

Internet Companies Gain Voice in Government

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First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov

Internet companies have found a forum to defend their interests before the government following a meeting Wednesday with First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and an array of high-ranking officials.

During the meeting, Shuvalov ordered a working group formed within the Communications and Press Ministry, which will bring together Internet business with representatives from the relevant ministries to develop amendments to intellectual property laws soon to face the State Duma.

"Today, the first deputy prime minister created a platform where business and state officials can find a balance of interests," Shuvalov's spokesman said.

It still remains to be seen what the working group will achieve, but the fact that it was created

at all, and particularly on the order of the first deputy prime minister, is significant, said Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of radio station Ekho Moskv and chairman of the commission for Internet media at The Russian Association for Electronic Communications, or RAEC.

Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, Communications Minister Nikolai Nikiforov, a representative from the Economic Development Ministry, and representatives of major Internet companies such as Afisha Rambler, Google, Yandex and Gazprom Media were in attendance.

RAEC called for meetings between business and the government in order to ensure that not only the worries of copyright holders were heard, but those of "honest content distributors, who could accidentally fall victim to legal repression," Venediktov said.

The working group will have seven days to do propose amendments to a bill on intellectual property set to go before the State Duma by the end of May. It will afterwards become a permanent institution tasked with monitoring all initiatives and proposals related to the Internet, Venediktov said.

Wednesday's meeting followed an earlier, informal meeting in April, at which representatives from Internet companies came together to express their concerns to Shuvalov. Following the meeting, Shuvalov called on the relevant ministries to work with members of the market in order to find a balanced approach in the industry, Shuvalov's spokesman said.

Shuvalov also called on the government officials and business representatives to work together on developing intellectual property legislation. Previously there had been two separate bills in development — one aimed at spreading copyright protection in the Internet from video content to all other copyrighted material, which Deputy Speaker Sergei Zheleznyak submitted to the State Duma in February, and a second by the Culture Ministry creating a system for pre-trial removal of pirated content, which passed its first reading in the Duma in April.

It is the second that especially raised concerns in the Internet community. Under current legislation, any person could announce that they had the rights to a certain image or written work, demand to have the content removed, and then order the site blocked if the content was still there after 24 hours.

The bill thus "opened the way to unfair competition," Venediktov said. For instance, someone could place a passage of Tolstoy's War and Peace on a competitor's website, complain to the General Prosecutor and then have the site blocked immediately for copyright violation, he said.

Even citing a work can be interpreted as piracy under the current legislation, he added. "This question demands legal regulation: What is pirated content, and what is quotation? What is the difference? Is a citation pirated content?" The working group will be tasked with defining these points and finding a middle ground that business and government can both agree on.

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