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# Dacha as a social and economic phenomenon and its role in rural development in Russia

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## Abstract

This article delves into the proliferation of *dacha* as a second/temporary country residence for urbanites in Russia. The phenomenon is viewed from a socio-cultural and economic perspective, uncovering the reasons behind their popularity among Russian city dwellers. These reasons are related to the geographical, historical, and economic features of the nation as well as to the evolution of rural areas and agriculture across various zones. The article analyzes the diversity of second homes, their types, quantities as well as preferences and activities of *dacha* dwellers (*dachniks*), their socio-economic composition and the challenges they face, contingent on the geographic location of these estates and the demand for them among specific urban groups. It is found that the interaction between *dachniks* who come from urban centers, local communities, and rural economies, as well as the distinctive facets of *dacha* life, vary markedly depending on the natural and socio-economic conditions, which are largely shaped by the remoteness of a place from cities. Special emphasis is put on the distribution and distinctiveness of *dachas* in the Non-Black Earth zone regions of central Russia, where their prevalence and significance are especially pronounced.

*Keywords:* dacha, rural area, agriculture, urbanization, counter-urbanization, Non-Black Earth zone of Russia.

*JEL classification:* Q1, R2.

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## 1. Introduction

Russia's vast expanse is marked by divergent trajectories in rural development, owing to the country's natural diversity and the limited number of major cities, which draw rural populations from the periphery, the northern area in particular. Historically, population settlement and agricultural cultivation were compelled to extend into less fertile natural zones than the agricultural activities per se did

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require. During the Soviet era, any agricultural damages were borne by robust state support. However, following the cessation of such support in the post-Soviet period, agricultural production shifted toward the south, where natural and demographic conditions were more favorable, or to the suburban areas closer to markets. This consolidation within the sector and the subsequent abandonment of arable lands accelerated the depopulation of marginal non-*chernozem* (northern, mostly woody) rural areas.

Concurrently, the rapid urbanization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century spurred a mass urban yearning for summertime retreats in the countryside. Industrialization and urban predicaments, including the acute housing and food shortages witnessed in the USSR, catalyzed the emergence of a network of second homes, accompanied by land plots and commonly called *dachas*. These were distributed expansively, spanning from suburban zones to remote rural districts. In doing so, they supplanted the traditional pattern of counter-urbanization, where city residents permanently relocated to rural areas, a trend more characteristic of Western countries. In Russia, at the very least, this process is lagging behind. In many regions experiencing substantial losses of permanent residents, the redevelopment of rural areas through *dachas*, a phenomenon distinct from agrarian redevelopment, emerged as a lifeline. This phenomenon has contributed to the preservation of existing houses and the construction of new ones, including entire *dacha* communities. Furthermore, it played a role in the growth of a new informal economy, providing jobs and incomes to segments of the rural population, thereby sustaining selective development across these territories.

While the phenomenon of *dachas* in Russia's extra-urban areas has been explored in scholarly literature, including contributions by us (Nefedova and Pallot, 2013; Treivish, 2014; Nefedova, 2015; Makhrova et al., 2016; Nefedova and Medvedev, 2020; Nefedova et al., 2021; etc.), the absence of official data on the urban population momentarily residing outside cities, their numbers, composition, and impact on rural areas call for alternative approaches. It is also a matter of variety in both the scale of the *dacha* phenomenon and the contribution made by urban *dacha* owners to rural economies and life at different distances from major cities. This variety is frequently intertwined with changing rural settlement patterns and economic structures.

In addressing these topics within this article, we perceive our role as consolidating the methodological and substantive insights gained from domestic *dacha* research. Additionally, we aim to analyze the prospects of rural development entwined with *dachas* and *dacha* dwellers.

## 2. Research materials and methodology

Estimating the number of Russian urbanites residing in *dachas* at any given moment or over specific periods of time is an exceedingly challenging task. Conventional population statistics primarily reflect the numbers and dynamics of permanent residents. Agricultural censuses, conducted once a decade or even less often (most recent ones are dated 2006 and 2016), report exclusively on the count of land plots within registered consolidated garden and *dacha* associations (Rosstat, 2017). This data fails to encompass cottage communities and *dacha* estates scattered throughout rural localities. Furthermore, there is no information regarding

the number of individuals, how frequently they visit *dachas*, and the duration of their stays. Data on the types of *dacha* dwellings is notably absent, and the use of land plots is presented only in broad strokes. The majority of garden and *dacha* communities are situated close to the cities (with the exception of the Moscow and St. Petersburg communities, which may be more remote), offering an incomplete representation of the full spectrum of *dachas*. When considering dwellings, it is only possible to deduce indirectly and incompletely whether these are first or second homes for specific individuals or groups. Statistics on the sale and purchase of *dachas* are limited in scope and access. As for information on land transactions, it is typically presented aggregated by region and country.

Until approximately 2000, rural household records included data about the permanent registration addresses of property owners, but these records became optional in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A handful of local administrations continued to monitor this information, but more often than not, even they lack exact knowledge regarding the whereabouts of house and landowners, who spend their time here or there.

Hence, increasingly, indirect methods are being employed, such as the analysis of satellite imagery, which allows us to determine the types and conditions of houses in rural areas, their degree of occupancy (based on nighttime illumination), and the level of land development (pathways, gardens, structures; Nefedova and Medvedev, 2022; Sheludkov and Starikova, 2022). To assess the regular movements of people between the city and the countryside, data from mobile phone operators is also utilized (Makhrova et al., 2021). However, identifying *dacha* residents within the overall flow can only be done indirectly, taking into account the season, the day of the week and even the time of day.

Field observations and local government data continue to be important sources. However, the consolidation of settlements and the creation of extensive urban districts have limited their value. *Dacha* dwellers can be studied to determine their numbers, the variety of second homes of urbanites, their occupations, preferences, and interactions with the rural population, among other factors. The self-supply of vegetables, fruits, and berries is also crucial, as well as the emergence of new forms of employment for the local population within the informal economy related to the needs of *dachniks*.

For many years, the authors have been surveying rural areas at various distances from cities in different regions of European Russia. They conducted interviews with both locals and *dacha* residents, partly with the assistance of students. Additionally, the authors' personal experience allowed them to study this phenomenon firsthand. Apart from their Moscow apartments, the authors own two *dachas*: one inherited in an old *dacha* settlement 30 km from Moscow with a plot of 0.1 hectares, and another in a village in the Kostroma region, 550 km from the Russian capital, with a 1-hectare plot. This experience has enabled them to rely on their own observations and close interactions with *dachniks* and local residents, providing significant advantages in obtaining information, especially for analyzing the life of city dwellers in remote villages not captured by statistics. Authorities in such areas do not pay much attention to *dachas* and *dachniks*; taxes from them are low, and budgeting of the local communities needs depends on the permanent population.

In an unfamiliar location, even if it is studied briefly on site, the properties of *dachniks* can be identified through the appearance of their houses and plots,

car numbers plates, and interviewing local inhabitants. In addition to direct field surveys, available municipal and regional statistics (demographic, social, and economic) are always used to analyze the general state of the *dacha* life of urbanites.

Cross-analysis of data obtained from various sources through different methods and their subsequent synthesis is highly desirable for a comprehensive analysis of territories and their socioeconomic life. When examining such an understudied phenomenon as *dachas*, which is essentially semi-observed, this approach becomes not only essential but also irreplaceable.

### 3. Key research findings

#### 3.1. *Dachas in Russia and worldwide*

Temporary summer residences, inhabited during weekends or in other patterns, represent second homes for urban dwellers in rural areas, and this phenomenon is not unique. According to our rough estimate, there are more than 200 million *dacha* owners (with their families) worldwide (excluding renters and those who travel out of town to visit relatives and friends, send their children on vacation, etc.). Let's assume they visit their *dachas* an average of six times a year; in that case, the annual flow of urban dwellers to second homes exceeds that of international tourists (Treivish, 2014).

Russia, where at least 45% of urban families own some form of *dacha*, has become the undisputed world leader in terms of the number of *dachas* and *dachniks*. Relative indicators are close to Russian ones in Finland (Adamiak et al., 2015) and its Scandinavian neighbors, where the desire for *dacha* privacy and its potential are enhanced by dispersed rural settlements and sharp seasonal climate variations. A high proportion of *dachas* in Eastern Europe is a legacy of the equitable distribution of modest social housing in cities and disruptions in their food supply, partially compensated for by *dacha* subsistence farming. Other European countries also have second homes that have been studied for a long time (Cribier, 1969; Lovell, 2003; Hall and Müller, 2004, 2018; Roca, 2013; etc.), but their numbers are significantly lower.

For instance, in France, second homes constitute approximately 10% of all dwellings. However, in that country, as well as in Spain, Italy, and Greece, these properties are often owned by foreigners, typically from Northern and Central Europe. In England and the United States, the proportion is only 3–5%. The demand for a rural or resort *dacha* is driven by recreational needs, the desire for counter-urbanization, especially upon retirement, and the perception of a second home as a sound investment. These motivations may be complemented by the desire to preserve ancestral homes, pursue new hobbies, or continue urban activities in the quiet of nature.

Sometimes, *dacha* is seen as a symbol of conspicuous consumption, an expensive toy of the elite (Coppock, 1977; Claval, 2013), and is criticized from both leftist and ecological perspectives. Paul Claval connected the very idea with longstanding naturalistic utopias in the spirit of J.-J. Rousseau, concepts like the garden city by E. Howard, and the broadacre city by F. L. Wright. While people of the past were drawn to the countryside for active outdoor leisure and sports, nowadays nature is optional, as cities are equipped with swimming pools, gyms, fitness centers, parks, etc. However, inequality associated with second homes persists and is on the rise.

In the meantime, the *dacha* movement is expanding in the global periphery and semi-periphery, although its scale varies. It appears to be less prevalent in countries with a “rice culture” due to the limited and valuable irrigated lands and high density of population. Japan was in a similar situation until recently, but currently the number of *dachas* is on the rise there—perhaps influenced by the popularity of “*dacha* tours” to the Russian Far East in the 1990s and 2000s.

The growth of temporary and returnable spatial mobility, including people’s journeys to *dachas*, often leads to categorizing them as a form of tourism (second home tourism), though it is a more intricate phenomenon. The expansion of all forms of such mobility is seen as a result of urbanization and modernization of spatial behavior, the contradictions of contemporary life, the compression of distances, and, in a way, the transformation of space and its perception (Zelinsky, 1971, Hägerstrand, 1975; Urry, 2007; Florida, 2008; Amar, 2010).

In Russia, the movement of people between their city apartments and *dachas* in the suburbs or farther away from the city has long become a standard way of life. Suburbanization and counter-urbanization, common in many Western countries, here, to a considerable extent, manifest themselves as this “bipolarity.” This phenomenon results from aligning the innate desire of everybody to combine the advantages of urban and rural life with the specific conditions of the country.

### 3.2. Diversity of Russian *dachas*

The term *dacha* in Russia is an inclusive concept, encompassing various types (Averkieva et al., 2016). These are classical *dachas* as traditional places of country rest, garden plots, and even vegetable gardens without permanent structures, located away from primary residences. The concept also includes inherited and purchased properties in rural areas, as well as opulent but temporarily inhabited mansions in the suburbs and resort localities.

The distribution of second homes (their absolute and relative numbers) in Russia, like elsewhere, varies according to their locations functions, visitation frequencies, and the wealth of their owners (Treivish, 2014). Representatives of the three primary types are found in many Russian regions and foreign countries but in different proportions.

The *suburban type* is characterized by a higher density of *dachas*, although transient, yet it doesn’t constitute the largest portion of the housing stock due to the presence of a substantial permanent population. Urban sprawl frequently encroaches upon these *dacha* areas in near suburbs. The choice of location, whether slightly further away from the city or in areas aligned with other types, depends on the desires, financial means of *dacha* owners, and transport access, etc. The *rural peripheral type* is fueled by depopulation, leaving rural houses to urban inheritors and buyers. Extending across wide areas of former inhabitancy, it is able to form a dispersed network of second homes. While they might constitute a significant portion of housing, their density is relatively low. *Dacha* clusters normally develop near bodies of water, natural reserves, and other picturesque and popular locations. The *resort type* is common in coastal and mountain resorts, but, similar to the suburbs, *dachas* here face competition from urban development and large-scale tourist industry.

All three types are present in Russia, yet they do not cover the entirety of *dacha* geography. Combinations (intersections) emerge, such as the Gulf of Finland’s

shores near St. Petersburg, where resort-type *dachas* exhibit all the characteristics of suburban ones. These are more like subtypes that further differentiate the geographical ranges of the basic types. While it may seem that second homes abroad should form a distinct category, upon closer examination, they fall into the same key types. For instance, among the *dachas* owned by Russians in Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Croatia, the resort type predominates, while those located in Finland align more with the rural peripheral type. Historical locations reflecting the practices and preferences of past generations of *dachniks* may comprise a separate subtype. Therefore, it is imperative to cover briefly the evolution of Russian *dachas*.

*Dachas* for the middle class in the Moscow and St. Petersburg suburbs became common from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards due to issues with summer living in the capitals, including sanitation concerns. Their prevalence expanded further during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. While urbanization in Russia lagged behind the West, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed explosive urban growth, marked by the hypertrophy of both national capitals and regional centers. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concentration of urban residents is combined with a sparse network of cities and ongoing rural depopulation in the peripheral regions, especially in the north. Centre-periphery shifts in settlement patterns still outweigh centrifugal ones, pronounced the most in summer when city dwellers visit their second homes located in rural, resort, or specifically *dacha* areas as well as in some small towns. While instances of genuine counter-urbanization exist, its spread is hindered by poor infrastructure and vast geographical distances.

After 1917 wooden *dachas* of wealthy people around both capitals were initially embezzled by the new Soviet elite. A mass wave of *dacha* proliferation was spurred by the 1949 decree of the USSR government regarding collective gardens and vegetable patches. Tiny plots of 300–600 sq. meters were allocated to workers near almost all cities, with strict limitations on the size and type of summer houses. A new wave of gardening expansion emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by a third wave in the 1990s, characterized by more freedom in the housing construction.

All three waves were closely tied to pressing food issues. By 1990, 8 million families had garden cottages and plots, and by 2016, that number had risen to 17 million. Urban *dachniks* harvested 12% of the then national amount of vegetables (including potatoes), 20% of fruits, and 37% of berries (Rosstat, 2017). Thus, beyond being a place for relaxation and lifestyle shifts, the plots in gardening communities, which often evolved into full-fledged settlements, played a role in alleviating food shortages or financial constraints. During the Soviet era, land was often allocated widely, though on inconvenient land, like in former peat quarries, under power lines, or near polluted roads, and remained the property of state.

With the advent of a market economy, gardening activities were pushed further away from major cities, particularly Moscow, while suburban lands, including old Soviet elite *dachas* and former agricultural fields, were acquired and transformed into two or three-story stone villas by businessmen and bureaucrats. They converted privatized plots into lush lawns and flower beds. In parallel with the practice of purchasing homes and land in remote villages by mostly urban intellectuals, which was often legally ambiguous during the Soviet era and frequently involved the use of proxy local residents, gained prominence.

### 3.3. Transformation of rural landscapes and dachas in Non-Chernozem regions of Russia

*Dacha* life hinges on natural conditions and the state of the countryside, as well as its proximity to urban centers. Regions with optimal conditions for habitation and agriculture only occupy 14% of Russia's territory, primarily in the forest-steppe and steppe zones (Zolotokrylin et al., 2020). The Soviet authorities, driven by concerns over supplying growing cities with food, expanded cultivation practices across the board, even in less fertile areas, suppressing other sectors of their rural economy except forestry. Despite huge investments in agriculture of the Non-Black Earth zone in the latter half of the century, yields predominantly increased in the south. The share of grain crops, including food grains, had become excessively high in non-chernozem regions by the end of the Soviet period, reaching 50–60%. This trend also extended to dairy cattle, despite low milk yields.

The expansion of agricultural activities occurred against a backdrop of low returns, rural outmigration from the Non-Black Earth zone hinterlands, a pull towards larger urban centers and their suburbs (Ioffe et al., 2006). Many regions, especially in Central Russia, lost more than half of their rural population between 1959 and 1989, in addition to the casualties of wartime and Stalinist repressions (Fig. 1). The peripheries of these regions bore the brunt of the losses. The disparity in rural population density between their suburbs (within 30 km of the regional center) and the outskirts had grown tenfold by 2020 alongside agricultural decline. The process was primarily driven by factors like poverty, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, social lifts and adequate infrastructure. These woes are most evident between Moscow and St. Petersburg, acting as demographic and economic pumps that have drained the hinterlands for centuries (Nefedova and Treivish, 2014).

The reforms of the 1990s exacerbated this situation. Recovery from the agrarian crisis since the 2000s has primarily been observed in the southern regions, as the market, in the absence of former subsidies, dictated a shift of crop production, and partly livestock farming to areas better endowed with natural resources and human capital (Nefedova, 2022). North and east from there, less fertile land

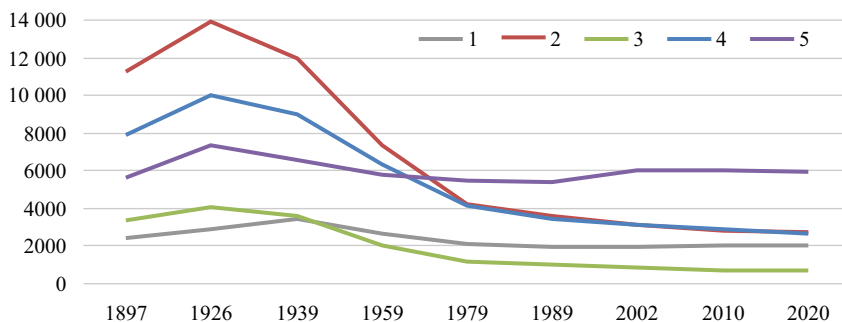


Fig. 1. Rural population in Russia's macro-regions from 1897 to 2020.

Note: 1—Moscow Region and Leningrad Region, 2—regions around Moscow Region, 3—regions between Moscow Region and Leningrad Region, 4—Central Chernozem regions, 5—Southern flat regions of European Russia.

Source: Nefedova, 2022.



away from cities fell out of agricultural use (Nefedova and Medvedev, 2020, Meyfroidt et al., 2016). In recent years, this land was partially reactivated, thanks to major agricultural holdings, either near regional centers and major transportation routes or in small “oases” of more fertile soils (Nefedova and Medvedev, 2020).

The recent campaign to consolidate settlements in the interest of budget savings, along with the closure of rural institutions like schools, hospitals, and community centers, has resulted in reduced job opportunities in the tertiary sector (Treivish et al., 2022). This further accelerated the exodus of rural residents to cities, especially larger ones and their suburbs, perpetuating the process of urbanization. Some degree of reverse migration from cities does exist, but hardly a full-scale wave of counter-urbanization in its Western sense (Berry, 1980). This phenomenon is typically weakened by various Russian sorts of *dachas*, which are widely available and cater to the diverse needs of citizens from different income strata. The specific form of *dacha* ownership depends on the region and the presence of demand-generating urban centers. The supply is most abundant in the Non-Black Earth zone, including Central Russia within a distance of 300–600 km from Moscow, where sectors of rural economy like agriculture and forestry have long been dwindling, along with the rural population, driving the sale of land and housing. The nature of these *dachas*, owned by city dwellers with varying incomes, is primarily regulated by their proximity to cities, which directly affects the price of *dacha* estate. This adds to its diversity, although among the three above-mentioned types of *dachas*, the resort type is rare in Central Russia (except in few localities). The center-periphery gradients are, instead, strikingly evident.

### 3.4. Distance related differences among *dachas* in Central Russia

Here, more than in other regions, *dacha* locations can be categorized into three groups: near, moderately distanced from major cities, and remote, where the properties and their usage exhibit notable distinctions.

*Near dachas.* *Dacha* communities in close proximity to Moscow, occupying former state and collective farmland, portions of forests, river floodplains, and settlements, are marked by continuous high fences that obscure various developments, ranging from fifty-year-old wooden houses to the latest brick villas, resembling castles and designed for year-round habitation. Here, we witness not so much an outflow of people from the capital but a surge in capital expenditure driven by the desire to showcase status and wealth, a result of the consumer revolution of the 1990s. Our surveys of *dacha* locations within 50 km of Moscow, conducted across different seasons, reveal that many houses remain vacant during winter, on weekdays and even weekends, functioning primarily as *dachas*. This is also confirmed by data from cellular phone companies (Makhrova et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, there are signs of genuine counter-urbanization in both luxury and much lower-priced *dachas*, whose owners rent out their Moscow apartments. Statistics fail to capture the extent of this population shift, particularly with regard to cottage settlements of well-to-do class—a product of time, with modest-sized plots (200–400 sq. meters) but spacious (up to three–four storey) homes intended for permanent residence. However, even these properties are often used in a *dacha* mode, while city apartments are retained. Meanwhile, extensive garden associations still exist, although houses and plots are bought and renovated. The total

area of *dacha* settlements lacking official independent status surpasses the area of all cities and villages in the Moscow Region. As a whole, the population here surges by more than 4 million during the summer, against a permanent population of 6.2 million, and multiplies several-fold in certain remote areas of the region (Makhrova et al., 2022).

The encroachment of such settlements on fields and forests causes land-use conflicts, given that the major part of the region is a densely populated periphery of urban agglomeration. Furthermore, due to its huge market, it continues to be a significant agricultural base, especially in the northern (Yakhroma floodplain), southwestern, and southeastern parts of the Moscow Region, which boast favorable natural conditions. Livestock farms and fields carry no benefits to *dachniks*. However, the access to the market demanding perishable goods, low transportation costs, human capital, and solid investment keep agriculture thriving here, unlike in many surrounding areas (Nefedova, 2022). As a result of Moscow's influence, its vicinities are saturated with logistical hubs (Makhrova, 2021). The increasing traffic and road congestion make even the nearest *dachas* less easily reachable. *Dachniks*, while complicating the work of local communal services, stimulate the growth of commerce, including construction markets, gas stations, sales of garden equipment and seedlings, etc. as well as other related services.

*Moderate-distant dachas*. The aforementioned trends, coupled with the expansion of high-rise constructions beyond Moscow city official boundaries, are pushing *dachas*, including those in gardening communities, towards the outskirts of the region. There, they are gradually transforming into moderate-distant *dachas* for Muscovites and residents of large cities in the Moscow metropolitan area, stretching 200–300 km from Moscow and mingling with *dacha* zones of adjacent regions.

The tightness in proximity to the capital intensifies the exodus of *dachniks* outside the Moscow Region. Local towns also contribute, as each of them has its own ring of gardening communities and other types of *dachas* intended for their respective residents. Thus, during the summer months, in many regions surrounding the Moscow Region and situated between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the number of *dacha* dwellers in gardening communities, *dacha* communities, and cottage settlements, not counting *dachniks* in villages, surpasses the number of local rural residents (Fig. 2). The *dacha* zones of the two major cities of Russia converge at Valdai, 300 km from both (Nefedova and Treivish, 2014).

Down south, such as in the Tula Region and Kaluga Region, *dacha* people increase the summer countryside population by a factor of 2 to 10. The abundance of *dachas* is directly proportional to their proximity to Moscow. Among those with upgraded houses, some urbanites opt to stay at their *dachas* through the winter. For instance, in the Zaoksky district along the Oka River, which borders the Moscow Region to the south, a quarter of homeowners from Moscow choose to reside there year-round, according to our field surveys, either compensating for the loss of urban income by renting out their city apartments or significantly supplementing their pensions this way. These are clear indicators of real counter-urbanization.

Moscow's gardening communities at medium ranges are juxtaposed with homes acquired by townspeople in villages or inherited from their rural relatives. As one moves farther away from the bustling metropolises, namely the "rustic *dachniks*" become more noticeable.

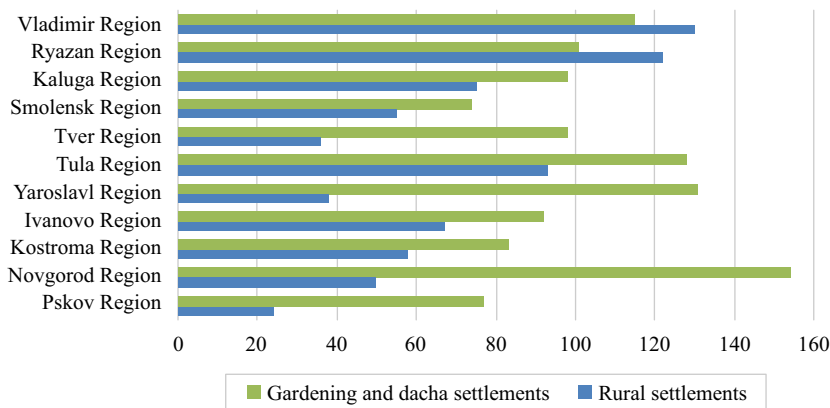


Fig. 2. Ratio of population in *dacha* settlements with no official status to population in rural settlements during the summer season in regions surrounding the Moscow Region and between the Moscow Region and Leningrad Region.

Source: Data is based on permanent population figures and the 2016 agricultural census regarding the number of plots, with the assumption that an average of 2 people occupy a *dacha* plot during the summer.

*Distant dachas* offer the closest semblance to genuine rural living. Located at distances ranging from 200–300 to 500–600 km from major cities, a range that eliminates daily commuting, the comers from cities are more inclined to acquire aging rural abodes rather than undertake new construction projects. This is especially true in the less-populated areas amidst forests. The natural and social challenges of this isolation can be excessive. Yet, they are offset by the appeal of the secondary real estate market, with homes many times less expensive than in the Moscow suburbs. Typically, *dachniks* spend extended periods here, varying from one to five-six months, from spring to deep into autumn. Other modes of habitation exist, but a “Plan B” in the city is still desirable. In such cases, the first and second homes may switch roles on time.

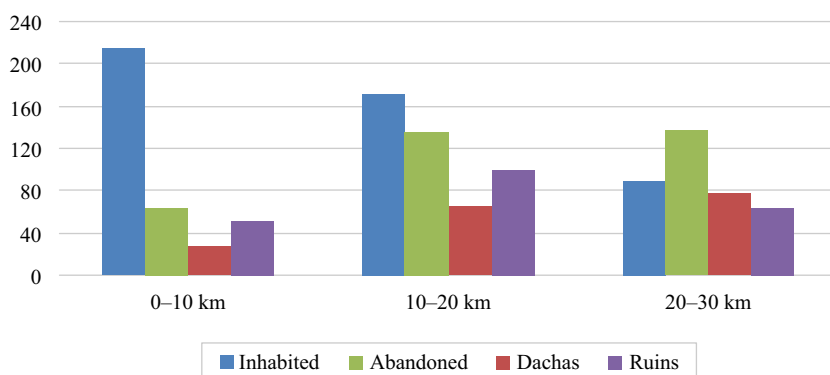
Our research focused on the *dachas* of Muscovites in Central Russia’s regions, such as Pskov, Tver, and Yaroslavl to the north of the capital, and Kaluga and Tula to the south. The northern *dacha* trend surpasses the southern one due to the higher vitality, denser population and wider farmland in the south. Most comprehensively studied of distant *dachas* within the Central macro-region was the Kostroma Region, situated 300–600 km northeast of Moscow, through the efforts of the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Community of Professional Sociologists since 2008 (Nefedova et al. 2021). This is a typical region of the forested landscape, where the decline of agriculture was evident long ago. Within the region, there is one big city, Kostroma, while the small ones are experiencing depopulation. The number of rural residents outside the Kostroma suburbs has decreased by a factor of 6–8 since the mid-twentieth century. Depopulation before was induced by the consolidation of collective farms and the migration to larger population centers. Cropland took a sharp decline after 1990, following the loss of subsidies and general crisis. Despite abundant grass, milk production within the region has dwindled fourfold, and meat production fivefold since 1990, concentrating in major agricultural holdings near Kostroma and their branch structures. In the 2010s, jobs were offered by forestry, trade, and services. The amalgamation of settlements and

the conversion of rural districts into urban ones resulted in a reduced capacity of local administrations, schools, hospitals, and retail outlets. School graduates and families with children migrate to cities, and the middle-aged people descend into apathy and various pathologies, losing their taste for life, while the older generation is passing away. The primary issue at hand is the exhaustion of human capital with protracted and persistent attrition of the active population.

The distinctive log cabins of northern architecture have garnered popularity among *dacha* enthusiasts, particularly those from Moscow. The farther from the city, regardless of its size, the more abandoned dwellings and *dacha* residences can be found (Fig. 3). Fences, if present at all, are often purely symbolic. *Dacha* owners frequently make an effort to preserve the visual aesthetics and overall ambiance of the northern villages.

In many places, urban residents dominate in numbers during the summertime. A typical distant *dachnik* is often an individual of middle to older age, with modest to limited financial means, frequently pursuing an independent profession that minimizes the need to visit the city often. Unlike his suburban counterparts, he is compelled to integrate into rural life and engage with local residents. Nonetheless, *dachniks* remain strangers, establishing closer ties with other *dacha* owners in the neighborhood, albeit not necessarily the closest ones, and thereby forming their own networks. The paramount aspiration here is to escape the hustle and bustle of Moscow, establishing a connection with nature through activities like swimming, fishing, mushroom hunting, and the maintenance or restoration of homes and sizeable plots of land including cutting the grass. Despite some degree of social isolation, the influence of newcomers on rural life is significant. The few able-bodied local men are in high demand, as *dacha* owners have assumed the role of their employers following the neglect by the state, because advancing years and lack of relevant skills may prevent *dachniks* from labor-intensive household managing and collecting wild fruits.

In recent years, urban residents have started to yearn for complete counter-urbanization at their *dachas*, fairly distant ones included. These settlers hope to enhance their quality of life, which they associate with rural life, its quiet and proximity to nature. However, urbanites often face difficulties integrating into rural



**Fig. 3.** The count of inhabited and abandoned dwellings, alongside properties acquired by *dacha* owners and derelict structures in the villages of Manturovsky District, Kostroma Region, in correlation with the distance from its administrative center towards the southwest.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Nefedova et al, 2021.

society. Their attempts to establish their own enterprises are more reliant on connections with fellow *dachniks* than with the native villagers. Urban youth actively discuss this subject on social media, but are seldom ready to relocate to the outback.

Three distinct groups are making their way to the countryside: (1) retirees, striving to make ends meet through subsistence farming and renting out their city apartments; (2) creative individuals who seek to embody their ideas away from cities; (3) passionate advocates of a return to rural lifestyle. Unlike today's rural residents, the latter group may introduce livestock or poultry into their households and supply their neighbors with animal products. These settlers, though spending almost the entire year in a village, still engage more actively with other urban aliens than with the indigenous population. Within their circles, they discuss various issues and brainstorm potential solutions. Nevertheless, only a select few are true enthusiasts when it comes to agricultural pursuits.

Such migrant and, all the more, *dachnik* per se, should not be mistaken for an eco-settler: their motivations bear some resemblance, but not all their settlements. What unites their minds is the socio-psychological, even if illusory, role of rural areas as sanctuaries from urban stresses, encompassing environmental, economic, and even military and political upheavals.

The year 2020 saw a sudden boom of this particular function of *dachas* as places for self-isolation under the COVID-19 pandemic, where people could minimize risky interactions with potential virus carriers (Nikolaeva and Rusanov, 2020). Mass exodus from Moscow and other major Russian cities to *dachas* commenced much earlier than usual, immediately following the March lockdowns. The shift towards remote work and schooling further accelerated the dispersion to *dachas*. This was noted by transportation authorities and cellular phone network operators. In summer 2020, *dacha* populations exceeded those of previous years, and *dachniks* extended their stays. Subsequently, there was a surge in demand for out-of-city homes. According to real estate agents, in June and July of 2020, compared to the same period in 2019, property sales increased by 1.8 times, and *dacha* rentals, which were previously less popular, showed a 2.5-fold increase (Makhrova and Nefedova, 2022). The relaxation of self-isolation measures reduced the demand, with some short-term spikes related to new waves of infections.

Two observations are noteworthy. First, in Russia, federal authorities and city mayors did not prevent their citizens from leaving urban centers, and attempts to restrict entry into *dacha* areas were largely unsuccessful, even when concerns over the virus spread were profound. Conversely, some states, like Finland, Sweden and Norway, where *dachas* are popular, imposed strict bans on urban residents fleeing to the countryside due to fears of virus transmission and the rural healthcare system's unpreparedness for the surge in patients.

Second, during the pandemic, the Moscow Region remained the most popular destination in Russia, despite COVID conditions being only slightly better than in Moscow city itself. This period witnessed the rapid transformation of *dacha*-driven suburbanization into quasi-permanent suburban living. Nevertheless, over half of *dacha* buyers still viewed these properties as second homes, adhering to the previous dual-home lifestyle model (within the city and out of it). In rural areas across many other regions, conditions for a radical counter-urbanization movement were clearly lacking, primarily due to constraints in social and communication infrastructure that limited remote work and education.

#### 4. Conclusion

The scale of the Russian *dacha* phenomenon is so impressive that it inevitably attracts attention. For many urbanites, sharing life between two or even three homes has become routine. Their *dacha* allows them to fulfill activities that prove challenging within city confines. It is not an exaggeration to assert that this distinctive cultural and economic phenomenon is among the country's defining social features.

Its uniqueness traces its roots to the past, including the Soviet era when the mass demand for countryside houses with small land plots stemmed from food shortages. The state provided urban residents with chances to subsistence partially through *dachas* (garden plots). Moreover, it represented the sole legally accessible form of personal land ownership for residents of expanding cities, distinguishing them from their rural counterparts and small-town inhabitants who resided in their own houses.

In the post-Soviet years, the demand for *dachas* has not waned, albeit undergoing various changes. This highlights the phenomenon's resilience, multifunctionality, and multifactorial nature, which also extends to countries with similar natural conditions and/or same political histories. Accessibility to *dachas* across different social strata has remained intact, largely due to the diverse array of property types and prices depending on location. There are three primary property types: suburban, rural peripheral, and resort, along with hybrid variations.

In Central Russia, where our detailed research was conducted, proximity to Moscow, as the main *dacha* demand driver, proved to be the top factor. *Dachas* in close and remote areas differ not only in terms of development, amenities, pricing tiers, and land use but also in the social types, lifestyles, and local roles of *dachnics*. Their impact on the suburban economy revolves around driving commerce and services. In more distant areas, informal exchanges and a shadow labor market, partial conservation or reactivation of dwellings and sometimes of rural infrastructure dominate, but never large-scale agriculture. *Dacha* owners essentially maintain an inhabitancy network in remote areas, despite their seasonal presence there. The impact of the rural background on the proliferation of *dachas* varies by direction: north of Moscow, degradation of rural areas expands *dacha* supply while limiting it in completely deserted places. South of the capital, *dacha* expansion is impeded by land-intensive agricultural activity.

Overall, Russia's deep-seated *dacha* traditions, offering millions of Russians seasonal or a shorter-term respite from urban life with a distinctive rhythm, seem to replace the Western-style full-fledged counter-urbanization. The yearning for the latter remains evident, though often manifested through *dacha*. At some point, it may become a primary residence, a trend unaccounted for in statistics and, furthermore, not precluding a subsequent return to urban living.

In any case, it is our belief that Russia, as the “world champion” in *dacha* culture, must drive robust research on this phenomenon.

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