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Russian Companies Fight For Secure Government Messenger Contract

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Maxim Stulov / Vedomosti

Russian companies have begun bidding for the rights to develop a new secure messaging service for government.

Earlier this year, the Kremlin tasked Russia's Internet Initiatives Development Fund (IIDF) to develop the project. Concerned that foreign governments could access secret Russian information shared via Western apps such as WhatsApp and Viber, officials expressed concerns that Russia's security agencies were unable to crack encryption if they wished to monitor officials' online communication.

While the Kremlin is yet to issue any specific technical specifications for the app, it will need to support VoIP calls, video conferencing, file sharing, document collaboration, and a calendar function, said IIDF spokesperson Sergei Skripnikov. The service will also use

high-level Russian cryptography and receive certification from Russia security agencies.

Skripnikov declined to reveal how much Russia would invest in the project, but said that entrepreneurs would likely retain a majority stake. He confirmed there were four
possible candidates for the development of the messenger app: Titanium, Flodium, Sibrus and SyncCloud.

Titanium co-founder Akshin Dzhangirov confirmed the company holding talks with IIDF, as has Vladimir Pivovarov, director of development at the Kibernika company. Dzhangirov estimated that the cost of developing a secure messaging service from scratch could run from to $5 million. Pivovarov put an estimated price tag of $3 million on developing the service.

Flodium co-founder Sergei Kravtsov also confirmed that he had spoken with the IIDF, and estimated the outright cost of the new messenger platform to be between several hundred thousand to several million dollars. However, Flodium's talks with the IIDF focused on joint earnings on subscription fees, with the state providing customer support in return for free service installation.

Several more companies expected to bid for the government messenger tender still have projects in the pipeline.

Russian company Rosenergoatom is reportedly testing its Staply secure messaging service for state-owned companies, while the Mail.ru Group and the Internet Development Institute (IDI) are believed to be considering the development a secure messenger service with messaging, voice, and video call functions. The IDI has already received 15 applications to review alongside Rostelecom and Communications Ministry representatives.

Some 60 million people in Russia use instant messenger services, according to Russian mobile operator Tele2.

A government source suggested "many" government officials use the secure messenger service Telegram, which was developed by the exiled founder of Russian social network VKontakte. There are currently no set rules governing the use of messenger apps, but officials do not use Telegram to share highly classified information, the source said.

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