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The Russian Middle Class as Policy Objective

Thomas F. Remington¹

Abstract: The subject of the Russian middle class has engaged the attention of scholars and policymakers inside and outside Russia. Debate over how the middle class should be defined and measured has been contentious. This article examines recent Russian social science literature on trends in the development of the middle class since the end of communism, considers problems in defining and measuring the size of the middle class, describes the role assigned to it by the Russian leadership, and looks at factors inhibiting the growth of the middle class.

The subject of the Russian middle class has engaged the attention of scholars and policymakers both inside and outside Russia. Discussion of how the middle class should be defined and measured has been contentious. Some of this debate is grounded in long-standing ideological differences over interpretations of the transition from the Soviet system, and some in the fact that expanding the share of the middle class in Russian society is an objective of the current Russian political leadership. In this article, I examine some of the recent Russian social science literature about trends in the development of the middle class since the end of communism, and describe the ambitious role assigned to it in recent statements by the Russian leadership. The article concludes with some general observations about factors inhibiting the growth of the middle class.

¹Professor, Department of Political Science, Emory University. This study is part of a larger project entitled “‘Silent Heroes’: State and Middle Class in Contemporary Russia,” conducted in collaboration with Mark Urnov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and funded in part by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research. I am grateful to Mark Urnov, Donna Bahry, and Harley Balzer for comments on this article, and to Irina Soboleva and Anton Sobolev of the Higher School of Economics for their research assistance. An earlier version of the article was presented at the annual conference of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies in Los Angeles, November 18–21, 2010.

Several empirical facts are now well established. In Russia, as in the United States, at least until the 2008 economic crisis, income inequality has risen in recent years while poverty has declined. In both countries, the growth in inequality reflects the concentration of income increases (both in pre- and post-tax and transfer incomes) in the highest income strata. In neither country has the middle class expanded at anything like the same rate as the growth in average incomes. Russia differs markedly from the United States, however, in the fact that half or more of middle-class individuals depend on the state for their livelihoods. However, both the Russian and current American leaderships recognize that the development of a larger middle class would be beneficial: by reducing the polarization between rich and poor, it would improve the provision of growth-enhancing public goods, reduce social tension and increase stability, and make government more effective and accountable. Whether it would also enhance the prospects for democratization is a fundamental question underlying this research.²

IN SEARCH OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

Three approaches to studying the middle class predominate in the Russian literature. The first is to define it according to individual or household position on one or more scales marking social status, the most common of which are income and material well-being, occupation and education, and self-identification. A simple and illustrative example of this approach is used by the state insurance company, Rosgosstrakh, whose researchers define the middle class as those households that can afford to buy their own apartment or at least their own car (M. Shishkin in *Kommer-sant*, February 27, 2008). Of course, most sociologists tend to combine multiple indicators. A second usage, overlapping with the first, is to imbue the middle class with agency, that is, to treat it as a coherent and self-aware social collectivity. The third is to conceive the middle class not as a concrete social group but as a package of values and behaviors.

Let us take these up in turn.

Middle Class as Social Stratum

In a series of works, Tat'yana Maleva, director of the Independent Institute for Social Policy in Moscow, has defined and measured the middle class as the group lying at the intersection of three sets of categories (represented as a Venn diagram): (1) level of income and material well-being; (2) occupational and educational status; and (3) self-identification. On the basis of extensive survey research, she reported in 2008 that approximately the top four deciles of the income distribution of the

²For an interesting discussion of the broader context for the development of middle class life since the end of communism see Chebankova (2010).

population (more precisely, the top 43.5 percent of income-earners) could be classified as middle class, with the top income decile being considered the "upper middle class"; 52 percent could be considered middle class by possession of durable goods, and 30 percent by self-identification. On the other hand, only 19 percent were middle class by occupation and education, and only 5 percent could be classified as middle class if middle-class status is restricted to those exhibiting all three properties. Another 15 percent share at least two sets of middle class traits (Shastitko et al., 2008; Maleva, 2008, pp. 9–13).

Natal'ya Tikhonova of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences uses a similar but slightly different set of criteria: material well-being; self-identification; and social-professional status and resources, including general and specific human capital. She finds that when all these are used, no more than 20 percent of population can be called middle class. However, if a more purely occupational status-based approach is used, she finds that the number rises to one-third, and has grown in recent years (Tikhonova, 2008).

On the basis of a 2006 survey, the veteran sociologist Ovsey Shkaratan found that some 22 percent of the population could be classified as "middle strata" either by possession of property or by access to power. Another 4 percent are "upper middle class," i.e., top managers and wealthy individual proprietors (Shkaratan et al., 2009).

Estimates of the number of people who consider themselves to be middle class vary considerably, depending on how the question is posed in surveys: what the alternatives are, for example, and what scale is suggested—whether by income, social status, housing, or some other marker. Some studies find that a large majority of the population consider themselves to be middle class. Lyudmila Khakhulina, head of the Social and Economic Research Department at the Levada Center, says that some 80 percent of the population consider themselves to be middle class, and that this figure has held steady for some years (Khakhulina, 2008). On the basis of RLMS (Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey), Olesya Yudina also notes that some 80 percent of households can be considered middle class using self-identification criteria (self-assessment of own social status and its security). But only 29 percent can be classified as middle class by education and occupation and 23 percent by quality of housing, and only 9 percent if all three criteria are applied simultaneously (Yudina, 2008).

The criteria people use for identifying themselves as middle class are not self-evident. The thresholds people apply in defining the lower and upper bounds of the middle-class category are quite elastic, and depend on their own circumstances. Khakhulina notes that the two key criteria people use in placing themselves or others in the middle class are housing (this criterion is generally in the top or second place) and income. But the higher one's own income, the lower the lower bound assigned for the threshold of middle-class status, whereas the lower one's own income, the higher the threshold posited. Moreover, the higher the income, the greater the desire to improve one's own income; only half of those in the

middle stratum of middle class want to achieve specific mobility goals and improve their incomes (Khakhulina, 2008).

Mikhail Gorshkov and Natal'ya Tikhonova, in a 2008 book based on three waves of surveys (1999, 2003, 2006), estimate that 20–22 percent of the economically active population of cities—i.e., excluding pensioners—can be called middle class using the combined approach, i.e., one defining the middle class as those sharing all three characteristics of middle-class status (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 15). This is equivalent to 18 percent of the total working population of Russia. Another third of the urban population form a “periphery” of the middle class (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 16). These are people who lack one qualification to be considered middle class, usually income; for the most part, they are people in the budget sector, whose incomes lag behind other groups (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 20).

It might appear that there is a broad agreement among social scientists both in their definitional approaches and in their estimates of the size of the Russian middle class. But there are several reasons for questioning how secure this seeming consensus is. First, as a number of researchers point out, there is remarkably little co-variation among the various measures of middle-class status. For example, the unusually large and nationally representative survey “Women and Children, Men and Women” (N = 11,117), conducted in mid-2007 by the Independent Institute of Social Policy in 32 regions, found strikingly low inter-item correlations among the characteristics making up the integral index of middle-class status. For example, income levels and savings were correlated at just .237, income and possessions at .33, and income and housing at .159. Possessions and savings were correlated at .195. And size of housing and the ownership of personal possessions were *negatively* correlated (Shastitko et al., 2008, p. 46)! The authors noted that the middle class defined by income alone had grown to 43 percent of the population since 2000, but that only 30 percent were saving any money out of current income, and only 2.6 percent held any investment assets (securities, pension savings, or other forms of appreciating assets). Therefore the growth in incomes was not being translated into a commensurate increase in the behavior considered characteristic of the middle class. In short, the estimates of the size and composition of the middle class are consistently inconsistent depending on the criteria chosen to measure it. We might well wonder therefore whether we have failed to find a valid measure of a theoretically sound concept, or whether perhaps the concept itself is faulty.

The stipulative approach to identifying and measuring the middle class also raises other serious questions about the use of these definitions of the middle class where the only theoretical rationale for setting cut-off points and attributes for assigning class membership is the observer's own judgment.

One problem is that when we define the middle class by its location on a given distribution, there may be substantial differences in its social, economic, and political behavior from one society to another. If we say

that 20–25 percent of the Russian population belongs to the middle class according to some arbitrary judgments about minimum and maximum thresholds on one or more hierarchies of status, we have little reason to suppose that that group is similar to some equally arbitrarily defined middle-class stratum in Western Europe or East Asia in its outlook, behavior, and political role.

Likewise, using the middle bracket of a hierarchy or cluster of hierarchies to define the middle class conceals important information about the nature of the distribution of the given value: for example, is the distribution of income normal, bimodal, or heavily skewed toward the rich or the poor? As in many cases in the social sciences, the properties of the distribution itself may be more important for understanding the society than identifying the mean or median point.

Another problem arises when we draw inferences about the dynamics of economic and social change from examining the distribution of status. Imagine that, on the basis of a cross-sectional survey, we observe a monotonic positive relation between the values of a scale such as income and some outcome variable of interest, such as worldly optimism (will I be better off in five years than I am now?) or a preference for democratic freedoms over authoritarian rule, or some other set of orientations and behaviors. We should not then infer that as mean income rises in a society, so will the proportion of optimists or democrats.

The danger is that we often confuse the mean with the median point on a scale such as income. The central tendency of growth in a country is almost always reported in terms of *mean* income or *mean* GDP per capita. Suppose we observe an increase in mean income in a developing society, and infer that the middle class is growing. We might (and often do) then say that such a country is becoming developed, that it is becoming more “middle class” in character, hence a better candidate for democratic transition and consolidation, and so on. But to assume that the mean is in some way representative of a significant social collectivity is incorrect. For that purpose, the median would be a better expression of the central tendency. After all, mean income can rise and leave the median income lagging far behind. The fact that mean income is rising tells us nothing about how the income growth is being distributed: the additional income might, as in the United States in the last few decades, be going overwhelmingly to the top 1 percent or .1 percent of the income distribution and raising the mean but not the median (Hacker and Pierson, 2010).

These inferential difficulties pertain directly to our understanding of the Russian middle class. For example, there is considerable disagreement over whether the middle class has grown under Putin. Some researchers answer this question in the affirmative. For example, Yelena Avraamova reports that in 2000, survey research found that only 10 percent of families were middle class by all three of the standard measures (education and occupation; income; and social identity) whereas on the basis of a survey in spring 2007 in four regions, around 25 percent of families possessed all three attributes (Avraamova, 2008). But this apparent increase

owes to the way individuals who in the Soviet society had some middle-class attributes were classified. Many of those who held middle-class status as defined by education and occupation lost a considerable amount of ground with respect to income. This means that if income is the principal determinant of class status, then there has been substantial growth of the middle class in the 2000s as real incomes have risen. Avraamova notes that the great majority of those with at least two of the standard three attributes of middle-class status reported experiencing improvements in living standards since the 1990s. But she also notes that the rising incomes benefited people in different branches of the economy very differently—in management and financial and legal services about half the employees are middle-class, while the figures are much lower in other branches. For example, in retail trade, security, and law enforcement, the rate is less than 20 percent, and it is only 11 percent in manufacturing except for energy (21 percent).

Compared with the United States, Russian median incomes have probably not lagged as severely behind mean incomes over the last decade. Unfortunately, Rosstat, unlike the US Census Bureau, does not report both median and mean income and earnings series. I have tried to construct a crude median income series by taking Rosstat's figures on the distribution of the population by income bracket between 2000 and 2009 (i.e., what was the income level at which half the population fell below and half above) and comparing this with the Russia-wide figures for mean per capita cash income. In this way, we can obtain a rough estimate of the relationship between the trends in mean and median income. Figure 1 presents the results.

Admittedly, these are very crude estimates. They are derived from the shares of the population that fall into relatively wide income bands. We have only an approximate indication of where the median income falls. Moreover, there is some evidence that, as in the United States, incomes rose fastest—before the crash—for those in the highest income brackets. A survey conducted by the state insurance company, Rosgosstrakh, found that in 2007, the fastest-growing income group comprised those with household incomes of \$125,000–\$250,000 per year (roughly 300,000 to 600,000 rubles per month—an astronomical level of earnings), and that 200,000 families (about .37 percent of all families) had annual incomes of over \$1 million. When we consider that only 6.7 percent of individuals had incomes over 30,000 rubles per month, it is evident that we are dealing with an extremely small segment of the population. Its rapid growth reflects not broad-based income growth, but income growth that is disproportionately benefiting the super-rich—exactly as in the United States at the same time (M. Shishkin in *Kommersant*, February 27, 2008). This inference is reinforced by the fact that the stratum with incomes of \$16,000–\$25,000 per year (40,000 to 62,000 rubles per month) grew more slowly than did the segment receiving more than \$25,000 per year.

In addition, the rise in incomes in the 2000s affected different sectors differently. If the mean wage in 2007 was 13,500 rubles (and the median

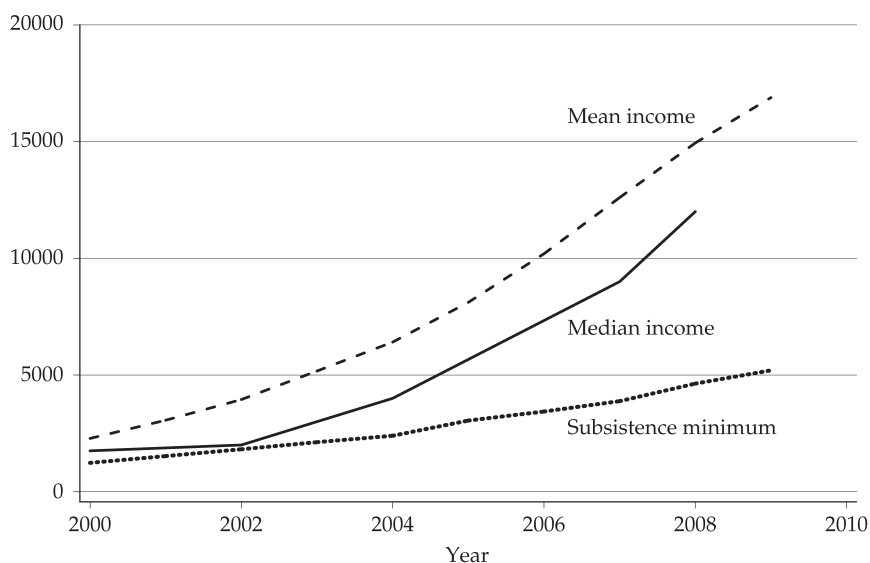


Fig. 1. Estimated trends in Russian mean and median income, 2000–2009, current rubles per month. *Source:* Roskomstat (*Rossiyskiy statisticheskiy yezhegodnik*, 2000–2009).

income about 9000), in the minerals extraction sector it was more than twice the average (28,000) and two-and-a-half times the average (35,000) in the financial sector (Grigor'ev and Salmina, 2009, p. 38). Meantime, the average wage in agriculture was 6,100, and in education 8,800, and in health care and social services 10,000. Shkaratan notes that cleaning ladies in banks were earning more than university professors (Shkaratan et al., 2009, pp. 244 ff.).

Moreover, as noted above, some scholars find that the middle class has not increased in size in recent years. Russian studies indicate that even though both mean and median incomes have risen in the 2000s, the orientations and behavioral patterns associated with a middle class, such as long-term financial strategies (savings, investment, educational upgrading), rational calculation in the use of resources, and civic activism, have lagged well behind. For example, a survey conducted by the Fund for Public Opinion found that between 1997 and 2008 there had been essentially no increase in the number of individuals who saved a portion of their monthly incomes—24 percent in 1997, 25 percent in 2008 (*RFE/RL Newslines*, April 14, 2008). Another study found that the number of those who saved had risen from 20 percent to 24 percent between 2006 and 2008 but there was a 50 percent jump in the total amount saved in the same period (21 percent of total income as opposed to 14 percent in 2006) (M. Shpigel' in *Vedomosti*, September 30, 2008). Evidently while the number of savers was returning to the pre-1998 level, the amount of disposable

income those savers were able to put away grew much faster. Meantime, as we will detail below, other aggregate indicators of the chrematistic behavior associated with middle-class status in other societies—such as investment for retirement or investment in education for oneself or one’s family—are characteristic of only a small minority of those who can be considered middle class by the standard criteria.

The very diversity of plausible definitions leads a number of scholars to the conclusion that there is no “middle class” as such, but that there are multiple “middle classes.” This was also the conclusion that Harley Balzer reached in reviewing the Russian literature in the 1990s (Shkaratan et al., 2009; Diligenskiy, 2002; Tikhonova, 2008; Balzer, 1998). Indeed, Vadim Radayev goes so far as to say that the middle class is “neither middle nor a class” but rather represents a “normative model” (Radayev, 2008). We shall return to this point below.

Summing up, although we can certainly define the middle class by stipulation as a set of households whose incomes and other attributes qualify them to be considered a middle class, we may doubt whether their behaviors and orientations resemble those of middle-class groups in other societies and whether their numbers have grown in recent years.

Middle Class as Agent of History

This leads to the second major usage of the term, by which the middle class is understood as a coherent social collectivity and an agent of historical change. In this theoretical approach, not only does a rising middle class reduce class polarization and redistributive pressure, it also provides support for modernization and democracy. Seymour Martin Lipset, in his classic 1959 article on the “Social Requisites of Democracy,” compared developmental levels by examining mean incomes, but emphasized the importance of how incomes and wealth were distributed for the political consequences of development; rising incomes could raise instability by sharpening the gap between haves and have-nots, or it could alter “the shape of the stratification structure from an elongated pyramid, with a large lower-class base, to a diamond with a growing middle class” (Lipset, 1959, p. 83). Such a middle class would be expected to temper extremism and class conflict, and therefore foster the conditions favorable to democracy. This theme was echoed by John Londregan and Keith Poole, who cited the example of Spain under Franco, where the growth of a “middle-income paunch of bourgeois affluence ... made it much less likely that the Spanish electorate would exercise the option of voting for confiscatory redistribution” (Londregan and Poole, 1996, p. 24). On the basis of a large cross-national dataset, World Bank economist William Easterly finds evidence that a larger middle class—defined operationally as the share of income going to the middle deciles of the income distribution and (in order to ensure that the measure is not itself endogenous to growth dynamics) instrumented for by estimating the share of commodity exports in GDP—is associated with a number of outcomes favorable to economic

development, democracy, and modernization (Easterly, 2001). He calls a condition where there is low polarization between rich and poor or among racial, religious, and ethnic groups “the middle class consensus.”

The political importance of the middle class as a collective agent of history was perhaps summed up most categorically by Barrington Moore in his magisterial account of paths to the modern era in the West when he observed: “no bourgeois, no democracy.” Even if such a middle class does not act “for itself,” it may exert latent pressure in defense of its common interests or could be mobilized to vote for parties that will protect them (Gerteis and Savage, 1998). Often Russian sociologists and political leaders argue that the middle class, whatever its size or composition, is of crucial importance to the country’s modernization because it tends to set the standards and aspirations for other members of society (Khakhuлина, 2008; Diligenskiy, 2002). In this vein, they can wax lyrical. German Diligenskiy concludes his study of the orientations and behavior of the middle class in Russia with this vision:

Russia resembles a person with an outstanding brain, who is not, however, capable of regulating his organism’s vital functions. People of the middle class that is being born are, possibly, one of those forces that could overcome that gap, and restore the lost connection between thought and social-historical action (Diligenskiy, 2002, p. 279).

Or consider the recent comments by Igor’ Yurgens, chairman of the Board of the Institute for Contemporary Development (Institut sovremenogo razvitiya or INSOR), who called attention to the formation of “a middle class that is small, mobile, and comparable with Western ones” and that “also is oriented to Russia, and not to foreign representatives of the elite, and comprises a sufficient resource to begin the progressive processes that the president has spoken of” (quoted in M. Sergeev and S. Kulikov in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 16, 2010).

But whether the Russian middle class that sociologists have identified has sufficient commonality of interests and orientations to enable it to play the ambitious historical role that theory assigns to it remains an open question. This problem is directly analogous to the old problem of characterizing the social structure of the Soviet Union. There was, and continues to be, a sharp debate over whether there was a “Soviet middle class” or at least a “proto-middle class,” based on educational, occupational, aspirational, and self-definitional traits. In the late 1980s, many saw this group as constituting the social base behind Gorbachev’s reforms. Many observers argued that Gorbachev’s democratizing reforms represented a belated but unavoidable accommodation to the demands of a rising class of educated urban groups whose tastes and aspirations were oriented to a Western standard of living and that exerted latent pressure for more freedom for public expression and association and channels for the articulation and aggregation of demands. The problem with this line of

argument, positing a causal relation between the hypothetical preferences of an imputed social collectivity and the Gorbachev political reforms, is its failure to consider the implications of the fact that all those who were classified as middle class were dependent on the state for their jobs and security. How interested many of them were in a system of private property and liberal democracy, depriving them of security and status, is—in retrospect—considerably less self-evident than it might have appeared at the time.³

The record shows that many of those who supported the breakup of the communist regime and the union state took advantage of the changes by acquiring monopoly rents over state-owned or state-controlled assets (Solnick, 1998; Gustafson, 1999; Barnes, 2001, 2006). Therefore, the notion of a burgeoning reform-minded Soviet middle class of the late 1980s now seems doubtful at best. The fact that in Soviet conditions, and still to a large extent today, the groups that were defined as middle class by income and material status, education and occupational status, and self-identification were dependent on the state for their livelihoods should have prompted a far more careful analysis of the way social status affected political interests. The large Soviet proto-middle class was, after all, extremely diverse. It comprised the educated professionals who ran state enterprises and provided technical and scientific expertise, as well as teachers, doctors, social service employees, and cultural sector employees whose salaries are paid by the state budget; career officers in the military and other uniformed services, some elements of the skilled working class, and legions of state and municipal officials. Even today, by most counts, about half of what can be called the middle class still comprises households tied to the state for employment. Presumably their calculations about whether they would be better off in a market economy vary widely. The divergence in outlooks between those groups that remain dependent and vulnerable and those that would welcome greater market competition remains a profound cleavage within the post-Soviet middle class.

The significance of this point is that there is an implicit conflict of interest between these groups. Aleksandr Auzan points out that the interests of the “private sector” middle class and the “state sector” middle class diverge: the state sector wants to tax the private sector more to support it (cited in Grigor’ev, 2008). Similarly, whereas the upper-income strata might be expected to oppose a change from the flat 13 percent income tax to a progressive scale, those farther down the income hierarchy, and those dependent on the state budget for their livelihoods, might well support it (Grigor’ev and Salmina, 2009, p. 74). At the same time, however, we should not draw too sharp a line between these two sets of groups. In practice, they are often overlapping and interconnected. For example, within the same household it is often the case that one person is employed

³Alexander Lukin’s work on contemporary Russian political culture raises this issue from a somewhat different angle (Lukin, 2009).

in the state or quasi-state sector, and another in the private sector (Diligenskiy, 2002, p. 114). And many who are employed in the state sector moonlight in the private sector.

Some Russian sociologists have made the bifurcation of the post-Soviet middle class fundamental to their analysis. Ovsey Shkaratan, Natal'ya Tikhonova, German Diligenskiy, and others have all pointed out that the transition from the Soviet system of social stratification, in which status directly depends on the intertwining of state power (*vlast'*) and property, to one of capitalist class relations, based on private property, has been tenuous and incomplete. As a result, access to income and material status for the predominant share of those who by objective stipulative criteria can be treated as middle class continues to depend on their position in hierarchies of power. Those who derive their social status—i.e., their income and material well-being, their opportunities for advancement, their long-term security—from their position in a system of private property-based class relations, still constitute no more than half of the stratum that can be called middle class, and, by other definitions, much less than half (cf. Shkaratan et al., 2009). This point helps explain the fact that the estimates of the size of the middle class vary widely depending on the particular measures used. Many who considered themselves middle class in Soviet society, where status depended far more on education and occupation than on income, experienced a sharp decline in their living standards as their earnings lagged far behind inflation. For example, Tikhonova reports the startling finding that 21 percent of those in Russian society who are in the poor or disadvantaged categories have higher educational degrees (Tikhonova, 2010, p. 10). Yet despite the sharp and humiliating sense of social degradation, some who suffered a loss of income and status still account themselves to be middle-class based on their perceived value to society (Patiko, 2008; Diligenskiy, 2002).

Still, the loss of status, indeed often of livelihoods, brought about by the transition resulted in a significant drop in the number of people calling themselves middle class. A series of surveys by Sergey Balabanov in Nizhniy Novgorod found that in the early 1990s, 70 percent of the respondents considered themselves to have been middle class before the Gorbachev reforms. This figure dropped to 52.7 percent in September 1993, 47.4 percent in February 1994, 43.6 percent in July 1994, and 38.2 percent by January 1995. Two-thirds agreed with the statement that “in Russia today it is only possible to make great wealth through dishonest means” and only 18 percent disagreed (Balabanov, 1995). Diligenskiy, who generally seeks to emphasize the adaptability of the old “Soviet” middle class rather than its wholesale destruction, estimates that only between one-fifth and one-third of those who were middle class in Soviet society entered the new post-Soviet middle class (Diligenskiy, 2002, p. 114). But once again, such estimates depend on purely stipulative criteria—including the assumption that there was a group in Soviet society that could be called middle class.

Middle Class as Normative Model

Taking seriously the argument that the category that can be called middle class is too divided and too heterogeneous to be considered an agent of social and historical action leads us to the third major conceptualization of the term. That is to treat the middle class as a “metaphor” (Diligenskiy, 2002) or a “normative model.” As Vadim Radayev puts it, the middle class is “not a statistical category, but a condition to which we want to move” (quoted in *polit.ru*, April 3, 2009). It is the embodiment of a particular behavioral and attitudinal syndrome. Usually there is a strongly positive normative and policy cast to this usage. As Radayev put it, the state should support not “statistical groups, but behavior.” The state should invest in “that into which people want to invest their time and resources, directions that can become vital interests in their own right” (quoted in *polit.ru*, April 3, 2009).

What are these behavior patterns that the state would wish to encourage?

Renal'd Simonyan quoted Ludwig Erhard, the former chancellor of postwar Germany, who is often considered to be the architect of Germany's economic miracle, based on the model of a “social market” economy, and who in 1954 described the middle class as “people whose qualitative characteristics are a feeling of self-worth, independence of view, self-reliance, social resilience, daring to make their existence dependent on the results of their own labor, and with the desire to assert themselves in a free society and free world” (Simonyan, 2009, p. 55). Simonyan also paraphrases the first prime minister of independent post-Soviet Estonia, Edgar Savisaar, who painted an even more flattering portrait. According to Savisaar, the middle class is characterized by a relatively high standard of living; a sense of assurance of stability in its standard of living; a high level of education; good preparation for employment and a high level of competitiveness in the labor market; a high level of knowledge about events in society; a skeptical attitude toward politics; the capacity to analyze and generalize information independently; the ability to achieve self-realization in society; an active impact on major social processes; a feeling of civic responsibility; and a concern with the well-being of the self and family as well as the society as a whole. Consistent with the classical model of the middle class, the middle class refers not just to possession of a given amount of property, but also is conceived as the bearer of basic values of civic and social self-worth, independence, and civil society (Simonyan, 2009, p. 55).

The current Russian leadership, including Vladimir Putin, Dmitriy Medvedev, and Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov, have likewise repeatedly expressed the view that the virtues traditionally associated with the middle class—a well-developed work ethic, the habit of saving and investing for the future, modesty in consumption, an orientation toward stability and security—are normatively desirable and important as policy objectives. Moreover, they recognize that recent economic trends (including

growing income inequality combined with the severe recession in recent years) have left the middle class severely strained.

For example, in his address to the State Council on February 8, 2008, President Putin declared that the current level of income differentiation (referring to the 15-fold gap between the highest and lowest income deciles) was “absolutely unacceptable” and should be reduced; he also called for measures that would bring about an expansion of the middle class. Its share, he declared, should reach 60 or even 70 percent by 2020 (Putin, 2008). The leaders of the United Russia party consistently speak of the middle class as a force for stability in society and as their natural constituency. Boris Gryzlov declared that the party “prefers social conservatism, relying on the middle class and acting in the interests of this class, defending the interests of those who need no revolutions, either financial, economic, cultural, political or orange, brown, red, or blue” (quoted in *RFE/RL Newslines*, April 25, 2005). In the current economic crisis, the party’s leaders declare, their task is to protect the middle class, “the foundation of the future society.” The co-chair of one of the party’s study clubs referred to “the so-called office plankton, and ordinary working stiff, who are the first victims of the crisis; but in fact they are the guarantee of the future of Russia as a normal European country, a country in which there are no longer any rich or poor” (Andrey Makarov quoted in A. Levkin, *polit.ru*, November 26, 2008, <http://www.polit.ru/author/2008/11/26/makarovsred.html>). Vladislav Surkov, deputy chief of the presidential administration, often stresses the importance of state efforts to build and protect the middle class. At a forum for leaders of the United Russia party on November 28, 2008, Surkov said that the middle class comprises “owners of ordinary housing, modest cars, small companies” as well as professionals, office workers, and state employees. He called them the country’s “silent heroes.” “They put aside thousands of rubles to buy a new refrigerator or apartment, and now are losing everything in the economic crisis. Now the state’s main task is to protect them during the recession” (quoted in M. Tsvetkova and N. Kostenko, *Vedomosti*, December 1, 2008; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, December 1, 2008).

The head of INSOR, Igor’ Yurgens, often emphasizes that building the middle class is the key to the success of economic and political modernization. At a conference devoted to the problems of developing the middle class sponsored by INSOR in April 2008, he referred to the government’s official “Strategy for the Long-Term Social-Economic Development of Russia to the Year 2020” (“Strategiya 2020”) which posits as a state goal raising the share of the middle class in the society to 50 percent (Yurgens, 2008). Yurgens noted several steps the state had taken to build up the middle class, such as the higher levels of state bank deposit guarantees (raised to 7,000 rubles) and the increases in salaries for budget sector employees. Defining the middle class as a group with the habit of savings and investment, with education at least at the specialized secondary level, with an inclination to protect their health and raise their educational qualifications, and active in civic life, Yurgens acknowledged that no more

than 15–20 percent of the population fit this description. To meet the government's goal of bringing the share of the middle class up to at least half, Yurgens declared that the number employed in small business should be raised from 20 percent or so, as at present, to at least 60 percent. Government must therefore free business of needless administrative burdens and encourage self-initiated associations. But as Yevgeniy Gontmakher, deputy director of IMEMO (Institut Mirovoy Ekonomiki i Mezhdunarodnykh Otnosheniy/Institute of World Economy and International Relations), pointed out at the same conference, the middle class is not growing. If current trends continue, he noted, the middle class will not grow to the desired 50 or 60 percent of society. Gontmakher emphasized that above all the middle class needs a sense of security, particularly retirement security (Gontmakher, 2008).

The normative model is employed by empirical sociologists as well. For example, Gontmakher, Grigor'ev, and Maleva argue that the Russian middle class is important politically because, as in other societies, it sets the moral standards for society and is the source of pressure for political freedom. However, at present, they warn, the middle class is threatened by rising inequality as incomes are increasingly concentrated in the top few income brackets while the incomes of lower brackets are stagnant. Moreover, and consistent with the points made above, they argue that part of the middle class belongs to a bureaucratic stratum and is politically passive (Gontmakher, Grigor'ev, and Maleva, 2008).

A number of studies have investigated whether the orientations and behavior of the groups that can reasonably be classified as middle class fit these normative models.

German Diligenskiy conducted a series of in-depth interviews with individuals who represented characteristic segments of the Russian middle class (Diligenskiy, 2002). Although he does not claim scientific representativeness for his subjects or try to estimate how many people in Russian society share these orientations, he does find some consistent patterns in the thinking and behavior of the few dozen people whom he studied. His conclusions have been corroborated by the findings of several large-N surveys.

Generalizing, Diligenskiy observes that members of the middle class exhibit a sense of agency in their own lives, and, more than members of other strata, a sense of optimism about the future. Diligenskiy also reports that they tend to value personal freedom. However, it is difficult to place much weight on this finding, because generally survey researchers find that the level of support for a value such as freedom is affected by the way the question poses the trade-offs required to attain it. For example, Gorshkov and Tikhonova found that asked to choose between two alternatives, a society of social equality and a society of individual freedom, only 36 percent of the urban middle class preferred the latter, while 60 percent chose the former. Only among those whose incomes per family member rose above 10,000 rubles—a segment well above the median—was a majority inclined to favor the society of individual freedom (Gorshkov

and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 109). To be sure, members of middle-class strata tend to rate the value of freedom more highly than lower income strata, but only by a margin of 10 percent (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 109). And likewise, the middle-class respondents are only 10 percent more likely to prefer equality of opportunity over equality of incomes and living conditions (70 percent of the potential middle class compared with 60 percent of all urban residents).

Diligenskiy and other studies also find that representatives of the middle class tend to be non-ideological and pragmatic in their politics. Gorshkov and Tikhonova, on the basis of their survey, also find that they manifest relatively low interest in politics, and almost no identification with the standard political ideologies, although over time, their support for United Russia has risen (Diligenskiy, 2002; Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008). Nor did Diligenskiy detect any sense of conflict with the political regime. On the other hand, he and other researchers found a high level of expressed support for a strong role on the part of the state to provide for social welfare. The model of a European-style welfare state has broad appeal among middle-class strata, as do European institutions more generally (Diligenskiy, 2002; Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 109). This is particularly the case among the younger cohorts of the study. Both Diligenskiy and Gorshkov and Tikhonova also tend to find a higher level of ethnic and religious tolerance among the middle class than among other strata of society.

On the other hand, Diligenskiy also finds that his subjects have little interest in joining associations in society and have very few ties to anyone outside their immediate circle of family and friends. Only 15–20 percent of his respondents have any ties to organizations. Most tend to condemn the existing array of organized associations as “nomenklaturist” (*nomenklaturnyye*) (Diligenskiy, 2002, p. 165). Similarly, Gorshkov and Tikhonova find that over half of the urban middle class consider it futile to engage in collective action to defend their interests (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, p. 105). They report that only 4 percent of the urban middle class take part in public-political life directly (compared with 3 percent of the urban population generally) although they follow politics at a higher rate (25 percent vs. 18 percent). The number of urban middle-class groups who would be willing to resort to protests such as demonstrations and hunger strikes in case of a sharp downturn in their personal fortunes is only 7 percent, whereas 42 percent would look for additional sources of income. Still, Gorshkov and Tikhonova note the rise in the number of self-organized social movements focused on particular causes, such as the interests of automobile owners, based on developing group identities (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, pp. 135, 140).

Perhaps the most striking set of findings to emerge from the survey research and in-depth interviews that Russian social scientists have conducted with representatives of middle-class strata is the low sense of assurance about the future and the low level of personal effort to make the future more secure. For example, between 2003 and 2006, Gorshkov and

Tikhonova note, the number of people in the urban middle class who were personally upgrading their own skill levels and knowledge decreased while the number who were doing nothing along these lines rose from 28 percent to 34 percent. The number spending money on education for themselves or their children fell from 42 percent to 32 percent. Fewer than 10 percent in this group have investments in the form of land, housing, securities, commercial bank savings, or commercial loans. Fully one-quarter of them spend all of their current income, and another third use any income not needed for immediate consumption to purchase durable goods. Only 16 percent have any bank savings; only 6 percent have land or housing as investments; only 2 percent hold securities (Gorshkov and Tikhonova, 2008, pp. 69–70). Tat'yana Maleva reports that only about 5 percent of the population hold home mortgages (Maleva, 2008). It is notable that around the same time (between 1999 and 2004), survey research found that orientations among the general public associated with the “achievement motivation” dropped significantly while orientations associated with welfare and security rose (Urnov, 2008, pp. 185–188).

As Maleva observes, the middle class is highly insecure. On average, Russian citizens can anticipate losing about three-fourths of their incomes upon retirement. This is because the replacement coefficient—the percent of current income that a person can expect to receive from retirement pension income—is only 27 percent (polit.ru. January 14, 2008). Under a program announced by Prime Minister Putin, the state will match savings contributions to private pension plans on a ruble-for-ruble basis if they contribute a minimum of 2000 rubles, but as of mid-2009, only 1.6 million people (out of a total of some 70 million who are employed) had declared their intention to participate. Of those, only a small minority had actually contributed any money (M. Sergeev in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 15, 2009; O. Kharseyev in *Kommersant*, July 21, 2009). As Maleva and others have noted, only a very small number of people are actually able to take any real benefit from such savings schemes. The average sum that people can contribute to private pension savings is 4,500 rubles—nowhere near enough to ensure a decent income in retirement (Maleva, 2008).

Similarly, Ol'ga Kuzina (director of the National Agency for Financial Research [NAFI]), which conducted a national survey in June 2008, found that most people are not accumulating savings for retirement: only 9 percent plan to live on their own savings; 4 percent plan to live on payments from private pension plans; 59 percent plan to supplement pensions with other income. Three-fourths plan to continue working, 14 percent plan to grow their own food, 26 percent plan to live on the income of their spouses or children. Only 7 percent of the population understood clearly what private pension funds are. She found that models of “income-smoothing” financial strategies simply did not apply in Russia (Kuzina, 2009, pp. 127–128).

One reason for this pattern of behavior is the extremely short time horizons with which middle-class households operate in their daily lives. Although middle-class individuals have slightly longer time horizons

than the average Russian citizen, these are still extremely short. Kuzina reports that only one-fifth of respondents (in a national sample survey) claim to know what their income will be in one year; one-third of the population do not plan their expenses even one month ahead. Only 39 percent feel confident that they know their income even six months ahead. Only 3 percent can project their income 10 years out. There is some variation in levels of time horizons by income bracket (i.e., by self-ascribed level of material well-being); of those who are well off, half say they can project income six months out, while only 20 percent of those are not making ends meet can do so. (The corresponding figures are 27 percent vs. 11 percent for projections one year out [Kuzina, 2009, pp. 133–135].) Forty-five percent of the population identified themselves as middle class, but of them only 8 percent could confidently predict what their income would be in three years. Eighty-five percent of them plan their expenses no more than a half year ahead (Kuzina, 2009, pp. 135–136)! Of those 100 individuals out of 1,600 who share three traits of middle-class status, only 11 percent use credit cards (Kuzina, 2009, p. 141).

To be sure, the mistrust in banks and other financial institutions is well founded, given the experience of the early 1990s and 1998, when many people lost all their savings through bank failures and devaluation. It is striking that in November 2008, as the new financial crisis and recession were striking, Russians withdrew 450 billion rubles—about \$15 billion—from banks in a month's time (G. Gubeydullina in *Vedomosti*, October 5, 2010). The preference for purchase of durable goods and real estate over other forms of investment therefore is understandable.

THE RECESSION AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

By all accounts the recession that began in 2008 hurt the groups that constitute the middle class much as it hurt both low-income and high-income groups. Using its consumption-based definition of the middle class—i.e., those who can afford to buy a car or an apartment are considered to qualify—the researchers for Rosgosstrakh found a significant drop over the 12 months from October 2008 to October 2009, from 15 percent of the population to 11 percent (M. Malykhin in *Vedomosti*, October 26, 2009). Another survey by a private market research firm found that the number of households that could afford to buy an apartment with a bank loan fell from 27 percent to 10 percent in a matter of several months (M. Sergeyev in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, December 25, 2008). As incomes at the top of the distribution leveled off or fell, inequality stopped rising for the first time in many years. Average real incomes fell in late 2008 and 2009, so that real money income was 6.7 percent lower in January 2009 than January 2008 (polit.ru, February 19, 2009). As incomes fell, interest rates rose and purchases of durable goods plummeted. The percentage of people saving nothing rose from 68 percent to 72 percent in one year (I. Naumov in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 25, 2009). Small business was hurt, partly because of the sharp decline in aggregate demand and because of tightening credit.

The head of OPORA (the All-Russian Public Organization of Small and Medium Entrepreneurship), Sergey Borisov, reported in September 2009 that before the crisis about 36 percent of small businesses used bank credits but that interest rates had risen and many small businesses were forced to close (some 100,000 had closed in 2008, another 25,000 in 2009) (quoted on polit.ru, September 28, 2010). As inflation continued, real earnings fell, some in absolute terms, many more in real terms. A survey of 185 firms in several sectors in early 2009 found that the biggest drops in earnings were in the sectors that had seen the greatest increases in recent years, such as finance (from an average of 285,000 rubles per month for the head of a financial institution down to below 230,000 between February 2008 and February 2009), retail trade (down 40 percent on average), and information technology and telecommunications (down 30 percent). In firms where compensation levels were rising, the increases came at the expense of layoffs (polit.ru, March 6, 2009). At the same time, pay increases in the budget sector and the levels of state pensions were keeping the incomes of lower-paid strata steady or slightly higher. Overall, therefore, the effect of the recession was to halt, at least temporarily, the rise in income inequality that has been marked over the 2000s—at least in officially reported incomes.

Yet other consequences of the recession give us reason to question how well official figures are capturing real trends in wages and incomes. This is because, at least according to some reports, the recession prompted a return of some of the informality that had characterized the Soviet economy and had remained prevalent into the 1990s. Informality takes many forms, including practices such as paying a portion of earnings “under the table” (“*v konverte*”) or in other forms, such as special bonuses. In the Soviet economy, an element of informality was manifest in the common practice of dividing wages into the regular wages owed according to the national wage scale (the *setka*) and another portion consisting of special supplements (*nadbavki*). For many individuals, supplements constituted as much as half of total earnings (Remington, 2011). This income, while entirely legal, was often paid at the discretion of the supervisor and bore little evident relation to effort expended.

The reason that informality matters for income distribution is that there is considerable circumstantial evidence that informality exacerbates inequality of earnings and (because much of the stream of informal income is neither reported nor taxed), still more, total income inequality (cf. Kurtz, 2004). Informal employment rose rapidly during the boom years of the early 2000s (from about 14.5 percent of all jobs in 2001 to about 18.5 percent in 2005) and gray forms of compensation remained prevalent. As of the mid-2000s, survey research conducted by the Independent Institute for Social Policy found that a third of all employed persons avoided paying any payroll taxes (i.e., the Single Social Tax, which at the time went to fund the Pension Fund, the Mandatory Medical Insurance Fund, and the Social Insurance Fund). Another 27 percent paid only part of it (Maleva et al., 2007, p. 126). Thus, even at a time when unemployment and wage

arrears were declining, payments into the social funds that enable the state to ensure dignified retirement and other forms of social security were lagging. This means that, as Russian scholars note, the pension system operates as a defense against poverty rather than as a way of ensuring investment in human and other forms of capital. The recession beginning in 2008–2009 only increased the scale of informal compensation in the economy.⁴ Generally, the large share of informal income (including associated practices, such as discretionary bonuses and in-kind benefits) exacerbates inequality, increasing the gap between the rich and the poor rather than expanding the middle-income strata. For example, Shkaratan reports that over a third of pay bonuses (*pribavki*) go to the top-paid 10 percent of individuals, while the lowest-paid 10 percent get only 1.5 percent of the total (Shkaratan et al., 2009, p. 246). Inequality and informality increase inflationary pressure and squeeze out government's ability to provide public goods and social insurance (Shkaratan et al., 2009, p. 372). There is therefore some reason to suppose that as incomes begin rising again due to the recovery in world energy and commodity prices, there will not be commensurate growth in the size or security of the middle class.

INSTITUTIONAL DRIFT: INCOME INEQUALITY, SOCIAL WELFARE, AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

We have surveyed evidence from Russian studies of the trends in the development of the Russian middle class in the post-Soviet period. The middle class is an elusive target; its size and shape shift depending on how it is conceptualized and measured, to the point that there is substantial doubt as to whether there is any single social group that merits being classified as a middle class at all or whether instead we should be looking for indications of orientations and behaviors that can be compared with those of middle classes elsewhere. Whether it is treated as a meaningful label for social strata characterized by a certain level of status in one or more social hierarchies, or as one or perhaps two distinctive and relatively cohesive groups of actors, or as a bundle of aspirations and values, it appears clear that several features of the institutional inheritance of the Soviet system inhibit formation of the kind of confident, savings-oriented, and civic-minded bourgeoisie that the Russian leadership declares desirable. Its development appears to be arrested despite the stated goals of the Russian leadership.

The Soviet legacy of social welfare institutions leaves the system of social security closely intertwined with employment. It is still through the

⁴In August 2009, the deputy chair of the state statistical service estimated that between 20 and 25 percent of the economy of the regions was “in the shadow zone” and that the economic crisis was making matters worse: “Before the crisis we had a tendency for the economy of Russia to move out of the shadows, for instance the alcohol business became almost entirely transparent. Now, unfortunately, the situation is worsening” (polit.ru, August 12, 2009).

workplace that many people receive their housing, access to health care, pension rights, and other benefits, not to mention the cash wages and supplements that come in unreported forms. Those in the private sector are often outside the state social benefits system and depend entirely on the cash economy of the marketplace to provide them for themselves, family members, and employees; often this means that they resort to informal transactions to do so. Almost no one expects that either state pensions or private savings will secure them a dignified existence in retirement. Therefore most people expect to continue working into retirement. The lack of opportunity to secure their own futures outside of employment in the state sector is one of several factors inhibiting the growth of a private sector that would complement the state social security system and encourage individuals to invest in human capital formation and other future-oriented strategies without fear of losing everything if they change employment.

The continuing insecurity that is the legacy of a state-based system of monetary and non-monetary compensation and social benefits also inhibits collective action. The fact that Russian workers tend not to mobilize for collective action except when it is in the interest of political elites to mobilize them has been well-documented (Robertson, 2007, 2011; Ashwin, 1999; Ashwin and Clarke, 2003; Crowley, 1994, 1997). But the same point applies as well to middle-class strata. A consistent theme in the empirical work done on the middle class is the unwillingness to organize or even to participate in associations—to condemn those that do exist as “*nomenklaturnyye*.”⁵ To be sure, there are movements of individuals protecting their status as consumers, such as the numerous associations of automobile owners. But the unwillingness of middle-income groups to form and join associations in defense of their common interests cannot be ascribed to the dead hand of cultural *incivisme* inherited from the Soviet period. There are far too many other types of organizations that have sprung up to defend other collective interests to put much stock in purely cultural explanations. Rather, it seems likely that the lack of security inhibits collective action. Instead of investing time and energy in civic movements, many whom we would call members of the middle class rely either on ties to the state sector or on informal (or illegal) practices to secure their private interests. A more effective system of state-plus-private social security (retirement savings vehicles, educational and training institutions, national health insurance schemes) would tend to encourage collective action by groups that have been shy about engaging in it.⁶

The high level of inequality in the labor market also contributes to the low level of collective capacity on the part of middle-class groups because

⁵See Elena Chebankova (2010) on the alternation of public and private phases in post-Soviet Russia.

⁶A similar point has been made by Sarah Brooks and Vittorio Merola (2010) in a recent paper.

it starves the public sector of the resources needed to build robust institutions of social protection. Those at the top of the income pyramid both benefit from the flat 13 percent income tax and wield disproportionate political influence. A recent legislative episode illustrates the point (and suggests once again how similar the US and Russia are in the concentrated political power they grant the wealthiest strata). The United Russia party decided to oppose consideration—not just passage, but even debate—of a bill that would have instituted a tax on the purchase of luxury goods (the Spravedlivaya Rossiya, Communist, and Liberal Democratic parties all supported it). United Russia's public rationale was that the bill would hurt the middle class without affecting the rich. The United Russia faction in the Duma refused to vote on the bill when it came up in first reading in May 2010 (polit.ru, May 12, 2010). It was telling that United Russia claimed to defend the middle class by shielding those wealthy groups whose luxury purchases would have netted the highest tax payments. As with its embrace of the flat income tax and the relatively regressive payroll tax structure, the rejection of the luxury tax suggested that the regime's position on tax issues remains opposed to using the tax system for redistributive purposes.

Therefore there is a great deal of merit to the argument made by Shkaratan and others that Russian social stratification remains heavily influenced by the marriage of state power and social status cemented under the Soviet regime. We need to go further, however, in explaining the distinctive behavioral patterns that sociologists have documented, such as the reluctance to accumulate savings for the future or to invest in educational upgrading. These patterns have to do with the still considerable institutional continuity from the Soviet era in the forms of social insurance. As the former Minister of Health and Social Policy, Mikhail Zurabov, recently put it: “[U]ntil the problem of converting public or state obligations, fully or partially, onto household budgets, simultaneously with a one-time increase in incomes, one cannot speak of the full establishment of a stable political system” (quoted on polit.ru, October, 15, 2010). Along with the recent rapid growth of income inequality as earnings in the extractive and financial sectors pulled away from those in the middle strata, the incomplete transition to a capitalist system of social welfare also retards the development of a middle class.

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