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Hackers Increasingly Targeting Religion Sites

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Hacker attacks against sites maintained by political opponents of the Russian government have received a great deal of attention. One target of hackers that has received far less press is Runet sites operated by religious groups, which are increasingly coming under cyber attack, a trend that reflects the importance of the Internet in Russian religious life.

In an article in newspaper Novya Izvestiya, reporter Mikhail Pozdnyaev says that among those who have suffered from hacker attacks are "representatives of all confessions, official and independent information agencies that write about religious news, and popular missionaries."

Because of the diversity of sites and the difficulties involved in determining why a site may

have failed and in tracking down those responsible, there are no reliable statistics available on just how widespread this trend is. Consequently, the Novaya Izvestiya journalist describes some of the more high-profile examples of this phenomenon.

Pozdnyaev begins with the hacker attack on the official site of the Maykop and Adygei eparchate of the Russian Orthodox Church this past Sunday. For several hours, he reports, visitors to the site found a page that had nothing to do with religious affairs, though the eparchate's technical staff was able to restore the site rather quickly.

Officials in the eparchate told Pozdnyaev that they believe that this attack happened when it did because at least some of the faithful are unhappy that Archbishop Panteleimon has been replaced as head of the see by Bishop Tikhon. The hackers, these officials believe, were supporters of Panteleimon.

But exactly who carried out the cyber attack remains unknown in this case, as in others even when the hackers declare themselves &mdash as happened earlier this year &mdash to be representatives of the " Free Radical Society of Atheists of Bobruisk" or the "Atheist from Shenkursk," titles that are only user names that reveal little.

A much larger hacking scandal occurred during the controversy over now dethroned Bishop Diomid and his challenge to the Moscow Patriarchate. The "Orthodoxy in the Far East" portal that featured information on his case came under attack twice &mdash once with those responsible posting pornographic pictures and another time with foul language.

The priest who oversees the portal said the hackers were people who supported Diomid and had enough resources to overcome the portal's defenses. Since then, the Interior Ministry's Bureau of Special Technical Measures has tracked down the individual involved: He is a citizen of one of the CIS countries, the ministry reported.

Russian prosecutors are seeking to bring this person to justice, the journalist says, but they have not had much luck. And that highlights a serious problem: As Pozdnyaev notes, "catching a hacker is harder that restoring a site that has been attacked."

Other religious entities that have been targeted include the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the official site of the Patriarchate itself following the death of Aleksii II, and Portal-Credo.ru, an independent religious news portal that is often highly critical of the Orthodox Church.

Hacker attacks against web sites maintained by the Russian Orthodox Church, its various subdivisions and even individual clerics, such as Archdeacon Andrey Kurayev, are a relatively new phenomenon, but such attacks have been taking place against Islamic sites on a regular basis for a decade.

At the end of June, hackers took offline for a brief period two of the most important Russian-language Islamic news sites, Islam.ru and IslamNews.ru, both of which have been subject to similar attacks in the past. Pozdnyaev says that it is possible that the hackers are people who "do not share the loyal attitude" of these sites to the government.

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