

There's More to Success Than Fancy Cars

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The new list of billionaires and their world ranking published by the Russian edition of Forbes magazine is not just data about the fortunes held by the country's richest individuals. The rating of billionaires is a very popular media product and a major news item in the country. What's more, the billionaires themselves serve as role models for many Russians.

The number of Russian billionaires (96) is one of the few indicators by which the country places second in the world, just ahead of China (95), although far behind the United States (425). When measuring the number of billionaires per capita, Russia lags behind the United States, Singapore and Hong Kong but surpasses many European countries.

The fortunes held by many of Russia's billionaires can be largely traced to the unfair privatization process in the 1990s and the chaotic way in which capitalism was formed in the country. But values also play a role.

This phenomenon may be best explained by the negative effects of the Soviet period. After more than seven decades of communism under which ordinary citizens were equally poor and the elite's wealth was largely hidden from the masses, people in the former Soviet republics are still reveling in the newfound benefits of the market economy.

There is nothing wrong with the desire to earn more money and improve one's standard of living. But in the post-Soviet years, Russian society began to perceive financial success as something other than a means for developing a business, scholarly achievements, funding inventions or even helping others. Conspicuous consumption and displaying one's wealth became the primary, and sometimes only, criterion of success.

Most Russians support a luxury tax on the rich — but only as long as they do not become rich themselves. The Economist magazine recently published the results of the fifth European Social Survey taken in 2010 that measures the attitudes toward money held by the residents of different countries. The authors of the survey questioned 30,000 people in 26 countries, including 2,400 in Russia. Thirty-eight percent of Russian respondents agreed with the statement: "Money and wealth are important for me" — more than in any other country polled. Israelis were next with 35 percent, and Ukrainians were third with 31 percent.

This trend affected everybody. Members of the establishment purchased palatial real estate, luxury cars and yachts. Members of the middle class pampered themselves with elite apartments, expensive vacations and weekly trips to swanky restaurants. State officials and siloviki began looking at promotions not as a source of honor but as a means of obtaining greater wealth. Even leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church fell victim to the temptations of wealth.

Many people who are proud of their wealth prefer not to mention how they obtained it. At the same time, young Russians aspire to Western standards of consumption while disregarding the West's legal standards for achieving and reporting such wealth.

Russia's false and primitive understanding of success explains why so many have contempt for the law and are willing to use unscrupulous methods to conduct business. This one-

dimensional understanding of success has hindered the process of inculcating respect among Russians for the law. If this understanding is left unchanged, it will impede the country's development as a whole.

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