

7 in 10 Russians Support Reviving ‘Gulag’ Prison Labor – Poll

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Marina Kruglyakova / TASS

Seven out of 10 Russians support government plans to revive the Stalin-era practice reminiscent of the gulag labor camps that would use prisoners for major construction projects, according to a state-backed survey [released](#) Tuesday.

Several cabinet ministers, the state railway monopoly and the head of Russia’s penitentiary system have in recent weeks proposed dispatching around 188,000 inmates to fill part of the shortage created by a coronavirus-driven exodus of Central Asian migrant workers.

Observers have drawn unfavorable comparisons between the proposal and the Soviet gulags where hundreds of thousands are estimated to have died between the 1930s and the 1950s. Officials bristle at the comparison, with Russia’s prison chief claiming last week that the latest initiative “will not be a gulag; these will be absolutely new and decent conditions.”

According to survey results published by the state-funded VTsIOM polling agency, 71% of Russians support the idea of replacing migrant workers with prisoners, compared with 21%

who oppose it.

Supporters of prison labor were more likely to cite redressing victims' grievances, serving out punishment and benefiting society to explain their reasoning, VTsIOM said. Opponents cited the need for inmates to be isolated from society, potentially bad work and gulag comparisons when explaining their objections.

The prison labor proposal, backed by Russia's justice and construction ministers as a way to streamline President Vladimir Putin's multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects, has sparked heated debate over one of the country's darkest moments in history. It came to a head with a controversial state media op-ed glorifying the gulags as so-called "social elevators" for the poor as opposed to death camps, a whitewashing that sparked outrage on social media.

"The speed with which Russia is resurrecting its Soviet past is frightening," [wrote](#) Russia's independent business news website The Bell on Friday. It criticized the slave-like gulag system as one of the causes of the Soviet collapse.

VTsIOM carried out its phone survey among 1,600 Russians on May 27.

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