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THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
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Gregory Feifer is an Institute Donors' Fellow studying the current political and cultural reshaping of Russia.

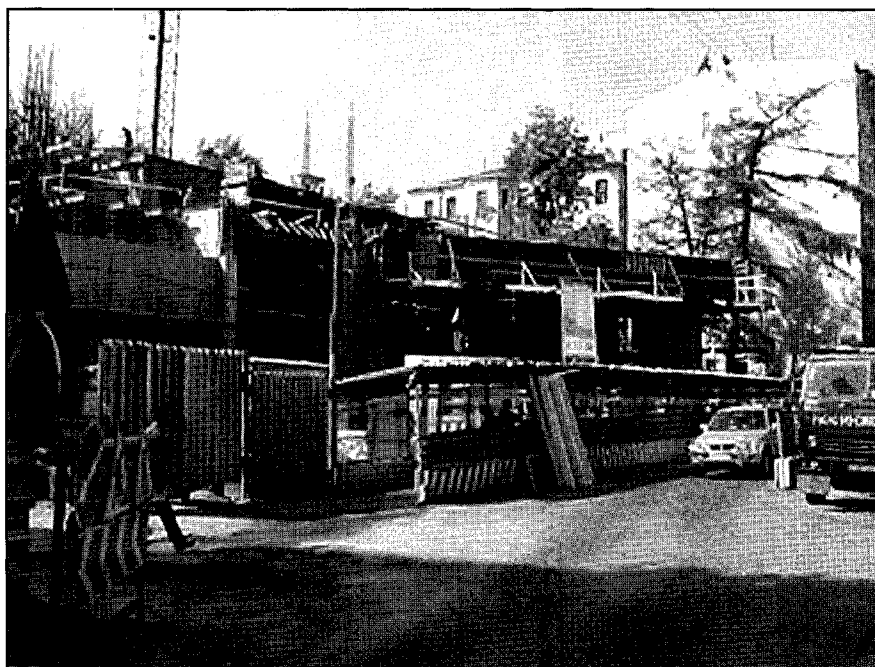
Autumn, Change from Below, and Russia's Middle Class

By Gregory Feifer

September 2001

MOSCOW—September is a busy, sober month in Russia as elsewhere. Children return to school with great fanfare on the first Monday and adults go back to work—often after having taken off the entire month of August. Politics grind into gear. Parliament begins its fall session, and the Kremlin's "reform" projects pick up once again. Even the weather gets down to business. The last few days of August suddenly turn cold and windy most years, announcing that the brief, giddy spell of summer is over and it's time to prepare for the long, dreary winter ahead.

This year seems especially busy. Driving through Moscow's center is becoming an increasing headache, and not just because of the proliferation of cars. It's also due to new construction projects. The most affected areas are in the elite areas, the city's central 18th- and 19th-century neighborhoods. Their narrow lanes—often difficult to negotiate under any conditions—are now hosting projects filling neighborhoods with the booming noise of bulldozers, saws and hammers. The city's already foul-smelling air is putrefied further still with the diesel fumes of cement mixers contributing their goopy contents to the creation



A ubiquitous sight in the pre-Revolutionary lanes of central Moscow

CORRECTION: GF-17, p. 5, col. 2, last para, should have read: Stalin himself (born Dzhugashvili)...

of scores of new, glass-encased, security-tight buildings of highly dubious taste. But it's not only the center that's benefiting from Russia's economic upswing. Massive elite apartment-block complexes are also going up in the outskirts of town, and many other areas are seeing refurbishing work and new building.

This highly visible sign of what many would call progress mirrors the state of the country's aforementioned politics. The government is lauded with having produced the country's first truly liberal budget for next year, and the State Duma passed it with record speed this month. With President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin firmly in control of the ship of state, it seems most Russians are once again digging in, shaking off the last vestiges of the ruinous 1998 economic crisis, and pushing ahead with whatever it is their lot in life to do.

Add to that Russia's new sense of importance that came with September 11's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Long-term strategic interests, envies and frictions of all kinds will surely soon sour the new Russo-American friendliness. But for the time being, Russia is basking in the glory of being wanted for the first time in a long while, not only to help find Saudi terrorist Osama Bin Laden, but also to contribute stability to America's quest to forge a global coalition to combat terrorism in general.

And yet, despite all these seemingly positive signs, it's hard to be optimistic. Under the mantra of fighting "international terrorism," Putin has tried to crack down once again—and once again unsuccessfully—in Chechnya.

Meanwhile, the inconceivable senselessness and destruction of the attacks in New York—along with the desire to keep Russia on its side—has silenced the West's already feeble criticism of Russia's own senseless daily acts of barbarism in the breakaway republic. Indeed, in recent months, instead of coming closer to the West as many wishfully thinking pundits have opined, Putin has actually deftly wound the West's major leaders around his fingers, from U.S. President George W. Bush—who "saw" Putin's "soul" after having bitterly criticized the Clinton administration for basing its Russia policy on "personal relations"—to French President Jacques Chirac and even German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Incredibly, each of these leaders has been cowed into nodding agreement with Putin's preposterous claims not only about Chechnya, but also the state of Russia's civil liberties and free press.

Russia is continuing its inexorable drift away from liberal and transparent market economics as much as, democratic politics. A number of economists accuse the government's much-vaunted 2002 budget, for example, of hiding billions of dollars of revenue to be used at the Kremlin's own discretion. Meanwhile, political analysts admit legislation meant to "strengthen the state," as Putin likes to put it, is often really aimed at decreasing the number of political parties, limiting the powers of regional governors and otherwise cutting down on opposition while putting more state funds at the Kremlin's disposal.

The presidential administration's vaunted image of itself—as well as the related contradictions to which it seems





The Moscow elite are voracious consumers of reflective glass.

blind—is perhaps best symbolized by the massive tsarist estate outside St. Petersburg that Putin has ordered refurbished at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars for use as his residence in the northern capital. Putin's myriad spokespeople assure inquisitive reporters that the grounds will also be used as a venue to host international leaders. But what about the Kremlin, the reporters ask, which itself was refurbished at a cost of billions of dollars and a major bribery scandal only a couple of years ago?

Meanwhile, the president, who this month began insisting that education reform is at the top of his agenda, continues to authorize the spending of millions on new fleets of official limousines, in addition to the grandiose construction projects. Russia's teachers, on the other hand, are paid an average of \$40 a month—so little that a number of them consider teaching a "hobby" they pursue while not earning money in their "real" jobs. The state of the education system is so bad that the best way to ensure acceptance to university is to bribe the professors who make up admissions boards.

The news isn't all bad. Moscow's vast numbers of new buildings indeed reflect an economy that is inexorably picking up—and at great speed, given the devastation of the recent economic crisis. Incredibly, foreign equities-fund managers once again rate Russia as one of the world's leading emerging markets—in part because so much of the global economy is moving in the opposite direction. But even here, the good news is largely superficial. Russia's is an unreformed economy anchored on raw-materials exports and criminalized regulation, and buoyed chiefly by high oil prices. Perhaps in reflection of those facts, one is more likely to see a shaved-headed, thug-like boss—or his moll—stepping out of one of the city's gleaming

new buildings and into his tinted-windowed Mercedes than a clean-cut businessman or woman doing the same. That's not to say well-groomed businessmen are the measure of all good—only that it's hopeless to expect "common" Russians to benefit much from the new housing boom. For the majority of Russians, life continues to be nasty, brutish and short. As I've pointed out previously, the average mortality rate for males—already at the unbelievably low level of 59 years—continues to drop. Is there any hope for change?

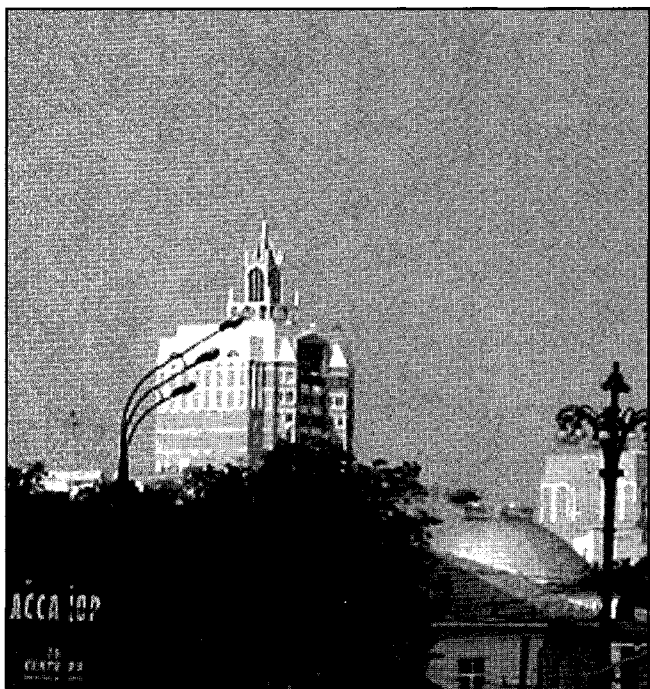
Slow Change, for a Change

New buildings don't mean capitalism and new legislation doesn't mean democracy, however much western observers hope they do. So as Russia settles into the salad years of the Putin era, what

is there to be optimistic about? A friend of mine, Yuri Vaschenko, one of Moscow's most compelling artists (about whom I've previously written), puts his stock in future generations. "The criminal businessmen, who are themselves unreformable, send their children to school in the West," Vaschenko told me recently. "Those children imbibe values that are incompatible to the way things are done in Russia. They will, in turn, want to create the conditions in which their own lives in Russia will be better."

Vaschenko's hope is echoed by many longtime Russia observers. It's a bleak optimism. "It's a slow, agonizing process," he conceded. "But that is the hope for the future, and meanwhile we'll continue to stumble along as best we can. Change can never occur in one fell swoop in this country. That kind of change is so often simply destructive." Vaschenko illustrates the country's current stumbling with language use—the form of address most Russians use when speaking to one another. "In the days of communism, everyone was 'comrade' [*tovarish*]. That's absurd, of course. So when communism fell, the natural inclination was to copy the West and use 'mister' [*gospodin*]. But that in turn sounded too stiff—perhaps because it had been seen as 'bourgeois' for so many years. And so we stopped using any form of address at all. I, for one, don't quite know how to catch the attention of people on the street or in shops. And so, for the time being, we either simply avoid saying anything specific other than 'you' [the formal form, *vy*], or revert to the absurd, calling shop women over fifty years of age 'girl' [*devushka*]."

The debate over how change takes place in Russia is hardly new. It's more than clear now that westernizing change—fundamental, and not superficial westernizing change—if it does occur at all, will do so painstakingly



Bells and whistles: Many of the new high-end residential buildings going up in central Moscow reflect a taste that is truly unique.

slowly with the experience of countless mistakes and in the face of massive opposition. That runs counter to the prescriptions of so many in Russian history—from the Decembrists, the gentry revolutionaries who opposed Nicholas II in 1825, to the prototypical 19th-century revolutionary Vissarion Belinsky—who have advocated uncompromising action to throw off the old order as the only way to bring change to Russia.

Among those who generally favored the same enlightened ends of their more revolution-minded colleagues, but through a process of more gradual revolution, Alexander Herzen, the journalist and philosopher, was one of few. Even then, his views only became more tempered after a conversion from his earlier revolutionary socialism following the European revolutions of 1848. (Herzen retained his belief in socialism as a whole. On the spectrum of Russian philosophers, others such as the historian Nikolai Karamzin—whose approach to social reform mirrored Montesquieu's—tended to become staunch nationalistic conservatives.)

Nowhere is Herzen's gradual approach more applicable than in 21st-century Russia, which has been laid so low by its 1917 Revolution. The trouble is that getting Russian leaders to learn from the mistakes of their own past is near-impossible. The Russian system of politics tends to perpetuate itself precisely because it's found the easiest way of dealing with the mess that it continues to help pro-

duce. In a vicious circle, bursts of destabilizing change are followed by inevitable drift toward the old behavior that tends to cover up inadequacies and pretend they don't exist rather than actually combat them. But more gilded presidential estates and downtown Moscow construction sites will never compensate for the rotting housing stock and decaying infrastructure with which most Russians have to put up. Look inside the cramped apartments of 80 percent of Russians, and you'll see cheap, Soviet-era furniture and décor—especially the ubiquitous green or brown wallpaper—which hasn't changed in the past 30 years, except perhaps to be augmented by a Korean or Japanese television and stereo.

Even Vaschenko's "model" of generational change resembles that of almost all other prescriptions and predictions throughout Russia's intellectual history because it still involves change by the élite, the traditional kind. Indeed, the whole of Russia's political history can be told by ostensible attempts to change it from above—from the efforts of Ivan III (the Great) to forge a Muscovite state in the 16th century to the liberalizing reforms of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, to the Bolsheviks, the Yeltsin-era reformers, and even Putin's avowed state-building. That change has almost always incorporated elements of outside influences into a system that remains patently Russian (not least because the fundamental system came about as a reaction to such influence-absorbing change).

In the past, not only has the traditional form of change come from above, but also the opposition to *fundamental* change. So perhaps if change is to be fundamental, it will have to come not from above as always, but from below. The line among Moscow liberals today is that change will happen only gradually in society itself, not because of "reform," but despite it. Therefore I'm happy to report that there's new evidence that signifi-



How many generations will be enough for fundamental change?

cant change may well occur for the first time from below.

Brakes on Openness

Before discussing possible reform from below, it's necessary to say a few words about the obstacles to such change. Those obstacles seemed to be lifted in the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness), exposed the mass of Russian society to the outside world as never before through an influx of popular culture. For the first time, society was at least allowed to know about developments in the West—a process that picked up most of its speed after the collapse of communism in 1991. It's unimportant here to discuss the types of culture that subsequently seeped in—most often the cheapest, most exportable kinds in the form of pop songs, Hollywood films, tabloid publications and the commercial culture of advertising. It's also unnecessary to elaborate on the domestic forms those influences spawned in Russia—magazines, pop music, detective thrillers. The chief fact was that the gates were open and the means existed to spread westernizing influences to a majority of the population. Even magazine stalls in faraway villages around Irkutsk carry *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*.

The degree of openness to channels of popular western culture suffered its first major blow following the economic crisis. Western-backed reform was briefly discredited and, in the wake of NATO bombing in Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, major politicians and society at large unleashed a barrage of anti-western rhetoric. (Broadcast of the BBC World Service on Russian medium-wave channels, for example, was temporarily shut down during that time.) Since Putin's ascent, curtailing of western influence has continued in more subtle ways. Independent NTV television—the channel most influenced by western journalistic practices—was forcibly taken over by a state-owned company. A major weekly newsmagazine and a newspaper owned by the same media company were also shut down. On another front, Russian scientists are now required by presidential decree to report all contact with foreign organizations to the Russian Academy of Sciences.

At the same time, the Kremlin is trying to coopt the potential development of civil society—another form of export from the West—which is crucial if Russia is to develop a culture of democracy. The effort is being led by the Fund for Effective Policy, headed by former dissident and current Kremlin image-maker Gleb Pavlovsky. The fund runs the Kremlin's un-official official website, *strana.ru*, which presents news with a Putin-friendly spin and posts policy papers generally denigrating the West and boosting government policy.

In June, Pavlovsky organized a meeting between Putin and representatives of a wide spectrum of NGOs. During

the meeting, Putin agreed to form a Union of Civic Unions, a civic chamber attached to the administration due to be launched in October. The following week, Human Rights Commission chairman Vladimir Kartashkin declared that the Kremlin was willing to cooperate only with organizations deemed “constructive.” “Many human rights activists, particularly in the capital, unfortunately continue their destructive struggle—they have not forgotten their dissident past, although the situation has totally changed,” Kartashkin said at the time. The most active and important human rights group in Russia, Memorial, was held up as a negative example. Critics say the Kremlin's civic union is actually intended to help create a new bureaucratic and political hierarchy. Instead of boosting civil society as stated, the organization will serve to coopt it while marginalizing truly independent organizations.

Meanwhile, living conditions for most Russians are so bad they force most of the population to worry not about human rights, but how they'll make it through another year. Last year, in the Far East region of Primorye, for example, thousands of families huddled in single rooms kept above freezing by homemade electric heaters or coal burning stoves. Russian television showed countless apartment walls coated in ice. A number of people died. Heating systems collapsed because the country's power grid is so old it literally fell apart with the surge in demand that came with cold temperatures—after corrupt local officials had channeled budget money away from investing in cruddy infrastructure while also failing to stock up on enough coal and other fuel. This spring, top-level ministers were appointed with much to-do by a stern Putin to prepare for the winter. But throughout the summer, dire warnings have been issued—and ignored—that this year will be a repeat.

The Middle Class Reappears

Change is nonetheless in the air. While “reformers” in the Putin administration continue to enact policies evidently anathema to real reform, a tiny group of “ordinary” Russians is developing in ways not yet controlled by the state. This is the small part of the population that has for the most part landed professional jobs with enough pay to provide savings and disposable incomes. This group is not part of the highly visible super-rich. (Its emergence also doesn't mean Russia's median standard of living is increasing. Its members are still part of the top 20 percent in society. Their wages are growing even while more Russians on the whole sink into poverty.)

Despite this group's tiny size, Russian journalists and sociologists have lately begun to opine that the nascent, so-called middle class is becoming socially significant. Its members are seen to be acting in increasingly independent-minded ways.¹ And it might just be that this tender shoot is

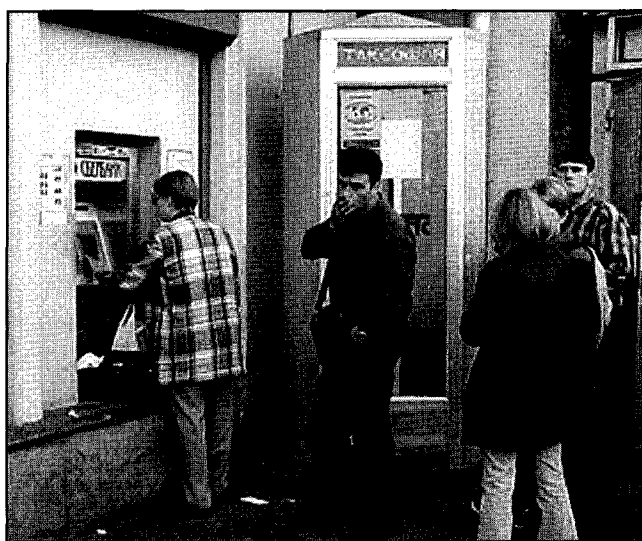
¹ Elena Chinyaeva, a writer for the Russian political weekly *Kommersant-Vlast*—and who holds a doctorate from Oxford University—is one of those who recently wrote about the trend. She aired her views in *The Jamestown Foundation Prism*, a monthly on the “post-Soviet” states (August 2001), published by the Jamestown Foundation think tank.

the best hope Russia has to one day change the way the rest of society lives and breathes.

Rumors of a middle class in Russia first surfaced with great fanfare in the middle of the 1990s. They didn't last, and neither did the middle class. The tiny stratum was dealt a crippling blow in the 1998 crisis when the banking system collapsed, taking with it the savings of depositors who had been expected to form the foundation of a new consumer society. What little cash wasn't essentially appropriated by banks—many of which managed nonetheless to transfer their own assets to new structures under different names—was wiped out by the inflation that inevitably followed. But reports are once again circulating, saying the middle class is back.

Significant differences separate the understanding of "middle class" in Russia and elsewhere.² In Russia, applying the usual western criteria of income, values and social status is problematic, to say the least. No census of the population has been carried out during the last ten years of dramatic social upheaval. And unlike in the West, higher education and professional status no longer necessarily correlate to higher income and social status—indeed, they're often mutually exclusive. Furthermore, due to a large "shadow" economy and massive tax evasion, any statistics that have been collected almost certainly cannot be wholly trusted.

Despite the difficulties of categorization, the market—with its need to sound out potential customers—has pushed the issue forward. In the fall of 1999, the weekly business magazine *Expert*, together with the Comcon market-re-



A sight not seen for about three years. "Ordinary" Muscovites were just beginning to get used to automatic teller machines when the 1998 economic crisis wiped out their bank accounts. For the first time since then, one can now see lines in front of ATMs. These depositors are getting their cash out of the state savings bank, Sberbank, one of the few not to go under in 1998.

search company, launched the first project aimed at arriving at an understanding of the nebulous "lifestyle and consumption tendencies" of the middle class. Pollsters questioned 1,120 people in 20 large Russian cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg and nine other cities with populations over 1 million. The respondents were asked whether they owned apartments, cars, washing machines, cell phones and bank accounts. Questions also included vacation preferences and other "lifestyle" choices. The findings were reported last year.



Restaurants and cafés catering to the middle class and not the super rich are increasing in number.

The survey's chief conclusion was that the middle class forms a distinct stratum of the population with comparable incomes, outlooks and values. Moreover, the survey's authors claim that members of the group consciously identify themselves as belonging to "the middle class," which is put at a total of about 4 million people (if you include dependents, the number doubles). These people constitute an average of 7 percent of the population in Russia's cities. (The figure increases to 10 percent in cities of over 1 million inhabitants and dips to 6 percent in those with over 250,000 people.) Moscow is the exception, with 20 percent of its residents identified as belonging to the middle class.

As I've mentioned, given the vastness

² The term is said to have first emerged in medieval Britain to describe the social stratum between the clergy and the landed gentry. Today, "middle class" in the West generally includes professionals and well-paid workers. But even in countries with comparable socio-economic systems, percentages and definitions differ. As Chinayeva writes, about 95 percent of Americans consider themselves middle class. In Europe, the figure is generally lower, at 60 to 70 percent.



The skylines of Moscow's residential outskirts are changing as new, relatively expensive buildings sprout between the Soviet-era concrete-slab tenements.

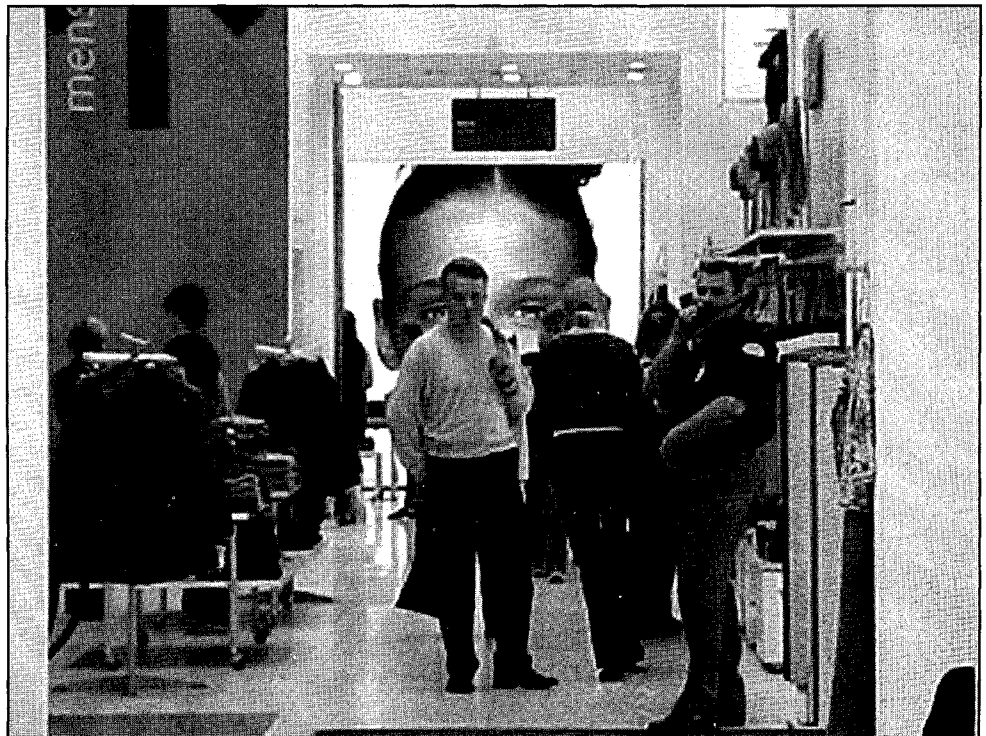
of Russia's poverty and the still-atrophied state of its economy, definitions of "middle class" differ significantly from those in the West—chiefly in terms of wealth. The Expert/Comcon survey set the minimum middle-class income at \$450 a month in the provinces and \$800 in Moscow. (The number translates to \$150 per family member in the provinces and \$300 in Moscow.) Using those parameters, the pollsters found the number of women members of the middle class to equal that of men. They reported the typical middle-class Russian to be approximately 33 years old, usually with a university degree and a job largely in the private sector as a mid-level manager or a qualified specialist—or in private business (about a quarter of respondents). Members of the middle class are said to generally live in privatized apartments and own cars. They are married, but do not "strive to reproduce" (the Russian middle class averages 1.2 children per person).

That produces 2.4 children per family, which might seem to clash with Russia's overall statistics of negative population growth. It must be remembered, however, that the middle class is tiny (and relatively prosperous) so that its reproductive rate most likely has little or no real effect on the country's as a whole. (That negative growth is partly the result of

staggering degrees of infant mortality and an unbelievably low degree of life expectancy—two factors that probably affect the middle class much less than poorer Russians. Of course the poor suffer everywhere—there just happen to be a lot of them in Russia.) Furthermore, since both the middle class and its outlook on life seem to have developed in the past two or so years, a change in attitude toward having children would reflect rather than disprove the emergence of the new group.

In an assessment of the Expert/Comcon study, Elena Chinayeva writes that members of the middle class seem to have a distinct system of values in which personal freedom and independence matter most. "They prefer to make their own decisions, are success-oriented and not afraid to take risks to achieve it. Interestingly enough, they don't consider the law the absolute value, believing that in modern Russia it is difficult not to break it. They are politically active and democratic in social behavior, and don't want to emigrate. A majority—64 percent—is optimistic about Russia's future."

But opinion varies. Critics have questioned the credibility of the study's criteria and their results. The most frequent complaint is the difficulty of defining the middle class by income and consumption habits—given the fact that so many Soviet-era professionals have been relegated to poverty. Some have also questioned the system of values and the assessment of political and social behavior as a determining criterion. Some members of the Russian Academy of Sciences say the study's middle class in fact corresponds



Moscow's central multi-story Benetton store. More shops are opening up catering to the young.



A Trussardi store. One of the differences between the thin layer of the middle class and its counterparts in other countries is that Russians with disposable cash tend to favor quality and brand names over affordability. Many young Russians will forego eating regular meals for weeks to save money for an expensive new coat.

to the thinner layer of the upper-middle class in the West, chiefly top management and professionals who make up much of the political and business élite. Since the bulk of the middle class in the West tends to be apolitical, the reasoning goes, its Russian analogue is therefore the broad segment of politically passive Russians with monthly incomes between \$70 and \$200—chiefly civil servants, small-business owners, and better-paid workers. Research carried out by the state's Bureau of Economic Analysis on the basis of standard Western criteria—education level, professional status, material well-being and the quality of self-identification—puts the size of the Russian middle class at 20-25 percent. Its members, the bureau says, tend to be older than in the *Expert/Comcon* study, and their chief desire is "stability."

This summer, *Expert* magazine conducted a follow-up study, which alleges that the consequences of the August 1998 financial crisis have finally been fully overcome. The study also found that the core middle class has not grown significantly over the past two years. The findings corresponded to those of another Comcon study, also completed this year. That poll was much larger than the previous ones—with 17,211 people interviewed across the country, including 2,790 in Moscow—and found that the few Rus-

sian consumers with disposable income are increasingly resembling their counterparts in wealthier Western countries.

Figures released in August by the Economic Development and Trade Ministry show that Russians are indeed spending more. Retail-trade turnover jumped almost 11 percent in the first half of the year, while imports were up 44 percent in July of this year compared with July 2000.³ Disposable income rose 5.4 percent in the first seven months of this year, and real wages increased 18 percent, the ministry reported.

Conclusions

It cannot be stressed too much that official statistics must be treated with extreme skepticism. Nonetheless, authors of the second *Expert* study claim that the improvement in the middle class's well-being has caused a number of

markets to boom. In the first quarter of 2001, for example, sales of new imported cars grew 30 percent. Real-estate sales have also been escalating.

Chinayeva writes that the survey's results correspond to political as well as economic developments. During the 1999 parliamentary elections, the Union of the Right Forces, the liberal bloc of ex-reformers, "positioned" itself as the party of the middle class and won over 8.7 percent of the vote in an unexpectedly high result. Only 6.1 percent of the electorate voted for the more established Yabloko Party—the country's other major liberal political organization.⁴ Yabloko tends to attract the traditional Soviet-era intelligentsia rather than younger voters. The Union of Right Forces' success therefore confirms that a process of social differentiation in Russian society is developing, Chinayeva writes. That development has been accompanied by a social and political maturation of the middle class—not simply because of its lifestyle and consumption habits, but also due to the "conscious and informed choices" of its members.

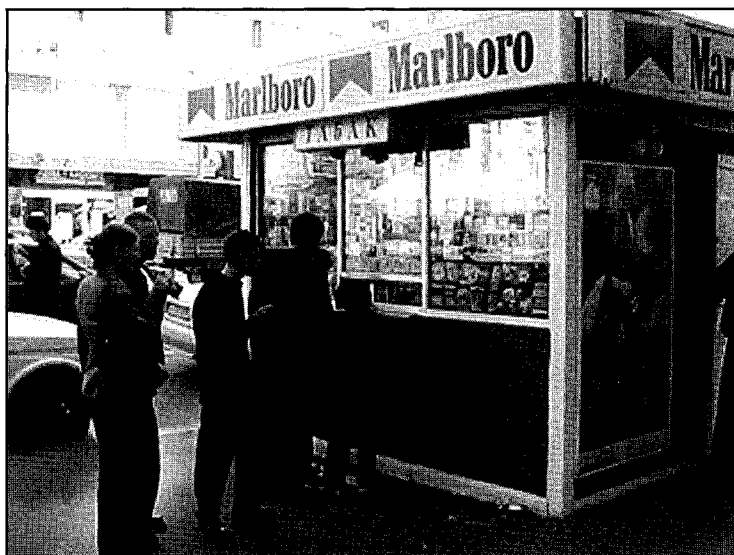
Chinayeva's conclusions may be disputed. The middle class—however it's defined—may not be as independent as some would like. It also remains a small-enough part of

³ *The Moscow Times*, September 4, 2001.

⁴ Traditional criticism of Yabloko has been that it is too "social-democratic"—too soft on issues of liberal market reform. However, since leaders of the Union of Right Forces decided to back Putin unconditionally in 1999, Yabloko therefore undoubtedly remains the only true major liberal party in Russia. That fact alone brings Chinayeva's conclusion—that the Union of Right Forces represents an "independent middle class"—into doubt. What cannot be doubted, however, is that the middle class does exert some political influence.

Russia's over-all population that drawing any conclusions about its political significance is problematic. However, it's difficult to question claims that the recent findings show the group is taking root. The development may well be Russia's most significant change since the economic crisis three years ago. Some say it's the most significant development since the Soviet collapse. Perhaps this new tendency is part of September's annual bustle, and demonstrates that society can develop by itself and from below in spite of "reform" and the limits the Kremlin is trying to put on the population in an attempt to shore up its own power.

Gore Vidal, speaking of the Soviet Union when it still existed, said he'd fear the Russians only when they'd learn how to make a vodka bottle cap that screwed off properly [instead of the cheap cap that had to be pried off]. Stolichnaya vodka now sells bottles with impressive plastic caps. Even more significant is that advertising slogans for Russia's emerging drink of choice—beer—are entering the vernacular. ("Who's going for Klinskoe beer?" is one of them.) But all change is relative. Most Russians still drink vodka, and the majority can't afford the plastic-topped kind. Most suffer daily grinds worse than those they bore under the Soviet Union. It's far too early to tell whether the hordes of Russia's poor—whose poverty is the price paid for the existence of Moscow's wealthy overlords—will benefit from the same tendencies supporting



The kiosks that flowered all over Moscow with the collapse of Communism are being supplanted by western-style shops, but they're still in demand. In the provinces, kiosks are often some of the only places to buy western cigarettes, soft drinks and candy.

the professionals in the middle class. It also remains to be seen whether that new middle class will grow enough to develop a critical mass whose interests begin to balance the influence of the ascendant political and economic elite so highly visible in Moscow. But perhaps for the first time in Russian history, the possibility exists. □

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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