DarkGaboon targets Russian FinServ

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The emergence and persistence of the DarkGaboon group, shows a sophisticated, adaptive threat actor exploiting publicly available tools and blending into the broader backdrop of malicious activity. Active since at least May 2023, the group has systematically targeted Russian financial entities, demonstrating advanced operational security practices and an acute understanding of Russian linguistic and cultural nuances. The combo allowed DarkGaboon to remain undetected for over 18 months, which is an unusually long tenure for an active threat group.

The initial detection of their activities involved the use of Revenge RAT payloads embedded in documents disguised as financial records. The method is their strategic targeting of employees within financial departments—sectors often rich in valuable data. The attackers' operational choices, such as using fake X.509 certificates and homoglyph techniques to evade detection, reveal not only a high level of technical knowledge but also a focus on long-term access.

Infrastructure and Malware Analysis

The infrastructure employed by DarkGaboon includes Dynamic DNS domains and servers predominantly located outside Russia, often in Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy. The regular rotation of command-and-control (C2) servers and domains—evidenced by the transition from the "rampage" to the "kilimanjaro" clusters—demonstrates their adaptability and intent to evade cybersecurity measures.

The group's malware arsenal revolves around Revenge RAT, a versatile remote access tool. The use of .NET Reactor-protected cryptors, combined with AES encryption and obfuscation techniques such as control flow manipulation and namespace mutation, signifies an investment in thwarting both signature-based and heuristic detection methods. The layered execution of payloads, with timers and injection into legitimate processes, reflects a deliberate effort to bypass endpoint defenses.

DarkGaboon's reliance on homoglyphs in file names, which mimic Cyrillic characters, represents another layer of evasion. The technique is effective in environments reliant on pattern-based detection systems. Coupled with the use of decoy documents sourced from legitimate Russian financial templates, the group blends its malicious activities into legitimate workflows, reducing the likelihood of early detection.

Operational Tactics and Indicators of Compromise

The report identified 369 unique files associated with DarkGaboon, revealing disciplined methods to regularly updating their malicious toolkit. The pattern fits their "snake-like" operational metaphor, characterized by periodic renewal and adaptation. The group's use of decoy files, including Excel and Word documents, to cloak their payloads mirrors the tactics of many financially motivated APT groups but is elevated by their nuanced understanding of Russian corporate environments.

The geographic distribution of Revenge RAT sample uploads further corroborates their focus on Russian targets. Institutions within the financial sector, large retail chains, and service companies have been identified as victims, illustrating a broad yet precise targeting strategy.

DarkGaboon's linguistic proficiency in Russian, evident in their use of native terminology and even expletives, strongly suggests a team comprising native speakers or individuals with deep immersion in Russian culture. The trait helps their operations by lowering the suspicion of their phishing lures among victims.

Implications and Future Risks

The ability of DarkGaboon to persist undetected for over 18 months raises concerns about the effectiveness of traditional threat detection mechanisms in identifying low-noise, high-stealth operations. Their operational strategy—relying on well-known tools rather than sophisticated zero-days—underscores the dangers posed by underestimated and misattributed threats. This approach not only lowers their operational costs but also makes attribution challenging.

The group's recent increase in activity, marked by a higher volume of malicious file updates since March 2024, signals an intent to expand their operations. This escalation could indicate either a response to external pressures or a broader strategic shift to target additional sectors within Russia or other regions.

Recommendations

The findings point to several protective measures organizations should adopt:

- Regular employee training to identify phishing attempts and suspicious attachments.
- Deployment of advanced threat detection systems capable of behavioral analysis, such as sandboxing and heuristic evaluation.
- Routine monitoring of network traffic for unusual patterns, particularly those involving non-standard ports or unexpected DNS queries.
- Verification of all file extensions and an emphasis on disabling macros within documents received from external sources.

DarkGaboon's activities reveal a calculated balance of simplicity and sophistication, leveraging common tools and advanced operational methods. Continued vigilance, coupled with an emphasis on anomaly detection, remains essential for countering such threats effectively.
