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Ministry Says Bison Killed to 'Discredit Park Management'

By Roland Oliphant

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The European bison killed by an apparent overdose of amphetamines and caffeine may have been the victim of a hit to discredit the nature reserve's management, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said Thursday.

Shponti, a 16-year-old breeding bull, was found dead in a pen at the Prioksko-Terrasny nature reserve on Jan. 6.

"The motive was to create an additional way to discredit the current leadership of the nature reserve," Vsevolod Stepanitsky, deputy director of the Department for State Policy and Regulation in Conservation said in an e-mail.

An independent commission appointed to investigate the death had concluded that there were signs of "intentional poisoning," but it refrained from speculating on a motive.

The Prioksko-Terrasny nature reserve, in the south of the Moscow region, was plunged into scandal following the death, which several current and former employees have blamed on the alleged corruption and incompetence of the current director, Andrei Ivonin.

But the ministry appears to be backing Ivonin, a former paratrooper appointed in 2010.

"The problematic situation at the Prioksko-Terrasny nature reserve is largely the legacy of many years of poor management implemented not by Ivonin but by his predecessors," Stepanitsky said.

"Ivonin, too, has made some mistakes as director, but he has also significantly infringed on the interests of a group of current and former employees that differed greatly from the interests of the nature reserve. These people have launched a personal vendetta against Ivonin and are pursuing it with all means available."

Stepanitsky also revealed further details of the autopsy report. He said veterinarians had identified the cause of death as heart and lung failure. The autopsy states that red blood cells ruptured and leaked hemoglobin into plasma and that blood saturated lung tissue, presumably following the ingestion of toxins.

Independent forensic tests revealed abnormal levels of caffeine and a branded amphetamine called Gepefrine in Shponti's kidneys.

Police are gathering evidence, but Stepanitsky said there was "a large degree of doubt" about whether the investigation would identify the culprits.

If caught, suspects could be charged with intentional destruction of property and cruelty to animals, which carry maximum sentences of five and two years in prison, respectively.

Stepanitsky declined to comment on whether any suspects had been identified, but he said he did not expect arrests in the near future.

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