

Database

The report is based on a database of the population and status of all urban settlements in the RSFSR and the Russian Federation: within the framework of this chapter, data from population censuses from 1970 to 2021 were systematized (by data, with the identification of cities, urban-type settlements (UTS), working settlements (WS), etc.) and taking into account their population size. Next, the growth/decline in the intercensal period (in percent) was calculated.

The structure of the table and its final form are available at the link.

Theoretical framework

The report attempts to develop the field of dynamic urbanistics, a new scientific discipline that studies rapid changes in urban population. The theoretical framework closest to this discipline is the theory of differentiated urbanization, which was developed in the 1980s and 1990s by Jack Gibbs, Herman Geyer, and Thomas Contuli. It also attempts to explain why cities grow unevenly: some large centers unexpectedly lose population, medium and small cities suddenly begin to grow faster, and completely new settlements appear in some places.

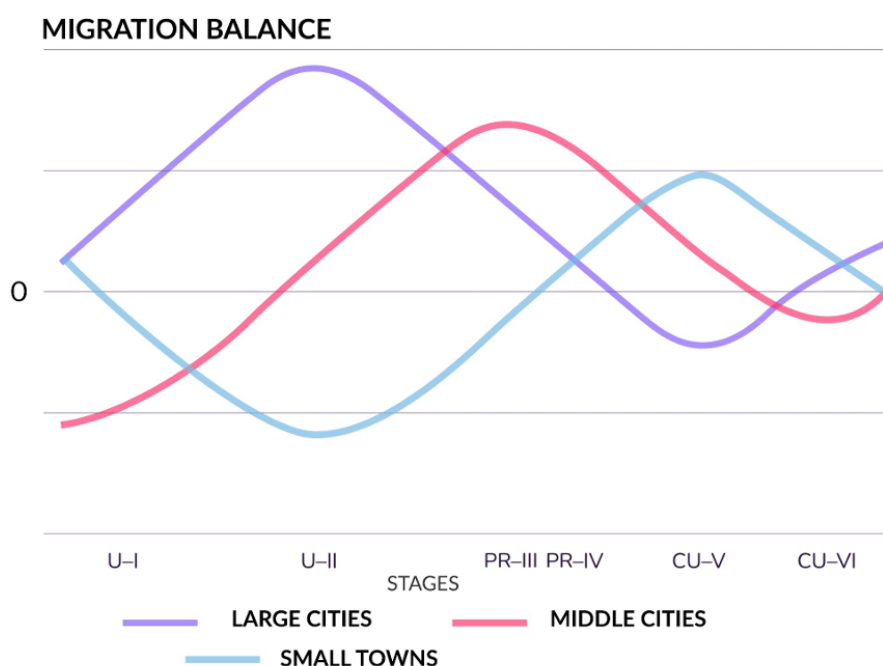


Figure 1. Description of city growth cycles according to Gibbs. The growth of large cities is followed by the growth of small cities.

The idea is based on the observation that different migration patterns have dominated at different periods of history and in different countries. First, people from villages move to large cities (essentially, the process of classical urbanization), then some of the inhabitants of large cities move to the suburbs and smaller towns (suburbanization and counter-urbanization), and then the reverse process may begin—reurbanization, when large centers attract the population again.

The report criticizes the theory, saying it's not a good fit for the field of dynamic urbanism in Russia: Gibbs' theory oversimplifies real-world processes and doesn't take local contexts into account. For example, the centralized influence of the state, i.e., the administrative-command economy and the

“direction” of people to cities (for example, to “shock” construction projects, within which small cities grew rapidly). It is very noticeable that the model is based almost entirely on the experience of the US, Western Europe, and several developed countries. Even when talking about Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the picture is often completely different: megacities continue to grow at a tremendous pace, and counter-urbanization is almost invisible (for example, this is typical of Indian and Chinese cities).

Exploring the field of dynamic urbanism, we will try to develop a new model, but first we need to identify contemporary and historical trends in dynamic urban settlements in Russia.

Cities in transition period: USSR type



Figure 2. Russian most dynamic cities in 1970s-1979s. Source: Petr Petrakov

As we can see in Figure 2, virtually all urban settlements, both large and small, grew in the 1970s. To a large extent, this was due to the third stage of demographic transition that the USSR entered during those years, with the population in many cities growing naturally. Only the old industrial areas of the Ural Mountains and isolated settlements along the Trans-Siberian Railway declined in population. At the same time, many new cities appeared, growing by thousands of percent between censuses. The most “dynamic” cities during this period were Nadym, Neryungri, and Kurchatov—cities of large construction projects and new development. Within this category, the most striking elements of dynamic urbanism are the “frontier” cities – cities in the depths of Siberia and the Far East, built for the development of deposits and further processing of resources remote from major transport routes, or for the construction of such routes. Such cities are not an “invention” of the planned economy – the concept of “frontier” comes from the development of remote areas of the American Wild West, and in particular, the cities of the Gold Rush. The most striking example is Dawson City (now Dawson, Yukon, Canada), which grew from 0 to 40,000 in a very short time due to news of gold being found in the Klondike River area. However, the command economy transformed this phenomenon from an exclusively market-driven one (as in this example, with individuals and small firms earning money from reselling gold) into an administrative-controlled one.

The biggest problems in such cities arise during the transition to a market economy, when the state has less need for a resource or facility, but there is no demand for it on the market. The most obvious examples here are the settlements along the BAM railway line – for example, the urban-type settlement of

Severomuysk, founded in the Siberian forest by a team of lumberjacks. In the 1970s and 1980s, it grew from 0 to more than 10,000 inhabitants as a settlement serving the BAM railway line and its construction. In the post-Soviet period, the town fell to 600-800 inhabitants, which is associated with the end of the “great construction” and the lower economic viability of the route. Centralized population growth was achieved only through the liquidation of nearby settlements (for example, the settlement of Tunnel). Such settlements are unprofitable for the market system, which is why they experience the greatest crisis during market transition.

Cities in transition period: Russian type



Figure 3. The most dynamic cities in Russia in the 2010s.

In the 2010s and 2020s, urbanization in Russia took on a distinctly differential character, with the growth of cities determined by a combination of economic incentives, climatic preferences, and cultural and demographic characteristics. Now, the growth of cities is often initiated by individual decisions, supported by market mechanisms, such as direct access to high-paying jobs (being within the isochrone of commuter migration). Separate elements include cultural characteristics, which can determine the demographic situation in the territory.

1. Agglomeration growth: The agglomeration of large cities, especially around megacities, has become one of the dominant vectors of growth in modern Russia. In the St. Petersburg agglomeration, for example, former rural settlements have rapidly transformed into urbanized areas. Murino and Bugry in the Vsevolozhsky District of the Leningrad Region illustrate this: in 2019, Murino officially received city status, and its population exceeded 116,000 by 2025, largely due to an influx from the capital and neighboring regions. These areas, located 10–20 kilometers from St. Petersburg, are developing as bedroom communities with high-rise buildings. Growth factors include proximity to the labor market and infrastructure, which reinforces polarization: central agglomerations attract up to 90 percent of internal migrants, while the periphery stagnates.

2. Ethnic demographics: The emphasis on large families is noticeable in the republics of the North Caucasus, where urbanization is combined with the preservation of traditional settlement patterns. For example, in the Chechen Republic: the village of Shelkovskaya, the administrative center of the Shelkovsky district, demonstrates the transition from rural to urban status: in 2024, it was transformed into a city with a population of about 15,000 people, including new settlements based on former “stanitsas” – Cossack or village communities. Here, growth is driven by high natural increase (the average family has 4-6 children) and migration from rural areas. The cultural factor plays a key role:

family ties and traditions keep the population in local areas where agricultural practices are combined with urban infrastructure.

3. “Endless vacation” reflects climatic migration to regions with a mild climate and recreational potential. The Krasnodar Krai and Kaliningrad Region lead in terms of migration growth: between 2010 and 2020, over 500,000 people arrived in the region, mainly pensioners and families from central and northern regions, attracted by the warm sea and low cost of living. In the Kaliningrad region, the migration inflow amounted to about 48,000 people during the same period. This flow intensified after 2014, when the regions became “second homes” for remote workers, but it creates major challenges for local residents: first and foremost, rising housing prices and a greater burden on urban infrastructure.

4. Labor migration to the “hydrocarbon regions” – the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YNAO) and the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug (KMAO) – is driven by the demand for skilled labor in oil and gas production. In 2010–2020, the districts attracted about 200,000 shift workers and permanent migrants annually, with a peak in 2018–2019, when the increase was 10–15 percent. Surgut, Nefteyugansk, and Kogalym continue to experience the highest growth.

The Soviet system artificially supported thousands of single-industry settlements, distributing resources and people according to a planned principle. After the collapse of the USSR, market mechanisms failed to replace state planning: demand for labor, coal, textiles, and military products collapsed, and new economic niches that would have allowed for economic diversification in most small towns did not emerge. As a result, population decline became the most visible manifestation of the failure of the market transition at the local level.

1. The crisis of urban-type settlements (UTS or PGT): By 2025, of the approximately 1,200 UTS that existed in 1991, more than 400 had lost over 30 percent of their residents, and about 150 had turned into “ghost towns” with a population of less than 3,000 people. A typical example is the single-industry settlements in the Irkutsk Region, Yakutia, and the Magadan Region. The market has not created alternative employment: factories and mines have closed, and private business has not arrived due to the lack of infrastructure, low purchasing power, and remoteness. The state tried to launch single-industry town programs (since 2014), but they covered only 319 settlements and largely failed: of the promised 30 billion rubles per year, significantly less was actually allocated, and new jobs were created mainly in trade and the public sector, rather than in manufacturing.

2. “The country that fled the cold”: the crisis of urban settlements in the northeast and Siberia. After 1991, the system of northern allowances was significantly reduced, air travel became commercial and, due to remoteness and climatic conditions, expensive, and extractive companies optimized their staff in market conditions, often switching to shift work instead of permanent residence. The result was that people lost their motivation to continue living in difficult climatic conditions: for example, the population of the Magadan region declined by 25 percent between 2010 and 2024, and in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug by 20 percent. Cities such as Bilibino and Pevek lost up to half of their residents, and urban-type settlements in these regions also experienced a crisis, with many simply becoming abandoned (for example, the settlements of Kadykchan and Atka in the Magadan region).

3. The “vacuum cleaner” effect: the crisis of the near periphery in Central Russia. Moscow and St. Petersburg used “market instruments” — salaries, services, and choices offered by the capitals — to draw the working-age population from the surrounding small towns. Entire “demographic voids” have formed in the Tver, Kostroma, and Smolensk regions: cities within a radius of 200–400 km from the capital are losing 1–2 percent of their population annually. Striking examples are Vyshny Volochek (up to -12 percent between censuses) and Bezhet'sk (up to -14 percent between censuses), both in the Tver region.

Summary

The shift from the Soviet planned economy to market relations represented the most profound structural shock ever experienced by Russia's settlement system. It fundamentally reordered the

urban hierarchy, redirected migration flows, and determined the very survival of hundreds of towns and settlements. The Western theory of differential urbanisation developed by Gibbs, Geyer, and Kontuly—built on gradual market evolution and sequential stages of concentration, counter-urbanisation, and reurbanisation—proved entirely inadequate as an explanatory model for the Russian case. In Russia these stages either failed to materialise, overlapped chaotically, or appeared in severely distorted forms.

The core weakness of the theory lies in its neglect of institutional and political factors. Under central planning, the growth and decline of cities were dictated not by market demand for labour or innovation but by state decisions on factory placement, military installations, and infrastructure. When those decisions lost financial and coercive support after 1991, market mechanisms did not simply activate—they operated selectively and with brutal effect. They strengthened only those places that already possessed a critical mass of population, infrastructure, and diversified economy.

Market signals thus became the primary driver of depopulation in small and medium-sized mono-industrial towns. Soviet settlements had been deliberately designed as single-factory or single-sector entities—mines, defence plants, timber combines, textile mills—with virtually no possibility of economic diversification. When the enterprise closed or slashed employment tenfold, the local labour market collapsed instantly. Private business never arrived because there was neither solvent demand nor market-priced transport access. Consequently, an entire class of Soviet-era towns and urban-type settlements proved structurally incapable of adapting to market conditions. This is not a temporary transition crisis but a fundamental incompatibility between the Soviet model of settlement and market principles.

At the same time, where local conditions aligned with new market opportunities, striking growth trajectories emerged: agglomerative expansion around Moscow and St Petersburg (Murino and Kudrovo), climate-driven migration to the south, and rotational-resource clusters in the North. These patterns fit none of the Gibbs stages; they combine concentration and deconcentration simultaneously and produce entirely new forms unknown in the West.

References

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