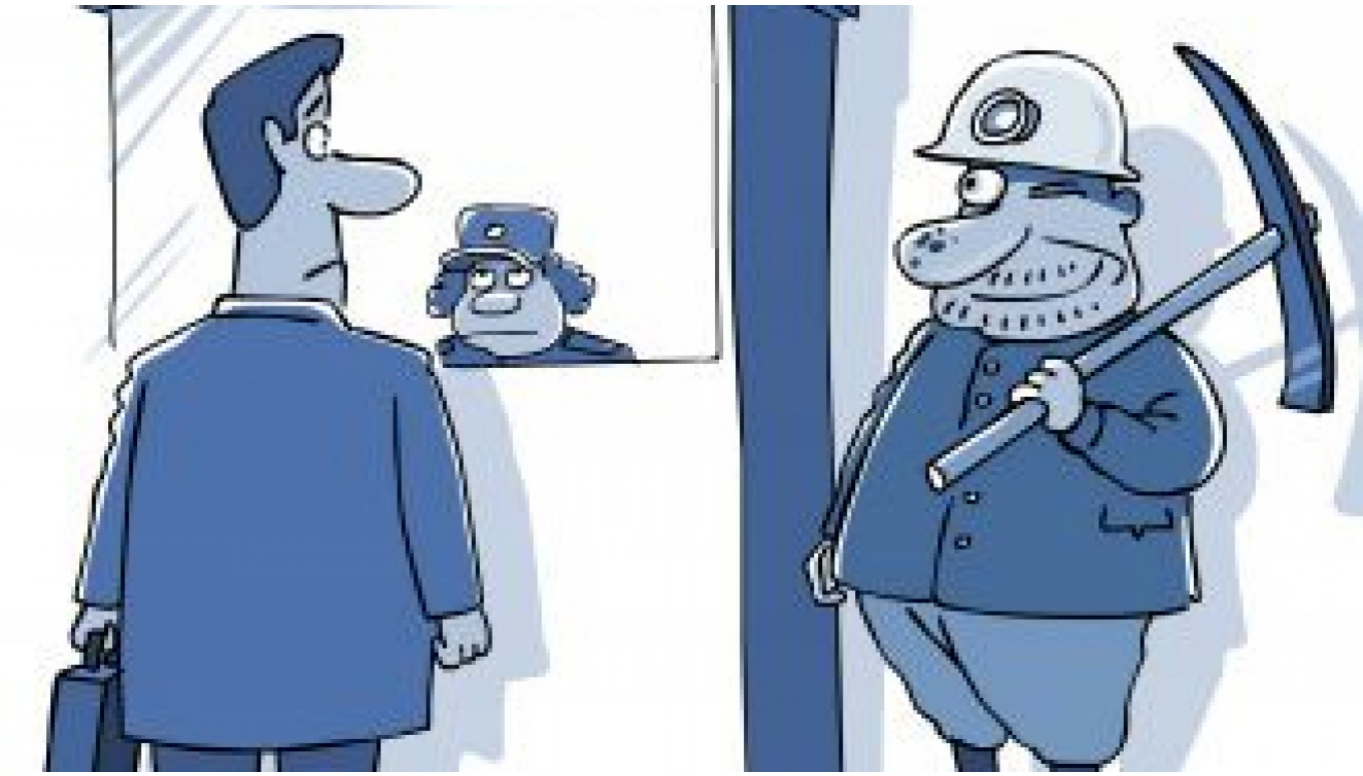
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Wanted: Gold Mining

By Kevin O'Flynn

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The official in the airport took the passport and boarding card, checked it with a well-honed perfunctoriness and handed it back, clearing the passenger to move on to customs control. And then she handed over a business card.

Not hers, but Oleg Mikhailovich's.

The card said, "Wish to buy or take part in sale of my stable business of gold mining by open way in Russia?" before adding, "You are waited by a good commission."

My friend, whose portfolio of precious metals is full to capacity at the moment, passed on the card's details.

Oleg, of the business card, with no surname, was a jolly gold mine owner and happy to get a call. He does, after all, want to sell quick.

He has a number of gold mines in various rivers in Buryatia, which go down a small way, one to two meters deep, he said, to extract gold.

He is selling them because of his health. "As the saying goes, you only have your health once."

He has some kind of severe diabetes and needs to go around the world for treatment. The price is about $20 million, but he sounded as if he was willing to haggle. He'll give me a commission if I bring in a buyer.

You can bring them to Buryatia, he said, and translate for them: "You can make big money."

The mines — although that may not be the correct term for what sounds like a few shallow holes — currently bring in 150 to 180 kilograms, enough for about 45 wedding gifts in Chechnya, but if you bring in foreign technology — ours is "old and weak" — then Oleg insisted you can get it up to 500 to 600 kilograms.

Would these mines by any chance be strategic properties that require some kind of government approval before being sold to a foreign entity, I enquired, saying the word "strategic" a few times in different pronunciations until he understood me.

That will be no problem, he insisted.

The airport official was handing out the card to other foreigners too, the recipient of the card said.

Oh yes, we have a deal, he said. With the airport or the official, he didn't say. They are given out to those going to China, Japan, the United States. And London, as my friend found out.

It is a clever marketing strategy. Perhaps she has different business deals on offer on other days and other routes. A seat in the State Duma for sale on internal flights, lawyers specializing in the International Criminal Court for Central Asian flights.

Right now, I think there is a flock of investors heading to Buryatia. I am available to translate straight after the holidays. Payment in gold accepted.

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