

## “BIG MOSCOW” PROJECT

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REGIONS

**M**oscow and other post-Soviet cities differ fundamentally from the majority of foreign European towns, where the autonomy of municipalities absorbed by expanding cities has been preserved, and where urban agglomerations in many cases contain hundreds of territorial communities. In the former Soviet Union, in accordance with the principles of one-man management and centralization of power, the administrative frontiers of towns and cities moved in step with their growth. The territory of Moscow has been expanded on more than one occasion. The most significant expansion took place in the 1960s when the capital's borders were widened to meet the fully built Moscow ring road (MKAD). In 1963, an exclave was added to Moscow, Zelenograd, one of the main centers for electrical industry. In 1984, the oval “body” of the capital grew tentacles in the form of several highways and in the 1990s acquired farther, less extensive enclaves and exclaves. However, the Russian capital had not undergone such a revolutionary reconfiguration of its administrative borders as that in 2011-2012.

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In June 2010, the then president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, announced an initiative for the enlargement of Moscow's borders. The governments of Moscow and the Moscow Region, as well as other relevant federal state structures, were charged with working out how to enlarge the territory of Moscow, including the re-positioning of the federal legislative and executive branches of power and the creation of an international financial center. These proposals were approved by the president on July 11 2011, and at the end of the same year by the legislative authorities of Moscow and the Moscow Region, the large majority of which is held by the ruling party United Russia.

In total, since July 1, 2012, 21 municipalities have joined Moscow from the south and southwest areas of the Moscow Region, including two small towns – Troitsk and Shcherbinka. Part of the Odinstovo and Krasnogorsk territories have also been integrated into the capital. As a result, the surface area of Moscow immediately increased by 149,000 hectares – or by 1.4 times. The capital came to border the Kaluga Region directly and the new territory has become known as New Moscow; chosen for its practical geographic location, favorable ecological state and low level of urbanization (a total population of 250,000) – the population of New Moscow is expected to be 1.5-2 million people.

The goal of solving all problems related to the centralization of power is very ambitious. But in modern conditions, it is hard to achieve – our huge social systems, such as urban agglomerations, are too complexly arranged and the diversity and autonomy of their constituent parts are too large for the Moscow project's successful development. As can be seen in many countries, a disparity between administrative borders of a centralized city and its agglomeration is a common phenomenon, which in itself does not prevent an effective solution to bigger problems.

The radical redrawing of the map of the capital region has seen quite a sluggish social response, even though the full realization of the government project requires such a large investment that in some way or another it will affect every Russian. Moreover, in taking on such a major decision, the authorities have not listened to the opinions of experts, and have not organized any public hearings or referendums regarding changes to the borders of the country's federal subjects. Meanwhile, the creation of a "Big London", or the reform of the administrative and territorial divisions of the Paris region, brought about sharp discussions and took not months, but years.

In both of these European capitals, the most important problems of the administrative reforms were not as much the administrative border and the creation of “verticals of power”, as the detailed distinction between the two levels of self-governance; provision of a single urban plan; the participation of citizens in activities of local municipalities; eliminating differences in the quality of various utilities in several parts of the city agglomeration. In France, national legislation obliges communes within a single urban agglomeration to work together. Resorting to the redistribution of borders is an extreme and rare measure. Such an approach is not only a testament to tradition and a show of respect for historical experience and the singularity of territorial communities, but also a reflection of the tendencies for the development of a contemporary society – the ambition of many strata of society to live in a single social sphere, which meets their specific demands. The administrative fragmentation of urban material gives municipalities the opportunity to take on necessary duties and regulate the use of territories in defined ways, while business people are able to choose communes that offer the most suitable conditions.

In planning such a costly initiative as the reworking of a capital city, a central government usually seeks specific political and economic aims – a transfer of the country’s government to a new city that is equidistant from former ‘centers of power’; specific regions or borders along ethnic lines; the construction of newly developed regions, etc. But this is the first the world has heard of – the construction of a new capital right next to an already overcrowded old one. What arguments were made in favor of such a significant enlargement of the capital’s borders by the project’s instigators?

## GET RID OF THE YOKE. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR, IDEAS AND PROJECTS

The first and main argument is that Moscow does not have enough space – for housing construction or to overcome its deficit of navigable roads, streets and conservation areas. Official experts called the MKAD a yoke for the capital city. For a long time now, Moscow has been spilling over its edges. More housing is already being constructed in the city’s outskirts than in the city itself. The gap

in per capita income of the region versus the city decreased in the 2000s from 4.5 to less than double.

Second, an undeniable argument is that Moscow and its surroundings already represent a holistic urban system, which should be governed from a single central point. The zone of active labor and cultural everyday interaction covers an area of no less than 30-50 km across. A single market for housing, places of work, recreation and service centers stretches 100 km from the MKAD and includes parts of the territories of neighboring regions.

A third argument is the urgent need to avoid a transportation collapse by means of a centralized territorial plan. Almost two thirds of the region's inhabitants work in the capital city, spending between 80 to 120 minutes each day commuting. The transportation system of the Moscow agglomeration, which is managed from a number of different centers, is not coping with adapting to such large-scale and long-distant journeys. Hours-long traffic jams in Moscow have become a sad reality.

Most experts see the roots of the problems as the historical radial-concentric structure of the agglomeration; almost half of all workplaces are located inside the Third Transport Ring, while only 8% of the population lives there (Velichko, 2012). Therefore, widening the city's boundaries represents a means of converting the monocentric structure into a polycentric one.

Polycentrism is one of the progressive principles for the territorial organization of a society. In the EU, it has become fundamental in territorial planning on all levels – from pan-European to urban. It is acceptable to call urban systems polycentric when they include several closely located and independent towns, between which intensive links have been built up, facilitated by their specialties, agreed strategies for development and cooperation. The rational idea for the creation of sub-centers to relieve the areas inside the Garden Ring was presented back in the Genplan of 1971. However, a tendency for territorial concentration took hold, particularly in the 1990s, when financial capital, goods and services from across Russia flowed into Moscow. From this point of departure, adherents to the city's enlargement draw the same conclusion: without drastic re-examination of the city's configuration, it will be impossible to mitigate the flow of traffic toward the center in the mornings and outflow from the center in the evenings.

There are arguments, of course, that politicians prefer not to disseminate. Foremost, construction industry interests and those of major landholders, which

are interlinked with the growth in prices of land plots in adjoining territories. To engage in mass construction on new sites is always considerably more profitable than to engage in “bespoke” building in cramped Moscow housing areas.

Other reasons that have been cited include the government’s ambition to create, for both itself and big business, more favorable living and working conditions in an ecologically clean region, to rid itself of Moscow traffic jams and form a ‘ghetto for the rich’. Those in power have also been suspected of seeking to protect themselves from the potential threat of mass demonstrations in a not particularly loyal city.

Almost all nine projects for the development of the Moscow capital region, established during the international consultation competition “Big Moscow”, were based on ideas of polycentric development. It goes without saying that this competition became one of the positive results of the decision to enlarge Moscow. It allowed an accumulation and analysis of the newest information and, most importantly, a creation of an unprecedented bank of ideas. During the competition, public reports were presented, while presentations and exhibitions were also made. Moscow authorities announced that no one single project would be chosen, but that final plans would comprise the best elements of each one.

The competition winner was announced as the French collective under the direction of Antoine Grumbach, head of the agency Antoine Grumbach and Associates, best known as the author of the “Grand Paris” project. As with the Paris project, winners of the Moscow competition proposed a linear schema for expansion of the capital city to the southwest. Their priorities were the creation of a “town in the woodland” and the development of rapid transit; they gave more attention to infrastructures for rapid transit than the other contenders. In several of the other projects proposed, the idea was raised, in particular, of linking Moscow’s airports using high-speed transportation. The general motif of many of the projects was the elimination of factors that bring people and transportation into the central part of Moscow. Concepts from the workshop of Moscow architect Andrey Chernikhov focused on organizing alternative centers of the gravitation of labor resources on a base of second and third-tier urban agglomerations, if the population of “Old Moscow” reduces from 12 million to 9-9.5 million people. Other possible ideas included the rehabilitation of industrial zones, the “humanization” of spaces between residential quarters, and the development and reworking of the Moscow riverside.

## “CRAZY SCHEME”? ARGUMENTS AGAINST

Given that much discussion has been devoted to the need to break the traditional radial structure, it is important to ask just how possible it is to make the Russian capital into a polycentric city. Historically, there have only been a handful of examples of major cities being totally reconstructed. The French geo-urban planner Philippe Haeringer called this phenomenon recondition – “overhaul”.

The experience of Grand Paris – which only now, over 40 years since its first general plan was accepted, is seeing the daily commute of people to places in the suburbs nearer their workplaces at levels somewhat comparable to flows of inward-traveling workers – demonstrates an extremely complex, time-consuming and costly task. In Moscow, it is impossible to trade the historical area of the center, which is full of architectural monuments and museums, theaters and exhibition halls, with any radically innovative representative buildings in sub-centers beyond the MKAD. A business ghetto for senior managers or civil servants in well-preserved cottage communities would hardly represent a varied enough or attractive environment for even the majority of their inhabitants.

Therefore, the existing inward-moving flows of people will remain. New people will join them: more civil servants and service personnel, while builders will be unlikely to live only within close distance of their new places of work, and family members of new “settlers” will continue to commute to “old” Moscow to work and study. On a regional level, Moscow, as with London or Paris, will remain a monocentric agglomeration. The transit system, to meet the requirements of an enlarged Moscow, essentially needs to be reinvented. Furthermore, there are no cities in the world with the same structure that Moscow will have following the enlargement.

New construction will require a huge amount of labor, which leads to depopulation in not only small and medium, but also other larger cities. However, this labor alone will not be enough as the capital will have to take in thousands of new migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia along with all the problems associated with resettlement, adaptation and social and territorial polarization.

The capital already has more than 20% of the GRP of all the regions in Russia, 25-30% of all paid services and trade and 80-90% of bank capital. The

spending power of Muscovites is twice the average for the rest of the country. The high concentration of financial resources and the incessant flow of migrants give the Moscow real estate market its speculative character and also create a sharp social polarization.

It is better not to be reminded about the question of cost. The initial estimate to move government structures was about 10 billion dollars. The value of the administrative buildings in “old” Moscow that would be vacated was assessed at 15 billion dollars, but the whole cost of the project is clearly much more. In addition, it is unlikely that the presidential administration and the government would fully abandon their representative buildings in the center. It is not just about convenience, but also the decades-long high symbolic value of the Kremlin and other such places in the eyes of the people – and the whole world – as well as the thousand-year long traditions of Russian power, its historical continuity and legitimacy. Furthermore, there is a political risk of isolation for upper government authorities if they are to be located far from the Kremlin in the forests of outer Moscow.

Participants in the international Big Moscow competition estimated that the development of the new capital territory would require between 85 billion and 187 billion euros. For example, Ricardo Bofill’s team estimated that investments in facilities for a new parliament center alone would be 100 billion euros.

Instead of the megalomania of “New Moscow”, some experts are calling for the use of available territorial reserves, primarily industrial areas – either closed ones or those that can be appropriately moved out of the city. According to the institute responsible for drawing up the General Plan for Moscow, the capital has 209 industrial areas, with a total surface area of 20,000 hectares.

It has been suggested that following a move by the administration and government to the periphery of Big Moscow, the center of the city will be given over to Russian and foreign tourists. This brings about two scenarios. Either vacated government buildings will quickly turn into office space and thus the number of workplaces in the center will not diminish, or the government’s departure will threaten the center with degeneration and the arrival of immigrants and other poorer sectors of society.

The Moscow region is losing tens of thousands of hectares of the most productive land. It is well known that agricultural productivity is higher the closer it is situated to a city. Only fragments of the protected forested belt

surrounding Moscow will remain. At an assembly for a working group under the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, anxiety was expressed that following its unification with Moscow, surrounding woodland would be reclassified as city land and up to 20% of its surface area would be given over to elite cottages. The emphasis put on the construction of low-level and individual housing construction by the initiators of the enlargement of the capital casts doubt over the ecological value of the project on account of the high-energy intensity of individual settlements and the predominance of sparsely populated households.

A Moscow law for the local autonomy of the new territories obliges authorities to consider the opinions of dacha owners and members of allotment cooperatives before making decisions on the development of new municipalities, and guarantees that land taxes will remain as they previously were. However, it is clear that a portion of dacha settlements near convenient roads or in other attractive locations will need to be removed to make way for expansion. The government has spoken of a simplified procedure for the confiscation of lands, based on its experience of construction for the Sochi Olympics. Under this plan, conflicts will be inevitable and could become politicized, especially considering the high social status of some of the dacha owners.

## UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS FOR A “RUSSIAN BRASILIA”

The seriousness of the federal government’s intent to develop the territory of “New Moscow” has been publicly confirmed on the highest level. However, the government’s goal to cut the budget deficit must make us assume that many projects will be launched only slowly. The creation of a Russian “Brasilia” right next to historical Moscow will be delayed and for the foreseeable future will be limited to the construction outside the MKAD areas of development, cottage settlements and office complexes.

Plans to move the government into “New Moscow” have already been cast into doubt, although no official rejection of the idea has been voiced. A key member of the presidential administration, Vladimir Kozhin, noted in October 2012 that, in addition to examining the question of moving federal authorities into “New Moscow”, another idea was under consideration – namely the



possibility of creating a government quarter not far from the Kremlin, where the main ministries and departments would be concentrated.

The project for the relocation of five higher education institutions for “New Moscow” represents a more near-term prospect. Construction of their campuses, which will hold a concentration of faculties, services and student halls that are currently spread out across different parts of the city, could begin by the end of 2014. From the view of the projects’ planners, this will enable an improvement in the quality of education.

According to a survey by the independent Levada Center, residents of “old” Moscow take a skeptical view of the grandiose plan to enlarge the city. Immediately after the government’s announcement that the plan had been accepted (July 19-21, 2011), social opinion divided: 41% of those questioned approved the plan in full or in part, while as many people were either fully or partially opposed to it (18% had difficulty answering). A month later (August 23-25), despite propaganda for the plan in the media, the number of opponents had grown: 42% versus 32% (while 24% did not respond). However, the majority of inhabitants of newly added territories look upon the project positively, where social standards are more equated to higher Moscow standards. For example, the average pension size grew from 5,700 rubles to 12,000, and pay for civil servants has risen significantly.

Solutions to problems in the Moscow capital region cannot be limited to that region alone, however large the borders that are under consideration. Moscow is one of several regions in Russia with a constantly growing population; it draws migrants from across the entire country. Therefore, a solution for the polycentric development of Russia beckons via the stimulus of major cities as alternatives to the hypertrophy of Moscow, neighboring regional centers and other large and medium-sized cities. Discussion should focus on effective regional policy, including the foundation of a nationwide strategy for resettlement, similar to the Soviet United Resettlement Scheme, but with a different ideological foundation.