

## MIDDLE CLASS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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*Abstract:*

*The article addresses composition and evolution of Russian middle class based on the materials of all-Russian researches carried out by Institute of Sociology RAS in 2003-2014. Social origins of middle class representatives, their sector of employment (state, privatized, private enterprises, etc.), specifics of their work positions are analyzed. It is also shown that the processes of collective consciousness formation of middle class are not finished yet and its norms and values systems are heterogeneous.*

Genesis of mass middle class as a special social subject is usually connected in literature to the general transition of society to late-industrial type. During this period, growth of production demands larger quantities of qualified employees and experts. Integration of production and uprise of joint-stock companies lead to growth in number of managers. Development of education system and public health services leads to increase in numbers of doctors, teachers, etc. Middle class growth during this period is also ensured by social and economic policy carried out by the state. Priorities of state policies move from struggle against poverty towards support of middle class. In many respects it is caused by pure pragmatic reasons: middle class does not only provide economy with workers with high-quality human capital, but also by providing growing demand for goods and services stimulates general growth of economy, which, in turn, strengthens middle class positions in society. Successful industrial development of such countries as Russia, China, India etc. actualizes problematic of middle class for them as well. Middle class in the conditions of economic growth carries out a number of important social and economic functions in society (it plays a role of society "stabilizer", carrier of national culture, "supplier" of highly skilled labour, etc.).

The key question for middle class analysis is the methodology of its definition. Because of the differences in defining middle class, estimations of middle class size in modern Russian society given by different researchers vary a lot. Based on analysis of foreign (Wright, 2000; Goldthorpe,

McKnight, 2002) and Russian (Avraamova, 2008; Belyaeva, 2007; Srednie klassy, 2003; Tikhonova, Mareeva, 2009) materials which are devoted to the role of middle class in class structures, and considering the research questions, the methodology of this social subject's definition was elaborated based on the features of those structural positions that the representatives of middle class occupy in the society. Two base criteria were used: first is a character of socio-professional status which marks certain structural positions in the employment relationship; and second is the level of human capital (the level of education was used as its indicator).

Usage of this particular criteria is considered to be sufficient for foreign research. However, two more criteria were introduced considering the Russian conditions: the level of welfare (not as level of income itself, but because middle class should be able to provide at least simple reproduction of itself as a class and its human capital); and indicator of self-identification which is used to sift out those outsiders that would certainly not comply with middle class based on peculiarity of attitudes and corresponding behaviour.

Thus, the following criteria were used to separate the middle class: (1) non-manual labour; (2) specialized secondary education or higher; (3) indicators of average monthly income per person not lower than average figures for given types of settlement or the quantity of available durable goods not lower than median value for the population in general; (4) integral self-appraisal by the individual of his status in the society not lower than four points inclusive based on 10-points scale.

Belonging to the middle class for the non-working population is based on three criteria given above (out of four), not considering professional status. Empirical tests showed that the representatives of non-working population who were separated this way as belonging to the middle class, were connected to structural positions that characterize the middle class, i.e., occupied before, or would most likely occupy them in the future (retired people with higher education, students from educated families etc.).

Applying these four criteria to the results of empirical research shows that in the year 2014 42% of the Russia's population could be ranked as middle class. This share is rather high, but one should consider that the middle class is not homogenous in structure. It can be divided into steady core, which has strong indications peculiar to the middle class, and also periphery, where these indications become weaker. Two base characteristics that reflect the specificity of the structural positions of middle

class were used to differentiate the middle class from the core and periphery – the socio-professional status and the level of education. The managers with higher education, businessmen, and specialists with computer skills were ranked as the core of the middle class. The other representatives that were ranked based on the four criteria of the middle class were included in neighbouring periphery with the core of the middle class, which together with the core itself formed the structure of the middle class in general. Those Russians who did not meet one of the criteria except social-professional status, i.e., those who did not correspond to either the educational level, or welfare, or self-identification criterion formed the distant periphery of the middle class (potential middle class, whose members will be able to enter actual middle class under certain circumstances, such as improvements in their material standing). Those who cannot be considered the middle class by social-professional status, as well as those who have corresponding level of education and social-professional status were not evaluated considering both criteria of the level of welfare and self-identification formed the rest of population.

The data shows that the volume of the middle class significantly increased during the period of economic growth preceding the crisis (see Fig. 1). However, the crisis of 2009 broke the positive growth tendency of the middle class. By the spring of 2009, the share of the middle class in the general population had decreased from one third to a quarter (26%) and the share of the middle class in the structure of the active urban population had decreased from over 40% to 30%. Nevertheless, the volume of the middle class increased again to over a third (36%) by the spring of 2010 and stabilized at 33% in 2011. In 2013-2014, it reached 42% (but mostly by increase in neighbouring periphery).

Such dynamics indicate that *the process of Russian middle class formation still continues. Russian middle class is still heterogeneous in its structure. It has a core in which characteristic features are most prominent, and neighbouring periphery, which is also included in middle class, but in which these features gradually weaken.* Another boundary group is the distant periphery, representatives of which are not included in middle class. Both peripheral groups of Russian middle class are disproportionably big and unstable; they are subject to strong influence of external conditions (so, during the periods of economic growth or recession size of these groups fluctuates greatly). It testifies that process of middle class formation in Russian society currently continues.

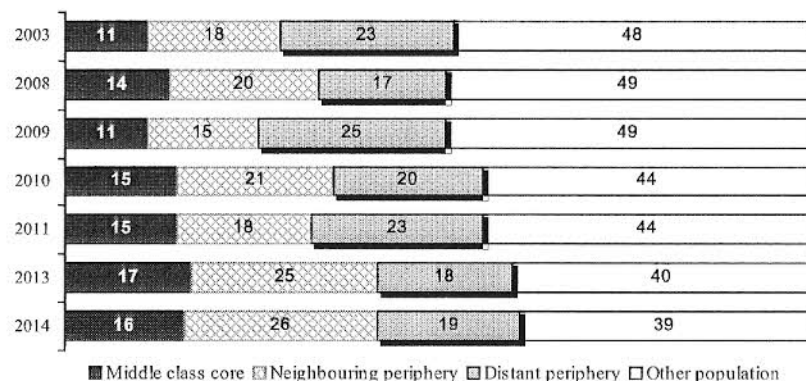


Figure 1. Dynamics of different social groups share, 2003–2014, %<sup>1</sup>.

The process of middle class formation in Russian society historically takes place considerably later than in the western countries. This process is influenced by structural changes in the economy and historical specifics of country's development in the 20th century - in particular, half of modern Russian middle class representatives come from "small Russia" (cities and villages with population less than 100 thousand). Compared to its periphery and other population groups, the core of the middle class has a higher volume of inhabitants of the regional capitals, as well as from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, which form 46% of the middle class core and 38% of its neighbouring periphery. The share of those who went through the initial socialization in villages is considerably lower in the middle class rather than in other classes of population (see Fig. 2).

<sup>1</sup> Data from national surveys of Institute of Complex Sociological Researches and Institute of Sociology: "Middle class in Modern Russia" (March 2003, n = 2,106); "Poor people in modern Russia: Who are they? How do they live? What do they strive for?" (March of 2008, n = 1751); "Russian everyday life during the crisis: the view of sociologists" (February of 2009, n = 1749); "Is Russian society ready for modernization?" (February–March 2010, n = 1734), "Poverty and Poor in Contemporary Russia" (April 2013, n = 1600)", (February–March 2010, n = 1734), "Middle Class in Contemporary Russia" (February 2014, n = 1900)". Samples for all of these studies represented the country's population by the region of living, and inside of each region - by the type of the settlement, gender, and age.

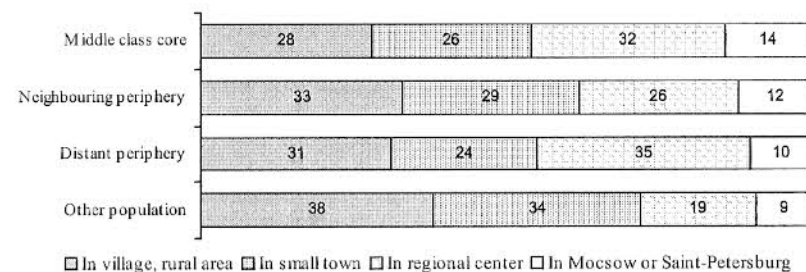


Figure 2. Answer to the question: "Where did you live when you entered school?" among representatives of different social groups, 2013, %.

In general, those who went through socialization in a big city have a higher chance of entering the middle class. However, it is necessary to point that even in the core of the middle class most of its representatives come from the "small Russia", which can affect the nature of the formation of the social subject, reflecting the peculiarity of mind and behaviour of its representatives.

It is also necessary to consider the level of education of parents when talking about the conditions of socialization of representatives of the middle class. It appears that this fact is closely connected to belonging to a particular social group (see Fig. 3).

As analysis shows, the level of education of the parents of the middle class representatives appears to be considerably higher than other social groups, and the core of the middle class differs significantly on this parameter from the neighbouring periphery that belongs to the middle class as well.

If we look at this picture from another perspective, it is necessary to point out that for Russians whose parents did not even have specialized secondary education, only 23% appeared in the middle class (and in 72% of cases they were in the neighbouring periphery rather than the core of the middle class). Mainly such Russians appeared to be the part of the population that did not qualify for the middle class.

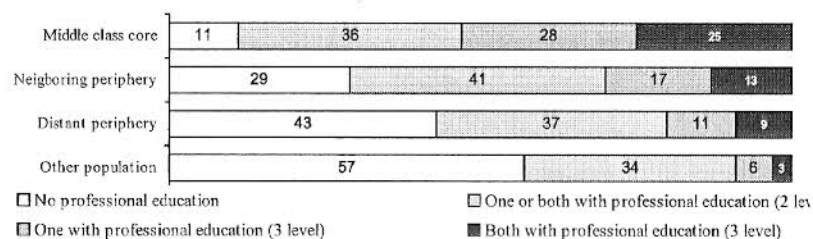


Figure 3. The level of parents' education in different social groups, 2014, %.

Thus, the middle class is primarily being formed from the children of families with high educational levels. However, considering the fact that the share of the hereditary urban population with both the parents having higher education is only 28% even in the middle class core, it becomes obvious that currently there is a considerable inflow from the outside to the positions corresponding to the middle class, and it happens out of a process of intergeneration reproduction. Only small (though the most stable) part of the middle class consists of hereditary professionals or semi-professionals of the cities that are able to self-reproduce. Therefore, specifics of middle class in Russia lie in smaller role of intergenerational reproduction in its formation.

Other specifics of Russian middle class in comparison with middle classes of western countries include concentration of its representatives primarily in state sector (see Fig. 4), rather low rents on their human capital, larger role of ascending social mobility.

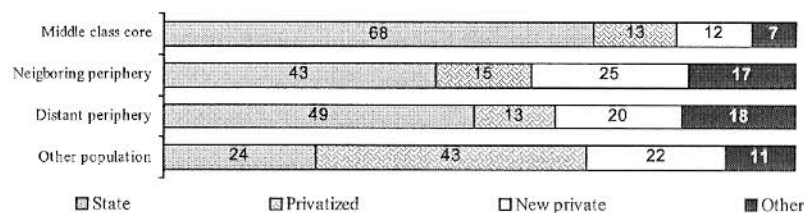


Figure 4. Sector of employment where representatives of different social groups earn their general income, 2014, % (for working population).

Half of the representatives of the middle class (56%) are employed by state enterprises, while over third work in the privatized or new private enterprises. The neighbouring and distant periphery appear to be rather similar by the distribution of its representatives by enterprise type, and it is possible to say that the difference between these groups are mainly connected not to this factor, but most likely with existing differences in the positions that they occupy in similar sectors of economy. Over 60% of the core of the middle class are state enterprise employees. Such specificity of the Russian middle class obviously has influence over many features of the mind and behaviour of its representatives, specifically their revenue and human capital, etc. This accounts for the important difference in structural positions for the middle class in Russia and the difference in the process of its development compared to the same process in the West. Besides the fact that the formation of the middle class in Russia began considerably later in time, the peculiarity of its structural positions is based on its concentration in the public sector of economy. As a result, while representatives of the Western middle class took part in market relationships offering human capital, the product that is in demand in the market, in Russian conditions the connection of the middle class and its assets with market mechanisms is not that definite, though it can be partially realized through the mechanism of secondary employment. As can be seen from the data, it happens more often in the middle class than among the other population, 17% of its representatives combine working at different jobs, 31% practice working at two jobs or overtime work at the main job, the same figures for those who do not belong to the middle class are 10% and 25%, respectively.

However, despite their localization in the state sector, exactly these positions are characterized by important specific characteristics that are traditionally connected to the middle class - power resource, work independence, career strategies (Gilbert, 2002; Wright, 2000; Goldthorpe, 1982). In particular, the specificity of the structural positions of the Russian middle class in the system of employment lie in higher level of power at the workplace (see Fig. 5).

These differences are certainly connected with the different professional structures of the middle class and other groups of the population. But in general, the power resource in the middle class can be found considerably more often than administrative / high level management positions, which provides evidence of middle class specifics in this respect.

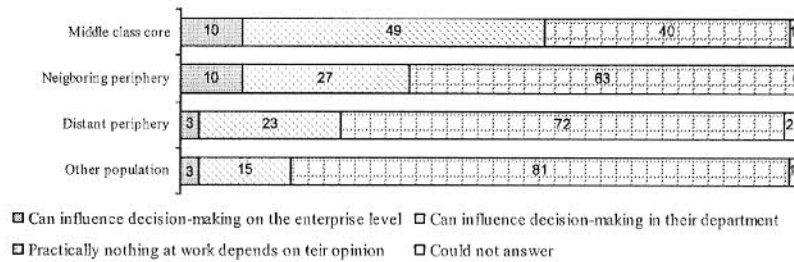


Figure 5. Evaluation of the degree of influence on the decision-making process at work among respondents from different population groups, 2014, % (for working population).

Besides, specifics of middle class structural positions lies in the fact that its representatives has career growth opportunities – there are certain career trajectories that are not common for structural positions of other social groups (see Fig. 6)

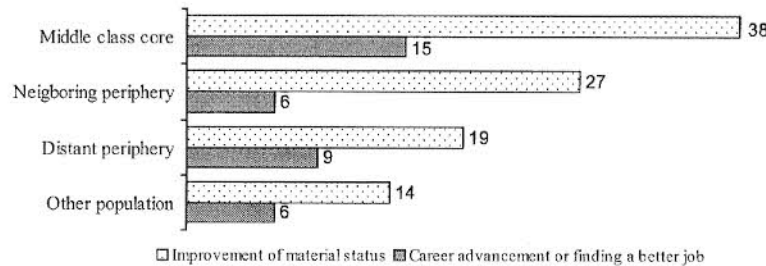


Figure 6. Change of work and material status of Russians from different population groups during last 3 years, 2014, % (for working population).

This confirms the conclusion about the specifics of middle class structural positions: exactly those positions are characterized by the power resources, higher work independence, career strategies, etc.

At the same time, processes of collective consciousness formation of middle class are not finished yet and its norms and values systems are heterogeneous (see table 1).

Table 1. Consent with alternative values in different groups of society, 2013, %

Opinion	Middle class core	Neighbouring periphery	Distant periphery	The other population
Equal income, status and conditions of living of any person is more important, than equal opportunities to reveal capabilities	22	28	37	35
Equal opportunities to reveal capabilities of each person are more important than equal income and conditions of living	77	72	63	64
It is better to live like others rather than stand out for the others	31	37	47	55
It is better to stand out among others and to be a bright personality rather than live like everyone else	68	62	53	44
It is important what economic situation will be in the country as few things depend on me	36	38	52	48
My wellbeing depends mostly on me	64	62	48	52

Formation of political consciousness and behavior of Russian middle class as collective political actor is currently far behind formation of patterns and values specific to middle class in economic and social spheres. As a result, neither middle class as a whole, nor its core is capable to act as independent actor in political sphere yet. This is due to the specifics of its norms which are far from traditional western understanding of freedom and democracy (see table 2).

Table 2. The Middle Class Representatives Attitude to Different Aspects of Ideal Political System, 2014, %<sup>2</sup>

Opinion	Completely agree	Completely disagree
Every person must have a right to defend his opinion even in the case the majority adhere to other opinion	37	8
The real democracy is impossible without political opposition	47	8
The task of opposition is not criticizing the government, but providing help in its work	43	8

The picture of political thinking in the middle class is not definite, as we see. On the one hand, the majority of middle class representatives agree that each person must have the right to defend his opinion and consider that the true democracy is impossible without political opposition. On the other hand, 43% of the middle class says that the task of opposition is not to criticize the government, but provide help in its work. Such an opinion is contrary to modern views on the structure of the democratic political system that is inherent in Western countries. This confirms the fact that it is not the time to speak about the forming of the political thinking of the Russian middle class that is inherent for the developed modern societies of the West. The middle class is neither in general, nor is its core is capable to play an independent role in the political sphere.

Besides, Russian middle class is characterized by weakness of its collective bargaining position. As a result, middle class currently does not have a base for consolidation. When in need to protect their rights, representatives of middle class prefer to do so individually, without using any public and political institutes.

At the same time, class identities are being formed in it quite actively, and it can accelerate its formation as a special actor of society's life (see table 3).

However, it is still early to talk about Russian middle class formation as the special social subject as a finished process. However it is possible to state that structural positions corresponding to middle class in Russian society are already generated in mass scale, and they are

<sup>2</sup> There was also answer "hard to say" that is not shown in the table.

characterized by the same qualitative features (autonomy of work, resources of influence at workplace etc.) as structural positions of middle class in the developed countries. Moreover, people who occupy these positions show close resemblance to representatives of "classical" middle class by specifics of their position, consciousness and behaviour; at the same time, they qualitatively differ from representatives of other classes and groups in Russian society.

Table 3. Identities of The Middle Class, 2014, %<sup>3</sup>

Identities	Middle class core	Neighbouring periphery	Distant periphery	The other population
Higher classes	1	1	0	0
Upper middle class	16	8	1	1
Middle class	65	58	32	25
Lower middle class	16	25	38	27
Working class	2	8	22	37
Lower classes	0	0	7	10

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<sup>3</sup> There was also answer "hard to say" that is not shown in the table.

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