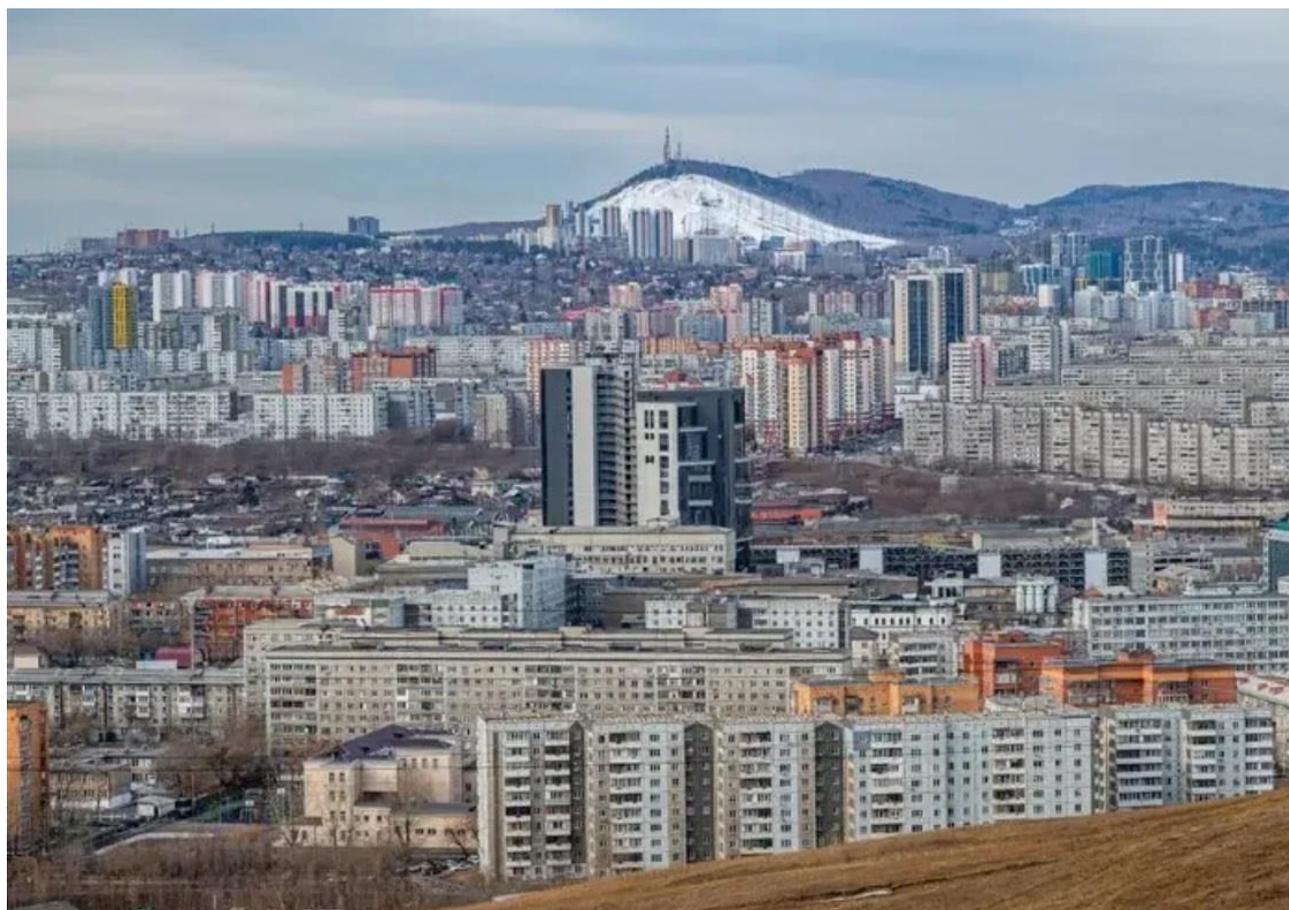


# Siberia or bust: the Kremlin's plan to relocate Ukrainians

**A dazzling Siberian development push hides a darker mission: breaking Ukrainian communities through forced relocation**



Overlook over Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia. March 19, 2025. [Michael Runkel/Robert Harding RF/AFP]

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Behind the façade of a glittering 700-billion-ruble investment bonanza in Siberia lurks a sinister Soviet-style plot: Moscow's scheme to forcibly relocate vulnerable Ukrainians, stripping them from their homes under the guise of opportunity.

In mid-November, the National Resistance Center revealed that "urgent" official letters started appearing in occupation administrations, schools, hospitals, and municipal institutions in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Local authorities were directed to create lists of workers suitable for "long-term business trips" to the Angara-Yenisei macroregion and the Far East. They were to focus on individuals "not burdened by family circumstances" – essentially, the most vulnerable ones.

The National Resistance Center stated that this is the start of a hidden campaign to deport Ukrainians to Siberia, disguised as voluntary relocation.



*Statue in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia. March 19, 2025. [Michael Runkel/Robert Harding RF/AFP]*

The essence of imperial policy remains unchanged: first – "passportization," then – "business trips," then – "state resettlement programs," and finally – a complete change in the demographic composition of the occupied regions, center analysts wrote on November 13.

Real-world parallels already exist. In occupied cities such as Mariupol, Russian authorities have already resettled thousands of migrants from Russia while systematically excluding former Ukrainian residents from housing and property ownership, mirroring the demographic engineering intended in Siberia.

## **Shoigu's program**

Another perspective on the new program is tied to domestic political and financial motives behind its creation.

In an interview with Kontur, Petro Andriushchenko, head of the Center for the Study of the Occupation, said the plan was mainly Sergei Shoigu's idea, referring to the Russian Security Council secretary.

"He's trying to establish this program to Siberianize Siberia. It's the second time... This program's estimated cost is 700 billion rubles," Andriushchenko said, adding that Shoigu aims to become "the ruler of Siberia" and gain influence and resources. "What is Siberia? It's diamonds. It's oil," he continued.

Andriushchenko is skeptical about mass resettlement of Ukrainians in compact groups.

"For [the Russians], the Ukrainians represent a danger: a danger of riots, a danger of a manifestation of discontent... So their goal is to disperse them," he said, noting that relocating everyone from Mariupol to Vladivostok, creating "a piece of Ukraine in Vladivostok," seems illogical.

Andriy Gorodnitskiy, PhD, a political expert and head of the NGO Ukrainian Trust, disagreed.

"There's enough territory that you can easily settle a large number of people there far apart from each other," he told Kontur, adding that in a harsh climate, "when you're not living but surviving," "you're not thinking hard about waging any battle."

"Second, there's some nuance here: these days in Russia there aren't so many resources that you can spend them comfortably on programs that aren't backed by ideology," Gorodnitskiy said.

He added that the aim is gradual: turning "voluntary" business trips into forced resettlement.

"First the deportation will be mild, and then it will grow harsher and harsher until no one is left there [in the occupied territories] who could in any way remind them [the Russians] of Ukrainians who supposedly might threaten them," he said.

## **Soviet deportations revived**

The Kremlin is following models tested during the Soviet era, Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk, a historian and senior research scientist at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, told Kontur.

The most vivid example was Operation West in 1947. Planned in strict secrecy, the operation resulted in the deportation of more than 78,000 people from western Ukraine to Kazakhstan and remote areas of Siberia in a single day. The Soviet government labeled all of them "active nationalists and bandits."

Open-source records show this was not the only mass deportation in western Ukraine, but it was the largest. In the 1940s and early 1950s, 203,000 people were forcibly removed from the region, most of them sent to Kazakhstan.

These operations aimed to achieve several goals at once: suppress resistance, impose demographic control and supply industry with labor.

Hai-Nyzhnyk said Russia faces similar pressures today. A militarized economy, mobilization and tighter limits on migration from Central Asia have produced an acute labor shortage. Propaganda now frequently promotes the need to "counterbalance the Muslim population."

As a result, he said, the Kremlin is seeking a "convenient resource" – Slavs who "will not stand out" in Siberia and the Far East and will help fill labor gaps.

## **Modern parallels emerge**

Hai-Nyzhnyk said another driving force behind the policy was the Kremlin's growing suspicion of residents in the occupied territories.

"At Russian Security Council meetings they've said repeatedly that loyalists are potential traitors," he said, noting that Moscow was creating an enemy for itself and looking for ways to scatter these residents across vast regions, separating them from their communities and stripping them of political influence.

Hai-Nyzhnyk stressed that the plan likely would not repeat Stalin-era brutality: "It won't be everyone shoved into train cars in one night."

Instead, he described a softer façade: employment contracts, supposedly voluntary moves, "new jobs" and propaganda promising a "chance at a new life." But the underlying process would remain the same, only the packaging would change.

Hai-Nyzhnyk said the end goal was "washing out Ukrainian identity, isolation from the European part, and making collective resistance impossible." The program aims not only to relocate people but also to dismantle the social fabric capable of opposing the occupation.

Recent leaks suggesting the possible transfer of occupied residents to Siberia and the Far East match years of Kremlin rhetoric.

According to Hai-Nyzhnyk, "Large-scale plans to relocate 'compatriots' and Russian speakers has long been a topic of discussion in Moscow." The term "compatriots," he noted, did not refer to Russian citizens but to all Slavs and Russian-speaking residents in occupied areas, automatically placing them within the so-called "Russian World."

The first examples were already visible.

"There are testimonials of illegal resettlement of Ukrainians in Murmansk Region and Siberia in 2022–2023," Hai-Nyzhnyk said. Russia, he argued, had effectively used the first two years of the full-scale war as a trial run for its deportation procedures.

He offered a warning to those under occupation who hoped loyalty might shield them.

"Any 'loyal' person will be destroyed morally, psychologically and physically. . . . This isn't a state where human life is valued," he said.

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