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Unauthorized Sidewalk Advertising Outlawed

By Alexander Bratersky

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President Vladimir Putin signed legislation outlawing unauthorized sidewalk ads, closing the door on the dirt-cheap advertising opportunity, according to the Kremlin's website.

Under the law, passed by both chambers of the parliament in late April and signed by Putin last week, sidewalk ads can only be placed with the permission of local authorities.

Sidewalk advertisements have become popular in Moscow and many other cities over the recent years.

Small ads for a massage parlor, a flower shop or even a nearby Subway restaurant have until now been placed on sidewalks without permission.

Some companies that offer such services were caught off-guard when approached by The Moscow Times on Sunday.

"Time will tell, we don't know what to expect," a representative of advertising agency Reklama Na Asfalte said.

The company offers several types of ads on its website, selling one A3 size ad for 400 rubles ($9.68), and providing discounts for over 200 placements.

An employee of sidewalk advertising agency RnA said the legislation was "news" to him.

"It was quite popular since it was cheap and effective," he said.

The technique has also proved to be popular with political activists, who used sidewalks to write slogans critical of the Kremlin.

The legislation also makes it easy to remove illegally installed banners and billboards and introduces heavy fines for them.

Such banners that feature phone numbers and addresses have been criticized by drivers.

"Some might end up in a traffic accident while reading them," Alexei, a 29-year-old Muscovite, said while driving to his vacation home over the weekend.

Individuals will be fined up to 1,500 rubles for violating the law, while companies will pay up to 1 million rubles.

Under the law, companies that seek to place billboards will be required to sign contracts with City Hall for between five and 10 years. The legislation also gives more power to municipal authorities to regulate those issues.

In many Russian cities, residents often complain about the pervasiveness of billboards and banners.

Some advertisements have also been used in business conflicts. In 1999, billboards in Moscow that read "Roma thinks about the family" gained nationwide attention. They were reportedly used in a media campaign against billionaire Roman Abramovich, who was accused of being close to the family of then President Boris Yeltsin.

Moscow City Hall said last year that a special department would be set up to deal with illegally installed advertisements.

The city currently accounts for almost 50 percent of all outdoor advertising in Russia, with City Hall's revenues from it amounting to almost 3 billion rubles per year.

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