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VKontakte Faces 9 Lawsuits

By The Moscow Times

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Nine major music corporations plan to sue leading Russian social network VKontakte for illegally distributing copyrighted material, Izvestia reported Friday.

If the record labels win, more than 6,000 songs from popular performers like Madonna, Metallica and Beyonce as well as Russian stars Splean, DDT and Zemfira could be deleted from the website.

The National Federation of the Music Industry, which includes international heavy-hitters Sony, Universal, EMI and Warner, and several other copyright holders have decided to file suits against VKontakte in the St. Petersburg arbitration tribunal, federation head Leonid Agronov said.

While VKontakte does not itself upload content, its huge reservoir of user-uploaded audio and video files has become the equivalent of a free streaming media service for its more than 100 million users.

VKontakte founder Pavel Durov said in July that his company was working with Sony, Warner and Universal to find a solution that could satisfy the music studios "without any harm to Russian Internet users" and predicted positive changes "in the upcoming months."

The parties have continued to discuss the issue but remain divided on the question of free streaming audio.

VKontakte is set on keeping this service free and has proposed creating new offerings, such as paid music downloads, to appease the record labels, but the labels see downloads and streaming audio as separate services that both require payment, Agronov said.

Spokesmen from VKontakte declined to comment.

"The social network shows advertising while you listen to music. That is, they are earning money from this...Actually, they are just pretending to negotiate. Since there is no anti-piracy law for music, they don't want to reach an agreement," Agronov said.

Although a law against distributing pirated video content came into force in August, music copyright remains legally undefended online.

In a similar case earlier this year, Russian record label Soyuz sued VKontakte for 4.6 million rubles ($140,000) in damages for distributing works by its coterie of rock bands.

The judge ruled in VKontakte's favor in October on the grounds that the company couldn't be held responsible for content uploaded by its users.

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