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Russia's Real 'Middle Class' — Those Who Own Cars — Gains a Victory

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA &mdash The Russian middle class, in whose emergence so many have invested so much hope for the future of the country, is neither an economic or a political category as elsewhere in the world but rather "a purely social one" consisting of car owners, a group that displays "greater organization and even greater civic maturity" than entrepreneurs.

And that uniquely Russian "class," Kasparov.ru observer Yury Gladysh argues in a comment this week, has won its first victory with first regional governments and now the Kremlin &mdash both fearful of protests in advance of upcoming elections &mdash backing away from plans to increase licensing fees on cars.

The reluctance of regional officials to impose the new higher licensing fees and the subsequent decision of the Kremlin to call on the Duma to rescind them altogether, Gladysh says in his comment entitled "Those Who Disagree on Wheels," suggests that

the powers that be in Russia "have finally understood how dangerous it is to play with fire."

The "greed" of officials to collect even more in taxes, he says, has brought them into conflict with "a unique and purely Russian phenomenon" &mdash "a middle class" which has "nothing in common with the classical middle class in the European or American sense." Instead, it is a "purely social category," including anyone who owns a personal automobile.

This is the result, Gladysh suggests, of "the 70 'horseless' Soviet years and the unforgivable poverty that accompanied them." One consequence of that, he says, is that "for the Russian precisely the automobile (and not one's own factory or store) became the symbol of success, social achievement and stability."

And that in turn has meant that over the last two decades, "automobile owners have been manifesting greater organization and even greater civic maturity than the much-discussed entrepreneurs, especially among small and midsized businesses." Many of the owners of the latter will defer to the state and start over as employees if need be.

"But," the commentator says, he "does not know a single owner of an automobile who would silently agree to any diminution of his rights," be they to own a car from Japan with a steering wheel on the right as in Vladivostok last winter or increases in licensing fees as now.

"The daily increasing army of car owners," he says, thus has "an enormous protest potential," something that the apparent decision of the powers that be to back down suggests that at least some of its members understand. But not all of them do, Gladysh insists, and consequently, one can expect "not a few surprises" in the future.

But regardless of whether his prediction on that point is correct, Gladysh's definition of the Russian middle class as those who own automobiles carries with it some interesting possibilities. First, it suggests yet another way in which a "middle class" can emerge and acquire a sense of itself.

Second, Gladysh's idea implies that Russian drivers may soon contest Moscow's longstanding failure to build more roads and keep those in existence in good repair, a change that could transform that country in many of the same ways that the Model T Ford did in the United States.

(Many people forget that it was not the creation of the American highway system that led to a demand for cars but rather the ownership of cars that led to the demand for better roads, something that in turn led, in the United States at least, to more dispersed business locations and lower density housing.)

And third, the role of the automobile as a transforming influence in the Russian Federation could also help create precisely the sense of the freedom of the open road that American car companies have long advertised, a kind of freedom that could at least in principle &mdash if Gladysh is right &mdash lead to demands for other freedoms as well.

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