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Boxing Champion Duma Deputy Throws Weight Behind Russians in Crimea

By The Moscow Times

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Nikolai Valuyev standing amongst a crowd in Sevastopol. **Konstantin Rykov**

A clutch of high-profile Russian parliamentarians arrived in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol on Thursday as unrest in the region spread.

Boxing champion Nikolai Valuyev, former figure skater Irina Rodnina, and the first woman in space Valentina Tereshkova were photographed in the central square of Sevastopol, which has been the focal point of pro-Russia protests in the city since it was the site of a Sunday rally attended by up to 20,000 people.

"I arrived in Sevastopol to support residents of Crimea. Friends, Russia is with you!" Valuyev wrote on Twitter.

Ethnic Russians make up the majority of the population of Crimea, which has been alarmed by belligerent nationalist rhetoric coming out of Kiev following the ouster of President Viktor

Yanukovych over the weekend.

Speakers at pro-Russia rallies across Crimea in recent days have condemned the incoming regime in Kiev as fascist and called for Russian intervention. Armed men seized the regional parliament in Simferopol overnight and remain in control of the building, which is currently cordoned off by police.

Valuyev also tweeted that there was an ongoing "information war" about events in Ukraine, and said he was there to find out what was happening on the ground.

Another Russian parliament member, Communist deputy Anatoly Lokot, also appeared to be in Sevastopol on Thursday. Lokot tweeted a photograph of himself with the city's pro-Russia leader, Alexei Chaly, whose supporters are striving to get recognized as the city's mayor, despite his Russian citizenship.

The prominent deputies from Russia's parliament are the latest in a string of senior Russian officials to visit the troubled region.

Sergei Mironov, leader of opposition party A Just Russia, said on his personal website that he held talks with Russia's consul in Crimea and visited the Black Sea fleet base in Sevastopol on Thursday.

Leonid Slutsky, who heads the Russian parliament's committee for relations with former Soviet States, arrived in Crimea on Monday evening for a 24-hour visit.

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