PETOSKEY — An unidentified hacker, seemingly of Russian origin, caused a temporary disruption late last week for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

The environmental advocacy group, based in Petoskey, was preparing for an online seminar on pipeline permit processes, scheduled for Monday at 2 p.m. The seminar required prospective participants to register online, and the registration system had the capacity to accept a couple hundred entries, which should have been more than adequate, Tip of the Mitt policy director Jennifer McKay said.

So, when people began receiving notifications saying the registration was all filled up, something didn’t compute. McKay said the issue came to her attention Thursday.

The email address column shows all different addresses, mostly registered Gmail.com accounts, but also including some Yandex.ru accounts, hosted by a Russian company offering services similar to Google’s.

At the very least, the fact that all of the entries came in such quick succession, shortly after 6:45 p.m. Thursday, indicate that they were entered via an automated system, not manually by an actual human.

McKay said the disruption was only minor, and easily fixed — she just went into the system and deleted all of the phony entries, which then allowed those who wished to register to do so. Since then, she said she just monitored the program closely.

She has not reported the incident to any official agency, and she also said she hasn’t identified any other issues that may be related.
"We still had people interested in registering, and wondering if they still could attend," she said.

She said she logged into the administrator account for the seminar and found out that the spaces, indeed, had all been filled up — but not by Northern Michiganders hoping to learn about how they can participate in state government decisions.

"It happened quite quickly," she said. "In a matter of two minutes, 183 registrations came in all from one name, which was Russian."

A screenshot that McKay took that night, which she sent to the News-Review on Monday, shows a small selection of those entries which blocked up registration. The "name" column of the screen does, in fact, all show the same name, spelled in lettering that seems to match the Cyrillic alphabet.

But she said it is curious that this particular seminar was targeted.

"Our best guess is just the fact that it has to do with oil and gas," she said. "There has been a big push to essentially limit participation for pipeline permitting and pipeline projects. I don't know if this has anything to do with it, but it could."

The goal of the seminar, she said, is to inform people about the laws governing pipelines and offer them tools to effectively participate in the decision-making processes.

It included speakers from the Michigan Public Service Commission and Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy.

A recording of the webinar will be available on the organization's website for those who were unable to attend.