

Olympic Organizers Faked Mascot Entry

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Using absurdity to protest the authorities is a long-standing Russian tradition, and nowhere did it blossom so splendidly as during a contest for the Sochi Olympics mascot, led for months by a psychedelic blue toad.

Only now it turns out that the toad was a hoax.

Zoich, a toad with five irises in two eyes and a ski stick in its mouth, was created at the request of Sochi organizers to boost publicity for the contest, the head of the 2014 Sochi organizing committee, Dmitry Chernyshenko, said in an interview published this week.

The toad's creator — designer and popular blogger Yegor Zhgun — confirmed the report, saying he was commissioned to draw Zoich, [Kommersant reported](#) Thursday. "I lied," he said of his earlier statements that the toad was an independent submission.

The goal was "to draw attention of the vividly growing audience of Internet users," Chernyshenko said, adding that no one had expected the toad to become a runaway success.

Zoich led the online voting for three months, only to be culled by the jury ahead of the finals in February. A one-minute [video](#) by Zhgun featuring the frog scored more than 34,000 views on YouTube.

Sochi organizers eventually picked three conventional-looking mascots — Polar Bear, Bunny and Leopard, with Leopard endorsed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. President Dmitry Medvedev criticized the organizers at the time for ignoring the online vote, although he did not mention the toad.

Critics have long accused the Kremlin of creating the perception of competition where no competition exists, most notably in politics with the founding of loyal parties like A Just Russia, Rodina and Right Cause to attract protest votes.

But with Zoich, the hoax might turn into a commercial success. Sochi organizers have copyrighted the toad along with the winners, RBC Daily [reported](#) this week.

Chernyshenko, who earlier criticized Zoich, saying, "Russia cannot be identified with a shaggy hypnotoad," said organizers were considering establishing a company to sell Zoich merchandise.

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