

## **Armenia Surprised by Anti-Russian Agitation**

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Emails and text messages seek to spark campaign over military bases.

A burst of anti-Russian emails and text messages, supposedly sent from an Armenian activist group, has left Armenians baffled as to who's behind it and what their motives are.

The emails and text messages originate from an organisation calling itself Hayastanci: Anti-Russia, and thousands of Armenians have received them.

"I got an email with the subject [www.antirusia.org](http://www.antirusia.org). It linked to various anti-Russian materials saying that the presence of a Russian military base in Armenia takes away our sovereignty and makes it impossible for Armenia to enter other alliances and groups, like the European Union," said Vardan Papikian, a Yerevan resident and one of the many contacted by the group.

"After that I received a text message with a request that I forward a message with the address of the anti-Russian site to my friends."

Russia has kept a military base in Armenia since 1995, when it was founded on the site of a previous Soviet installation, and it has been a key link in Russia's defensive chain since Georgia forced it to close its bases there. Armenian politicians are close to their Russian counterparts, and the anti-Russian agitation was greeted with bemusement in a country used to friendship with Moscow.

A spokesman for Russian-owned VivaCell-MTS, the mobile company to whose phones the text messages were sent, said it had no connection to the agitation and that anyone with internet access could send text messages that appear to come from the provider.

"The client thinks the message is from the mobile operator, but in fact the company could not use the network for such purposes," said Vahe Isahakian.

Internet security experts said it was easy to register a website on the .org domain, and that it could be very hard to discover the site's real owner.

"The site is registered to one Gurgen Pinosian, but the registration information is obviously false. For example, the address is listed with the non-existent address Hakarusastyan Street, 1," said an Armenian computer security blogger called Rafael.

IWPR managed to communicate with Armen Ghazarian, the head of the movement, via email, but he declined to comment on his motives. He said he was currently in Georgia but intended to return in the near future.

"I don't consider it sensible to reply to your questions at the moment or to tell you the number of direct participants in our movement in Yerevan. They have been ordered not to take action at the moment, since

the regime has ordered a campaign against our movement,” he said.

“I can say only that our movement is not organised enough at the moment. However, we have many members and supporters. Since 2002, the regime’s security services have detained me and my relatives several times in Yerevan. The serious persecution of me and our movement began in 2007, and we could not even hold a press conference.”

In the absence of further information, Armenians were reduced to speculating as to why such a site, aimed at spoiling relations between Armenia and its closest ally, should appear now.

Apart from Russia’s military base, Moscow has significant economic ties to Armenia. Both of the Armenian mobile companies – VivaCell-MTS and Armentel – are owned by Russian companies, while other major assets, such as 80 per cent of the energy network and the country’s nuclear power plant, are also Russian-controlled.

Samvel Martirosian, an expert in information security, said the new campaign could be connected to Azerbaijan since it also appeared to be aiming to separate Armenians in Armenia from their ethnic kin in Nagorny Karabakh, which has broken free of Baku’s control.

“When you are talking about the internet it is hard to know who is really behind something. I am 90 per cent sure this is Azerbaijani propaganda, an attempt to put pressure on Armenians via Armenians,” he said.

He also pointed out that since the middle of the summer, hacker attacks on Armenian government websites had intensified and become more ambitious.

Sergei Shakarians, a political commentator, linked the site to Georgia as well. He said the campaign could be part of an intensifying battle for influence in the South Caucasus, where Turkey is also seeking to gain sway via a peace process with Armenia.

“There is a group of paid agitators who earn their wages by such operations, including over the internet, which contain anti-Russian propaganda characteristic of Georgia and Azerbaijan. In our region the battle for influence is intensifying, and the last redoubt of non-anti-Russian feeling is Armenia,” he said.

But other experts pointed to a simpler cause. They speculated that the rise in Russian racist violence, which is often targeted against Armenians and other people from the Caucasus, who typically have darker skin and hair than ethnic Russians, could have angered some Armenian web-users.

According to the Russian human rights group the Centre for Information and Analysis, SOVA, 109 foreigners were murdered in Russia in 2008, including 25 from the Caucasus. So far in 2009, 49 foreigners have been murdered, including 11 from the Caucasus.

“We can speculate that there is circular xenophobia, which consists of, for example, Armenian citizens becoming victims of racist aggression in Russia. On returning to Armenia, they employ their nationalist aggression against Russians, Russian-speakers or Russia in general,” said Galina Kozhevnikova, SOVA’s vice-president.

Ara Saghatelian, director of the Armenian president's information centre, said the authorities were monitoring the internet and forcing sites to remove harmful material. He said that in the last two months, YouTube had taken down around 1,300 videos deemed to be anti-Armenian.

"We are watching those measures initiated specifically by our well-known neighbouring country and which are aimed against the informational interests of Armenia, and we are taking steps to oppose those measures," he said.

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**Location:** Caucasus  
Turkey  
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**Focus:** Caucasus

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