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Mobile Internet Use Climbing

By Rachel Nielsen

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More and more Russians are using a smartphone or unwired laptop to connect to the Internet, and competition for those customers is heating up between the biggest wireless companies, recent research shows.

The "Big Troika" companies, or the wireless-services providers with the three largest pools of customers, are in a tight race for users of their mobile Internet services, figures compiled by ACM-Consulting suggest. The figures put MTS at the top of the pack, with 20 million users of its mobile Internet services at the end of 2011.

But MegaFon is close behind at 19 million users, while VimpelCom, the operator of the Beeline mobile brand, has 17 million.

ACM's definition of mobile Internet includes Internet access via both smartphones and via flash-drive modems that plug into laptops.

ACM's figures for the Big Troika put the total number of mobile web subscribers in the

country at roughly 60 million. Mobile Internet services let people view and interact with many, if not all, sites on the Web from a portable device.

Mobile Internet traffic in Russia is rising sharply, said Oksana Pankratova, a partner at ACM, which is a media and telecoms research firm in Moscow. That traffic more than doubled last year, increasing 130 percent, Pankratova said in an e-mail interview.

She also said the volume of mobile Internet traffic per customer — which indicates the number of websites visited and the amount of songs, videos and other files downloaded — has been increasing.

Meanwhile, smartphones now make up more than 25 percent of cell phone sales here, compared with 19 percent of sales at the end of December, Pankratova said.

MTS and MegaFon didn't immediately return requests for comment. VimpelCom said by e-mail that it doesn't disclose its mobile Internet user figures.

The merger of national telecoms giants Rostelecom and Svyazinvest came a step closer to realization on Tuesday, when President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree setting a 12-month deadline for joining the two companies.

The deadline goes into effect immediately, according to the measure, which was published on the Kremlin's website. The decree said the government, together with state-controlled bank VEB, will control "more than 50 percent of the ordinary shares" post-merger.

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