

# **“We went down into the basement because of the war”**

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Since the beginning of October 2022, life in Belgorod has been far from peaceful. First casualties, destroyed offices, houses, and power plants, missiles hitting the airport, fire breaking out at an oil depot and an explosion at an ammunition depot — everything has changed. Now locals are setting up shelters in basements, buying bullet-proof jackets and duct-taping their windows to avoid them getting shattered during the shelling. Novaya Vkladka and [Spektr](#) take a peek inside the city to find out what Belgorod’s residents think and feel and how they prepare for the future.

## **“Children, stay strong”**

“Keep in mind the basic rules of what to do during shelling. Keep down to the ground — it’s safer. Avoid being close to windows and unreliable structures.

Vehicles can easily catch fire...” — news anchors announce from the screens inside a crowded bus in Belgorod. Instructions are repeated on loop, but no one cares anymore. Leaflets with the same message are being stuck on doorways, in office buildings, schools and kindergartens, and shared on social media and in local chat groups. Passengers on the bus stare blankly out the windows or into their phone screens. As the explosions are heard closer and closer (both local authorities and residents call them “claps”) people get tense. They put away their phones and books and begin to look around for the source of the “claps”. The final, loudest explosion is heard right over their heads and some of the passengers take a loud breath out.

“Oh, children, stay strong,” says a short, blonde, middle-aged woman at the back of the bus, cradling two sobbing school-aged boys.

“Oh fuck!” a girl with a blank look in her eyes blurts out, clutching onto the handrail near the back door.

A few seconds later, phone calls are heard from different ends of the bus. After each series of explosions, Belgorod locals call their loved ones to make sure they are all right, it’s already become a habit. Almost all the passengers pick up the phones at the same time.



Letter Z, installed in Belgorod on the occasion of the Victory Day  
“Hello, yes, we saw it, again,” says a man from the back seat.

“It’s okay, I’m on the bus on Sadovaya Street now,” a woman’s voice can be heard from the end of the bus.

“There it is!” an elderly woman points at something, leaning against the window. The other passengers also look out the windows, some take out their cell phones to take pictures of the traces left by the missile. To the left of the bus, a black patch of smoke spreads over one of the high-rise buildings.

“Oh,” an elderly woman, the first to notice it, sighs.

A woman with two children at the next stop hurries out of the bus. “No tutors, we’re going home now,” she blurts out, her voice quivering.

The bus sets off and a few minutes later the passengers’ heads are down on their smartphone screens again, as if nothing happened.

## **“Stay in town until the end”**

A bright pink and red leaflet with pictures, reminding the residents of safety rules to abide by during shelling hangs on the metal door of a four-story building, typical of the Stalinist architecture, in downtown Belgorod. A note hangs next to it: “The basement keys are in apartment number 8 and at the building Management Company”.

“To be honest, since many have storage rooms there, almost all the tenants in our building have keys to the basement,” says Alexander [not his real name], one of the building residents, as he opens the wooden basement door and turns the metal key several times in the keyhole.

Alexander is 45 years old. He is married with two children, and he owns and runs several grocery stores in town. He says he will stay in Belgorod even if the shelling gets worse. To protect himself and his family, he signed up for basic military training (though he has never even served in the army), turned his basement into a safe place to hide from shelling and bought a bulletproof vest.

Novaya Vkladka found out about at least 15 people living in Belgorod and the Belgorod region who are turning the basements of their homes into bomb shelters: cleaning, and stocking with warm clothes, water and food. Some are buying generators in case of a blackout.

The team also has information about at least four Belgorod residents who decided to buy bulletproof vests after the shelling began in the region, and there are now 476 participants in the group chat dedicated to the military course that Alexander signed up for.



A house in Belgorod

"I enrolled in the course after the situation at the border and inside the city deteriorated, to fill my knowledge gaps. They teach us tactical medicine and how to handle and use weapons properly, Alexander says, flicking a light switch in the basement. It's important for my safety and the safety of my family. I think I will need those skills if things get bad in the city and I have to stay here and defend it in one way or another. If they set up territorial defence forces or militia, I could join."

Going down the dusty basement stairs, Alexander says that in the past few days, a lot of people have left the city, since it has become difficult to be here, both because of the explosions and psychologically.

Over 26,000 people have left Belgorod Region since the beginning of March, [according](#) to a post on a popular Telegram channel, referring to [data](#) from Rosstat. Between those who left and those who moved in, the overall population has decreased by 5000, a big number for a region like Belgorod. Between January and September 2021, the population in this formerly prosperous region only grew by 2400.

The basement in the building is spacious, with high ceilings and a thick layer of sand on the floor, but it is all partitioned into storage rooms, linked by one long passageway, one and a half meters wide. "In case of an emergency, everyone will have to fit in the aisle. I doubt anyone will go into the storerooms: they're full," Alexander explains.

He is convinced this is not the end of a peaceful life and doesn't understand those leaving Belgorod. "Of course, the tension because of the shelling is palpable. People go out less, and rarely go on walks with their children, but I can't say that Belgorod is a frontline city. We have no problems with food and manufactured goods, prices have not gone up, he says, Some have gone away to stay with relatives, others have real estate in other regions". But he personally does not support such decisions.

"I know people who have left areas situated right on the border, where people are badly affected by shelling. I can understand them: it is tough enough for them psychologically and physically to stay there with their families and children. But I don't understand those who leave Belgorod itself. I think you can't hide from your fate. If you are destined to die, you will die," he concludes.





### A city street

The worst thing that can happen to Belgorod, in Alexander's opinion, is that Ukrainian troops will enter the city. But he's not planning on leaving. "I will stay here until the end. If the Armed Forces of Ukraine approach Belgorod, I will take my family somewhere, and then come back. I want to defend my city, but I hope it won't come to that," he says, turning into his storage unit from the shared corridor.

A wooden door, which Alexander opens with a smaller key, leads into a compact rectangular room filled with old children's clothes, tools and other things.

"Here's some water," Alexander points to four five-liter cans placed on the floor in a row. "Here's some food. We have canned food: fish, meat," he says, patting a large cardboard box.

"There's also some preserves. I put them in the other pantry. I brought a fold-out bed and chairs from the apartment," he nods, pointing to the left corner of the pantry, where a chair inside a cover is propped up with a folded-up camping cot. Alexander points to the stack of wooden planks near the storage unit: "And these

I can use to build some benches. In theory, the management company should do it, but so far it's empty in here".



Alexander in his basement

A small window overlooking the yard at the far end of the basement can also be covered up with wooden planks, so that the glass doesn't break, Alexander adds. He says that the basement was officially recognized as a bomb shelter back in Soviet times. There is service water in the pipes, electricity, and candles, in case the power goes out.

These days emergency basements and cellars are mostly being set up in privately-owned buildings, Alexander says, as he locks his storage unit and switches off the light. Many people stock those shelters up with warm clothes, mattresses and blankets. But many houses in Belgorod don't even have basements.

"Five-story buildings and those built by Khrushchev have basements. In the new high-rises there is nowhere to hide, bad luck," he shrugged.

Alexander keeps his bulletproof vest in his apartment. He saw an ad online and



bought it: it's khaki colour with a picture of a hand pointing its middle finger and a caption "Fuck you".

"I decided that if I don't take care of myself, no one will, he says, showing his vest. It's simple, but it'll protect me from machine gun and pistol bullets and some types of shrapnel. I have a couple of friends who also bought bulletproof jackets and packed first-aid kits, in case the situation gets worse."



Food supplies that Alexander brought down to the basement  
Alexander's family packed some things in case they need to leave Belgorod for another city. The suitcase is filled with the basic necessities: children's clothes, a first aid kit and documents.

"The youngest daughter has already been in the basement at her kindergarten, says Alexander's wife Anna. When the explosions started, the kindergarten teacher took them downstairs. She got them dressed and took them downstairs. And when it was all over, she took them back to the nursery for a nap but asked them to keep their clothes on. Another day, a play at our local puppet theatre was canceled. A theatrical troupe from Chechnya was supposed to perform, but after

the shelling the actors decided not to risk it”.

Alexander and Anna’s six-year-old daughter runs into the room. “We were in kindergarten going down to the basement because of the war,” the girl quickly explains. They even had water there, but no food.”

## **“People avoid leaving their houses.”**

One of Alexander’s stores is located in a small one-story building near Belgorod airport, where Russian warplanes take off and where Ukrainian missiles land. “I’m already deaf in one ear from these explosions,” complains a young saleswoman wearing a dark blue apron. She sits behind the counter, her head propped up on her hand.

“When the airport got hit, bags with grain started falling over here, the shopkeeper says, pointing to top shelves, stocked up with packaged pasta and breakfast cereal. After that, we decided to tape up the windows.”

Two windows are sealed with transparent duct tape, others are barricaded with refrigerators with soda and frozen meat. Alexander is planning to remove those soon and tape the rest of the window panes shut.



Alexander sitting on the cot

“Of course, there are fewer people now because of the shelling and our profits have gone down,” he admits. But we are still working and are not planning on closing down”.

“People are saving their money now and trying to spend less, confirms the sales assistant, standing behind the counter. Often customers come in and say, “We feel something serious is going to happen”.

“But they still make big purchases, Alexander adds. If someone used to buy two packs of cigarettes at a time, now they take five. People avoid leaving their houses and stock up”.

“It’s not safe indoors these days, either,” the sales assistant sighs.

“But it’s better than outside. At least there’s no risk shrapnel will land in your head,” the shop owner cuts the conversation short.

# **“I was told that I was passing coordinates to the AFU.”**

On October 13, Belgorod was shelled from the side where Russia borders Ukraine. Local government claimed Russian air defences shot down a flying missile, and its debris fell on a residential apartment building on Gubkin Street. One of the residents of the house said, that day she felt as if “a real war started in the city.

For the second time since the start of the real attacks on Belgorod hit a residential house. The first time, on July 3, a fragment of a downed Ukrainian missile fell into a privately owned area on Mayakovsky Street. Five people were [killed](#) and 74 residential buildings were damaged that day, 16 of them completely destroyed.

A week after the October shelling, emergency response services are still clearing the rubble. One by one, crane lifts large pieces of what used to be the building's roof that fell inside one of the apartments on the top floor. Passersby lift their eyes up and examine the rescuer clearing the debris above their heads. Some take pictures of him, though almost any photo taken on the streets of Belgorod can now be considered as “helping the AFU.”



Lenin Park, Belgorod

"This is where I was standing and explaining what had happened," 17-year-old Belgorod journalist Alina [her name was changed due to security concerns] says, standing in front of the missile-hit apartment building, the same spot she went live from on October 13 for an independent Russian TV channel.

"That day I heard several loud 'bangs', she says, making air quotes with her fingers. I read in the news that something had "landed". I got to the place and I saw people panicking, and a piece of the house was literally missing. I thought it was retaliation for Russian troops shelling Kyiv. And I realized that it wasn't going to be the last time something "landed" inside the city. As I was filming the house, passers-by scolded me, claiming I was transmitting coordinates to the AFU."

Broadcasting live from the scene, Alina gathered opinion from the local public and answered questions from her colleagues. They asked her about the aftermath of the shelling and whether there was an air raid alert in the city. "Later I found out that I wasn't allowed to say there wasn't one," she says.

After her live, some Telegram users started harassing Alina in Belgorod's

anonymous Telegram channels. “They wrote that I was a Ukrainian journalist, that I wasn’t a real journalist, and same things in the comment section,” Alina recalls, walking along the fencing tape outside “Pyatyorochka”, a supermarket, which has been closed for over a week.



Mayakovsky street

A few days after her live broadcast Alina tried to get into one of the hotels in Belgorod, where the local authorities had brought Ukrainian refugees, and found out she had been “blacklisted by the FSB.” “This basically means I won’t be able to get accreditation, no one [from local media] will cooperate with me, and I won’t be able to work as a journalist. As far as I understand, you can no longer talk about what’s going on in our city,” Alina shrugs.

We walk into a cafe in one of the city parks. The place is open, music from a popular radio chart is playing, but there are no people inside. Alina orders tea at the bar, and we sit down at one of the empty tables. Since October more and more restrictions about covering the shelling of the city and other events of that kind in the Belgorod region have been imposed by the local authorities, all coming through unofficial channels.



“I feel like journalists working in the city are being suffocated more and more every day. For example, we are now forced to blur our photos if shells hit important infrastructure. We can’t write without official confirmation [from the authorities] if members of the military are hit, we can’t write anything if it’s the infrastructure. We can’t say that we don’t have air-raid alarms either, or talk about the condition of basements in the city. In some cities, newsrooms strongly recommended not to use the word “evacuated” when referring to Belgorod residents,” Alina says.

There is more to prove that working in Belgorod is getting more and more difficult for journalists. In late October there was an [attempt](#) to file a criminal case against Valeria Kaidalova, a journalist working for an independent outlet FONAR.TV, for allegedly spreading fake news about the Russian Army because of a [comment](#) she gave to Dozhd, a TV channel, back in September. On air Kaidalova spoke about the overall mood in the city and said that despite a decree released by Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov, not all of the city residents received keys to the basements of their homes. The government officials went after her because she reported locals were afraid that “the AFU could enter the city”, Kaidalova says.

Earlier, on October 19, an hour after the introduction of a “medium response mode”, a “Sobesednik” correspondent Danila Nozdryakov was detained in Belgorod. The outlet [said](#) that the journalist was writing an article about life in Belgorod and taking pictures of the city’s landmarks. He was released two hours later.

In September, The Moscow Times correspondent Kirill Ponomarev was also [detained](#) in Belgorod. He was talking to refugees from Ukraine. He was detained at the police station for about 19 hours and was eventually fined 500 rubles for hooliganism.

The inability to cover what’s happening in the city doesn’t just affect journalists, but also ordinary citizens, Alina says. Locals are now censoring each other: not letting others photograph anything in the city that, in their opinion, could become a target for the AFU.

“This happens in all of the city’s group chats, Alina says. People write ‘What are you doing, why are you helping the AFU?’ If admins want to target a particular

channel “war correspondents” and “zetmans”[pro-war members] just need to write that its admins are Ukrainian, and everyone starts to attack the channel. People have stopped talking to journalists altogether”.

## **“They intimidate their own people.”**

With time, Belgorod residents figured that the “landings” happen at roughly the same time: in the morning and between six and seven PM. On the most turbulent days, people tried not to leave their buildings during these time slots. But after a few quiet days, everyone relaxed again, forgetting what was going on a week ago. The city was crowded again, and traffic jams filled the roads.

On October 19 the authorities in Belgorod and other bordering regions, introduced a “medium response mode”, following a presidential decree. So far it means increased attention from police, who monitor what and where citizens photograph. For example, on October 20, policemen with guns stopped two people who were taking photos of heavy fog near the bus station.

“I was shocked when they got out of the car with a machine gun. I thought it was some kind of joke and even laughed, says Victoria [name changed], a Belgorod resident. First they wanted to see the passports, and then asked to unlock the phones and open the photo gallery. They made me do that, too, although I didn’t take any photos. The policeman threatened to take me to the police station if I didn’t show him my photos. Then they ran the information about my friend through the database and said that everything was okay, but that it was better to take selfies these days. They intimidate their own people.”



Destroyed houses on Mayakovsky Street after the missile fell on July 3

A Belgorod-based outlet FONAR.TV [wrote](#) that identity checks among locals who take photos of themselves or other objects on the streets have become common practice since October 19, referring to testimonies from the residents. One local journalist who wished to remain anonymous told our correspondent that two women in Belgorod reported being stopped for an identity check after taking selfies near the regional government building.

On October 19, immediately after the authorities introduced a “medium response mode” in the Belgorod region, police [started](#) stopping and searching cars. According to eyewitnesses, there were similar checks on November 3 as well, the day after a man with a fake grenade was [detained](#) in Belgorod.

School and university students in the whole of Belgorod region were told that they will continue to attend classes remotely until December 1, whereas businesses located in Belgorod and other areas close to the Ukrainian border were advised to switch over to remote work and introduce flexible working hours.

Between late October and early November about 500 Belgorod residents, mostly

women with children, were officially [transferred](#) from the city to temporary accommodation centers near Moscow and Tula, according to government data.

Still, no official checkpoints have been placed at the entrance to Belgorod itself. Movement in and out of Belgorod Region remains unrestricted.

## **“If you don’t clap, no bomb shelter for you!”**

On Sunday evening, one of Belgorod’s bars was unexpectedly crowded: ten guests in one room. The windowless basement with is filled with soft red light of the garland, tables with sofas line the plywood walls, bartender pours beer and cider from the tap. One of the guests jokes that it could be used as a bomb shelter, “the glass won’t shatter”.

The owner of the bar, Alexei [not his real name], left Belgorod and moved to St. Petersburg since September 21. He decided it would be safer that way, not only because of the shelling, but also because of the mobilisation.

“It’s very difficult to be in Belgorod now, also because of the mobilization. Everyone knows each other there and understands that a lot of guys have been taken away. Expecting that maybe something could arrive now or that the military enlistment office could come knocking on my door is tough,” he tells us on the phone.

Only since moving to another city, did he remember what peaceful life in Belgorod looked like before the war in Ukraine, he admits.



A street in Belgorod

"The military is everywhere around the city, these Z letters and \*\*\*\*\* [awful] explosions. All this is seen as normal as if it is the way it should be, and then you go visit to a quiet big city where really nothing is happening, where the people live like they used to, unlike in Belgorod, where everything is different now," Alexei explains, overcome with emotion.

In St. Petersburg, he says, most of the people he talked to do not understand the current situation in Belgorod. He divided people into four categories, based on their perceptions of what is happening on the Russian-Ukrainian border. "Those in the first category say, 'Holy shit, are you from Belgorod? Does Belgorod still exist!'" Those of the second type think that Belgorod is part of Ukraine and ask me how I got to Russia and how I crossed the border. The third group of people are those who at least read some news. They understand roughly what is going on, but it's the smallest group. There's also a fourth category, those just don't care. They don't understand what Belgorod is, where it's located, whether it's Ukrainian or Russian, they don't care," Alexei explains.

While he is away, a group of guests are playing board games in his bar, and a

couple is kissing at a table in the far end of the room. Among themselves, the people hardly talk about the shelling, the new response mode or the overall situation in the city. DJ sets are still on Fridays and Saturdays, movies are being screened on weekdays, and the staff is planning a Halloween party in the coming days. Still, according to Alexei, his bar is still going through hard times, since February.



A house in Belgorod

“Now all my staff are quitting and leaving town, and I need to find new people. Our revenue has also gone down a lot. We opened during the second wave of the coronavirus, and then I thought, ‘If we survive the coronavirus now, we’ll survive everything’. Then the special operation was launched, and we started to earn in two weeks the amount we used to earn on one Friday night. Since September 22, we’re back there again. A lot of potential customers left town. At this point we’re hanging on by some divine spark, I guess, the bar owner laughs. And it’s not just us — everyone’s situation is bad. The owner of another place called me the other day and said, ‘Today will go down in history. Five people came in and spent a total of two thousand rubles.’”



Stress also affects the customers themselves, Alexei says. A few regulars “get drunk because they can’t leave”. People who used to go to the bar once or twice a month now go every day and have alcohol problems.

It’s hard to predict what will happen to businesses as a result of Belgorod authorities introducing a “medium-level response mode”. “No one knows what it is and how to live with it. [No one knows], whether the authorities will introduce some elements of martial law. Martial law prohibits the sale of alcohol, and if that happens, then business is \*\*\* [doomed]. At any moment, they can introduce curfew and shut down all public catering,” Alexei says.



#### Rides in Lenin Park

An open mic night is about to start in the bar, but there aren’t many of those eager to take the stage. Just one man, a Russian rock fan in his thirties, wearing a black sweatshirt, his dark hair gathered in a sloppy ponytail, decides to perform. He starts by shouting into the microphone: “Tonight’s the anti-crisis concert! If you don’t clap, no bomb shelter for you tonight!” After tuning his guitar, the musician sings a famous song by a rock band “Nochniye Snaipery” before performing a few ballads by “Korol i Shut”.

“I don’t plan to go back to Belgorod, because I don’t see any prospects there. Why would I want to be in a city where I have to rebuild from scratch what I already had if I can create something else — and still be at least somewhat sure that it will not be destroyed?” Alexei concludes.

Still, the entrepreneur is afraid that the fighting could reach the city where he moved to, and that it could affect everyone in Russia.

“Of course, I am very scared that this escalates, because if hostilities reach St. Petersburg, it will mean the beginning of a world war or a full-scale and ruthless war on Russian territory, which will affect all its people. And, of course, it’s scary as hell,” he confesses.

By midnight, the bar in Belgorod is empty.