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Cyber Assaults on Estonia Typify a New Battle Tactic

By Peter Finn

Washington Post Foreign Service

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TALLINN, Estonia, May 18 -- This small Baltic country, one of the most wired societies in Europe, has been subject in recent weeks to massive and coordinated cyber attacks on Web sites of the government, banks, telecommunications companies, Internet service providers and news organizations, according to Estonian and foreign officials here.



Hillar Aarelaid is part of the country's Computer Emergency Response Team. (By Peter Finn -- The Washington Post)

Computer security specialists here call it an unprecedented assault on the public and private electronic infrastructure of a state. They say it is originating in Russia, which is angry over Estonia's recent relocation of a Soviet war memorial. Russian officials deny any government involvement.

The NATO alliance and the European Union have rushed information technology specialists to Estonia to observe and assist during the attacks, which have disrupted government e-mail and led financial institutions to shut down online banking.

As societies become increasingly dependent on computer networks that cross national borders, security experts worry that in wartime, enemies will attempt to cripple those networks with electronic attacks. The Department of Homeland Security has warned that U.S. networks should be secured against al-Qaeda hackers. Estonia's experience provides a rare chance to observe how such assaults proceed.

"These attacks were massive, well targeted and well organized," Jaak Aaviksoo, Estonia's minister of defense, said in an interview. They can't be viewed, he said, "as the spontaneous response of public discontent worldwide with the actions of the Estonian authorities" concerning the memorial. "Rather, we have to speak of organized attacks on basic modern infrastructures."

The Estonian government stops short of accusing the Russian government of orchestrating the assaults, but alleges that authorities in Moscow have shown no interest in helping to end them or investigating evidence that Russian state employees have taken part. One Estonian citizen has been arrested, and officials here say they also have identified Russians involved in the attacks.

"They won't even pick up the phone," Rein Lang, Estonia's minister of justice, said in an interview.

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Estonian officials said they traced some attackers to Internet protocol (IP) addresses that belong to the Russian presidential administration and other state agencies in Russia.

"There are strong indications of Russian state involvement," said Silver Meikar, a member of Parliament in the governing coalition who follows information technology issues in Estonia. "I can say that based on a wide range of conversations with people in the security agencies."

Russian officials deny that claim. In a recent interview, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov called it "out of the question." Reached Friday at a Russia-E.U. summit, he reiterated the denial, saying there was nothing to add.

A Russian official who the Estonians say took part in the attacks said in an interview Friday that the assertion was groundless. "We know about the allegations, of course, and we checked our IP addresses," said Andrei Sosov, who works at the agency that handles information technology for the Russian government. His IP address was identified by the Estonians as having participated, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post.

"Our names and contact numbers are open resources. I am just saying that professional hackers could easily have used our IP addresses to spoil relations between Estonia and Russia."

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