
VALUES AND STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOUR UNDER THE RUSSIAN CONDITIONS

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Middle Class: System of Values and Perceptions on Country's Development Vector

Abstract

The paper estimates the share of Russian population that belong to the middle class and analyzes their values, standards, and ideas of the nation's future vector of development. The analysis is based on nationwide representative polls conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2013–2014. The paper shows that everyday values of the Russian middle class are modernized and proactive and thus are different from those of other population groups; however, the middle class barely stands out from other groups in terms of political values and the vision of Russia's future. As of now, the consensus view of the middle class (as well as other groups of Russians) is that Russia cannot just copy the Western "route" and needs to take its own way defined by its people's values, standards and attitudes to some basic non-political institutions such as private property, rule of law etc.

Key words: middle class, middle strata, standards, values, political mindset, private property, modernization, cultural dynamics, the Western route of development.

Academic papers and public opinion tend to associate the middle class with a potential actor that can play a decisive part when determining the country's vector of development. Indeed, this mass social group comprises the Russians that hold quite stable structural positions in the society and are most resourceful (including financial, social, educational, human resources etc.). This group can

strongly influence the choice of Russia's further direction – in particular, accepting or rejecting the values, standards and practices associated with certain paths of development at the micro-level, and spreading their ideas among other social groups. Researchers have studied the inclination of the middle class to innovation activity (Radaev 2003; Golovlyanitsyna 2009); its demand for democracy and attitude to authorities (Urnov 2010; Petukhov 2014), to law and order (Levinson and others 2004) and its demands of the state in general (Shastitko and others 2010) – particularly in the wake of the 2011–2012 protest movement (Fedorov 2012) and the discussions of what road Russia must choose. However, Western social and economic researchers have long been focused on studying the link between the middle class and the development of democracy (Inglehart and others 2005; *The Global Middle Class* 2009).

It should be mentioned that researchers who analyze the middle class under the functionalistic approach tend to attribute very different social roles to this class, ranging from securing the stability in the society and supporting traditional values to promoting changes and modernization, acting as an innovative agent responsible for modernization. However, such approaches, initially based on some functions the researcher wants this class to perform in the society, do not provide clear answers what the real life middle class values and standards are and what direction of the country's development they fit. In this paper we attempt to figure out what path the middle class finds most preferable for the country, according to the values and standards of the middle class as described by the nationwide representative quantitative research carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences over the last few years.¹

We developed our own methodology to determine the share of the middle class based on the analysis of the Russian and foreign literature that focuses on the place of the middle class in social structures and bearing in mind the objective of research. The methodology focuses on the specifics of the structural positions that the representatives of the middle class hold in the society. We used the approach that is widely used in Russian and Western social science – applying a set of specific stratification criteria (multidimensional stratification) that measure these specifics. Since social science lacks a commonly recognized set

¹ We refer to representative nationwide research studies by the Institute for Complex Social Research and the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences: “The Rich and the Poor in Contemporary Russia” (March 2003, n = 2106); “The Poor and Poverty in Contemporary Russia” (April 2013, n = 1600), “The Middle Class in Contemporary Russia” (February 2014, n = 1600 + extra middle class sampling n=300). The sampling of every study was representative of the country's population by region, and by gender, age and location (urban/rural) within the region.

of criteria to include an individual or a household into the middle class, this approach often causes debate as to what set of criteria should be used to define the middle class in research and what threshold values should be assigned to them.

We used the following set of criteria and threshold values:

- education (no less than vocational/post-secondary education);
- professional status (non-manual labour);
- well-being (monthly average income per capita no less than the median income for the type of settlement or the quantity of durable goods in possession no less than the median for the whole sampling);
- self-identification (the individual rates his/her social status at least 4 points out of 10).²

However, the middle class is not homogenous, just like any other social group. It includes two subgroups: the core of middle class is relatively stable and it comprises the people who display the qualities of the middle class most clearly. The periphery of the middle class core is less stable and middle class features gradually weaken in it.

We used two key features of the middle class to define the above-mentioned subgroups – education and professional status. The core of the middle class was made up of managers/supervisors, entrepreneurs and experts/specialists with higher education and computer skills. The periphery comprised other people that met the criteria of the middle class, including: self-employed, clerks and retail sector employees with vocational secondary education, people with unusual combinations of education and job position (managers with vocational secondary education, low-level employees with higher education) or qualification (such as managers, entrepreneurs and experts with higher education but without computer skills) and unemployed middle class people. The core and the periphery together make up the contemporary Russian middle class.

As for the rest of the Russians beyond the middle class, two categories were defined – the potential middle class and other population that has no chances to be included in it. The potential middle class included the people that failed one of the four criteria except for the professional status, i.e. those who do not qualify as middle class due to education/well-being/self-identification but meet the professional status requirement. The rest of the population either failed the professional status criterion or had the adequate education and professional status but failed both self-identification and well-being criteria.

² See the justification for the choice of these criteria in Tikhonova N.E., Mareeva S.V. *Middle Class: Theory and Reality. M.: – Alfa-M, 2009.*

Speaking of the middle class size change, the above methodology applied to the data obtained by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IS RAS) for the last 11 years shows that the middle class increased throughout 2003–2008 (to 34% from 29%), shrank during the 2008–2009 crisis (25%), recovered in 2010 and resumed slow growth reaching 42% of the population by now (Fig.1).

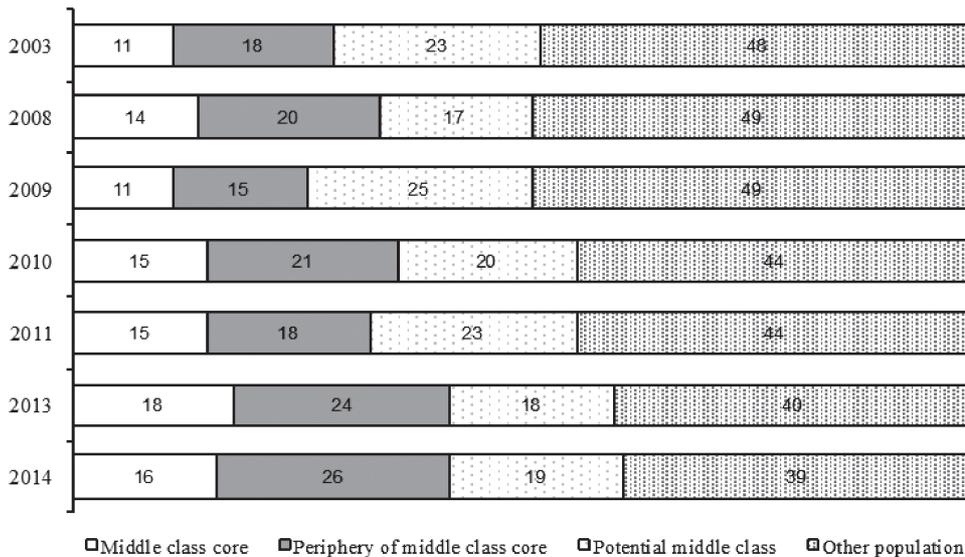


Fig. 1. Size of population groups in Russia in 2003–2014, %

Now let us analyze the standards and values of the middle class, starting with the values that usually associate with modernist societies³ – nonconformity, choosing equal opportunities over equal incomes, internal locus of control (taking responsibility for one’s own life) (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that the values and beliefs typical for modernist societies are most prominent within the middle class, particularly its core. Both the core and the periphery of the middle class show very similar figures except for their judgment whether they can survive without the government support (more than half of the core middle class and less than half of the peripheral middle class are positive about it, the rest of Russians are even less confident of themselves).

¹⁴ Speaking of modernist societies (as opposed to traditional societies) we mean the condition that these societies reach throughout modernization. Modernization is viewed in its neo-modernist interpretation – as a process that develops differently due to the specifics of cultures and historic experience of a given nation. Societies achieve the state of modern via economical, political, cultural, social and socio-cultural modernization (latter means shaping up new systems of values, meanings, behavioral patterns and rational type of thinking, etc.).

Table 1

Values of population groups in 2013 and 2014, %⁴

Alternative statements	Middle class, including			Potential middle class	Other population
	Core	Periphery	Total		
A person is responsible for his/her happiness, success and failure *	64	61	62	48	52
A person's life is largely determined by external factors, not by his/her efforts *	36	39	38	52	48
I am sure I can provide for myself and my family on my own and I do not need financial assistance from the government	54	43	47	34	35
It is hard for me and my family to survive without financial support from the government	46	57	53	66	65
It is better to stand out as a unique personality than to live like everybody else *	69	63	65	53	45
It is better to be like everybody else than to stand out *	31	37	35	47	55
It is most important to be proactive, undertaking, looking for new things in work and life even if you find yourself in minority	59	54	56	45	42
It is most important to respect customs and traditions	41	46	44	55	58
Equal opportunities for everyone to show their abilities are more important than equal income, status and living standards *	78	72	74	63	65
Equal income, status and living standards are more important than equal opportunities *	22	28	25	37	35

⁴The data marked by * are provided according to the IS RAS poll of 2013 that covered a comparable nationwide representative sampling and outlined various groups of population under the same methodology as later in 2014. The positions that are most typical for the respective groups are highlighted in grey (here and after).

Still it would be a stretch to say that modernist values clearly prevail in the middle class. A smaller but still significant share of the middle class holds to opposing, traditional values. The Russian middle class demonstrates the same discrepancy of values typical of the contemporary Russian society as a whole, though the former has advanced further on its way from traditional to modernist values (sociocultural modernization).

Looking at the historic data and comparing them against the 2003 figures shows that the support of nonconformity by the middle class increased but mostly due to its peripheral group (from 55% to 63%). The rest of the Russians showed an even stronger increase in support of nonconformity. As for the “equal opportunity vs equal income” dilemma, the changes were more controversial – the peripheral middle class and the Russians outside the middle class showed little change, while the core middle class that prioritized equal opportunity in 2003 (88%) showed a reversal (Table 2).

Table 2

Values of population groups, 2003 and 2013, %

Alternative statements	Middle class, including				Other population	
	Core		Periphery		2003	2013
	2003	2013	2003	2013		
It is better to stand out as a unique personality than to live like everybody else	72	69	55	63	37	47
It is better to be like everybody else than to stand out	28	31	45	37	63	53
Equal opportunities for everyone to show their abilities are more important than equal income, status and living standards	88	78	73	72	62	64
Equal income, status and living standards are more important than equal opportunities	12	22	27	28	38	36

On the one hand, the changes show that the society is becoming more homogenous in terms of values and that the middle class is becoming closer to the rest of the Russians. On the other hand, this means that part of the core middle class is disappointed with the modernist values that do not perform in the Russian institutional environment the way they were expected to.

The middle class appears divided in its view of the values and beliefs of the modernist society; the split is seen not only between the core and periphery of the group but also among age subgroups in it: younger people of the middle class tend to show more support for the modernist values than older people (Table 3).

Table 3

Middle class values in various age groups, 2013 and 2014, %⁵

Alternative statements	Age group		
	Younger than 30	30–50	51 and older
A person is responsible for his/her happiness, success and failure *	75	59	50
A person's life is largely determined by external factors, not by his/her efforts *	25	41	50
I am sure I can provide for myself and my family on my own and I do not need financial assistance from the government	55	47	36
It is hard for me and my family to survive without financial support from the government	45	53	64
It is better to stand out as a unique personality than to live like everybody else *	75	66	50
It is better to be like everybody else than to stand out *	25	34	50
It is most important to be proactive, undertaking, looking for new things in work and life even if you find yourself in minority	70	51	45
It is most important to respect customs and traditions	30	49	55
Equal opportunities for everyone to show their abilities are more important than equal income, status and living standards *	77	74	72
Equal income, status and living standards are more important than equal opportunities *	23	26	28

The middle class is similar to the rest of the Russian population – younger Russians generally show a more modernized mindset. However, even considering only the people below 30, it is the middle class that shows more support to the modernist values. Age is an important factor marking the difference between Russians who prefer modernist or traditionalist values but it is not the only one – the social class matters as well, reflecting a group of attributes that influence this choice (a certain level of well-being, accrued human and cultural capital etc.).

We also note that the middle class shows age differences across all these values except for the “equal opportunity vs equal income” dilemma where the middle class splits 3 to 1 (75% supporting equal opportunity and 25% support equal income) regardless of age.

⁵ The data marked by * are provided according to the IS RAS poll of 2013 that covered a comparable nationwide representative sampling and outlined various groups of population under the same methodology.

Speaking of the extent of modernization of values among the middle class, we can briefly mention such a feature as rational thinking that is also typical of modernist societies. Mid-term and long-term planning of one’s life, more typical of the middle class, is one of indicators of rational thinking (Fig. 2). The middle class, particularly its core, has a much longer planning timeframe than the rest of Russians due to the differences in living conditions (a more stable position on the job market), standards and norms.

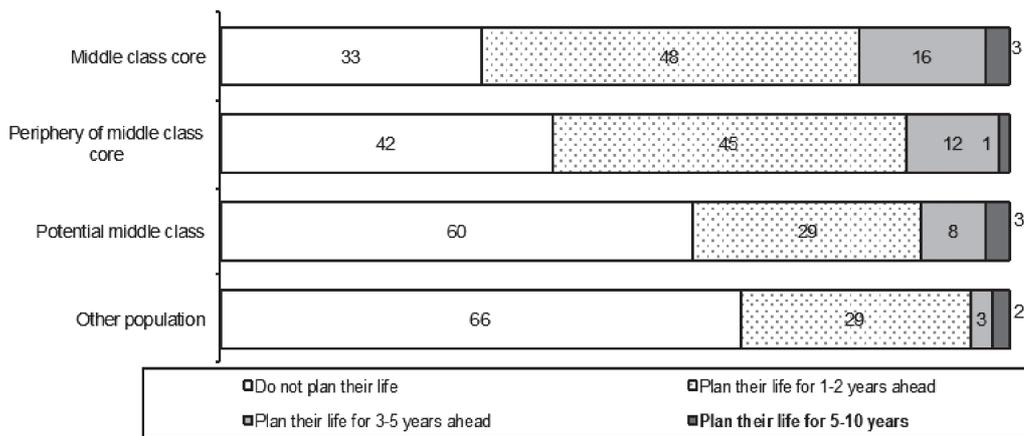


Fig. 2. Life planning among different groups of population, 2014, %

Hence, talking about everyday values, standards and mindset of the Russian middle class one can state that modernist values (such as independence, nonconformity, initiative, rational planning of one’s life) prevail. This might bring us to the conclusion that the Russian middle class should show stronger support for the Western-oriented path of development (and the institutions associated with it). However, empirical data shows that this is not the case – the Russian society currently holds the consensus view that the Western model of development cannot be applied to Russia, and though the middle class supports the Western route more than other populations’ groups do, most middle class representatives (as well as Russians in other social groups) tend to take the view that Russia needs its own “special” way (over 66% of the middle class and 75% of Russians from other social groups back this opinion).

Comparing the recent data to the answers from the year 2003, one can see that the opinions of different social groups barely changed – with the exception of the core middle class where the support of the Western path declined to 33% from 43% (Table 4) meaning that even the most pro-Western part of the middle class gradually gives up on this way of development. It is likely that, witnessing the development of Russia in the recent years and trying to implement the Western model over the last 20 years, the core middle class decided that the standards

and institutions that perform efficiently in the developed Western world can yield quite different results in Russia.

Table 4

Support for the Western path of development across different groups of the Russian population, 2003 and 2014, %

Years	Middle class, including			Potential middle class	Other population
	Core	Periphery	Total		
2003	43	34	37	26	23
2014	33	32	32	26	24

Support for one or another path of development differs in middle class depending on age: the younger representatives of the middle class are more prone to choose the West-oriented option than the older generation. In the below 30 age group, 42% of the middle class believe Russia should live by the same rules as the contemporary Western powers. This share decreases with increase of age – to slightly above one third among people 31 to 40 years old and to 25% among older groups. It should also be noted that the middle class shows more support for the Western path in every age group: 17% of all Russians older than 50 and 21% of the middle class in the respective age group choose the Western route. In general, though the idea of Russia following the West is more popular with the Russian middle class than with other social groups, this point of view is not prevailing even among the younger representatives of the middle class – almost 60% of them want Russia to find its own, special way.

The general idea that the middle class has about the future it wants for Russia is largely similar to that of the general population and clearly articulates the demand of the society for the soft conservatism focused on social issues: justice, equal rights and strong government are the main priorities (Table 5).

The middle class supports the stable development of the country: it does not welcome hardline government or revolutionary reforms; neither does it support the free market with the minimum involvement of the government. Convergence with the West is also not a priority. This confirms the conclusion that the middle class wants Russia to take its unique “special way” that does not coincide with that of the Western world. The Russian middle class believes that Russia’s way should not be limited to social justice, equal rights and freedom of self-expression, i.e. features typical of the Western world as well (note that the middle class typically prefers equal opportunity to equal income), but should also include quite a significant involvement of the government in social and economic issues (mostly by creating a specific institutional environment, setting

the fair institutional rules, enforcing them and balancing the interests of different social groups – Mareeva 2013; Tikhonova 2011), a feature less typical of the contemporary neoliberal Western doctrine.

Table 5

**Statements about the future of Russia as seen by the middle class
and the rest of the Russians, 2014, %
(ranked by the replies of the middle class)**

Statements describing the desirable future of Russia	Middle class	Rest of the Russians
Social fairness, equal rights for everyone, a strong government taking care of the nation's citizens	49	56
Regaining the status of a superpower	35	31
Return to national traditions, moral values tested over time	34	32
Human rights, democracy, freedom of self-expression	33	27
Securing stability and social development without revolutions or shocks	27	29
A strong hardline government able to secure order	16	21
Russia primarily for Russians, creating a national Russian state	16	20
Solving the global problems of humanity (environment protection etc.)	14	12
Free market, private property, keeping government involvement in the economy to the minimum	14	10
Convergence with the West and the developed world, entering the "common European home"	10	6
New, revolutionary rebuilding of Russia	1	2
None of these slogans reflect your personal dream of Russia's future	2	3

Now let us turn to the values and standards that are not the direct markers of Russia's future path chosen by the middle class but that largely influence the range of opportunities available when choosing the nation's development model. Any nationwide initiative can succeed only if it finds support at the grassroots. Let us look at the values that reflect the attitude of the middle class to private property, the key non-political institution.

The Russian middle class is positive about the very fact that private property exists in Russia, and its support for private property is stronger than in other groups, while the difference between the core and the periphery of the middle class is insignificant (in both if these middle class subgroups at least 70% approve of private property and see it as a necessary and useful institution, and about

25% are neutral about it, taking it as a natural fact). The potential middle class and the rest of the population show much lower support rates for private property (56% and 52%, respectively). A negative attitude to private property is displayed by 2% of the middle class core, 6% of its periphery and 12% of people outside the middle class. Therefore, accepting private property as an effective and necessary social institution, not just as an existing fact, is more typical of the middle class than of the rest of the Russians.

The data show that all the strata of the Russian population have improved their attitude to private property since 2005; that applies to the middle class as well, though it did not show any qualitative changes – back in 2005, it already perceived private property as part of everyday life, as a standard (Table 6).

Table 6

Positive attitude to private property across various groups of population, 2005 and 2014, %

Years	Middle class, including			Potential middle class	Other population
	Core	Periphery	Total		
2005	68	64	66	54	45
2014	73	70	71	56	52

But what does the Russian middle class mean when talking about private property? Data show that the way that the Russian middle class sees private property is quite different from the classic understanding accepted by the economic science. The Russian middle class understands private property primarily as personal use items and real estate such as apartments (85%), country houses (81%), land plots used for one’s own need (78%) or for growing agricultural products for sale (66%), and cars (71%). A smaller share of the middle class is ready to accept the idea that private property can apply to plants, factories, shops (63%), shares of company stock (52%), large amounts of money (47%), durable goods (45%). Finally, the Russian middle class barely applies the concept of “private property” to natural resources (13%), meaning that it does not see private property for nature and its resources as legitimate. Other groups of the Russian population largely take a similar view, though people outside the middle class tend to show smaller rates of support for private property for country houses (74%), apartments (80%), land plots used for one’s own needs (72%) or for growing agricultural products for sale (60%). As we can see, all Russians, including the middle class, understand private property as applying mostly to tangible physical objects. Understanding private property for less “physical” things such as money, stocks etc. is weaker.

Now let us see how the middle class treats the fact that foreign companies operate in Russia. The data show that the middle class tolerates this fact better than the rest of the Russians, and both parts of the middle class stand out in this respect from the groups that do not belong to it. The core of the middle class is more positive about the presence of foreign owned companies in Russia (Fig. 3). However, even the core has a smaller but still a significant share that is negative about foreign ownership of businesses, and this share grows to one third for the peripheral middle class. Therefore, one can say that Russians, and even their middle class, do not accept the open market economy “as is” and this means the classical Western model cannot be applied to Russia.

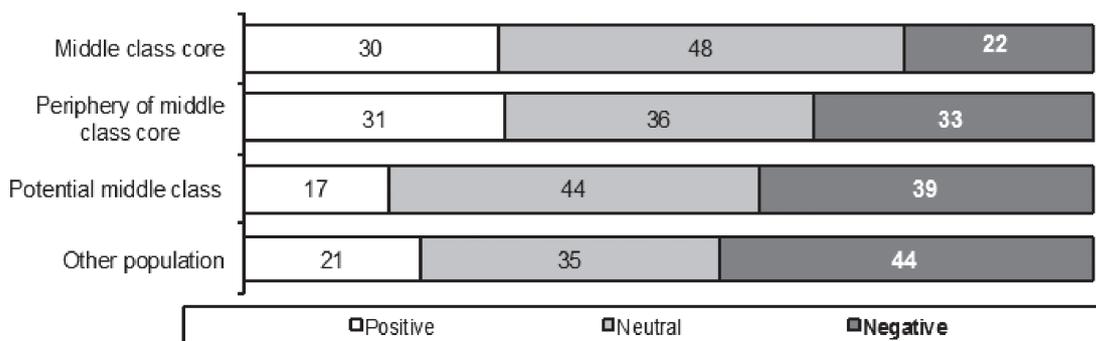


Fig. 3. Attitude to foreign ownership of businesses that operate in Russia across various groups of population, 2014, %

Dynamics of the data show that though the share of people who consider the Western path of development unacceptable for Russia has grown, the share of the middle class that is positive about foreign ownership of Russian companies has grown over the last 10 years (from 18% in 2005 to 31% in 2014) while the share of people taking it negatively declined (from 42% to 29%). However, the change in the middle class’ attitude to foreign ownership reflects the general increase in Russians’ tolerance to foreign ownership.

Now let us see how the Russian middle class treats the rule of law, another basic institution of the Western society. The middle class reflects the general opinion of the Russian society on the issue that implies a certain degree of “conventionality” – it is not necessary to abide by the law if the authorities break it; only 25% of Russians (both in and outside the middle class) accept the rule of law unconditionally (Fig. 4).

We see that the middle class is representative of the whole Russian population in terms of attitude to private property and to the law as a tool that regulates relations in the society. Both the middle class and the rest of Russians neither reject the basic non-political institutions of the contemporary Western

societies, nor do they take them for granted – they believe that there are boundaries for the concept of private property, prerequisites that justify abiding law etc.

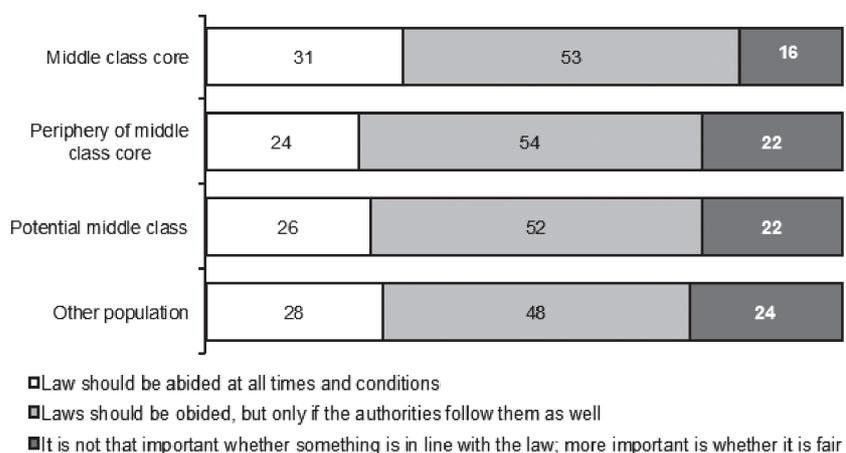


Fig. 4. Attitude to law across various groups of population, 2014, %

Now let us see what Russians think about the standards and values related to political institutions and the regulation of the political life in the society. Again, the data show that the middle class generally reflects the opinion of the whole Russian population, and it is not possible to say that the people of the Russian middle class have a different political mind-frame or very different ideas of the optimal political structure and political institutions than the rest of the Russians. Also, these values and beliefs are sometimes quite different from the understanding of human rights and the role of the opposition in the society typical of the developed Western democracies. For instance, the Russian middle class generally (though to a lesser extent than the rest of the population) agrees that the state must always choose to protect the interests of the majority over the interests of an individual, and that the mission of the opposition is to help the government rather than criticize it (Table 7).

It should be noted that the survey was held at a time when the political events in Ukraine took a twist beyond the rule of its constitution,⁶ so the opinions of the Russians about the acceptability of strikes and public protests to protect one's opinion and about the actions of the opposition could have been "heated up" by the media campaign and their unwillingness to see the Ukrainian scenario unfold in Russia, and this should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the research. However, historical data show that the recent data are not occidental (Fig. 5).

⁶ February 2014.

Table 7

Political positioning of the middle class, 2014, % (ranked according to the share of those who completely agree to the respective statements)

Statements	Fully agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree
Every person should have the right to protect his/her opinion even though it differs from the majority view	62	34	4
The state should always protect the interests of the whole people over the interests of an individual	47	43	10
Real democracy is impossible without political opposition	46	45	9
The mission of the opposition is not to criticize the government but to help it do its job	43	49	8
Every citizen has the right to protect his/her interests by means of public rallies and strikes in any situation	37	55	8
Citizens should not be allowed to go on strike or hold protest rallies if public order is threatened	30	47	23
There are conflicts in every society that can only be settled by violence	10	41	49

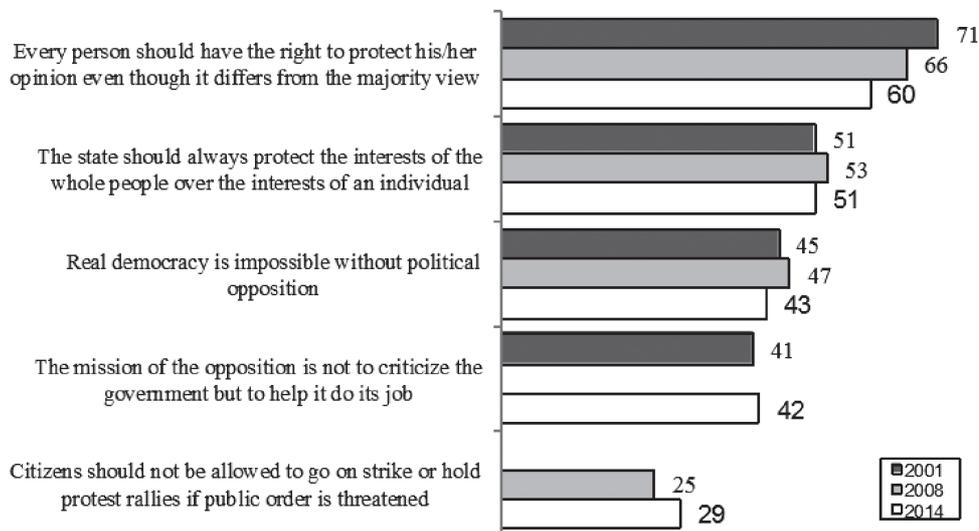


Fig. 5. Political preferences of Russians: 2001, 2008, 2014, %⁷ (share of those who chose "completely agree")

⁷ The question about the mission of the opposition was not asked in 2008, the question about strikes threatening public order was not asked in 2001, so these data are not present on the chart.

Looking at the dynamics of this data for the middle class (2008–2014), one can see it was quite mixed: on the one hand, the share of the core middle class fully supporting that the government should protect the interests of the whole people over those of an individual decreased (from 52% to 41%; the periphery of the middle class showed no changes), reflecting a move to accepting the “individual above the society” concept that is typical of modernist societies. On the other hand, opposing trends were visible too: the share of those who believe that a person should have the right to protect his/her opinion even if different from the majority view fell (core middle class – from 72% to 65%, peripheral middle class – from 69% to 60%), while the share of believers that threat to public order voids the right to protect one’s personal interests increased (core – from 25% to 30%, periphery – from 22% to 30%). Such trends show that the political modernization of norms and values of Russians (including middle class) is complicated and non-linear process.

Conclusions

The values and standards of the middle class in everyday life largely match those of a modernist society (nonconformity, initiative, independence, rational thinking etc.). However, the political values and standards typical of the Western societies still do not prevail in the minds of the Russian middle class and are far from there. Such a discrepancy can be explained by the fact that the Russian middle class finds that, in the current situation, with the institutional specifics of the Russian state, such as excessive inequality, non-legitimacy of institutional conditions, lack of rule of law, – the direct copying of the Western route would be inefficient. It would be more plausible to borrow and adapt certain Western features that fit the Russian life. The Russian middle class supports the idea that Russia should find its unique way that matches its cultural code and implies social fairness, equal rights for everyone and strong involvement of the government.

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