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Russia Labels Ukrainian Meme 'Terrorist Organization'

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The flag of the fictional "Belgorod People's Republic." **Social media**

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) designated the "Belgorod People's Republic," a fictional entity born as an online meme, as a "terrorist organization," Russian media reported Tuesday.

The "Belgorod People's Republic" meme began circulating on Ukrainian social media in reaction to incursions by armed groups into southwestern Russia's Belgorod region after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The name parodies the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's republics in eastern Ukraine, which were established by pro-Russian rebels in 2014. Moscow recognized these territories as independent ahead of the full-scale invasion and later claimed to annex them.

The meme gained enough popularity to prompt Belgorod region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov to publicly deny rumors about the "Belgorod People's Republic" in mid-2022.

Meanwhile, Google Maps lists a fictional address for the "BNR" in the Belgorod border village of Bezymeno, linking it to a Ukrainian hotline for Russian soldiers seeking to defect. Ukrainian forces also reportedly distributed leaflets in the area urging residents to display a fictional flag or write "BNR" on rooftops to avoid drone strikes.

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The independent news outlet Pepel first reported on the FSB's designation of the "Belgorod People's Republic" as a terrorist organization on Tuesday.

The designation coincides with the FSB's publication of a list of 172 Indigenous groups labeled as "terrorist organizations" by Russia's Supreme Court last November. The list now includes, for the first time, two regional media outlets that cover Indigenous culture and life in Russia.

Authorities claim the listed organizations are "structural subdivisions" of the Free Nations of PostRussia Forum, a Poland-based group founded in 2022 that advocates for the dissolution of the Russian Federation.

Many of the organizations have rejected those accusations, arguing that they work to protect the rights of Indigenous people in Russia rather than promote separatism.

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