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Cyrillic Domain Names Sell Fast

By Scott Rose

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The body overseeing the .рф Internet domain said 184,352 addresses were snapped up Thursday as registration was opened to the general public, though some of the sexiest real estate was already long gone.

More than 36,000 addresses were registered in the first hour alone, the Coordination Center for the National Internet Domain said on its web site. The center's director, Andrei Kolesnikov, had predicted that the 100,000 mark would only be broken by the end of the year.

State bodies and trademark holders were given priority access to the Cyrillic addresses, with registration beginning Nov. 25, 2009. About 18,000 addresses were registered before the process was opened to the public, bringing the total to more than 200,0000 by 6 p.m., the center said.

The first 10 addresses registered Thursday were for nondescript, common nouns: работа.рф (work); видео.рф (video); автозапчасти.рф (auto parts); магазин.рф (store); бизнес.рф (business); игры.рф (games); телефон.рф (telephone); золото.рф (gold); квартира.рф

(apartment); сайт.рф (site).

None of the sites was online as of Thursday evening.

The rush to register came less than a month after a U.S. bankruptcy court auctioned off the site Sex.com for $13 million. The property has changed hands several times since U.S. businessman Gary Kremen first registered it in 1994.

Web entrepreneurs hoping to repeat his success were out of luck, however. The Cyrillic equivalent — Секс.рф — has been up and running for months.

Moscow-based design studio Cetis, which owns the trademark for "sex" in Russian, registered the site shortly after it became available on Nov. 25, 2009, founder Yevgeny Yakushev said in e-mailed comments.

He said Секс.рф was the first site created specially for the Cyrillic domain. A closed version of the site was started May 25, when invitations were sent to 10,000 users. The site will open to the public later this month, he said.

"The project's main goal is to provide a wide audience with quality information about all forms of sexual education, family planning and raising children," he said.

"We've had some requests" about selling, Yakushev said. "We don't intend to sell the site or domain — we're looking to develop Секс.рф. But we're open to meeting potential investors who are interested in this social education project."

Cetis was founded in 1998 and was the first company to publicly call for the introduction of Cyrillic web address, he said. Now, the studio is helping design other Cyrillic sites that "meet the public's interests."

The Coordination Center — whose site was designed by Cetis — has created a list of words, including vulgarities, that cannot be used, Kolesnikov said.

"The stop list is for internal use, and no one is planning to publish it anywhere," Kolesnikov said Wednesday. "We made the list so that the first word registered after we started wouldn't be something like х-тра-ля-ля.рф," he added, using a euphuism for the male sex organ.

President Dmitry Medvedev, an avid Internet user, had lobbied global Internet oversight body ICAAN to introduce the Cyrillic names. In September 2008, he told an Internet conference that it would have "symbolic significance" for the Russian language.

The .ru domain has more than 3 million registered addresses, according to a running count on the center's web site.

But the launch of Cyrillic domains spurred fears that a new wave of cybersquatters would seek to cash in on established businesses' names.

In the country's first high-profile cybersquatting dispute, U.S. camera maker Eastman Kodak won the rights to Kodak.ru in 1999 after a costly two-year legal battle. The court awarded them 2,600 rubles, or about $100 at the time, in damages.

Earlier this year, the Russian edition of Forbes magazine won a similar case against a company that had registered Forbes.ru. The Moscow Arbitration Court awarded $300,000 in damages, the largest compensation payout ruling to date.

The magazine did not receive the money and eventually reached a settlement under which it was given the domain, Forbes.ru editor Grigory Punanov said Thursday.

"We registered the Cyrillic domain this time around, mostly as a defensive measure against squatters," Punanov said. "We're not expecting a lot of traffic from the Cyrillic address, but it cost next to nothing to register."

Only Russian citizens and businesses registered in the country were able to buy domains, Kolesnikov said Wednesday, according to comments posted on the center's web site. Registration will cost about the same as for .ru addresses — about 500 rubles to 600 rubles ($16 to $20).

The most popular letters in the addresses registered in the first hour were ы and я — Cyrillic characters with no equivalent in the Roman script, the center said on its web site.

Kolesnikov said the domains would allow Russian-speaking Internet users to feel at home on the web.

"The letter ё is what we were deprived of all these years using the English-language Internet," he said. The character, pronounced "yo," is often printed as a standard "e" in Cyrillic texts.

"Now we have it. All patriots should register their domain names with the letter ё," Kolesnikov said.

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