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Bigfoot Forum Derided as United Russia Ploy

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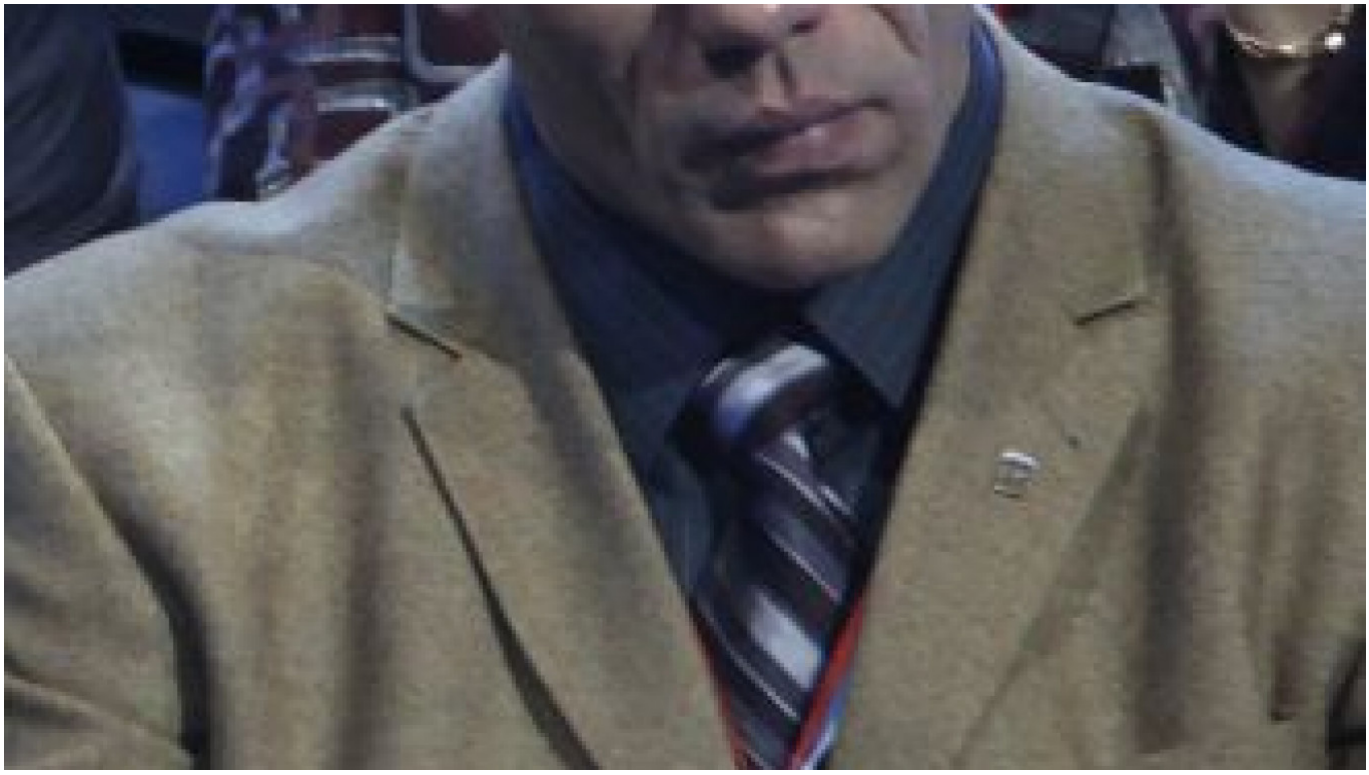

Boxing great Nikolai Valuyev **Igor Tabakov**

A scientific conference featuring a boxing legend and U.S. Bigfoot believers has claimed that it found "95 percent evidence" for the existence of a Yeti-like hominoid in southern Siberia, but an opposition politician ridiculed the findings on Monday as pure pre-election publicity for United Russia.

The conference, held at the initiative of local governor and United Russia strongman Aman Tuleyev, wound up over the weekend in the Kemerovo region town of Tashtagol and included a short expedition into a mountain cave, where participants said they discovered signs of the creature's markings and sampled some hair.

"Participants concluded that the discovered objects confirm 95 percent that a snowman abides in the Kemorovo region," the local administration said in a statement on its web site.

The group of international experts was graced by former heavyweight boxer Nikolai Valuyev, who told the conference that he was convinced personally by what he had seen in the cave. "I have no doubts: The Yeti really has settled in the Kuzbass," he said in remarks carried by Itar-Tass. Kuzbass is the more commonly used name for the Siberian coal-mining region.

Valuyev, whose 2.13-meter height gave rise to his boxing nickname "Beast From the East," also showed reporters in the cave that his shoe size was no match for the Yeti's, who he claimed left a footprint there. "I have size 52 — and the Yeti has maybe 60," he said, Komsomolskaya Pravda reported. The paper even posted a video showing Valuyev raising a glass of vodka to the snowman in the cave.

Valuyev recently entered politics and is standing in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections in Kemerovo for United Russia, which made him No. 6 on the regional electoral list.

But Nina Ostanina, a Communist Duma deputy from Kemerovo, said the whole story smacked of an elaborate publicity campaign by United Russia.

"I believe the administration is making a point in showing that Valuyev is not just meeting with voters but is also the snowman," she said.

Dubbed "Kuzbass-Yeti," the mysterious creature has been made a regional trademark with a special web site and even its own Twitter account.

The conference also was attended by Michigan farmer Robin Lynne, who claims that she regularly feeds a Bigfoot outside her house, and California resident Ron Morhead, who presented audio recordings of noises that he said were made by the giant ape-like creature, also known as Sasquatch in the United States.

But Arkady Tishkov, deputy head of the Academy of Sciences' Geography Institute and an expert on cryptozoology, the study of yet-undiscovered animals, said the conference's findings were unimpressive as long as DNA tests failed to prove that any recovered hair or tissue did not belong to bears or other known animals.

"All this might attract so far is tourism," he said by telephone.

Research on the Snezhny Chelovyek, or snowman, was backed by the Soviet government in 1958 during the post-Stalin thaw, but official support ended soon afterward.

Yet some 1,000 sightings of Bigfoot have been claimed in the former Soviet Union. They range from the Caucasus to Siberia and more recently also in the Kirov region northeast of Moscow, where a Yeti was said to be discovered in the Vyatsky forest.

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