New Eurozine Partner Focuses the Russian Middle Class

Eurozine News Item
31 August 2002

Three articles published in our new partner magazine Neprikosnovennij Zapas ask what constitutes the Russian Middle Class.

Did a middle class exist in the Soviet Union? And what defines the middle class in contemporary Russia? Eurozine’s new partner Neprikosnovennij Zapas, has published a number of articles that evolve around these questions, each of them offering differing definitions of the middle class. They raise the question of how the middle class can be conceptualized: In a political context of providing a stable basis for democracy? In terms of its economic purchasing power? Or purely through a cultural lens? And is middle class a term applied by politicians and sociologists, or does the middle class define itself as such?

Maya Turovskaya, describes in “The Soviet Middle Class” the everyday life of trading not only commodities, but also cultural knowledge and information: Since purchasing power was non-existent in the former Soviet Union, scarce goods, but also cultural information were available only through contacts and “communal networks”. The middle class could not be defined through hard economic data: Instead the enjoyment of culture -high culture – to which access was as limited and guarded as to economic goods defined the self-perception of the Soviet middle class.

“Proposed Circumstances” by Revekka Frumkina somewhat refutes this argument – while Frumkina acknowledges that culture was a necessity to preserve “one’s personality”, she denies the notion that culture was a central commodity and insists that even those people without access to high culture could survive by smart transactions and a net of contacts.

Both articles offer not only a personal insight into the often contradictory and multiple ways of economic exchange but also how a middle class could survive in such a system where everything was scarce.

In the third article, an interview with Sergei Parkhomenko, the focus is laid upon the middle class in modern day Russia. A new milieu has emerged in the wake of the new market economy he argues, albeit the criteria for determining the middle class vary:
Economic indicators and data are as important as other external cultural factors – an increase in mobility and travel, more consumer choice, increased access to mass entertainment and rapid processes of modernisation and urbanisation – have all dramatically altered the outlook and self-perception of the nascent middle class.

Interestingly, Parkhomenko disputes the concept of a Soviet Middle Class. The Soviet system was, in his view, too rigid and regulated in structure to allow the emergence of such a class in the true definition of the word. He sees the middle class as defined by certain economic liberties and prosperity and by its social and spatial mobility, factors, which were altogether non-existent in the Soviet Union.

A solid and dependable middle class, Sergei Parkhomenko argues, is the basis for a democracy and a true deterrent to a dictatorship. Thus, a middle class could not have existed under the Soviet Regime as argued by Maya Turovskaia and Revekka Frumkina.

So who is right? What ought to be the criteria to define the middle class? Can both definitions stand, given how drastically social structures have changed the country since the beginning of the 90’s? Is it a simply romantic and outdated notion to define the middle class through its interest in “high culture”? Or does Parkhomenko apply the accepted definitions of middle class from the capitalist western democracies too easily? Can both definitions stand, given how drastically social structures have changed the country since the beginning of the 90’s?

All three articles are now available in Eurozine.

*Eurozine ed.*

Maya Turovskaia

*The Soviet Middle Class (en)*

Maya Turovskaia examines what constituted the “Soviet middle class’ survival kit”. In a society in which even basic commodities had to be secured through a series of complex and lengthy exchanges, not luxury goods but the enjoyment of culture was at the core of the middle class identity.

Revekka Frumkina

*Proposed Circumstances (en)*

Revekka Frumkina investigates the point made by Maya Turovskaia in her article “The Soviet Middle Class”. Frumkina argues that while culture was a central concern, cultural status could not necessarily be conversed into commodities and services.

Sergei Parkhomenko

*The Middle Class: Expenditure Structure and Self-Understanding (en)*

Sergei Parkhomenko argues that a new middle class is emerging in Russia but its definition depends on much more than just economic factors. A changing self-perception plays a vital part in reshaping the economic and social structures of the Soviet Union. How will this affect the democratisation of the Russian society?

**Published 31 August 2002**