
RUSSIA OFFERS FREE LAND TO ALL CITIZENS WILLING TO MOVE TO THE FAR EAST

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Call it the Muscovite version of "manifest destiny." On Monday, President Vladimir Putin signed into law a bill that offers every Russian citizen a tract of land in their country's remote Far East.

"All citizens will be entitled to apply for up to hectare of land in the Kamchatka, Primorye, Khabarovsk, Amur, Magadan and Sakhalin regions, the republic of Sakha, or the Jewish and Chukotka autonomous districts," the Moscow Times reports. This is a vast stretch of territory spanning the upper Arctic reaches near Alaska, down to islands off the coast of Japan and deep into the Siberian hinterland.

Those interested in the venture can hold their hectare (about 2.5 acres) free of payment or tax for five years. After that, they would receive titles to their plot provided they have put it to use in the prior years.

The move is part of Moscow's desire to leverage the unexploited potential of a region that remains a kind of "Wild West" □ a realm rich in natural resources but whose residents hail from scattered indigenous tribes, the descendants of political exiles and other forgotten schemes of the Soviet Union.

There are also more immediate concerns. About 7.4 million Russians populate the entire Russian Far East. Just across the frigid border with China, there's a booming population of more than 100 million people in the northeast of that country.

In recent years, Moscow has grown alarmed at the prospect of a Sinification of its Far East, with the entrance of Chinese businesses into the region and the emergence of Chinese communities compensating for the labor shortfalls. There's an inexorable demographic argument: Birthrates on the Russian side of the border are in decline; on the Chinese side, they are on the rise.

Last summer, a Russian government official suggested that the population of the Far East could be increased six-fold to about 36 million people through the land scheme.

"We view this project as a possibility for Russian citizens to achieve self-realization in our Far East and for attracting people to the region," said Alexander Galushka, minister in charge of development in the Far East. Still, there's profound skepticism about the likelihood of such an eastward migration.

In September, at a summit in the Pacific port city of Vladivostok, Putin encouraged investment in the region, including from companies in China. "The Far East is open for everybody who is ready to cooperate, he said.

Last week, the Kremlin began another eye-catching venture in the region with the first rocket launch at Vostochny Cosmodrome, a new spaceport in the Amur region that will reduce the Russian space program's dependence on an older facility in Kazakhstan.

Not all are thrilled by Moscow's interest in populating the Far East. According to the BBC, protesters and officials in the Sakha region expressed concerns in March about the potential effects of an influx of outsiders. They are fearful of a 21st-century gold rush.

Kaynak/Source: