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Russian Police Pursuing Separatist Hackers Who Declared 'Volga People's Republic'

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Police are looking for hackers suspected of breaking into the website of a regional legislature in a Volga region to announce the creation of a local "people's republic" — like the self-proclaimed separatist states that Moscow supports in Ukraine's east but criminalizes in its own country.

The announcement, which briefly appeared on the Astrakhan regional legislature's website early Tuesday, declared that the territory was seceding from Russia to become the "Lower Volga People's Republic," and called for local police and military units to defect "to the side of the people."

"The short-sighted, criminal policies of the federal authorities have put this country on the verge of catastrophe," the announcement said, according to screenshot images taken

by Russian Internet users and posted online. "The government has fully discredited itself, having lost the huge credit of confidence that had been granted to it."

The note was signed by an "emergency situations committee," which listed as its members the local governor, legislative speaker, police chief and Igor Strelkov, a Russian militant who had previously led separatists in Ukraine's east.

A spokesman for the Astrakhan legislature, Viktor Martynenko, said that his office did not post the announcement and that the website was "probably" hacked, TASS reported.

The Interior Ministry branch in Astrakhan is investigating, spokesman Pyotr Rusanov told Interfax.

Besides hacking, Russian law also criminalizes calls for separatism. Officials in the southern Krasnodar region charged a local activist, Darya Polyudova, with separatism and placed her in pretrial detention last month for calling for broader autonomy — though not specifically secession — for her region.

Strelkov, the Russian militant who was listed in the Astrakhan separatist announcement, left Ukraine last month, saying he was going to stay in Moscow and protect President Vladimir Putin from enemies and traitors. He has since disappeared from Russian state-run television newscasts, which had once given him favorable coverage.

Ukrainian separatist website Novorossia.ru posted what it described as an "exclusive interview" with Strelkov last week, quoting him as saying that he had been "removed" from separatist Ukrainian regions and was not coming back.

"Unfortunately, I have no opportunity to return to the territory of Novorossia because nobody will allow me there," Strelkov was quoted as saying. "I wasn't removed from there in order for me to come back in a new capacity."

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