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Putin's Favorite Named Olympic Mascot

By Alexander Bratersky

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The winning mascots to be used for the Sochi Winter Olympics, clockwise from top left, Ray of Light and Snowflake, Leopard, Bunny and Polar Bear.

A snowboarding leopard backed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has been selected as one of three official mascots for the 2014 Sochi Olympics, trouncing a popular blue frog that made organizers shudder and a cartoon saw favored by bloggers as a symbol of Olympic corruption.

Leopard was chosen together with Polar Bear and a white Bunny on Saturday at the conclusion of a much-touted telephone and online vote of more than 1 million people, organizers said. The three swept more than 60 percent of the total vote, which started Feb. 7.

Two other contestants, Ray of Light and Snowflake, were named symbols of the Sochi Paralympics.

Criticism about the winners erupted almost immediately, with the creator of the mascot for the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics complaining that his work had been stolen and Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky mocking all the mascots.

Speculation also circulated that the contest had been rigged.

The most popular mascot, with 28 percent of the vote, was Leopard, which Putin called a "mighty, fast and beautiful" animal in a meeting with students in Sochi just hours ahead of the announcement on Saturday, Interfax reported.

The bear mascot was the favorite of President Dmitry Medvedev, Ekho Moskvy radio reported, citing Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov. The last name "Medvedev" stems from the word "bear."

With more than 1 million callers, the televised poll was the largest since the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow, organizers said.

Voters got to choose from 11 finalists selected by a professional jury headed by Channel One television's chief, Konstantin Ernst.

The finalists were pared down from the first round of 24,000-plus submissions that was open to everyone.

Among the more notable entrants that gained popularity in the blogosphere was "Pila," or "Saw," which poked fun at the rampant corruption that critics expect to plague Olympic construction. In Russian, stealing state money is described literally as "sawing the budget."

Another contender was "Stakasha," whose name derives from the word for "glass" and satirizes stereotypical Russian alcoholism.

Both Pila and Stakasha fell out of the race early on, but another unexpected contestant lingered much longer — "Zoich," a psychedelic blue frog with a ski stick in its mouth that led online voting for weeks.

Eventually, the professional jury simply refused to include Zoich, whom designer Yegor Zhgun based on the character "Hypnotoad" from the U.S. cartoon series "Futurama," on the list of finalists. The decision was in line with selection rules but de-facto voided the purpose of online voting.

"Zoich was absolutely out of consideration," a source within the Russian Olympic Committee told The Moscow Times on Sunday. "It was very depressing."

"The mascot should symbolize Russia, but imagine the impression people around the world would have when they looked at this blue toad?" said the source, who asked not to be identified because she was not authorized to speak to the media.

Another finalist, Ded Moroz, Russia's answer to Santa Claus, was removed before the vote's closing because Russia would have lost the copyright for it to the International Olympic Committee had it won.

The decision to have several mascots is not unheard of; the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics had five patrons.

Organizers denied any link between Putin's endorsement and the outcome of the public vote,

but observers were not so sure.

Putin's choice "influenced the public's choice, willingly or not," opposition politician Georgy Bovt said by telephone.

"If he said the symbol would be Leopard, it would be Leopard," said Kiril Andreyev, a member of the boy band Ivanushki International.

He added that Putin's selection had "good taste," but said he personally had rooted for a robin mascot that failed to score in the finals.

Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin told Ekho Moskvy that the vote was a test of public loyalty, and he hinted that the outcome might have been rigged.

Medvedev's favorite took some flak from a different side, with Viktor Chizhikov, creator of the 1980 mascot, a brown bear, calling Polar Bear a ripoff.

"Everything about this bear is swiped from my artwork — the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the smile — though everything's distorted," Chizhikov said on Ekho Mosvky.

He added sourly that all the Sochi submissions were "unprofessional."

Zhirinovsky, who serves as a Duma deputy speaker, complained that the mascots would not bring any luck to the games, Interfax reported. "The bear is the dumbest animal," he said, "the leopard is bloodthirsty, and the hare a coward who always runs away."

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