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Apple Launches iPad 2 Early

By Herbert Mosmuller

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President Dmitry Medvedev at home enjoying his iPad earlier this year.

Official sales of Apple's iPad 2 will kick off Friday, retailers said Wednesday, in an apparently hurried response to unauthorized sales of the device in recent weeks.

The iPad 2 will go on sale at authorized dealers including re:Store, Bely Veter Tsifrovoi, M.Video, Z-Store, Tekhnosila and Eldorado from 7 p.m. Friday evening.

The short notice announcement ends months of impatient speculation among Apple fans over the iPad 2's launch in Russia.

But it appears that Apple was forced to bring the date forward after telecom chain Svyaznoi started unauthorized sales May 12.

The early sales led to allegations published in online newspaper Gazeta.ru on Tuesday that Svyaznoi's iPads may have been purchased though "gray" channels.

Svyaznoi spokeswoman Yelena Nogotkova rejected the allegations. "We bought the shipments

from Russian distributors, and Apple authorized these shipments for sales on the Russian market," she told The Moscow Times. "All our iPads were purchased in compliance with Russian law and customs procedures."

Apple did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

Tigran Hovhannisyan, a senior consultant at UralSib Capital, said Svyaznoi's purchases could be legal if the chain's distributors had bought the iPads in Europe from a non-Apple partner.

Impatient Apple fans had to pay between 33,990 rubles and 37,990 rubles ($1,195 and $1,335) for their iPads at Svyaznoi, well over the prices that Apple-appointed outlets offer.

At re:Store, prices will run from 18,990 rubles to 30,990 rubles ($668 to $1,089). Nogotkova said Svyaznoi will review its prices after the official introduction of the iPad.

Official iPad 2 prices in Russia will be 30 percent to 40 percent higher than in the United States, where the tablet goes for $499 to $829. The disparity is largely down to high import duties, taxes and bureaucratic hurdles, said Alexander Kazbegi of Renaissance Capital.

Sales in Russia start 2 1/2 months after the U.S. premiere March 11 and two months after the European debut March 25.

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