

SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF RUSSIA UNTIL 2030 AND RURAL POLICY

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Abstract. Sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas is one of the main directions of spatial development in Russia. They occupy a large developed part of the country, while the standard and quality of life of the rural population is significantly lower compared to the city. The problems of rural areas are not fully reflected in the “Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 with a forecast up to 2036”. Priority was given to urban agglomerations and about 2,300 key settlements, among which the proportion of villages is insignificant. The article examines the risks of this approach and the main disadvantages of rural development tools, including the State Program “Integrated Rural Development”. Proposals have been put forward to improve the rural development policy, including measures to ensure its legal and financial support.

Keywords: *spatial development strategy, rural areas, urbanization, key settlements, sustainable rural development policy*

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A paradoxical result of the development of the “Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 with a forecast up to 2036” (hereinafter referred to as Strategy-2030) was the exclusion of the section on rural areas from it, although they (rural settlements and inter-settlement territories) occupy the largest part of the country, and the level of socio-economic development of the village still lags significantly behind the city, despite the tendency towards equalization. The formal explanation for this decision is the existence of a special “Strategy for Sustainable Rural Development of the Russian Federation through 2030”, approved by the Government of the Russian Federation in February 2015 [1]. However, this did not prevent the inclusion of

provisions on the socio-economic development of rural areas in the “Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2025” (hereinafter referred to as Strategy-2025), which has been in effect since 2019, and the allocation of a corresponding section in the strategy implementation plan [2].

The lack of due attention to rural areas by the developers of Strategy-2030 is most likely due to the fact that rural development is no longer considered a priority. A purely urbanistic view of the prospects of Russian society can be traced in the provisions of the current Strategy-2025, although rural issues are not completely ignored in it. In particular, it speaks of “the concentration of economic growth in a limited number of centers, the growth of the socio-economic role of cities”. The strategy implementation plan contains a special section “Socio-economic development of large and largest urban agglomerations”, including the development of at least 20 long-term plans for the socio-economic development of large and largest urban agglomerations, as well as a draft Federal Law “On Urban Agglomerations”.

In Strategy-2030, four types of key settlements are named as a new tool for spatial development: urban agglomerations and administrative centers of subjects of the Russian Federation that are not part of urban agglomerations; strategic settlements (serving critical



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infrastructure or ensuring national security); one or several nearby settlements in which large investment projects are being implemented or are planned for implementation; other settlements (including rural and small towns) with a population of 3 to 50 thousand people, performing the functions of key settlements (providing access to basic state services for the adjacent territory) [3]. It is assumed that the so-called “key settlements” will become institutions for the development of rural territories. In our opinion, this approach cannot be agreed with for either theoretical or practical reasons. If we take into account that the goal of the country’s spatial development is not only to create conditions for GDP growth, most of which is produced in urban agglomerations, but also the social and environmental well-being of society, including ensuring national (including food) security, then there can be no talk of prioritizing the development of cities to the detriment of villages. On the contrary, it is necessary to create conditions for the balanced development of rural and urban settlements.

The emphasis on urbanization inevitably leads to its aggressive and hypertrophied development, which is accompanied by a number of unfavorable socio-economic consequences: a reduction in the share and number of the rural population; a drop in the birth rate in rural areas below the urban level; an increase in the number of empty settlements with the loss of enormous housing and infrastructure capital; loss of cultural landscapes; the withdrawal of tens of millions of hectares of agricultural land from circulation; a weakening of social control over vast territories, which threatens geopolitical risks; an exacerbation of housing, transport and environmental problems in large cities [4]. These consequences can be avoided with a balanced approach to territorial development, within the framework of which the city and the village are considered as equal, unique in their functions, socio-territorial communities. Neither complete ruralization nor total urbanization of society should be allowed; their harmonious combination should be ensured, which should be appropriately recorded in Strategy-2030.

Let’s consider the practical aspect of forming a network of core settlements as centers for rural development. By October 2024, the Ministry of Economic Development of Russia, together with the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, has determined a list of 2,264 key settlements, including 1,940 with a population of 3,000 to 50,000 people, which will become participants in the State Program “Integrated Rural Development” (hereinafter referred to as the State Program). This decision is associated with a number of risks. Firstly, there is an increased likelihood that a significant portion of the resources of the aforementioned State Program, originally

intended for rural areas, will go to the development of small towns, although the level of their improvement and quality of life there are higher than in rural areas. Secondly, given the relatively small number of key settlements (only 1.38% of rural and urban settlements with a population of up to 50,000 people) and the insufficient development of a high-quality road network, problems with servicing adjacent territories will inevitably arise. Thirdly, it is unclear how services will be provided to remote villages outside the boundaries of adjacent territories.

In the pre-reform economy, the central estates of collective and state farms served as support settlements. In 1990, there were 12.9 thousand collective farms and 13 thousand state farms in Russia, i.e. 25.9 thousand central estates. In the Republic of Belarus, the role of key settlements is assigned to agro-towns located in rural areas. These are well-appointed settlements, where there is production and social infrastructure to provide (according to social standards) the population living in them and residents of adjacent territories. In total, 1,512 agro-towns have been organized in the country, which serve more than 22 thousand settlements [5]. In the Republic of Kazakhstan, out of 6,316 rural settlements (according to data for 2020), 1,150 key villages with developed social and industrial infrastructure have been identified, intended to serve not only the local population, but also residents of adjacent territories [6]. In Russia, it is necessary to form a network of rural key settlements, which can be the centers of rural municipalities and former central estates of collective and state farms.

An institutional problem of rural development remains unresolved, such as the absence of quantitative criteria for classifying settlements and administrative districts in federal legislation. As a result, settlements with the same number of residents can be both rural and urban (Table 1). There is uncertainty in the choice of the subject of rural policy itself, which leads to the risk of losing social benefits provided to the rural population, as well as to the potential possibility of redistribution of financial resources of state rural development programs in favor of cities and vice versa.

It is worth noting that many countries have established quantitative criteria for the distribution of urban and rural areas and settlements by density and population size, including criteria used for international comparisons by the UN Commission on Human Settlements, the Organization for International Cooperation and Development, etc. In Russia, a similar classification should be introduced at the federal level, while it is important to give regions the right to adjust federal criteria in order to take into account local specifics.

Table 1. Distribution of urban and rural settlements by population

Population, people	5,001–10,000	10,001–15,000	15,001–20,000	20,001–25,000	25,001–30,000	30,001–35,000	35,001–40,000
Urban settlements	523	155	85	50	26	29	21
Rural settlements	764	157	42	17	12	4	3

Source: compiled by Nikonov All-Russian Institute for Agrarian Problems and Informatics based on primary data from the 2020 All-Russian Population Census.

The main instrument of federal rural policy is the State Program “Integrated Rural Development”, implemented since 2020. The structure of its financing is presented in Table 2.

The State Program is a targeted investment plan for the construction of housing in rural areas (70.8% of expenditures from all sources of financing in 2023), social and engineering infrastructure (20.6%), and transport infrastructure (7.7%). It contains virtually no measures to develop the labor market and increase the income of rural residents. Expenditures on the Federal Project “Promoting Rural Employment” make

up only 0.7% of total funding and include subsidies to agricultural producers to reimburse the costs of training personnel at universities of the Ministry of Agriculture of Russia and students undergoing industrial internships. There are no provisions concerning non-agricultural employment and the employment of workers laid off from agricultural enterprises and farms. As a result, over the past 10–12 years, the number of new jobs created in rural areas is 2 times less than the number of people laid off from agriculture [4, p. 119]. They are forced to look for work outside their home towns, resulting in a multi-million (about 4.2 million) army of migrant workers, seasonal and commuting migrants.

Table 2. Structure of expenditures of the State Program “Integrated Rural Development”, 2023

Section (project)	Expenses		
	billion rubles	% to the state program	% to the section (project)
State program	157.7	100	—
including:			
federal budget	63.7	40.4	—
regional budget	5.9	3.7	—
extra-budgetary sources	88	55.8	—
Popularization and promotion of achievements in the field of rural development	0.1	0.1	100
including:			
federal budget	0.1	0.1	100
regional budget	0	0	0
extra-budgetary sources	0	0	0
Information, analytical and methodological support for the integrated development of rural areas	0.2	0.1	100
including:			
federal budget	0.2	0.1	100
regional budget	0	0	0
extra-budgetary sources	0	0	0

Table 2 (ending)

Section (project)	Expenses		
	billion rubles	% to the state program	% to the section (project)
Federal project “Development of housing construction in rural areas and increase of the improvement level of households”	111.7	70.8	100
including:			
federal budget	25.3	16	22.6
regional budget	1.8	1.1	1.6
extra-budgetary sources	84.6	53.7	75.8
Federal project “Development of transport infrastructure in rural areas”	12.1	7.7	100
including:			
federal budget	10.3	6.5	85
regional budget	1.3	0.9	11.1
extra-budgetary sources	0.5	0.3	3.9
Federal project “Improvement of rural areas”	2.5	1.6	100
including:			
federal budget	1.5	0.9	58.6
regional budget	0.6	0.4	24
extra-budgetary sources	0.4	0.3	17.5
Federal project “Modern appearance of rural areas”	29.9	19	100
including:			
federal budget	26.1	16.6	87.5
regional budget	2.2	1.4	7.2
extra-budgetary sources	1.6	1	5.3
Federal project “Promoting employment of the rural population”	1.1	0.7	100
including:			
federal budget	0.2	0.2	21.3
regional budget	0	0	1.1
extra-budgetary sources	0.9	0.6	77.6

Source: author's calculations based on data from the Russian Ministry of Agriculture.

Due to the low rural population density, fine-grained rural settlement (i.e. the predominance of small settlements) and great distances from service centers, the specific costs of providing social services in rural areas are significantly higher than in the city. This necessitates significant resources for the infrastructural

development of the village. According to the report of the Russian Ministry of Agriculture at a meeting of the Government Commission on the Agro-Industrial Complex and Sustainable Development of Rural Areas on May 21, 2019, “more than 6 trillion rubles are required to solve the priority tasks of rural areas” [7]. It was planned

to allocate 2.3 trillion rubles for the implementation of the State Program “Integrated Rural Development” for 2020–2025, including 1.1 trillion rubles from the federal budget. In 2020, financial support for the program was significantly reduced – by 730.6 billion rubles, or 31.1% [8]. In subsequent years, this difference was compensated, but the initial passport values were not achieved.

In addition, residents of small towns with a population of up to 30 thousand people became participants in the federal housing construction project (the largest in terms of funding volumes in the State Program). This happened because federal legislation did not establish objective criteria for dividing settlements into rural and urban, and small towns were classified as rural areas. As a result, part of the financial resources of the State Program (up to 20%, according to estimates by the Ministry of Finance of Russia), originally intended for the village, ends up in cities, which is of interest to the main operators of the Federal Project in question – banks working with so-called rural mortgages, and construction organizations that prefer to place production facilities in cities rather than in rural areas.

The main mechanism for selecting potential participants in the State Program is the all-Russian competitions held by the Russian Ministry of Agriculture according to the same rules for all regions. On the one hand, this reduces corruption risks, but on the other hand, it does not allow taking into account the level of socio-economic development of the village of a particular entity, as well as its budget self-sufficiency. Regions with low budget security and depressed rural areas find it difficult to compete with economically developed subjects of the Russian Federation. Thus, interregional differences in the standard and quality of life of the rural population are increasing.

According to the selection rules, projects that provide the greatest increase in jobs and the maximum volumes

Table 3. Employed population of private households (aged 15 years and older) working outside their locality

Permanent place of residence	Working outside their locality, people	Share of total employed population, %
City	2,068,259	4.5
Village	4,273,100	29.5
Village/city, %	206.6	655.6

Source: author's calculations based on [9].

of extra-budgetary financing receive a higher score. As a result, the State Program is aimed at large investment projects in the agro-industrial complex, and not at the development of rural areas as a whole, taking into account economic, social and environmental efficiency. In our opinion, the volumes of financing and mechanisms for implementing the State Program “Comprehensive Rural Development” should be gradually adjusted. Its resource provision should be restored to the original passport values, while simultaneously excluding from it the population of small towns, the development of which is the focus of other national projects. It is necessary to significantly expand measures to support small non-agricultural entrepreneurship in rural areas, as well as diversify the activities of agricultural organizations.

In order to smooth out interregional differences in the standard and quality of life of the rural population, it is necessary to differentiate the participation of the subjects of the Russian Federation in the State Program depending on their budgetary capabilities, and also to widely use the normative approach in distributing expenses for infrastructure development, developing special measures to support depressed rural areas.

An important factor in rural development is strengthening the budgets of municipalities. In this regard, it is advisable to consider the issue of transferring taxes on the income of individuals permanently residing in them but working outside their borders to the budgets of rural administrations and small towns. According to the 2020 All-Russian Population Census, the number of such citizens among the rural population is about 4.3 million people (almost 30% of all employed), which is much more than in the city (Table 3), and the personal income tax they pay, according to the author's calculations, reached 300 billion rubles in 2020, which is comparable to the own income of rural settlements.

Thus, it is necessary to pay close attention to the problems of rural areas that were not reflected in the “Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2030 with a forecast up to 2036”, and to make appropriate additions and amendments to the strategy aimed at the equal development of urban and rural settlements, balanced financing and ensuring the comprehensive well-being of society.

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