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# Siberian Zoo Scraps Mascot Vote After Orangutan Becomes Opposition Hero

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Batu was unable to comment on his rise to fame. **zoonovosib.ru**

A vote to choose a Siberian zoo's new mascot turned into a political tug-of-war after members of Russia's opposition championed one candidate in particular: an orangutan named Batu.

Novosibirsk Zoo in Russia's third-largest city announced the public vote to choose its mascot for its status as the country's "New Year Capital" for 2022.

But what began as an innocuous vote to select the city's mammalian mascot quickly turned political when exiled city deputy Sergei Boyko, the former Novosibirsk coordinator for jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, chose Batu as the candidate most suited to the job.

"Against the backdrop of everything going on in Novosibirsk, I think that the orangutan is absolutely the best option. Therefore, I urge you to support the orangutan," he said in a YouTube broadcast late last month.

Batu — a surprise addition to the ballot, as many voters considered him an unfitting face for the Siberian capital — quickly started to receive a wave of online support as a number of journalists, bloggers and deputies rallied their online followings behind him. Popular blogger Ilya Varlamov even dubbed the orange ape "the candidate of the people."

Once the authorities noticed that Batu represented the political opposition, the mayor's office allegedly ordered to put a stop to his success at the polls, according to the local Tayga.info news website.

Shilka the polar bear cub soon started to enjoy a lead over Batu. And then Sayan, the white snow leopard, netted 25,000 votes in a single day, sailing into the lead.

However, the votes for the snow leopard were in reality fraudulent, according to The Insider news website. The leopard received 25,000 votes in four hours despite the voting website only receiving 1,851 unique visitors, The Insider reported.

"The orangutan clearly won. Apparently, the authorities could not come to terms with this victory. Why — well, one can only speculate," said local artist Artyom Loskutov, whose work has documented political demonstrations in Russia since 2004.

In the end, the zoo decided to scrap the vote altogether a day before it was set to close, saying it would choose the mascot itself at a later date.

"Unfortunately, today we see that our animals have become participants in a farce organized by the people," the zoo wrote on its website.

"Novosibirsk Zoo is not interested in such attention to our animals, and we do not like offensive memes, therefore we ask that the survey be stopped and its results not taken into account," its statement said.

The vote's cancellation angered Batu's supporters, who has become a symbol of Novosibirsk and its political opposition in the last three weeks.

"I always knew the city was run by a zoo, but at least they were ashamed of it before," Boyko tweeted on Sunday.

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