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Fear Grips Russian Border Towns Amid Ukrainian Offensive

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t.me/vvgladkov

Russians living in areas near the Ukrainian border are voicing growing concern as Kyiv's counteroffensive around the northeastern city of Kharkiv has brought Ukrainian forces to Russia's doorstep, according to posts on local social media groups.

"I'd like to find out how secure the residents of Shebekino are as a result of recent events? We're scared," posted Olga Podtyolkova, who lives in the town of Shebekino about five kilometers from a border crossing with Ukraine.

"They are firing within earshot. Are we already getting bombed?" Natalia Lyovina, a resident of Valuyki, a village some 15 kilometers from Ukraine, wrote on social media site VKontakte on Wednesday.

Valuyki and Shebekino are both settlements in Russia's Belgorod region, whose southern edges have become a de-facto line of contact after Russian troops occupying Ukraine's Kharkiv region were pushed back earlier this month.

Though Kyiv has given no indication that Ukrainian forces will advance into Russia, cross-border attacks have become more frequent in recent days.

Residents of the border village of Krasnyi Khutor were evacuated Wednesday following "shelling from the Ukrainian side," Belgorod region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov wrote on Telegram. A similar attack on the village of Shelaevo, less than 10 kilometers from Ukraine, left two local residents injured Tuesday, according to Gladkov.

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> Eastern #Ukraine Update:
>
> The Ukrainian counteroffensive in eastern #Kharkiv Oblast continues to degrade #Russian forces and threaten Russian artillery and air defenses. /1https://t.co/T1TDscVl2p pic.twitter.com/rEe8bzRWbe
>
> — ISW (@TheStudyofWar) September 15, 2022

Fighting near the Russia-Ukraine border in other areas, including Russia's Kursk and Bryansk regions, has been sporadic since the beginning of the invasion in February, resulting in damage to Russian towns and villages.

Ukrainian officials have adopted a policy of "strategic ambiguity" toward the attacks on Russian border areas, neither confirming nor denying involvement.

In response to the incidents, Gladkov ordered officials to ensure all residents of apartment blocks in the region have access to basements in case of an air attack.

"I gave instructions two months ago... I still haven't seen a report about this," a visibly frustrated Gladkov said at a meeting on the subject earlier this week.

Despite the governor's efforts, towns and villages across the region seem to be ill-prepared for a full-scale Ukrainian attack if it were to materialize.

"How can we rely on a basement that is flooded and where pipes are 'fixed' with scotch tape?" Alisa Tomsina, who lives in the Belgorod region's Shebekinsky district, complained Tuesday during a livestream with district head Vladimir Zhdanov.

Like other local district officials, Zhdanov has been holding daily livestreams to address residents' concerns following an order earlier this week from Governor Gladkov.

"Don't believe the rumors. I ask you to trust only official sources," Zhdanov told those listening in to his livestream.

"Our law enforcement, border services and military are ensuring the security of our residents around the clock... All agencies are working as normal."

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In particular, local residents appeared particularly concerned about access to bomb shelters.

“Where are the town’s bomb shelters and where do we go to hide in case of shelling?” posted Shebekinsky resident Maria Ivanova under the announcement of a livestream with a senior district official.

“Do we have any bomb shelters?” asked another user, Irina Peredistaya.

Others expressed worries of whether Russia has sufficient air defenses in place.

“Tell us if there are air defenses at the border and what residents should do,” Valuyki’s Lyovina posted beneath another announcement of a livestream by a local official.

Despite the authorities’ attempts to calm fears, there is evidence some residents of Belgorod’s border regions were looking to leave the area in anticipation of fighting.

“I am amazed by the people who wear the Soviet military uniform on May 9 [Victory Day] and then flee the town in a panic as soon as some rumors emerge,” one local resident wrote on a Vkontakte community page for the Shebekinsky district earlier this week.

For those who remain, officials have pledged that planned events will not be canceled.

The authorities in Shebekino, for example, will go ahead with celebrating the 309th anniversary of the town’s founding Saturday.

“We cannot cancel the city day and there is no reason to do so... Yes, we will add some minor changes, but will still be celebrating this important milestone,” said Zhdanov.

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