

# The 5 Weirdest Online Petitions Russians Have Started and Signed

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A viral picture of Jennifer Fichter with a nimbus, created by sympathizing Russian social media users.

Two of Russia's most notorious online petitions on activist website Change.org had gathered more than 640,000 signatures by the time this article went to press.

The first, a petition against destroying food imported illegally into the country, collected 501,130 signatures and even attracted the attention of President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov last month. Peskov said he would inform the president about it.

The second petition, against banning imported medical goods, had gathered 144,920 signatures and made national headlines on Tuesday.

In 2012, Putin signed a decree stipulating that public initiatives with 100,000 signatures or more would have to be taken into consideration by the authorities. But these signatures have to be collected on the specialized website Roi.ru, where people are formally identified but

which is a far less popular platform than Change.org.

Petitions on Change.org and other similar websites don't have to be considered by authorities, no matter how many signatures their initiatives gather.

“A small number of people [in Russia] — some 20 percent — have this itch. They don't influence anything in the country, but would like to — to take part in social life, to spread their ideas,” Alexei Roshchin, a social psychologist and an expert for the Center of Political Technologies, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

The Moscow Times reviewed five of the most absurd petitions started by Russians online that would doubtfully lead to any policy changes.

### **Save the Bear, Not the Woman**

*159,841 signatures by the time of publication*

In early July, a cafe patron in the Siberian city of Tomsk was mauled by a bear that had spent years caged up as an attraction to draw diners in.

A woman dining at the cafe went to get a closer look at two captive beasts as her husband ordered their meals when one attacked. Local media claimed the bear tore her arm off.

That very same day, concerned locals started an online petition aimed at protecting not the woman, who had ended up in the hospital with serious injuries, but the bear.

The petition, launched via Change.org, charged that the young woman had provoked the bear by breaking the rules and climbing the fence surrounding its enclosure, thereby getting too close for comfort to the animals.

“We appeal to the common sense and humanism of the petition's addressees [to save the animal]. We ask you to not be indifferent and help our bear get to the zoo — it can't be just set free at this point, and in the zoo it will be fed and live in comfort with the help of competent specialists,” the petition, addressed to the governor of Tomsk region, Sergei Zhvachkin, said.

It was illustrated by a photo of a bear captioned “bearykins, stay alive!”

### **Punish Trolls for Offending Dead Singer**

*159,275 signatures by the time of publication*

Russian singer, actress, model and television presenter Zhanna Friske passed away in June at the age of 40 after a yearlong battle with brain cancer and several months in a coma.

Friske was one of the most beloved figures in pop culture: Following the public announcement of her illness last year, Russia's Channel One television station raised over 66 million rubles (\$1.1 million) to cover the cost of her treatment in the U.S. and Germany.

That's why when a popular public page on the Russian social network VKontakte posted a joke about her death — a picture of Friske captioned “I have never been to a grave before, not till

tonight” — offended fans launched a petition on the Change.org website in June, demanding that the General Prosecutor’s Office punish the jokers.

“Lacking any moral principles, the admins of the page published a post, ‘joking’ about the death of the prominent singer Zhanna Friske,” the petition said. “I ask [the petition’s addressee] to take measures outlined in administrative or criminal [codes],” it added.

The petition gathered almost 15,000 more signatures than one demanding to introduce a law on domestic violence — which had only 144,473 signatures by the time of publication.

## **Free U.S. Sex Offender**

*65,822 signatures by the time of publication*

The sentencing of Jennifer Fichter, an American teacher, to 22 years in prison for having sex with multiple teenage students has sparked outrage among Russians who believe the 30-year-old woman had “done nothing wrong” by pursuing the amorous affairs.

Shortly after Jennifer Fichter’s sentence for bedding three of her 17-year-old students was handed down by a Florida court in early July, Russian sympathizers started an online petition demanding to set the woman free and “stop the legal tyranny” of the U.S.

It quickly went viral among Russian social media users, both among champions of “traditional values” and those who just two months before were appalled when a 46-year-old top-ranking policeman in Russia’s republic of Chechnya officially took a 17-year-old as his second bride. In the photos of the wedding that surfaced in the press the girl looked unhappy and sad, which led the society to believe she was forced to marry the man, who, media outlets said, hadn’t divorced his first wife by the time of the wedding.

“Twenty-two years for a woman who helped three mature male students start their adult lives. Twenty-two years for a woman who wanted to be happy and loved, even if it was by someone younger than herself. Twenty-two years for the fact that these students wanted to be with her, longed for her tenderness and attention,” said the petition.

The emotional statement was accompanied by a picture of Fichter with a halo photoshopped around her head.

## **Day Off for Paying Your Mortgage**

*17,265 signatures by the time of publication*

More than 17,000 people considered a day off a worthy reward for paying their mortgages and signed a petition demanding such a day off in the Labor Code. The petition, launched on the Change.org website in September, was addressed to the State Duma.

“At least 1 million Russian families are paying mortgages. For every family, the day when they make the last payment will become a true holiday. A holiday that means a calm future [ahead],” the petition said.

It called on the Duma to amend the Labor Code to stipulate an official day off for everyone

who repaid a mortgage. “To get the day off, a person will have to show the employer an official document from the bank,” the petition said.

The average time a person spends paying out the mortgage, the petition added, is seven years. “Seven years of worries and dependence on the economy, stable job, currency rates. ... That’s why we’re sure anyone who paid off their mortgage in full suffered a small ordeal for their future and for their children,” the petition said.

## **Apology to Michael Jackson**

*13,384 signatures by the times of publication*

In 2011, controversial Russian TV presenter Yelena Malysheva, known for her extravagant statements on health care-related topics, said in a TV show that the deceased U.S. celebrity Michael Jackson “was a drug addict” and “died because of a drug overdose.”

She also said that the singer, beloved by millions of fans worldwide, “stood trial for molesting minors, and it was proven.”

But the only proven thing was that Jackson had a lot of fans in Russia. In a petition started on the website Onlinepetition.ru in the fall of 2011 and addressed to Konstantin Ernst, head of the Russian Channel One, they demanded that Malysheva apologize to them for defaming their idol.

“The whole world knows that accusations of molesting minors were refuted by the U.S. court of Santa Barbara in California. The world lost its idol only recently, a lot of people haven’t come around the loss yet, and Malysheva’s incompetence hurt a lot of people’s feelings,” the petition said.

“A TV presenter for a major channel doesn’t have the right to make such statements if they don’t know all the facts,” it said.

## **In Their Own Bubble**

According to Roshchin, most petitions are started and signed by the same group of people — the 20 percent of Russians who have the “itch” — and the growing number of signatures doesn’t signify the growing popularity of online petitions.

“People are stuck in their own little world, gathering these virtual signatures,” he said. “It’s like they’re blocked in a cage and try to push through to the sunlight, to send signals out there. ... But the signals don’t come through,” he said.

“The political situation in Russia is built in such a way that there are no means of communication [between people and decision-makers],” Roshchin added.

Starting numerous campaigns on the Internet is one of the consequences of this situation, he said.

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