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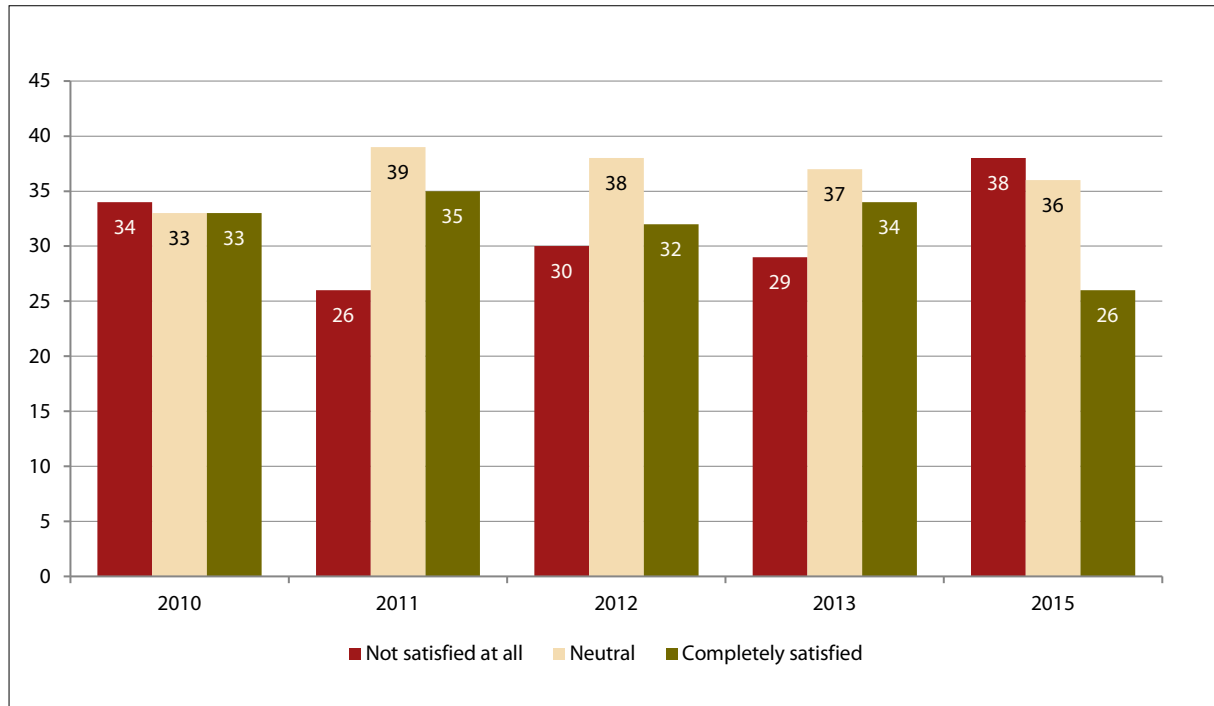
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Figure 5: Reported Levels of Happiness in Georgia (in %, Caucasus Barometer, 2010–15)



‘Middle-Class, Limited-Edition’? Middle Class Subjectivities in Urban Azerbaijan

By Cristina Boboc (Ghent University)

Abstract

This article discusses the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project on the characteristics and dynamics of Azerbaijan’s urban middle class. The aim of this article is to examine what ‘middle class’ means in the country currently when new westernized consumption practices and lifestyle aspirations meet traditional local values. Additionally, what is the social role that the new middle class plays in the country’s development? Based on ethnographic data collected throughout 2016 in Baku, this contribution argues that the middle class identity is more than an interplay between the accumulation of material goods, education and occupation; middle-class belonging is also defined by linguistic identity and assumed modernity.

‘Middle What...?!’

Talking about my research topic while doing fieldwork in Baku, I am constantly asked by locals and by foreign residents alike if there is a middle class in Azerbaijan at all or if I ‘managed’ yet to find some middle class people. These questions are obviously intended more to mark their surprise and/or to express doubts

about the mere existence of a middle class in present-day Azerbaijan. Therefore, I will use this opportunity to answer to the most common questions: Is there any middle class in Azerbaijan? What does ‘middle-class’ mean in Azerbaijan’s societal context? The perception of ‘the middle-class’ in common knowledge is generally associated with the economic aspects of the middle strata

of society. According to this understanding, income is the main criterion that draws the lines of social stratification. In this article, however, I intend to show that class structure in post-Soviet countries is more complex than a quantitative analysis of income and of the ability to accumulate material goods. Moreover, this contribution argues that class belonging is expressed not through a group identification but in an asserted distinction from the other classes.

The selection of the respondents involved in my ongoing research is based primarily on self-identification. The intention is to document the perceptions, the meanings, and the boundaries of class belonging in the urban landscape of Azerbaijan. The revenues from oil and gas extraction allowed a relatively more rapid recovery of post-Soviet Azerbaijan in comparison with the other Soviet successor countries in the southern Caucasus. The Azerbaijani government paid special attention to ‘putting Azerbaijan on the map’, as the locals used to say, by hosting a score of large international events. As a result, especially in the capital city or at least its central parts, an intensive modernization process took off, which includes beautification of the city, modernization of infrastructure, an upgrade of public services, and the reorganization of the educational system.

Standard of Modernization

However, in this context, the formation of a middle class has become a point of reference since, from the national political perspective, the formation of a strong middle class is part of the country’s rapid modernization process. The eradication of extreme poverty and the expansion of the middle class clearly became priority issues, at least in the public discourse of the national and local authorities who emphasize, for instance, that “the problem of ‘absolute poverty’ will constantly be the center of attention again, and along with that, the expansion of the middle class and the strengthening of the role of this class is one of the main purposes. The experience of various countries shows that countries with a stronger middle class are more sustainable from political, economic, social and other aspects and have higher development potential.”¹

While receiving a World Bank delegation headed by the bank’s then newly appointed regional director for the southern Caucasus, Henry Kerali, in spring 2014, the president of Azerbaijan, noted that “the country is carrying out targeted measures to improve the social situation

of the middle class”². Therefore, the ‘middle class issue’ is constantly on the political agenda of Azerbaijani authorities. International organizations and local researchers have shown a growing interest in the economic middle class topic as well. In a report from summer 2015, the World Bank estimated the size of the middle class in Azerbaijan at up to 29 percent in comparison to the national average and in Baku at up to 44 percent of the city’s population.³ The situation of the middle class and the impact of the recent economic changes has also been extensively discussed in a report on the regional branch of Radio Free Europe-Radio Azadliq.⁴

The interviewed researchers, mostly economists, argued there that the Azerbaijani middle class is seriously shrinking as a result of plummeting oil prices and the devaluation of the national currency. This reflected again that the interest in the existence and predicament of the middle class considerably increased over the last few years, yet, it is still primarily discussed using economic and financial terms. Even though a financial-economic framework does provides data and assessments on the size of the middle class in Azerbaijan, from a social anthropology lens, to size and assess the Azerbaijani middle class is, for now, almost an impossible mission. In the aforementioned research, I do not consider income as the main criteria in analyzing the class belonging for two reasons. The first reason is the omnipresent and strong informal economy in the country causes official statistics to fail to reflect the population’s real income. Second, as the partial results show, social class in Azerbaijan, as in other formerly Soviet countries, is much more than the power of accumulating material goods.

Class Understanding

As the understanding of this social stratum opens a big debate, I consider it necessary to clarify my conceptualization of the middle class. I consider the middle class a stratum of society, where the distinction is made by profession, occupation, education, manners, and the assumed level of ‘modernity’ one has achieved. As noted already, I do not consider income an absolute standard

1 Portal of the president of Azerbaijan, ‘Development concept—Azerbaijan 2020, look into the future’, <http://www.president.az/files/future_en.pdf>, accessed on 27.04.2016

2 Portal of the president of Azerbaijan, <<http://en.president.az/mobile/articles/11172>>

3 World Bank Group, “Azerbaijan systematic country diagnostic”, South Caucasus Country Management Unit—Europe and Central Asia, report № 97113. This report is based on income analyses before the devaluation of the Azerbaijani manat. However, according to it, the middle class in Azerbaijan grew from 4.26 percent of the population to 28.89 percent between the years 2007 and 2012. In this World Bank study, the middle class is considered any household with a minimum per capita consumption above \$10 PPP.

4 Радио Азадлиг, «Остался ли в Азербайджане средний класс?», <www.radioazadlyg.org/a/orta-tebeqe-azerbaycan/28082555.html>

for being part of this class, even if income does offer possibilities for achieving middle class status. Moreover, in terms of social distinction, the language one speaks is an important social mark and draws the borders of group appurtenance. To better understand the situation of the middle class in today's Azerbaijan, I propose to look briefly at its regional history. The different perceptions and common understanding of class during the Soviet era left a fingerprint on today's perception of class in former Soviet countries.

Soviet socialism advocated classless society and equality between the citizens. However, as demonstrated by much research, the propagated equality was largely a myth since the real social stratification in the Soviet Union was very complex and sophisticated. Without entering into too much detail about the many subdivisions, there were roughly three classes then, which included peasants and the working class; intellectual professions or the *intelligentsia*; and the ruling state bureaucratic class or so-called *nomenklatura*. The destruction of the local aristocracy and the urban bourgeoisie, during the Soviet era, affected today's class stratification in the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term 'middle class' entered Azerbaijan with a clear economic connotation. The Western model of social prosperity reached Azerbaijan quickly when the revenues from the extractive industry, especially oil and gas, gave the Azerbaijanis enormous hopes and aspirations.

'Middle-Class, Limited-Edition', or a False Dis-Identification

A new, financial-economic middle class indeed started to emerge, while the 'old', professional middle class, still nicknamed *bakinskaya intelligentsia* or *ziyali*, remained stranded in the precarious state caused by the collapse of Soviet socialism. Today, the professional middle class, is too weak and impoverished to form a solid middle class, while the newly emerging middle class is too small and fragile to be considered a class itself. A coexistence or merging between these two groups or in their corresponding interpretations of 'the middle class' is nearly impossible as the intelligentsia perceives the new financial-economic middle groups as *parvenu*, even more so when those concerned arrived from the provinces and settled in Baku relatively recently. The status of members of the Baku intelligentsia currently is frequently pitied, and they are not seen as being middle class by the newly enriched. This professional middle class does enjoy social status, but often has no means to maintain a decent standard of living.

The insignificance and the weakness of this social stratum is constantly emphasized by my informants, i.e., 'middle class, ah, there are so few of us left' (claim

the old intelligentsia) and 'there is no middle class here'. Interestingly, at the same time, the refrain 'I'm middle class' is often heard among the new financial-economic middle strata, thereby emphasizing their success and denying a group belonging. This apparently contradictory phrase became a leitmotiv in my research. The prevalent economic perception of a class belonging shows an apparent absence of class identity, and a very sharp distinction and belonging to distinctive groups. From this perspective, class identity seems absent. In fact, it looks more like a class dis-identification.

However, besides the narratives of middle class existence or absence, the research so far shows a strong group belonging in distinction and relation to the other groups as follows: *my Bakinty* ('we, Bakuvians') in opposition to the *rayonie* (internal migrants from the countryside or small provincial towns); *we kul'turnie lyudi* (educated and well-mannered people, or *ziyali* in Azerbaijani), vis-à-vis *nyekul'turnie* (the uneducated, ill-unmannered), and 'we Russian speakers' in opposition to 'Azerbaijani speakers'. The class dis-identification is just a false premise, and the absence of a strong class identity is seen in other class marks. When speaking about class belonging, Azerbaijani people often claim that one 'does not need to be part of a class but has to have class'.

Struggling in the Middle Moat

As sociologist Sergey Rummyantsev argues, Azerbaijan is in a constant process of "modernization of the country and its citizens".⁵ However, the modernization project seems to focus mostly on the capital. Only recently have some modest modernization projects been started in the other, secondary cities of the country. The countryside, for its part, is still largely excluded from the process. The concentration of the development projects, city beautification, the proliferation of luxury retail and shopping malls, and the arrival of skilled foreigners and external specialists locally engendered new middle class aspirations. The imported occidental lifestyles and trappings, combined with Dubai's luxury mirage, created a need for distinction through consumption among the middle strata. The 'modernized' lifestyle, including perceived 'European' manners, ways of thinking, and ways of acting, collided with local norms and values and started to create an identity crisis.

As one of my informants noted, "When you are on one side or on another side, you know very well who

5 Sergey Rummyantsev (Сергей Румянцев), «Ускользающая современность: постсоветская модернизация Азербайджана. Социологическое эссе», *Historians*, summer 2015, <www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/doslidzhennya/1641-sergej-rummyantsev-uskol-zayushchaya-sovremennost-postsovetskaya-modernizatsiya-azerbajdzhana-sotsiologicheskoe-esse>

you are. When you are poor, you live in your community with your customs and social norms. When you are rich, you live as you wish. Nobody judges you because people respect money more than people here. But that's fine; you know which side you are on. But when you live in the middle, you try to live with both sides inside, and this just divides you; it collides inside you. You live a double life in a way you try to fulfill traditional societal norms, but at the same time you aspire to a modern life, a 'European lifestyle' that is contradictory to our norms and values." Living with the struggle of being in the middle where someone has to address the norms dictated by tradition and with the aspirations of a modernity is what links people and makes them part of the same middle class.

Some Concluding Remarks

Due to natural resources and high world market prices for these commodities and a favorable geopolitical position, the Azerbaijani economy went through rapid growth, at least during the first decade of this century. This engendered stark changes in the country's social landscape and social stratification. The state used a portion of the revenues from the extractive sector to invest

in the modernization of the country and in the creation of new aspirational values for its citizens. The formation of a stable middle class has become a priority project for the Azerbaijani authorities. Nevertheless, despite the growing interest in the condition and predicament of the middle class, the social strata under examination are still weak and lack class unity and coherence.

Class identity is expressed through group belonging, in distinction to other groups. The impoverished professional middle class seeks distinction in spoken language, manners, education and occupation. Meanwhile, the emerging financial-economic middle groups distinguishes itself through consumption power, including holidays, overseas education, western products and westernized lifestyles. These two groups will not see themselves as belonging to the same class and will claim that their positions are distinct from one another. However, to trace clear borders between these groups of the same wider stratum is impossible as they interfere in their aspirations and achievements. In either case, the rapid modernization process brought to the country new aspirations and a desire for a 'Western European' lifestyle that placed the emerging middle class in tension with the local, 'Caucasian' values and traditions.

About the Author

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