

Russia: Estonian President Says Moscow Sees Democracy As A 'Threat'

PRAGUE, June 5, 2007 (RFE/RL) -- Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves spoke today with RFE/RL correspondents Jeffrey Donovan and Irena Chalupa about his country's vulnerability after weeks of cyberattacks and Estonia's relations with Russia.

RFE/RL: Your country has had a lot of attention recently, given this story about moving the Soviet monument and then the cyberattacks on Estonian computer systems. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I don't know where to begin. Certainly, we saw the use of massive cyberattacks against state institutions, as well as private sites, including banks. Initially, you could say it was sort of a grassroots thing. But then it became a matter of organized crime.

I say that because the mechanism used were botnets, which you can look up in wikipedia if it means nothing to you. But briefly, 10 to 20 percent of world computers are infected by robots, malware, which allows a computer to be taken over and operated by someone else. It's almost the sole source of spam. These things are illegal. Malware is illegal. Installing it on someone else's computer gets you 50 years in jail in the United States. And organized crime owns banks of robot computers. They have been used in the past to extort money from companies, threatening to shut down their...basically, Internet companies. But now they were used against a country.

What I can say is that every EU country has something called CERT, a computer emergency response team. And they visited ours, and there they had a graph of the cyberattacks, which suddenly rises straight up and continues and continues at a massive level of attacks, and at

exactly 00:00 GMT, it stopped. I asked, "Why is that?" And the head of CERT said, "Well, they didn't buy any more time."

If it's a random...process of people on the web sort of doing things when they're launching attacks, that's something that goes on like white noise in the background. But a discrete, massive attack must be organized. The question is, can we prove who bought the time on these illegal organized crime botnets? We can't. But it's probably not Uruguay.

RFE/RL: So you're saying it's Russia.

Ilves: No, I'm saying it's not Uruguay, probably.

RFE/RL: Are there any clues that can point you toward any given country, beside Uruguay?

Ilves: Given it's timing...I mean, it's all circumstantial. Why do we have this? There is direct evidence of sort of grassroots-level [activity]. One of the commissars of the [pro-Kremlin youth] organization Nashi, in an interview with "Vedomosti," said, "Yes, I organized attacks." But he was giving people instructions on how to do a computer attack. But that would have had an effect at the sort of low level of people who themselves wanted to do something, but not at the level of an organized industrial-strength attack of this type.

RFE/RL: And did you sustain any serious damage from these attacks -- on banks, financial

institutions, or government institutions?

Iives: First of all, CERT says it was probably at a much lower level than it would have been otherwise had we not had computerized voting in our elections in March. Which meant that they "gamed" various hacking approaches, including DDOS, or distributed denial of service attacks, which were the kinds of attacks we got. And so having gamed it, having tested it, we were a little better prepared.

The attacks on my irrelevant homepage [laughs] were not that bad. It was just knocked out. But for more serious things, first of all, the national emergency number, 112, was hit. That was mercifully out of commission for a very short time, but had there been at that time when it was briefly out of commission a fire, a heart attack, it would have been...someone could have died. It was a problem for banks because 97 percent of bank transactions in my country are over the Internet, which one of our main responses was to keep out all computer messages from outside the country code .ee, as you [here in the Czech Republic] have .cz. Here in Europe, we have country codes.

What that meant was that you could access pages inside the country, but you couldn't from the outside. So if you wanted to go into your bank account from outside then, of course.... Being a very open country with one of the highest trade-to-GDP ratios in the world, I think No. 2 after Hong Kong, that means it does affect you.

RFE/RL: Given what happened, is Estonia feeling more vulnerable, given the situation with Russia now and the West and sort of rising tensions in general?

Iives: Well, vulnerability...I actually think that being a highly computerized country, much more than much of the rest of Europe, the biggest vulnerability I felt personally was that countries that have a low level of computerization didn't quite understand. The Finns, the Swedes, and the United States understood. They immediately understood what it meant. Some other countries that really don't have a high level of government services on the Internet, that don't really do Internet banking, they didn't understand what it meant.

Considering our vulnerability, we came out fairly well. A number of people I've read in memos said [that] had it been some other country with less experience, they would have been in much bigger trouble faced by these kinds of attacks. If anything, we feel the solidarity shown by the European Union, as well as by the United States. In fact, I think it made Estonians feel much more secure. And our support level for the European Union has risen to 87 percent, which is by far the highest in Europe.

RFE/RL: What about NATO? Do people have the sense that the EU is the one that is providing their security?

Iives: No, I mean they're two different ball games. The EU provided solidarity, stood up to Russia on the groundless attacks that were made against Estonia, as well as stood up for Lithuania, stood up for Poland. NATO, on the other hand, was the institution that immediately, from the minute things started happening, flew in its top cyberexperts to look at what's going on. So we felt pretty secure about that.

It does raise a concrete philosophical question about the nature of attacks. I mean, NATO in Article 5 and also Article 4, [those articles] are really based on physical military attacks. In 1949, when the treaty was drafted, there weren't many computers. There was no Internet. This is a digital and a virtual attack, but in its effect a very real kind of attack, and I think the way to look at it perhaps is this might be a test run for something bigger and larger, just like the Germans tested out Stuka bombers in 1936 in Spain.

RFE/RL: What could be bigger and larger?

Iives: Well, I mean in the sense that it is a weapon. It is clear that cyberattacks are a form of

offensive action that can paralyze, weaken, harm a nation state.

RFE/RL: Did you get a sense that NATO is interested in exploring this kind of possibility, that this may become a part of their defence platform on some level?

Ives: As one who has been reading security-policy literature for about 25 to 30 years, in the last 10 to 15 years people have been writing about the potential for cyberwarfare, and there have been precedents. After the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Serbian conflict, the Pentagon was attacked. Israel's various state institutions have come under cyberattack at different times. So it's not that new. I guess the newness was the scale and the breadth of the attacks against one particular target country.

RFE/RL: Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday gave an interview to "Corriere della Sera," an Italian newspaper, in which he was asked his reaction to the missile-defence system that the United States is seeking to install here and in Poland. And, of course, he said that Russia would react. And they asked him, "Does that mean you'll be pointing missiles at European cities?" And he said, "Yes, naturally." Given those kinds of comments and some of the comments and actions that have happened in Estonia, how do you react to that?

Ives: I gave a long talk on that last night. Briefly, democracies don't go to war with each other. Democracies don't make warlike threats against each other. Either that truism is false or the notion of a G8 of the industrialized democracies getting together is based on a false premise. I mean, democracies don't behave like that. [It's] one or the other. Either we chuck out the premise, or we have to rethink what the G8 stands for. Which is not to mean that anyone's going to throw the Russians out of the G8.

RFE/RL: Some people are calling for that.

Ilves: That's true, but...if you're not a member of the G8, it's not difficult to call for anyone to be thrown out. But I certainly wouldn't call it the organization of industrialized democracies anymore.

RFE/RL: What would you call it?

Ilves: Seven industrial democracies and one country brought in for reasons that have lost their relevance. If you think about it, why would you not have China then? Why would you not have India? But your earlier question on Russia, it's difficult to say.

RFE/RL: There's got to be some unease in your country.

Ilves: The thing is, people [in Estonia] who think about foreign policy feel like Winston Smith in [George Orwell's 1948 novel] "1984," a book I thought had long lost its relevance but there...during the Hour of Hate, Winston Smith goes and is yelling -- whether it's Oceania or Eastasia -- and he says, 'It's not always been Eastasia; wasn't it Oceania last week?' And I get the same feeling.

One year or one season it's Latvia. Then it's Georgia, and they're compiling lists of children with Georgian names in Moscow schools and deporting Georgians in transport planes. Now that's all died down. Georgia doesn't figure on their radar screen anywhere. And now it's Estonia's turn. The question is, who's next? On the concrete issue itself, I mean, given that in the last four

months the Russians have blown up, destroyed, five monuments without any qualms.... It is true that journalists are forbidden to mention in the Russian media that in Khimki [outside Moscow], they actually sort of did this without any legal basis whatsoever and beat up people who were protesting [the reburial of the remains of Soviet soldiers killed in World War II].

If you don't have a free media, then all things are possible...which is why Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is still needed. If you don't have a free media, you can convince people of anything.

RFE/RL: How do you see Estonia's relationship with Russia? Where can it go?

Ives: Only better. [Laughs] Because it can't get much worse. Some people say it's domestic politics, an election cycle. It's a pretty weird argument that you have to go bash your neighbors. But you know...Joseph Goebbels said, "Was wir brauchen eines Feindes Bild zu schaffen," [which means], "What must we do? We must create an image of the enemy." And that's worked very well. The Levada [Polling Center] poll of last week showed that 60 percent of Russians think that the greatest enemy of Russia with its 143 million people, it's greatest enemy is 1.3 million Estonians. So it's a pretty good accomplishment. Levada said this is the first time that anyone's broken the 50 percent [barrier]. So you can see that propaganda does a good job.

RFE/RL: What would happen if more of Russia's neighbors -- Georgia, Ukraine -- follow the Estonian path of integration with NATO and the EU? Some people say that a good, democratic Ukraine could pull Russia down the same road.

Ives: It's clear that Russia has bad relations with all the democratic countries on its borders that were formerly under communist rule -- I mean, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Georgia, Ukraine. All democratic countries.

RFE/RL: Even Belarus doesn't have such good relations with Russia anymore.

Ilves: It has passable, if not good, relations with nondemocratic countries -- Belarus, the Central Asian countries, where democracy is not always so wonderful. That should make one think. And what it should make one think about is that Russian relations with Ukraine and Georgia were fine until they had democratic revolutions. What does that mean? Well, that means that democracy really is perceived as a threat by Russia.

I didn't quite understand why this would be the case until I read Robert Kagan's history of U.S. diplomacy in the 19th century, "Dangerous Nation," which came out a couple of months ago. He talks about the opposition of the southern states in the 1840s and 1850s to enlargement of the territory of the United States to include new states that were nonslaveholding, because slavery was not allowed on the new territories. When they came in, they could not come in as slaveholders. And so the southern states did not want to see nonslaveholding states come in. They were highly in favor of bringing in former Spanish colonies where slavery was allowed, because that would increase the number of slaveholding states.

But why were the southern states, according to Kagan, afraid of bringing in new states that were nonslaveholding? Because it showed that democracy works, blacks are equal to whites. That was perceived as a source of instability.

And so, too, in the case of Russia today, we see tremendous fear that freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of the media, free and fair elections are viewed as bad things, and countries that have those things disprove the notion of a sovereign democracy -- previously called a "managed democracy," but now for [public relations] reasons called a "sovereign democracy" -- but either way, it means that the general rules of democracy don't apply. There's a separate way, a separate road, a separate route. There's a different kind of democracy.

Well, from Estonia to Georgia, Ukraine, Poland -- they all show it's not true. In fact, democracy works as democracy. And I think that is viewed by many as a threat. If you read the [Russian]

press -- "There will be no Orange Revolutions here" -- what are the Nashi or Molodaya gvardia [nationalist youth groups] there for? They're all sort of there to make sure that if you ever get a Maydan [revolution like that in Ukraine], you have the shock troops to prevent Maydan from happening.

RFE/RL: That sounds pretty bleak.

Ilves: Just my personal opinion. [Laughing] This does not represent the position of the Estonian government.