The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Thumbing Noses at WTO, Pirates Try to Form a Party

By Alexandra Odynova

September 26, 2010



Members of the Pirate Party voting at their first convention this month. **Mikhail Fedin**

These "pirates" may be sailing against the tide, but they are riding a wave of popular opinion.

A group of activists in their 20s who advocate modernizing the economy by "copying everything" are trying to register as a political party just as Russia tightens its anti-piracy policies in a bid for membership in the World Trade Organization.

The Pirate Party of Russia, which claims 15,000 registered online supporters, decided this month to apply for official party registration with the Justice Ministry. The so-called pirates will need to gather at least 45,000 signatures by March 12 to meet the government's criteria ☒ though that is little guarantee of state recognition.

But many ordinary Russians seem to agree with the party's platform that Internet users should be paying for speed and quality of information, not just information itself, when they

go online.

In fact, the Pirate Party, whose web site bears the slogan "Copy Everything!" next to a black flag, is a revival of an earlier Russian pirate group.

“We realize that Russia's membership in the WTO is unavoidable, but we will speak up against reaching it by all means,” Pavel Rassudov, chairman of the Pirate Party of Russia, told The Moscow Times.

Going against everything the Pirate Party stands for, the State Duma on Friday voted unanimously in a third and final reading to pass anti-piracy amendments that will bring Russian law in line with the TRIPS agreement, required for membership in the WTO. The amendments say authors and other copyright holders can seek reimbursement for the use of intellectual property in private settings like the home.

The Pirate Party opposes the changes because they will make criminals out of an estimated 60 million Russians.

The Pirate Party's deputy chairman, Stanislav Shakirov, said the group does not oppose paid software and does not plan to sell pirated DVDs. Instead, it is focused on broader issues, said Shakirov, a 23-year-old programmer.

The Russians are part of an international movement led by Sweden's Pirate Party that is pushing for changes of patent and copyright systems to allow free access to information and open government. Sweden's Pirate Party won two seats in the European Parliament after 2009 elections.

On the Russian pirates' web site, they prominently say copyright laws and other laws "should not be grounds for punishing those who take part in the noncommercial exchange of information, restricting an author's right to choose which publisher to work with, or censorship."

The free-information ideology isn't mirrored by Russian law, Rassudov said. In one example, widely recognized Creative Commons copyright licenses can't be used under current Russian law.

“Authors can't give up their work for free use under the current legislation in the country,” said Rassudov, a 27-year-old consultant who lectures businesses and politicians on harnessing the Internet.

Denis Voyevodin, a partner on intellectual property issues at the Salans law firm, confirmed that free licenses just don't exist in Russian legislation. ⊠"An author can give away his work, but the authorship will still belong to him," Voyevodin said. ⊠"In Russia, intellectual property is protected by law, but there is little control," he added. "Russia is a big country where there is little respect toward one's copyrights."

The pirates said their platform echoes the modernization campaign spearheaded by President Dmitry Medvedev. The president has named five industries for revamp, including telecommunications and information technology. Part of his plan is to develop an innovation center in the Moscow region town of Skolkovo.

The pirates said Medvedev's initiatives will not succeed without changes to Internet and copyright laws. “Skolkovo won't be able to write its own programs until free licenses appear,” Rassudov said.

Unsurprisingly, the head of the Russian Anti-Piracy Organization strongly opposes the creation of a pirate political party.

“Of course, we will make a stand against such a party,” Viktor Zemchenkov said by telephone. “We don't have the money to make movies because pirates are using our marketing and doing nothing."

He may not need to worry about the pirates' political future. Authorities routinely deny registration to parties and candidates outside United Russia, the country's dominant party, and the pirates' prospects for becoming a full-fledged party appear dim because of the political climate, said Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank.

Just this month, the Justice Ministry denied registration of the Rot Front party, led by Left Front opposition campaigner Sergei Udaltsov, citing technical mistakes in the group's application.

“Maybe later, when the power changes,” Pribylovsky said of the Pirate Party's chances.

“But any group advocating for freedoms in Russia deserves support,” he said.

In any case, the pirates seem uninterested in making any political alliances, and their number of active participants is tiny. Though its online supporters number about 15,000, the group only attracted about two dozen people to the Moscow region town of Malakhovka on Sept. 12 and 13 for its first convention, including Gregory Engels, co-chairman of the Pirate Party International.

The group is “against everyone, both the opposition and the ruling authorities," Rassudov said.

The group is targeting Internet users, especially the young, as potential voters. Supporters are largely professionals and active Internet users, aged 20 to 30, including small entrepreneurs and artists, Shakirov and Rassudov said. The two are searching for young, brilliant activists to build their cause.

Piracy of DVDs, software and other copyrighted goods is rampant. A new study by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow estimates that $30 billion in counterfeit goods a year are sold in Russian stores, Kommersant reported Friday. The study said counterfeit goods included medicine, cosmetics, alcohol and clothing, and their sale is growing after declining in recent years, the newspaper said, without giving figures.Sixty-seven percent of the software installed on personal computers in 2009 was unlicensed, according to a May report by International Data Corp. and the Business Software Alliance. Russia was ranked as having the third-highest commercial value of pirated software last year, at $2.6 billion, after the United States' $8.4 billion and China's $7.6 billion.

Russia's loose attitudes toward illegal uses of intellectual property have been a huge stumbling block in its 17-year-old bid to join the WTO.

As recently as June, U.S. officials reiterated that a major reason Russia's WTO accession was being held up was its failure to carry out promises from a 2006 anti-piracy agreement with the United States.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/26/thumbing-noses-at-wto-pirates-try-to-form-a-party-a1723