Ukraine Secret Police Takes Down 30,000 Websites to Fight "Pro-Russian Propaganda"

SBU's crack-down on a Ukrainian web-hosting company resulted in nearly 30,000 sites of various types to become inaccessible

By Global Research News

Global Research, May 02, 2015
Global Voices Online

Region: Russia and FSU
In-depth Report: UKRAINE REPORT
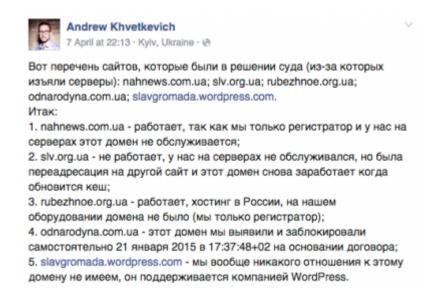
by Anna Poludenko-Young

This article originally appeared on Global Voices. It was also published by Russian Insider.

Ukraine's State Security Service (SBU) was initially aiming to shut down five websites that had been allegedly spreading pro-Russian views about the conflict in Ukraine. Instead, they ended up crushing thousands of other websites, halting business and other activities of the Ukrainian segment of the Internet.

How It All Went Down

In an attempt to block five allegedly anti-Ukrainian websites, the State Security Service cracked down on a local web-hosting company, NIC.ua, also the largest domain registrar in Ukraine. SBU officers seized hosting servers at four NIC.ua data centers in Kyiv on April 7, 2015. Surprisingly, the targeted 'pro-Russian' websites resumed work in a few hours, but almost 30,000 Ukrainian websites that had nothing to do with the information war between Ukraine and Russia went down for weeks. Among them were e-commerce, charity, news, and even local government websites.

The problem was hidden in the details. As it turned out, the Ukrainian service provider was not hosting the websites targeted by the SBU. According to Andrew Khvetkevich, NIC.ua CEO, his company previously hosted only one of the five websites, and had blocked it back in January. In a Facebook post, Khvetkevich said that hree other websites used the Ukrainian company only as a registrar, but kept all their files on servers in Russia. Finally, the last targeted website turned out to be a WordPress.com blog, hosted by WordPress.

This is a list of sites that have been in the court's decision (which allowed to seize servers): nahnews.com.ua; slv.org.ua; rubezhnoe.org.ua; odnarodyna.com.ua; slavgromada.wordpress.com.

1. nahnews.com.ua – Works, since we are only a registrar for them and this domain is not on our servers;
2. slv.org.ua – Does not work, wasn't using our servers. It was redirected to another site and the domain will work again when you refresh the cache;
3. rubezhnoe.org.ua – Works, hosting in Russia, we didn't host their domain on our equipment (we are only a registrar for them);
4. odnarodyna.com.ua – This domain we have identified and froze on 17:37:48 +02 January 21, 2015;
5. slavgromada.wordpress.com – We have nothing to do with this domain. It is supported by WordPress.

Markian Lubkivskyi, senior advisor at the Security Service of Ukraine, said that before seizing the servers, the SBU officially requested NIC.ua to block the targeted websites, but the company did not comply.

NIC.ua denied the fact that they received any official requests from SBU. CEO Khvetkevich said they received only a few poorly scanned information requests. Khvetkevich also noted that it is illegal in Ukraine to simply block a website based on a scanned request or warrant, and the proper procedure would require original documents.

While the SBU and NIC.ua have been trying to decide who is to blame for hosting the 'pro-Russian' websites, a few hundred websites that are hosted by NIC.ua servers still remain inaccessible. Thousands of websites that were initially incapacitated have been coming back online over the last few weeks, after SBU's Lubkivskyi promised that SBU would be returning copies of data from the seized servers to those who approach the Security Service with a written request. SBU said it would keep the physical servers for the next two months 'for investigative purposes.'

Internet Users Not Impressed

Needless to say, the online community was not very excited about SBU's actions. Maksym

Savanevsky, chief editor of Watcher, a website about Internet business and social media marketing in Ukraine, whose website also went down as a result of the server seizure, wrote in a blog post that SBU's server data return mechanism looked strange and wasn't very helpful.

> This is very weird, because it is impossible to get data without a concrete connection to the servers. Without the NIC.ua experts, the SBU will be able to return only files at best, not the databases, but the website doesn't function without them.

Facebook users also left quite a few angry comments under Lubkivsky's announcement about providing copies of the data to websites who had suffered from the blanket server seizure. User Ekaterina Glebova wondered who would compensate for the hosting fees she'd paid and where SBU suggested she put the copies of files if her server was in their hands.

> Dear Markian Lubkivskyi, where are we supposed to put those obtained copies? We've paid for the hosting. Maybe the hosting for all the NIC.ua customers will be on you? Also, why do I have to go now somewhere to obtain my lawfully created website, that I worked on and invested in?
> Let's come to the SSU all together and stand there until we get back our websites and hosting from those who caused us these loses.

Mykola Radchenko echoed Glebova's sentiment and said even schoolchildren could figure out that you don't need to extract the whole server farm to take down a few websites.

> What do I need the copy of the website for? What am I going to do with it? I want to use the hosting that I paid for. The provider can't help me, because you seized the servers. It is all very simple. Will you be reimbursing people or what?
> [...]
> In order to turn off the light in one apartment, you don't need to destroy the power station! I hope you got the comparison.

Facebook users, especially representatives of Internet businesses, expressed another concern: incidents like this could very well kill the Ukrainian hosting market. If servers can be seized so easily and without due process, hosting providers fear that Ukrainian companies and individuals are likely to shift to services by international hosting companies, forcing the local ones to go out of business.

That fear is not entirely unreasonable: over three weeks, thousands of Ukrainian websites were offline, losing views, clicks and potential business. At the time of publishing, NIC.ua said 91% of hosted accounts that were down as a result of the server seizure are now back online.

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