

In Russian Border City, Election Must Go On Under Ukrainian Fire

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

March 17, 2024



Smoke over Belgorod after shelling on March 17. t.me/belpepel

BELGOROD, Russia — The sounds of sirens, the rush toward the nearest shelter, then the echoes of anti-aircraft fire and the anxious wait for calm after the storm.

This has become a daily routine for residents of Belgorod, a city located 30 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, as they were called to the polls for this weekend's presidential election.

As the polls opened for the third and final day of the vote, Ukrainian shelling [hit a house, killing](#) a 16-year-old girl and injuring her father, authorities said. Later in the day, another strike killed a man in a parking lot and wounded 11.

"Of course it's scary," Oksana Petrovna, 46, an election observer at a polling station in the city center, told The Moscow Times.

She recalled Saturday's bombardment that hit the city, forcing her and the rest of the election

commission to pause the voting and take cover in air-raid shelters.

“The blasts were so strong that the walls were shaking.”

Two residents were killed in the attack, while another three were injured, according to local authorities. Five similar attacks rocked the city on Friday, the first day of the election.

After each attack, Oksana calls up her daughter at home.

“We ask each other whether we are OK,” she says.

Belgorod and its surrounding region have faced regular attacks from over the border in the more than two years since Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine, wreaking widespread destruction on its pro-Western neighbor.

But in the days leading up to the presidential election, the cross-border strikes have become relentless, with rockets and drones raining down on the city multiple times per day.

On Saturday, 15 RM-70 Vampire rockets [were intercepted](#) over the city by air defense fire, Belgorod’s governor reported. One civilian was wounded.

The use of these rocket launchers, known for their poor accuracy, indicates the indiscriminate nature of these attacks, which don’t appear to be aimed at military targets.

“It’s impossible to hit precise targets at such a distance with this type of weapon,” said Dmitry Kuznets, a military analyst and editor at the independent Meduza news website.

Related article: [Wave of Drones Target Russia on Final Day of Voting](#)

Many analysts agree the goal of these attacks is mainly political: disrupting the ongoing presidential elections and inciting discontent against President Vladimir Putin by making Russians realize that he is responsible for bringing the war to Russian soil by launching the invasion in the first place.

However, they appear to have backfired, solidifying support for Putin and reinforcing the Kremlin’s narrative that Russia is the victim, not the aggressor, in this conflict. According to official data, voter turnout in the Belgorod region exceeded 78% this morning, above the national average.

“We feel the effects of the special military operation more intensely,” said Oksana, the observer. “The sense of patriotism is stronger here.”

Support for Putin appears to be widespread among voters.

"He's the only person who can restore order to our country and he is doing that" said Irina, a woman just leaving the polling station who voted for the current president.

"He started this thing, and he will bring it to an end," she added, referring to the offensive in Ukraine.

Irina said she thinks Putin should neutralize the threat posed to Russia by the "Nazi" government in Kyiv, which she blames for the attacks on civilians in Belgorod. She seems unaware of the countless civilian casualties caused by Russian bombardments in Ukraine over the past two years.

"We only target military objectives," she insists, echoing one of the Kremlin's main propaganda messages. Just the day before, a Russian airstrike on the Ukrainian city of Odesa [resulted](#) in the deaths of at least 20 people and injured another 75, according to local authorities.

The streets of Belgorod are semi-deserted, and most shops are closed. The few people on the street walk briskly or wait for the bus at stops reinforced with concrete protections.

Local schools will remain closed on Monday and Tuesday as a consequence of the constant attacks, Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov [announced](#). Shopping malls will remain closed on Sunday and Monday, he added.

"He is for Russia, I don't need another president," says Yana, a 55-year-old cashier who has just returned from the polling station where she voted for Putin.

"What do they think? That they can scare us?" she says defiantly, referring to the Ukrainian attacks. She is sipping beer with her partner, Mikhail, 59, a retired military serviceman, and watching the news on Russian state television.

A day earlier, Mikhail was smoking on the balcony when a projectile crashed just meters away, shattering the windows of their apartment.

Miraculously unharmed, Mikhail stepped onto the balcony and defiantly waved the red flag of the Soviet Union, a symbol of the nostalgia for a great-power era shared by many of Putin's supporters.

"He's the boss, and that's right," Mikhail said, remarking on the absence of significant competition in the ongoing presidential elections. "There's no need for competition; who knows who would come in his place otherwise."

The couple is satisfied with the city administration's response to the attacks. As with other attacks on the city, a brigade of workers was swiftly sent to their house to repair the damage, all free of charge.

Despite the frequent shelling, Yana supports the president in launching the invasion of Ukraine, which she sees as a preemptive strike.

"Putin just acted a couple of days ahead of time," Yana explained. "If it weren't for him, there would be Khokhols [a derogatory Russian slur for Ukrainians] with rifles here by now."

Like many other residents of Belgorod, Yana has relatives on the other side of the front: an aunt in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv just a handful of kilometers away — a frequent target of Russian bombardments launched from Belgorod.

"She doesn't understand me; she thinks we're the guilty ones."

Border villages

The situation in villages along the border is even more dire than in Belgorod city. In the Graivoron district, forces from Ukraine have launched repeated incursions in recent days, engaging Russian border guards in heavy fighting.

While the attempts were largely unsuccessful, fighting is reportedly ongoing and residents have been partially evacuated from the area.

Following its longstanding practice, Kyiv has remained silent on attacks on Russian territory. A group of anti-Kremlin militias fighting alongside the Ukrainian army has claimed responsibility: the Russian Volunteer Corps, the Freedom of Russia Legion and the Siberian Battalion.

In Shebekino, a town about six kilometers from the border, tension hangs heavy in the air. The town was almost fully evacuated last June due to intensified cross-border shelling.

While most of the town center's facades have since been repaired and some of its residents have returned since the June 2023 bombardments, the danger of shelling remains constant. Worries about potential provocations and terror attacks on election day are on everyone's minds.

"Ukraine is trying all possible ways to disrupt the elections," says Natalia, 38, a local election observer smoking outside. "We are being warned all the time."

Police officers and men in camouflage guard the entrance of a poll station inside the town's Palace of Culture. There are no voters inside. Due to the danger of shelling, many residents have preferred voting online from home, the head of the local election commission explained.

However, amid the palpable anxiety gripping the town, support for Putin has surged.

"With another president, Russia would be weak, while Putin means strength," says Alexei, 40, a local security guard who is walking out of a local shop.

"Let him rule for a hundred years, I am sure it would be for the better," agrees Vitaly, 46, a former contract soldier standing on crutches and smoking outside the shop.

He recently returned from the frontline near Kupiansk, where his feet were heavily injured in a drone attack. He appears content with the compensation he received for his injury of about 3.3 million rubles (\$35,660).

"As the leader of this country who defends its interests on the international stage, that is his thing," he said.

He said he believes the constant shelling of the Belgorod region is a price worth paying for achieving the goals of the "special military operation," the Kremlin's preferred term for the invasion of Ukraine.

"You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/17/in-russian-border-city-election-must-go-on-under-ukrainian-fire-a84489>