



#10 - JRL 2006-277 - JRL Home

From: "Jon Hellevig" <hellevig@hku.ru>

Subject: The Russian Middle Class

Date: Thu, 7 Dec 2006

THE RUSSIAN MIDDLE CLASS

By Jon Hellevig

The writer is a Finnish lawyer who has lived in Moscow for 15 years. He has written the book *Expressions and Interpretations* (www.hellevig.ru) discussing Russia's social development from the viewpoint of philosophy and philosophy of law. He is also the author of several books on the Russian tax and labor law.

The rapid economic growth enables the overwhelming majority of Russians, the large well-educated culturally advanced population, alias middle class, to fulfill its potential. Not only fundamentally but even in accordance with the economic figures the life conditions of these people more and more resemble those of the Western Europeans.

The Aleksanteri Institute is the center for Russia studies of the University of Helsinki, where the best and the brightest meet. Nevertheless the director of Aleksanteri Institute Professor Markku Kivinen claims that there is no middle class in Russia. According to him "we, the scholars, are disappointed that no middle class has taken root in Russia". The problem is however not with the Russian middle class, but with the researchers and their so-called research methods. In Russia the teachings of Marx have been long time ago thrown in the waste basket of history, but at home in Finland they are still going strong and quite popular in the Finnish academic community. Marx's childish capital markets theories and his political agitation are somehow still perceived to possess kind of a scientific value. It is telling that one of the most recent publications of the Institute is called *Marx and Russia (2006)* and deals with their pet theme.

Of course in a free country the universities should choose to study what they want, even an ideological oriented research program (although it is unclear why the taxpayers through the Finnish state and the EU will have to pay for it). And it wouldn't be a problem as such, were it not for the fact that this particular genre of prose is considered as 'science' with the backing of the authority and the prestige of the University of Helsinki; if people would not seriously think that this quite ordinary and dull Marxist prose fiction writing should serve as a guide to identify "classes" in Russia (Dr. Melin from the Tampere University even claims that "In accordance with the official theory, based on a speech that Stalin held in the 1930's the Soviet Union was a class society, but there were no contradictions between the classes." However he does not qualify his quote in anyway e.g. by pointing out that this "official opinion" of Stalin did not have any scientific value, neither then, nor today. Source: <http://www.uta.fi/laitokset/iss/monnetcentre/wordit/melin1.rtf>).

In *Why I Write* George Orwell (Penguin Books) already in year 1946 stressed that the old division between classes was obsolete: "the upward and downward extension of the middle class has happened on such a scale as to make the old classification of

society in to capitalists, proletarians and petit bourgeois almost obsolete”.

A part from the “class theories” Finnish sociologists keep their gaze on the official economic statistics. They go through the figures on salary payment, compare those with their own salary, and conclude that no middle class could be detected. The question arises “For heavens sake, where do we need the sociologists, if their studies are based on repeating the economic statistics”? The economic research is strong enough to produce the statistics, and certainly better equipped to interpret them.

Instead real sociology needs a different approach: the sociologist should analyze the surrounding society, how people live, how they interact, the culture and level of education, the intellectual capacities of people.

Upon hearing February 2006 Prof. Kivinen’s claim on the absence of the Russian middle class I have often contemplated over it. In Moscow and St. Petersburg on the streets, in the traffic, in the metro, at work, in coffee shops, I sit and ponder, sit and wonder: “who does not belong to the group, which one is the non-middle class guy, how does Markku define it?” On the contrary I think that most people here are middle class, if we want to use this lingo of classes, but who do we have left for the other classes; 20 oligarchs do not make a class, and I doubt they would even feel comfortable in such. I would think that from the whole population approximately 70-80% are such that we may well call middle class. Even the economic figures support this view, when you read them correctly. I do not want anybody to forget though that there is a huge social problem; a huge number of people have become socially incapable and marginalized. But this is foremost an economic and socio-political problem, not a class issue. There is no class of marginalized people, but there are a lot of those people.

Being middle class is most of all an issue concerning the general cultural and educational level of people. I propose to subsume this under our broad classificatory “civilization” (even so simultaneously rejecting the value-content: what we consider civilized could well be contested by other people). Russia is a society of civilized people. Middle class people are those that strive for a good education, think and act independently; those who take care of themselves and the well-being of themselves and their loved ones; strive forward, develop; those who buy cars, own their dwellings and want to improve them; travel abroad, read books, go to the theaters, watch both domestic and foreign movies; dispute on matters of taste and politics; are in a sound sense patriotic while at the same time tolerant; want to decide over their own lives and the affairs of their country for themselves; buy branded goods, are particular with their hygiene, dress well, do not believe all they are told, support peace, and given a choice opt for civil service...

The Russians represent all the above values. And now after the fundamentals are set I want to draw attention to some interesting statistics in this connection:

In Russia the number of enrollments to higher education (universities and similar) has tripled in Russia compared with the Soviet Union. In the Russian part of the Soviet Union (1985) 590 thousand students entered higher education, in today’s Russia – Putin’s Russia, as they say – 1,6 million students enrolled. This is about 70-80% of the age group (<http://stat.edu.ru>). In fact 200 thousand more than those who finished secondary education enrolled. Today some 6 million people study at higher education schools in Russia. Russia has probably the highest penetration of participation in education in the world. But this is not any new “highly trained proletariat” as the bad-wishers claim. We can prove this alone by pointing out that 50% of the students pay for the education (The fees are often even quite high, but the

free programs have been maintained parallel). From the Avenir salary survey (www.avenir.ru) we may conclude that these highly trained people also reach a high salary level.

Personally I think that the qualitative level of the education still leaves a lot to improve. (Among other things I always want to remind about the problem of training of lawyers. The written presentation, communication, skills are practically neglected. For example close to none written exams are conducted during all the 5 years of studies, while e.g. in Finland all the studies culminate in the written exams every 1 or 2 months with essay style writing on case studies. A lawyer works and thinks by writing, he develops his argumentation and detects justice by writing. In fact I think this is a huge obstacle on the path of strengthening the judiciary and even civil society. I would urge Russian universities to stress this). In general, however, I think it is fair to say that this large and enthusiastic education system which in a free country has almost spontaneously developed will in this democratic market economy eventually improve. All is still so new. – But here we are not foremost concerned with the qualitative level, but the penetration. A country, the world leader, with this increasing huge number of people who study cannot be but, at least, middle class.

The number of personal cars has increased from Soviet times manifold. Still in year 1993 there were 59 cars per thousand persons, in 2005 there were already 250 per thousand. In the Soviet Union people were barred from getting telephones. In 1992 only 16,7 of one hundred had access to a fixed line phone, today there are 29,8 lines per hundred persons. On top of that the mobile phone network covers 86,7 % of all people. Almost all households have televisions. Number of regular Internet users is up to 23,7 millions. In Russia the housing has been privatized to the former residents. The prices per square meter even for older suburban flats range between 1 and 2 thousand dollars in each major town. In Moscow, which is the forerunner of change the prices are even higher. This means that people have acquired significant value in form of private property. (I would even consider that this to a large extent makes up for the ruble savings destroyed by Gorbachov's economic reforms.). New houses are built on a pace corresponding to 10% of the total outstanding housing pool. However Russia is still deplored of the symbols of Finnish middle class: a monopolistic choice of two yellow press tabloids present in every corner of the country, and the dress-for-all-occasions running suit.

When we move on from Marx's class theories to a sociological analysis of the middle class, then, upon understanding this, we can also throw a glance at the statistics. For now we can see what leverage the economic improvements bring. The Russian middle class is a carrier of a huge potential. It is not a question of the better economy creating a middle class, but bringing out the potential of the existing middle class. The middle class is already there. With 5 to 10 more years of this kind of development then Russia will judging by any parameters be the biggest market in Europe, and certainly have made significant improvements on strengthening civil society as well.

Yeltsin became the leader of Russia in 1991, but state power in the country was not transferred to him. He got but a vantage point to power, enabling him to fight the former power, now challenged in its monopoly. During the whole Yeltsin period, as today, the country had a democratic constitution. According to the constitution the legislative power was with the parliament, the Russian Duma. All through Yeltsin's presidency the Duma was controlled by the communist opposition. - Although I do not know if it is correct to call the party holding the legislative power 'opposition'; I would rather claim that it was the other way around, it was Yeltsin who was in opposition. Finally Yeltsin managed to overcome the communist power elite, and

thus prepared the ground for the reforms Putin has been conducting since year 2000. But while the president in opposition was fighting the old regime, there reigned in the country near anarchy. The Russian regions and towns were controlled by more or less criminal and dishonest groups. Media manipulation, other forms of extra-parliamentarian pressure, membership in or close ties with organized crime groups and other big time crime were some of the most significant tools those people used in grabbing their undemocratic power stealing national wealth while on that.

All the while statehood was upheld by the fighting president and his small entourage, but foremost of all statehood was maintained by the Russian middle class. It was the Russian middle class that in accordance with its own upbringing and sense of moral who amidst the chaos kept the country going. The teachers as usual opened the schools each morning, teaching the kids, albeit receiving almost no pay for that; the doctors and nurses took care of people the best they could in the toughest of conditions; young people surged to universities even three times more than their parents; tax inspectors were learning market economy and tax collection although the laws were not of much use; the business people created jobs, and taught themselves and others through trial and errors how to act in a free society; the computer specialists created home-made software to cope with the needs of the new information society, and thought others how to use it. The bus drivers started the engines and carried the passengers on time; and the police stood on their posts freezing on the streets, I guess most of them were honest as well.

Now, during Putin, they are making a state out of this country of the middle class. This is what this is all about, nothing more. There are those people that want to deny the Russians this state. And this is what the media war aims at with the means of totally biased and unfair criticism.

The discussion and analysis is confused by the small pool of people who call themselves "intelligentsia." Among them there are persons that are long estranged from the people. These persons regard themselves as better than others and morally more fit. Their living consists of criticizing. They criticize all that moves; although, they do not do much moving round themselves, at least not among the people. As they are the moral elite, they pronounce of all things Russian with great authority, but with almost complete lack of understanding of the underlying issues; the sole fact they base the claim on authority on is the history of the long-suffered Russian peoples, the crown of the suffering that they enthrone themselves with. They are angry at the Russian people for lack of respect and interest in their opinions, and they seek consolation for the fact that in the West people with cold war mentality listen to them and quote them as if they would be the heirs of Dostoyevsky, Akhmatova and other great people of Russia. They enjoy a significant brand-awareness in the West and the demand is pressing.

In George Orwell's *Why I Write* I came across a quote which well fits in. Here Orwell described the negative contribution of the British left-wing intelligentsia during the period leading up to the war: "It is clear that the special position of the English intellectuals during the past ten years, as purely, negative creatures, mere anti-blimps, was a by-product of ruling class stupidity. Society could not use them, and they had not got it in them to see that devotion to one's country implies for better, for worse...Patriotism and intelligence will have to come together again".

Many of them were with Yeltsin when the Soviet rule was overthrown, and some took part in the new administration, a new administration where there was need for construction as well, not only criticism and destruction. And soon they returned to the role of dissidents. The members of this small sour intelligentsia are the ones that our

Finnish cultural elite and politicians meet, from them they get their feed of “information”, and hence form their own distorted perceptions of the country and go on to disseminate that to others, bordering on propaganda of hatred. I would recommend to them to broaden the scope of Russian people they deal with, I mean, at least, if they want to pose as specialists. Myself, I do like Maxim Gorky used to do, I meet with the people. Among the working people of Russia I meet with general managers, experts, bricklayers, accountants, cleaners, lawyers, guards, drivers etc. I visit homes and country houses of ordinary Russians, I visit friends and their relatives in hospitals, schools; I take part of the joys and sorrows of the people in living society. And the picture that turns out is not the same I read about in the West, or the echoes that vibrate in Moscow.

Take part of living life, meet the 100 million or so people that constitute the Russian middle class that uphold the country. After that, sit down in the comfort of your desk at the editorial office. Then take a deep breath, consider, are you really in the position to sit in a glass house and throw stones on your neighbors.

In a way this middle class issue is the final and decisive battle of this information war against Russia. With this understanding market economy and democracy will further live up in Russia, which is good for international peaceful people. For when it is admitted that there is a middle class in Russia after all, then both the domestic and external moral elite, lose their argument of ‘knowing better’. They claim that they know better what is good for Russia than the Russian people who they regard as mere cattle. And consequently they claim that their voice is more important than the voice expressed by the Russian people democratically electing their parliament and institutions.

We may conclude that the Soviet Union in many ways was a failed society, but one thing stands out as a huge contradiction: In the USSR the Russians of today were born, the well-educated civilized morally strong middle class that turned around the society and is building the new country. They managed to keep the cultural heritage of the Russians alive, and even strengthened on the level of individuals all through that period. The state that aimed at an all encompassing collectivity at the end of the day produced the strongest individuals of Europe, maybe of the world. Maxim Gorky’s work is a case in point. He was lifted to the status of an icon of Soviet society, and that is only good, because being brought up in the spirit of Maxim Gorky is not a bad thing at all.