

NEW TEXTS

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The Paths from Middle Class: Evaluation of the Poverty Risks for the Russian Middle Class



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Abstract

The middle class is usually perceived as a main supporter of innovations, source of political stability, and core consumer of goods and services. As a result, its members are traditionally supposed to have high human potential and make a significant contribution to economic growth both in certain country and all over the world, which permanently generates great interest in the issues concerning middle class. However, the main research questions have changed significantly over the last years. The experts both in Russia and abroad highlight the factors that negatively influence the position of the middle class. These are changes in labor market, price growth that outruns the growth of income, increase of tax burden and problems with access to public goods.

During COVID-19 pandemic the income has fallen, the risks of unemployment have increased, and the costs of healthcare also have grown. The scholars in different countries underline similar tendencies: middle-class members, who already had to live in an ambiguous world, faced the risks of falling into poverty during the corona crisis.

Using data from the Russian Longitudinal Monitor Survey, we evaluate the tracks of middle-class families during 2014–2020 and demonstrate that the problem of poverty affects a part of this social stratum every year. But the share of middle-class members with the income below the poverty line is relatively low and remains largely unaffected by the current corona crisis.

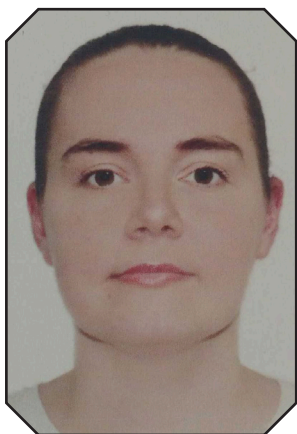
Keywords: middle class; poverty; social status; social stratification; Russia; the Russian Longitudinal Monitor Survey—Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE).

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Introduction

The middle class is usually perceived as a main supporter of innovations [Radaev 2003], source of political stability [Birdsall 2010], and core consumer of goods and services [Krasilnikova 2019]. As a result, its members are traditionally supposed to have high human potential and make a significant contribu-



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tion to economic growth both in certain country and all over the world [Chun et al. 2017], which permanently generates strong interest in the issues concerning the middle class. However, the main research questions have changed significantly over the last years.

Although the middle class has been a guarantor of stability for a long time, nowadays it faces great uncertainty. Since the beginning of the 2000's, the researchers have been observing the processes leading to the decrease in middle class number. Scholars and public figures highlight the increase in tax burden; the growing uncertainty in the labor market, caused by the development of automatization and new forms of employment; the decrease of returns to education and the rise of real estate prices [OECD 2019]. The load for middle class becomes heavier and, according to some views, can become overwhelming. Finally, the middle class loses stability that was considered to be its specific trait for a long time.

COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on a middle-class position. During the lockdown incomes fell, the risks of unemployment increased, the costs of healthcare also grew. The scholars in different countries underline similar tendencies: middle-class members, who already had to live in an ambiguous world, faced the risks of falling into poverty during the corona crisis (see, for example: [Albert et al. 2020; Inchauste, De Hoop, Saavedra 2020]). The experts suppose that it may not only lower the potential of economic growth in some countries but also cause political destabilization [Dagher 2020].

These trends make evident the importance of middle class dynamic analysis. Such evaluations have been already done based on the RLMS-HSE survey data and showed a significant variation in its composition [Pishnyak 2020]. This study is focused on the tracks of those who fall out of the middle class: Do they manage to maintain relatively high welfare level or, as some experts suppose [The Head of HSE... 2020], do they face high risks of poverty? To answer this question, we focus on the recent tendencies and use the data from the RLMS-HSE for 2014–2020.

We structure the research as follows: first, we focus on the history of the idea of middle class and its possible definitions and show that it is rooted in ancient philosophy. Then we move to the actual tendencies in the dynamics of the middle class, describing the trends of the last several years including those influenced by COVID-19. Second, we describe the data and methodology of the research. Finally, we go deeper into the results of data analysis, showing the dynamics of the middle-class prevalence, the intersection of the groups of poor population and middle class and the profile of different subgroups inside the middle class.

This article contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it aggregates and systematizes the latest trends in the analyses of middle class and shifts the focus from the measurement of the middle-class share and the means to increase it to the vulnerability of the position of this stratum. Second, the study shows the interrelation between middle-class membership and poverty and poses a question whether the common middle-class criteria are an appropriate instrument to work with this term.

Literature Review

Middle Class: The History of the Idea and Possible Definitions

The idea of middle class had been studied for a long time — the middle layers of society were mentioned already in the works of Aristotle [Adamovsky 2005]. Later the idea of middle class was considered in many works of the renowned philosophers. The basics for middle class definition were set by M. Weber and K. Marx [Walton 1971], and their successors many times turned back to their theories to identify the middle class and to describe its role in society.

Although different aspects of the middle-class theory are beyond the scope of this article, it should be underlined that the income criteria, which the economists still use to identify different strata, were supplemented by other characteristics of the middle class. The core ideas were developed by neo-Marxists. For instance, E. O. Wright introduced the notion of “contradictory class locations” in the society: the groups of those who do not have control over the economic resources (such as capital, means of production and labor) but can influence them [Wright 1980]. The other approach was developed by neo-Weberians. J. Goldthorpe and his co-authors paid attention to an increasing differentiation of labor force and the dependency of workers on the type of employment contract. The latter depends on the specificity of workers’ tasks and the ability to control the worker [Halsey et al. 1982].

Although the understanding of the middle class as the part of society with specific socio-professional profile and lifestyle is approved by many scholars, the researchers usually reduce the scheme of its identification to income evaluation. The authors use the absolute monetary criteria comparing the household income with the median income of a population or checking whether the household belongs to a certain quintile group. The vision of the middle class for developing countries differs to some extent: the scholars treat it as a part of society the members of which overcame the poverty but did not achieve the consumption standards that are typical for the developed countries [Ravallion 2009]. The Asian Development Bank sets the income criteria at \$2–\$20 per capita per day (2005 PPP US dollars) for developing Asian countries and shows the significant growth of this group across different countries [Chun 2010]. The same income range is used to identify the middle class in Africa [Ncube, Lufumpa, Steve 2011]. The World bank also follows the idea of setting the income range in absolute figures; however, the criteria vary for the different groups of countries, for Europe and Central Asia they are set at the level from \$11 to \$28 [Bussolo et al. 2019].

To evaluate the size of the middle class in European countries, the data from Eurostat should be considered [ILO 2016b]. According to this source, the growth of the middle class was evidenced in 1980–1990, while during the last years its number has decreased. The scholars also address the variability of the middle class and identify the lower middle class (income at 60–80% of median income), core middle class (income at 80–120% of median income), and higher middle class (income at 120–200% of median income). If we implement this approach, the share of middle class is relatively high, ranging from 23% in Latvia to 40% in Denmark.

The works of OECD adopt the term “middle-income class” and define it as those people whose income lies between 75 and 200% of the median income of the population [OECD 2019]. Besides, in some studies the range of 75–125% is used, and the threshold is set in absolute monetary figures. The share of middle-income class (identified as those who have income at 75–200% of the median) varies significantly, reaching its highest number in Iceland (72%) followed by Czech Republic (71%) and Norway (71%). South Africa has the lowest share of middle class (33%), according to OECD data.

In spite of the fact that all the monetary approaches used by the international organization are oriented toward comparison of the middle-class share in various countries, they show great variation in the results and do not

assess homogeneity of this income group. Trying to identify not only the certain income category but the social stratum, other scholars add educational and socio-professional criteria into analysis.

Such approach became popular in Russia, where the existence of the middle class is questionable and the criteria of its identification are debatable among social scientists. In recent years the risk of its disappearance has been widely discussed. The issues concerning middle-class identification were considered in different studies, both academic and applied. The most famous studies were conducted by the research groups headed by N. Tikhonova [Tikhonova, Mareeva 2009], E. Avraamova, T. Maleva, L. Ovcharova, V. Radaev [Avraamova et al. 2000] and the researchers from the Institute of Economics and Finance [Grigoryev, Salmina 2009].

Although the approach of each group has its own specifics, they all use a multicriteria scheme. These criteria include well-being, educational level, social-professional status, and self-evaluation of social position.

The group headed by N. Tikhonova defined the middle class by non-physical type of work, having at least secondary special education, the income above the median for a certain settlement, a set of consumer durables, and relatively strong self-identification. The group headed by T. Maleva used welfare and criteria such as social well-being (like self-estimations of being successful, etc.) The authors identify the general middle class (those who fit at least two criteria), proto-middle class and post-middle class. The approach chosen by the Institute of Economics and Finance included work status, education, qualification, the complexity of work tasks, and the sector of the economy.

The studies were also based on the idea of middle-class heterogeneity. The usage of multicriteria approaches resulted in several aspects of analysis: the scholars paid attention not only to the middle class itself (i.e., those who fit all the criteria) but also to those who have only a part of middle-class characteristics. Such scheme widens the scope of analysis and makes it possible to focus on the groups that can become the donors for the middle-class increase. Besides, the data show that such “periphery” usually internalizes the middle-class consumption preferences being very close to it by consumer, financial and other practices.

What is the number of the middle class in modern Russia? The variability of approaches makes it hardly possible to give the definite answer. One of the most recent evaluations was done by N. Tikhonova. If the lower criterion was set at 125% of the median income (without setting the upper one), the share of middle class achieved 32.4% in 2019. If the educational and professional criteria were added (those who had higher education and profession that belongs to 0–4 professional classes by ISCO-08 were considered to be the middle class), 19.1% could be considered as the middle class. The share of those who comply with all the criteria amounted to 7.5% [Tikhonova 2019]. The share of middle-class members varied significantly from region to region [RIA Rating 2019].

Why is Middle Class Squeezing?

The question of middle class squeezing became the most acute during COVID-19 pandemic; however, the problem emerged much earlier. In 2009, the paper by M. Ravallion, prepared together with the World Bank, was published. The author showed that the number of the middle class in developed countries was decreasing; however, it was growing in the developing countries [Ravallion 2009].

Those, who can be treated as a middle class based on income criteria, in fact are not middle class. Although the studies show that the growth of the middle class is positively connected with spending on healthcare and education, liberalization of trade and financial markets as well as the development of democracy in developing countries, its members are not ready to invest into public goods. As a result, the expected level of standard of living is not achieved [De la Torre, Rigolini 2013].

In 2016, the International Labor Organization (ILO) published the materials that expressed concerns about the squeezing of middle class in Europe [ILO 2016a]. The scholars from different countries highlighted the growing inequality and outlined the factors that had an impact on the middle class, such as lowering qualification standards (mainly because of high levels of migration), spreading the non-standard forms of employment (with low wages and part-time work), the decreasing role of trade unions (that aggravates the bargaining power of labor force), lowering public investment into education and healthcare, the inadequate tax system (that impose the highest tax burden on middle-class representatives), the rise of cost of living (and especially real estate prices). But some of these factors are debatable to some extent: the researchers from the Cross-National Data Center in Luxemburg, using OECD data on redistribution via taxation, demonstrate that the middle class do not suffer income loss due to the system of taxation but sometimes even slightly win (but less than low-income groups) [Causa, Hermansen 2018].

The tendency of weakening the middle-class positions has been also observed by U.S. scholars who identify several factors that have changed the position of the middle class. The first is the development of technologies that causes labor market transformations and decreases the ability to earn among the middle class, and also leads to the rise of labor cost. Second, the development of outsourcing that provides large corporations the ability to hire employees from different countries, making the U.S. workers to work for lower wages or to lose the job. Third, it is the decreasing role of higher education: as its cost becomes higher, not every middle-class member can afford it for his children, whereas a high proportion of population with higher education results in reducing wages among those having higher education. Among the factors that weaken the middle-class position are also changes in family relationships (marriage in older age and idea of both partners employment) and lowering availability of the real estate [Beltz 2012]. The recent researches predict the increasing inequality in the United States that will deepen a gap between the richest and the poorest leaving the small proportion of households with medium income level [Temin 2017].

In 2017, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions also mentioned the decrease in the middle-class number as a result of the 2008 crisis. The researchers pointed out that its consequences varied among European countries: the crisis hit particularly hard the poorest countries and the members of lower middle class, some of whom moved to poverty [Vacas-Soriano, Fernández-Macías 2017] (similar scenarios could be seen in evaluations of corona crisis in Russia).

The problem of the middle class squeezing was also considered by the OECD researchers. In 2019, they published the report devoted to this category of population. The authors highlight that during the last 30 years the increase in the middle-class income was insignificant and so was the benefit from economic growth. Like the ILO report, the study mentioned the growing cost of real estate and services and the increase of uncertainty that the middle class faces due to the changes in the labor market [OECD 2019]. The latter were called “job polarization”: as a result of the automatization process, some routine work performed by the middle class becomes unnecessary; there is only the need for top-qualified professionals and for cheap low-qualified workforce to maintain the automated work. Consequently, the middle class loses the source of income [Jaimovich 2020].

In accordance with the World Bank expert opinion, the lowering of the middle-class number is still very slow and not so visible, but one can expect more dramatic changes. The middle class becomes more vulnerable, and even those who now have the income that is typical for middle class can face the risk of poverty in the future [Bussolo et al. 2019].

The middle class in Russia also faces the problems like those mentioned above. The transformations in the labor market are described in terms of the precarization of the middle class when the significant part of this social stratum are employed at the positions that lack social security. Russian studies also prove the idea of the middle-class heterogeneity and show that the members of its lower and middle layers (those who fit not all the criteria of the middle-class identification) have higher probability of precarious work [Anikin 2019].

Among the factors increasing the risks for the middle class, high mobility of the middle-class members should be mentioned. According to the data for 2000–2017, both the attrition rate and the entry rate are high, and the most stable positions are typical for the middle-class members employed at the state-owned and partly state-owned companies [Pishnyak 2019]. That can negatively influence the situation in the country: instead of developing economy, the middle class expects the activities from the government [Ruvinskiy 2019]. The vulnerable position of the middle class is also proved by the other expert opinion: based on the empirical data, they argue that the middle class is unstable in Russia, and it is enough to become retired or to have a child to exit it because of per capita income decrease [Savina 2020].

We have no data to explore the long-term changes in the number of the middle class until now. But the previous studies show that the share of the middle class — identified in accordance with four criteria (the level of education, welfare, socio-professional status and self-identification) — increased from 29% in 2003 to 34% in 2008. During the crisis of 2008–2009, the size of the middle-class strata remained unchanged, but later its recovery started. In 2014 the share of the core middle class achieved 16%, the share of its periphery (those treated as the middle class by the education and socio-professional status) reached 26% [The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences 2014].

Summarizing all the issues concerning the middle class, we should underline that the problem of its reduction has been under discussion a relatively long time. The weakening of the position of this middle layer is conditioned by the set of factors described above. The COVID-19 pandemic has only strengthened these tendencies. The growing risks for the middle class were described by the World Bank [The World Bank 2020a] and the UN [The Impact of COVID-19... 2020] as well as examined for particular countries, such as Philippines [Albert et al. 2020], India [Gupta, Bansal 2020], Chile [Inchauste, De Hoop, Saavedra 2020], Turkey [Çoban 2022], the USA [Silva et al. 2020].

In Russia the model evaluations of the middle-class dynamics (identified by the income level, education, and professional status) support the idea of worsening its position. About one quarter of its members not only lost their jobs and incomes but also fell into poverty [Ageeva, Starostina 2020]. The experts suggest that the chances of the middle class to survive depend on whether or not the middle class receives state support [Buheji, Dunya 2020]. However, it is supposed that now budget-sector workers are the main focus of social support, while the middle class is seen not as a source of stability but a source of protest activities. As a result, it has not get enough support during the pandemic [Skorobogatiy 2020].

Understanding Poverty

The final part of the theoretical framework description is devoted to poverty, and below we focus on the question whether a middle-class member can fall into poverty. Nowadays scholars agree that there is no unique definition of poverty; however, different methodologies of poverty measurement exist. The monetary approach, subjective and deprivational ones are among the core approaches to poverty [Laderchi, Saith, Stewart 2003].

The monetary approach is based on the comparison of one's income with a certain threshold ('a poverty line'). The latter can be calculated using the cost of a minimum set of goods and services needed to cover basic needs or using the income distribution for the population (e. g., the poverty line can be set as a certain percentage of per capita income). The first approach treats the poor as those who live on the edge of survival, the second — as those who cannot maintain the standard of living typical for society in general.

The subjective approach is based on the idea that those who see themselves as poor should be classified as the poor.

The view of poverty as inability to live as everyone else in society is also at the core of the deprivational approach. To find out who is poor, the evaluation of deprivations (i. e., inability to eat meat food, to spend a week

away from home on holiday, etc.) is conducted. Those who face a lot of deprivations are considered to be the poor.

Finally, the development of multidimensional approaches, that combine the criteria described above, should be mentioned. The At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROPE) rate measured by Eurostat [Korchagina, Prokofyeva, Ter-Akopov 2019] and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) [Alkire, Foster 2011] demonstrate the peculiarities of such approaches.

In Russia for a long time the absolute monetary approach was used by the Federal Statistic Service. The poverty line was based on subsistence minimum level estimated as a cost of basic goods and services indexed by the price level annually. In 2021, the new methodology was introduced, and the subsistence minimum level was set at 44.2% of the median income of population. As our data refer to the pre-2021 period, we follow the absolute monetary approach.

Methods

Data

The present text is devoted to the evaluation of the risks of poverty for the middle class based on the data of the Russian Longitudinal Monitor Survey conducted by the Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE)¹.

The survey has been conducted in Russia since 1994; the data are collected using a split-sample design that has a panel and a representative part. The choice of this database is primarily explained by the ability to track the status of one household (that belongs to the middle class) in a long-term perspective. For all the years the same approach is used: the share of the middle class is calculated on unweighted representative sample. Since the status of any household is tracked, the panel part of the sample is also added.

Although the RLMS-HSE provides the data since the 1990s, we focus on the period 2014–2020. The duration of such period makes it possible to track the position of the middle class for a relatively long time and keep a relatively large part of the sample unchanged. The lower bound of the interval is conditioned by the beginning of the new economic crisis (the share of the poor started growing since 2013)² and defines the period of relatively high instability. The upper bound is defined by the last year when the old methodology of subsistence minimum level calculation was used.

The RLMS-HSE data include the information collected using two types of questionnaires, for individuals and households. We start from the assumption that being the middle class is more household than individual trait, which impose some restrictions on the data. As in case of every panel study we face the risk of losing some families. There is also a problem of tracking the status of some households even if they continue taking part in the survey. Some of the families continue filling in the questionnaires but split into several new families in case of divorce or separation of older children. We track changes in status of those households that continue to reside at the same address included in the original sample.³

¹ *Source*: “Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, RLMS-HSE”, conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics and OOO Demoscope together with Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Institute of Sociology of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. (RLMS-HSE web sites: <https://rlms-hse.cpc.unc.edu>, <https://www.hse.ru/org/hse/rlms>).

² For more details about poverty dynamics, see: <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/13397>

³ We see the restrictions of such approach as the head of the family, or the majority of its members could move to another place of living. However, as the share of such family splits is relatively low, we do not go deeper into the analysis and base on the address of the household.

The sample size changes from year to year. Table 1 shows the number of cases at the individual and household levels for each year.

Table 1

RLMS-HSE Sample Size

Sample Type	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Individual Level							
Representative sample	12,908	12,667	12,554	12,441	12,161	12,228	12,123
Longitudinal data (incl. panel and representative sample)	18,372	18,429	18,756	18,954	18,234	18,061	17,701
Household Level							
Representative sample	4,872	4,862	4,849	4,855	4,824	4,833	4,831
Longitudinal data (incl. panel and representative sample)	6,762	6,872	7,000	7,114	6,938	6,856	6,767

Methodology: Identifying the Middle Class and the Poor

Before moving to the description of changes in the middle-class position over time, we should discuss the issues concerning its identification in detail. As we have shown above, in Russia the studies of the middle class are primarily based on multicriteria approaches using the combination of characteristics to identify the middle class, including material well-being, education, professional status, and perceived status. This study follows the same approach by defining the middle class according to such criteria as educational level, income, and professional status.

When assessing educational level, we treated as the middle class those who finished three and more years at the university, received a diploma or finished postgraduate program (with or without getting credentials). The idea of using education level as an indicator of middle-class membership is used by many researchers in Russia [Maleva 2003; Maleva, Burdyak, Tyndik 2015; Tikhonova 2020b].

The indicator of being the middle class in professional area is the occupation classified 0–4 by ISCO-88 (armed forces; legislators, senior officials and managers; professionals; technicians and associate professionals; clerks). In this aspect, we follow the approaches used in [Tikhonova 2019].

If the education and professional status are measured at the individual level, the data about the income were taken from household questionnaires. In order to get it, the threshold set at 1.25 of the regional median per capita income was calculated using the representative sample. Those who had the income higher than this threshold were marked as the middle class. And the data were added to individual database. This threshold was chosen in accordance with the study based on the RLMS-HSE data, that demonstrates that the threshold at 1.25 of median income is the best criterion to split the population into a relatively vulnerable group and a group of those whose material well-being is relatively stable. The position of those whose income is above the median income and below this line is to some extent unstable [Tikhonova 2018]. The same income criterion is used in other studies [Tikhonova 2020b]. As the population surveys usually cover the mass population only and do not include the groups with the highest income [Tikhonova 2018], we do not set the upper threshold for the income. The RLMS-HSE data contain information about the income collected in two ways: using the direct question about the total income and the questions about the different components of income (labor income, social benefits, etc.). The scholars demonstrate that different answers could be given to these questions as the respondents treat the notion of total income in different ways; however, the direct evaluation of the income and the aggregated evaluation based on the income components in most cases do not differ [Cherkashina 2020]. While these figures differ in the RLMS-HSE, we choose the

maximal evaluation since the RLMS-HSE data tend to provide lower estimations of income in comparison with other sources⁴.

The research is based on the assumption that middle-class membership is the characteristic of a household rather than an individual. The same idea was proposed, for example, in [Maleva 2003]. The analysis is divided into several steps. First, those who comply with the middle-class criteria are examined at the individual level. In case of compliance with all the criteria, the person is supposed to belong to a core middle class, two criteria—a generalized middle class. Second, the household is identified as the middle class if half or more of its adult members are classified as a part of middle class.

Then all the data was aggregated at the household level, and all the families were categorized into three types: not being the middle class, being the core middle class (those who fit all the criteria) and being the generalized middle class (those who fit two or three criteria).

Table 2 demonstrates that the number of individuals that have middle-class characteristics has not changed significantly over the last years and achieved about one fifth of the population.

Table 2

**The Share of Those Who Have the Characteristics of the Middle Class in the Population,
% from All the Population (representative sample without weights)**

Criteria of the Middle Class	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
The Middle-Class Characteristics							
Have higher or unfinished higher education	21.3	22.9	23.6	23.9	24.3	24.5	24.9
Have occupation classified by 0–4 by ISCO-88	21.5	21.4	20.7	20.8	20.6	20.5	20.4
Have per capita income higher than 1.25 of regional per capita income	28.3	27.9	27.7	27.8	27.8	26.4	26.2
The Combination of the Middle-Class Characteristics							
Have at least two characteristics	18.8	19.1	19.0	19.2	19.5	19.0	19.2
Fit all the middle-class criteria	6.1	6.4	6.4	6.1	6.0	6.0	6.0
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>12,908</i>	<i>12,667</i>	<i>12,554</i>	<i>12,441</i>	<i>12,161</i>	<i>12,228</i>	<i>12,123</i>

About one quarter of all the population have the income that is typical for the middle class, and about one quarter have higher education. Almost 20% have the professional status classified 0–4 by ISCO-88. All the figures are relatively stable, educational level is the only exception, the share of those who can be defined as middle class by this criterion increased from 21% to 25% during the last six years.

The selected criteria can define the middle-class membership only for the adult employable individuals (the others may have no education or job). At the same time, belonging to this stratum highly influences one's lifestyle and values. Those who do not fit all the criteria (for instance, children) but belong to the household that includes many individuals with middle-class characteristics, can also be treated as the middle-class members. Due to this reason, the analysis is based on the assumption that being the middle class is more a household trait than an individual one.

While the number of middle-class households was assessed for each family, the number of adults (i. e., those over the age of 17 if they are not college students and over the age of 23 if they are enrolled in educational institutions) was evaluated. This figure was compared to the number of family members having the middle-class characteristics. If half of the adult family members or more belong to the middle class by the income, edu-

⁴ For example, see the comparison of the salaries in the RLMS-HSE and ROSSTAT in [Zhuravleva, Gavrilova 2017].

cational and professional criteria (at least by two of them), the household was classified as the middle class. The core middle class was identified similarly: to be part of it, the family should have half or more members falling into that category.

Table 3 shows that the number of the middle-class members was quite stable in 2014–2020: about one third of the families belonged the middle class and about 10% constituted its core.

Table 3

**The Share of the Households that Belong to the Middle Class, % of All the Households
(representative sample without weights)**

Relation to the Middle Class	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
General middle class	28.8	28.5	28.8	28.9	28.9	27.9	27.5
Core middle class	10.0	10.6	10.4	9.8	9.6	9.4	9.2
<i>Sample size</i>	4,872	4,862	4,849	4,855	4,824	4,833	4,831

The poor are identified in accordance with the absolute monetary approach: for each household the total income is calculated as well as the sum of regional subsistence minimum levels (SML) for all household members (the SML are different for children, retired, and employable population). If the income is lower than the sum of subsistence minimum levels, one is classified as the poor.

Concluding the part devoted to methodology, we should also mention the ‘risks of poverty’ term. In some cases, the scholars evaluate them as the odds ratio [Layte, Whelan 2001]; in other cases, poverty risks are treated as a share of the poor among a certain group [Richardson] (i. e., the probability of becoming poor). Like the other Russian scholars working in the field of poverty, we follow the latter approach [Lezhnina 2014; Ovcharova 2019].

Results

The Middle-Class Dynamics and Changes in its Structure

The data described above can prove the hypothesis of highly stable position of the middle class and its stable number, but consideration of the changes inside this stratum call this idea into question. First, we should mention that less than half of those who belonged to the middle class in 2014 kept their status until 2020 (Fig. 1).

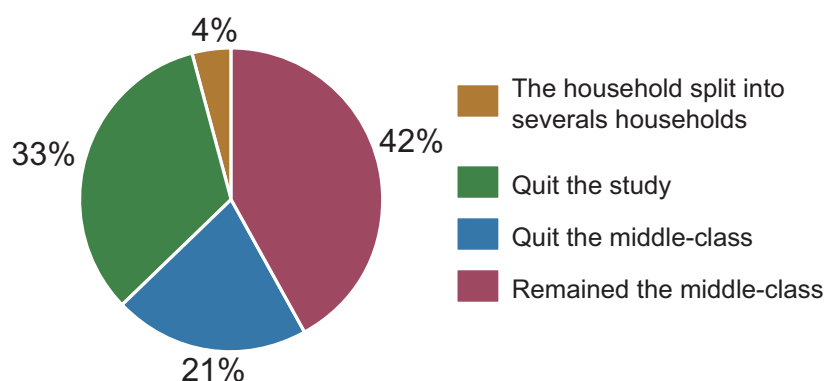


Fig. 1. Changes in the Middle-Class Structure in 2014–2020
(those who were the middle-class members in 2014 = 100%, *Sample Size* = 1,405)

We should also underline that the share of those who quit the study is also high: they could remain the middle class as well as quit it. But even among those being the members of research panel the share of those who

quit the middle class is 21%. And 4% of the households formed new families and their position cannot be tracked.

While the comparison of 2014 vs 2020 demonstrates the high share of those who quit the study, we also show the tracks of the middle-class members on year-by-year basis. The majority of the middle-class members stay in this stratum for at least more than one year (Fig. 2).

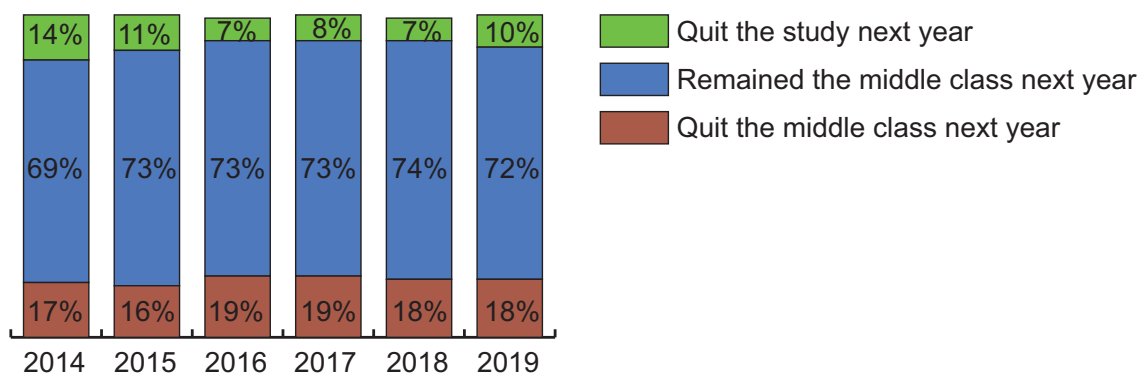


Fig. 2. Year-by-Year Changes in the Middle-Class Structure (those who were the middle-class members in the respective year = 100%, *Sample Size* = 1,405/1,386/1,396/1,403/1,395/1,349)

The other important figure to understand the position of the middle class is the duration of being its part. By taking the middle-class members of 2014 as a base and choosing only those who constantly took part in the study until 2020, we assessed how long they were the middle-class members (the maximum duration is seven years). This figure achieved 5.34 years. First, such data also prove the idea of vulnerable middle-class position (at least some of its members quit the middle class for some time and return later). Second, we can assume that such middle-class dynamics can lead to the fact that those who become the middle-class members cannot fully internalize values and behavioral patterns that are typical for the middle class, which makes its reproduction questionable and cause shrinking its boundaries.

When the data containing missing values for some years are included, the average middle-class status duration drops to 3.30 as any missing value is treated as not being inside the middle-class.

Poverty risks for the Middle Class in Russia

Traditionally the stable financial situation is seen as peculiar to the middle class, but the RLMS-HSE data analysis demonstrates the opposite tendencies. Describing the risks of poverty for the middle class, we see two different aspects: first, influenced by different factors, the middle-class members can quit this stratum falling into poverty. Second, the middle class includes those who are already poor by income criteria (see Table 4).

Table 4

The Share of Poor among the Middle-Class Households and among All the Households in Russia, % (representative sample without weights)

The Parameter	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
The share of poor households among the middle-class members, % of all middle-class households	4.8	5.6	4.7	3.9	4.4	3.7	5.2
The share of poor households, % of all households	12.3	14.7	13.7	11.7	11.3	11.2	11.5
Sample size (middle-class households)	1405	1386	1396	1403	1395	1349	1329
Sample size (all households)	4872	4862	4849	4855	4824	4833	4831

Based on the data, we see that the risks of poverty for the middle class are almost three times lower than for the households in Russia in general. At the same time, during the period under consideration, about 5% of all middle-class households were among the poor. In other words, we can propose that the distinctive characteristics of the middle class (educational level and professional status) do not result in having relatively high incomes.

As the income level was among the characteristics used for middle-class identification, the presence of poor only in the generalized middle class, not in the core, should be considered.

Besides the cases when the poor middle-class families remain in the middle-class stratum, there are also the situations when families fall out of the middle class and become poor. Due to the large number of possible scenarios, we are not able to construct the classic transition matrices. But we can provide the scheme for one year as an example since the ratio of all the tracks is very similar for all the years.

Figure 3 demonstrates the scheme showing how the position of those who were the middle-class members in 2019 changed in 2020. Despite the presence of the poor among the middle-class members, their share is not high (about 4% in 2019). By 2020, 2% of those who were the middle class in 2020, had affiliation both with the middle class and the poor. About 1% of the middle class of 2019 improved their position and quit poverty, whereas less than 1% quit both the middle class and poverty.

Remaining in the middle class without falling into poverty is the most typical for the middle class: 68% of those who belonged to the middle class in 2019 remained in this group in 2020. While 16% quit the middle class, their income decrease was not large enough to push them into poverty. About 1% kept their middle-class membership but fell into poverty, 1% quit the middle class and become poor.

10% of those who took part in the RLMS-HSE in 2019 and were the middle-class members did not take part in the survey in 2020.

The data show that the problem of poverty among the middle-class members definitely exists, but it touches upon only a small share of the middle-class. The problems of poverty touched upon about 5% of the middle class in 2019: some of its members were poor in 2019, others fell into poverty in 2020.

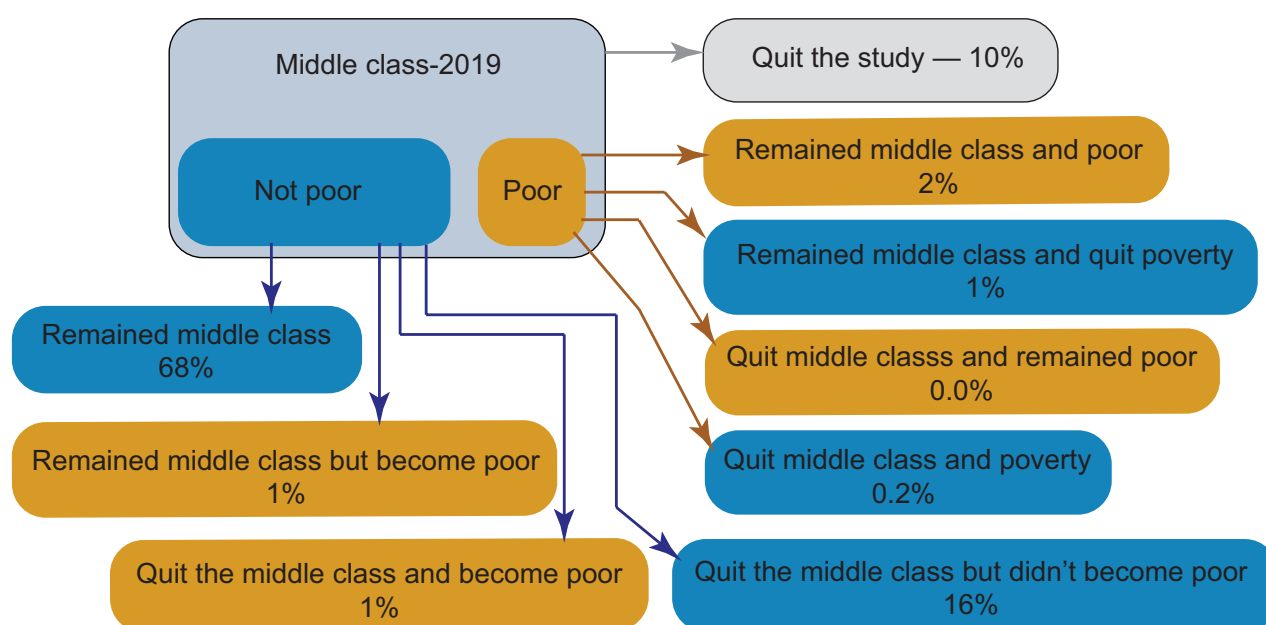


Fig. 3. Changes in the Middle Class of 2019 in 2020 (*Sample Size = 1,349*)

Evaluation of the risks of poverty for the middle class for the longer time periods should be also considered. Using the part of the sample that consisted of the middle-class members who constantly took part in the study during 2014–2020, we assess how many of these group members faced the problem of low income during this time. The prevalence of such households achieves 26%.

Some of the middle class members of 2019 (identified in accordance with the widespread criteria) not only faced the problem of poverty but also were among the chronic poor living on low income for several years. The average duration of poverty for the middle class is 2.04 years (out of 7 years). The distribution is shown in Fig. 4. The result contradicts to the conventional idea of the middle class, and we are going to consider this in the discussion.

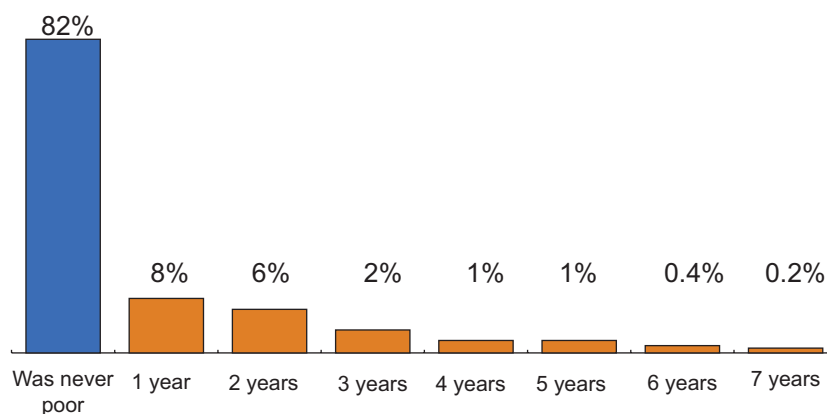


Fig. 4. The Average Duration of Being Poor for the Middle-class Members (*Sample Size = 769*)

In accordance with these data, the long-term analysis of the middle-class position shows that it does not have the stability that many researchers see as its substantial characteristic. More than $\frac{1}{10}$ of its members are at risk of being poor for at least one year, and sometimes even for a longer time.

The Profiles of Those Who Comply with Both Middle Class and Income Poverty Criteria

Now we are going to examine how the socio-demographic characteristics differ between those who belong to the middle class in general and to the middle class and poor. We also compare them to the profile of all poor households (see Table 5). Due to the fact that belonging to the middle class was defined as a household characteristic, for comparisons we selected parameters that refer to the household as a whole. We start with geographic and settlement components. All Russian regions vary greatly in socio-economic characteristics: average per capita income, poverty level, unemployment rate, etc. Also, the regions are united into larger administrative territorial units, Federal Districts. Compared to the middle class, its poor representatives are more common in the Central Federal District (36% among the middle-class versus 30% among the poor middle-class) and the Southern Federal District (13 versus 9%). Among all the poor, 11% live in the North Caucasian Federal District, while among the middle-class groups the share of the poor is slightly less than 3%. Considering that these districts differ in terms of average per capita income of the population,⁵ we can say that even the poor representatives of the middle class are more likely to live in the regions in which incomes are generally higher.

The fact that the majority of the poor middle class live in regional centers and their proportion is higher than among all the poor partly confirms our previous suggestion. However, when compared to the whole middle class, we discovered that the share of the rural population in this group is two times higher. Thus, despite the

⁵ The North Caucasian Federal District is among the districts with the lowest average per capita household incomes while the Central Federal District is the district with the highest incomes.

fact that the members of the poor middle class are less likely to be rural residents than all poor Russian households, living in such type of settlement nevertheless increases the risk of poverty.

It is considered that childbirth raises poverty risks, and in case of the middle class, we may suggest that it is one of main determinants of falling into poverty. Having a first, and to a greater extent, second child, significantly increases household's chances of being poor representative of the middle class. At the same time, the share of families with both one child or two children under 16 years old among a poor part of the middle stratum is higher not only in relation to the general middle class but also in relation to all the poor. In general, middle-class families have no children (in 64% of cases).

A degree in higher education is one of the identifying features of the middle class; accordingly, it is expected that people with higher education would be widely represented in the group of the poor middle class. Here we should mention that among the entire poor group most of the households are those where no one have a higher education degree. In the case of the poor middle class, risk of poverty is higher for the families in which only someone has no education degree.

Another defining characteristic is the employment status of family members. Here we should pay attention to the following results. Families that have no members of working age represent every fifth middle-class household. It means that these are the families of middle-class retirees who either continue working or have enough amount of pension benefits to be defined as middle class. Among the poor part of the middle class, such households are not represented, therefore we can suggest that reaching older age, including retirement, does not increase risk of poverty for the middle stratum. Risks are rising only when some household members are not employed (54 versus 34%); nevertheless, in the group of poor households, families with unemployed persons are more common (79%).

To sum up, the average poor middle-class household has more family members, children under 16 years old, as well as these are the households in which it is less likely to find retired people and as a result there are more people of working age in them.

Thus, at this stage of analysis we may suggest that poverty risks for the middle class are associated with childbirth, an increase in number of household members and unemployment of working age individuals. In addition, structural factors, such as low regional incomes and labor market failures, can have an impact. On the one hand, these are the same risks as for the entire poor population. On the other hand, compared to the poor, each of the determinants may have another impact. Based on current data, we see that children birth greatly increases the chances of middle class to fall into poverty.

Table 5.

Comparison of the Profiles of the Households that Belong to the Poor, the Middle Class and Both the Poor and the Middle Class

Profile		Comply with Both Middle Class and Income Poverty Criteria			Comply with Middle Class Criteria Only			Comply with Poverty Criteria Only		
		Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL	Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL	Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL
		%								
Federal District of the Russian Federation	Central	36.0	31.6	40.5	30.0	29.1	30.9	22.5	21.2	23.8
	Northwestern	9.0	6.6	11.9	11.7	11.1	12.3	7.1	6.4	8.0
	Far Eastern	3.8	2.3	5.9	4.5	4.1	4.9	7.3	6.5	8.1
	Volga	17.1	13.8	20.8	21.2	20.4	22.0	18.0	16.9	19.2
	North Caucasian	2.5	1.3	4.2	2.7	2.4	3.0	11.4	10.4	12.4
	Siberian	11.5	8.8	14.7	13.4	12.7	14.1	16.8	15.7	17.9
	Ural	7.0	4.9	9.6	7.8	7.2	8.3	5.8	5.1	6.6
	Southern	13.3	10.3	16.6	8.8	8.3	9.4	11.1	10.2	12.1
Type of settlement	Regional center	42.7	38.2	47.3	51.2	50.2	52.2	28.3	26.9	29.7
	Town	23.6	19.8	27.7	28.3	27.4	29.2	20.1	18.9	21.3
	Urban-type settlement	5.4	3.6	7.8	5.9	5.4	6.4	8.3	7.5	9.2
	Rural area	28.3	24.3	32.6	14.6	13.9	15.3	43.3	41.9	44.9
Number of children under 16 years old	1 child	31.7	27.5	36.1	22.6	21.8	23.4	25.7	24.4	27.0
	2 children	37.5	33.1	42.1	11.5	10.9	12.2	22.4	21.1	23.6
	3 and more children	10.8	8.2	13.9	2.0	1.7	2.3	10.0	9.1	11.0
	Have no children	20.0	16.5	23.9	63.9	63.0	64.9	41.9	40.4	43.4
Number of persons with a higher education degree	All aged 23 and older have a higher education degree	46.3	41.7	50.9	46.3	45.3	47.3	7.3	6.5	8.1
	Some of household members aged 23 and older have a higher education degree	50.1	45.5	54.7	37.0	36.1	38.0	17.8	16.7	19.0
	None of household members aged 23 and older have a higher education degree	3.5	1.9	6.5	16.6	15.8	17.6	74.9	73.0	76.9

Table 5. Continued

Profile		Comply with Both Middle Class and Income Poverty Criteria			Comply with Middle Class Criteria Only			Comply with Poverty Criteria Only		
		Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL	Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL	Indicator	95% Lower CL	95% Upper CL
Number of unemployed persons of working age	None of household members of working age	0.0	-	-	20.1	19.3	20.9	2.4	2.0	2.9
	There are unemployed persons of working age	53.4	46.1	61.4	34.4	32.9	35.9	79.2	76.3	82.2
	There are no unemployed persons of working age	46.5	41.9	51.2	45.5	44.5	46.5	18.3	17.2	19.5
		Mean								
	Number of household members	3.72	3.60	3.84	2.61	2.59	2.64	3.67	3.61	3.73
	Number of children under 16	1.45	1.35	1.55	0.52	0.50	0.54	1.07	1.03	1.11
	Number of children under 18	1.55	1.45	1.65	0.58	0.56	0.59	1.20	1.16	1.24
	Number of unemployed	0.70	0.62	0.77	0.58	0.56	0.59	1.58	1.54	1.62
	Number of persons of working age	2.12	2.04	2.20	1.54	1.52	1.56	2.20	2.16	2.24
	Number of disabled people	0.05	0.03	0.08	0.15	0.14	0.16	0.16	0.14	0.17
	Number of persons with a higher education degree	1.44	1.37	1.51	1.24	1.23	1.26	0.35	0.33	0.38
	Number of retirees	0.15	0.11	0.19	0.55	0.53	0.56	0.40	0.38	0.42
	<i>Sample Size:</i>		<i>N = 445</i>			<i>N = 9663</i>			<i>N = 4187</i>	

Conclusion and Discussion

The request for the middle-class identification and the analysis of middle-class households is constantly seen in political and expert agenda. The scholars suppose that there is a variety of different middle classes with inconsistent criteria for identification. Due to this fact, there is a high variation in its share [Radaev 2019]. During the crisis and transformation periods, the middle class attract an increased interest. It is primarily caused by the roles that are usually attributed to this stratum: in a worsening economic situation it is seen as an anchor of stability in society and as a group having potential to overcome the negative crisis effects.

The latest crisis, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions, stroke even the most successful economic areas and negatively influenced employment, including that of highly qualified workers with higher education and high labor income. As soon as lockdowns were announced, the experts started drawing attention to the increasing risks of poverty for the middle class. However, such assumptions were based mainly on previous experience and qualitative data, which made us to start new research and evaluate the middle-class mobility. All the reasons mentioned above made us to shift the research focus from the questions about which groups could widen the middle class [Maleva, Ovcharova 2009], what political changes could be caused by its growth [Belanovskiy et al. 2012] or what are the peculiarities of middle-class consumption [Tikhonova 2015] to the question whether the middle class will be able to retain its stable social position in the current turbulent time.

Assuming the idea that all the measurements are depended upon the approach to the middle class, we nonetheless suppose that among the Russian sociologists the consensus about multi-criteria approach to the middle-class is achieved given the different combinations of criteria used in the works of [Avraamova et al. 2000; Grigoryev, Salmina 2009; Tikhonova, Mareeva 2009]. We reject the 'economic approach' currently applied to the countries where the interest to the middle-class issues remains high (see, for example: [Jenmana 2018, The World Bank 2020b]). We think that the middle-class characteristics lie not only in the field of income but also in the field of values, expectations, consumer behavior, etc. If the income criteria only are used, they are not able to answer the questions whether the category identified is a class and to what extent it is heterogenous. We follow the multi-criteria tradition using three criteria for the middle-class definition.

The results demonstrate that there was no crucial reduction in the middle class share in 2020: before the corona crisis, 28% of the households were identified as the middle class, compared to 27.5% in 2020. However, the calculation of 2014–2020 RLMS-HSE data shows that the middle class demonstrates high mobility and a constantly changing structure: about $\frac{1}{3}$ of its members change their status annually and some of them move into poverty. In the context of multicriteria methodology, it means that the criteria commonly used to identify this stratum (education, profession, and income) are not harmonized. The hypothesis about a poor return on human capital is proved, since high educational level and qualifications do not result in higher incomes [Tikhonova 2020a]. As a result, the generalized middle class includes the households having the income below the subsistence minimum.

At the same time, the middle-class households that face the problem of poverty do not differ from the other Russian poor families. There are those who live in small urban and rural areas, have children and unemployed family members.

Summarizing the results of implementing the multicriteria methodology, we should either assume that the middle class still has not been formed or raise the question about modifying the methodology itself. Otherwise, we face a question if a certain group could be treated as a middle class. This is the point for further discussion, which is beyond the scope of our study. The search for proper criteria for the middle-class identification as well as clarification of the methodology seem to be the core vector in the future development of middle-class studies in Russia. Also we need to answer the question why the share of the middle class remains so stable while there is an ongoing rotation inside of it and what factors cause this rotation inside the middle class.

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