

Quality of Life: Expectations and Achievements of Middle Class in Kazakhstan

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Abstract—The improvement of quality of life is the main visible integrated indicator of state well-being. More and more states pay attention to define and to achieve social standards of quality of life as social-economic strategy of development. These standards are determinate by state features, complex of needs and interests of individual, family and society.

It still remains in open question: “What is middle class” in contemporary Kazakhstan. Appearance of new social standards of quality of life is important indicator of its successful establishment. The middle class as agent of social, politic and economic reforms promotes to improve the quality of life of the country. But if consider a low and a middle stratum of middle class, we can see that high social expectations and real achievements are still significantly different.

The article relies on the sociological data, collected during of search of household’s standards of living in Almaty city and Almaty region, and case-study of cottage city “Jana Kuat”.

Keywords—the quality of life, the social standards of life, the middle class of Kazakhstan, the economic behavior of households.

I. INTRODUCTION

LIFE standards represent one of the most important integral people’s welfare overall index. Generally speaking, quality of life means the quality of satisfying material and cultural needs of people. As the quality of life improves, the life quality indices grow as well.

The quality and the standards of life are the key categories to assess the welfare of the developed state. Improving these indicators first of all proves government’s attention to the citizens and developing its potential. Main strategic development directions for Kazakhstan in the next decade are strengthening economy, improving welfare and the significance of the high quality of the human resources.

People’s increased confidence in their future has become one of the important outcomes of the state development in the last few years. This refers to the possibility of independent achieving the desired level and quality of life, increasing the quality of life, the possibility of choice of better work, more comfortable housing and the ability to regular travel abroad. All this changes the question of “What to live for?” to the question “How to live?”

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The transfer to the market society and further quite stable development of the Kazakhstan economy created the background for middle class establishment. However this process has not completed yet. In terms of Kazakhstan society we can speak only of the approximate outline of the middle class. Nevertheless, the establishing middle class has already formed its preferences and expectations in regard to the quality and standards of life.

II. PERCEIVABLE QUALITY OF LIFE

Such social and economic comprehension like “population life quality” not only characterizes stable development of the specific society and social classes and groups, but it is basically focused on the individual human and its social well-being. This is the comprehension “with the help of which significant circumstances of the people’s lives are characterized which determine the level of dignity and personal freedoms of any human” [1]. This comprehension includes the principal characteristics as follows:

- The “quality” of the population determined by its ability to reproduce next generations, create stable families, its level of qualifications and education;
- Material aspects of welfare, such as profits, current consumption and savings of the population, GDP per capita, consumer price index, rate of unemployment and poverty;
- Living conditions of the population, such as housing facilities, availability of healthcare and education services for the population;
- Level of information availability for the population which is telecommunication means and information structure development;
- Social security which is working conditions, social insurance and social safety, physical and property security;
- Environment quality: air and water pollution level, soil quality, biodiversity of the territory;
- Natural and climatic conditions: climate peculiarities, probability of natural disasters and emergency situations.

The perception of life quality as a whole and in some peculiar reflections mostly depends on the standard of life, which is subjectively assessed by the level of income, the availability and the set of material benefits in comparison to the living standards of other people [2]. Living standard from this point of view is a social and economic comprehension which characterizes the amount of material and spiritual

benefits used by an individual (family, household, society) in the course of satisfying its primary needs.

The concept of the "perceivable life quality" is the prevailing direction in the middle class establishing in the western society. This concept is based on the assertion that the true value of life quality is reflected in subjective sensation of individual persons formed on the basis of peculiar life standards and emotional estate [3].

Currently the comprehension of "social standards" of living quality as a desired pattern of population welfare for which various social groups are oriented becomes more and more actual along with the categories like quality and level of life. The economic estate of the country causes great influence in determining social standards. At various historical stages of the social and economic development the societies place their own requirements towards the rate and the quality of living. The combination of these requirements specifies principal components of the social standard.

III. KAZAKHSTAN STATE LIFE STANDARDS POLICY

The issues of the necessity to create the draft law on social standards and life quality guarantees are put forward on the state policy level. The development of the draft law will prevent social marginalization of the population and provide consequent life standard improvement [4]. Main purposes of such law will be elaborating such social standards of the Kazakhstan citizens' living standards which would stimulate them to decent work and economic activity and would give them the feeling of safety and security.

The term Social Standard announced at the highest state level poses the question as to its particular contents within the Kazakhstan reality. What conditions are to be created to provide decent living standards and free development for the people? The scientists are to find the answer to this question and the result of their research is to be reflected in the law. Currently social standard of the life quality have not been established legally.

With the population living standard improvement and determining the comprehension of "Social Life Standard" the issue of expanding the middle class in Kazakhstan becomes quite actual. Social standardization of the life quality is the main background of forming the "massive" middle class which acts as the most vivid and efficient social progress agent.

The state government asserts the necessity of forming the middle class. In this case the lifestyle of the middle class becomes the guide for the major of Kazakhstan citizens. The fact of middle class forming should be considered as an important criterion of reform efficiency which proves the strength of the system of economic, social and political institutions [5].

IV. KAZAKHSTAN MIDDLE CLASS

General middle class characteristic traits are two peculiarities which most precisely reflect mental and behavioristic essence of the middle class representatives the

first being that the middle class is not involved in manual or physical work and the second is that the members of the middle class are not the owners of any large industries.

One of the first theoretic justifications of the middle class role and position in the social stratification hierarchy was given by M. Weber. He proved the presence of the multiple social main line taking the middle position between the two opposing social poles and acting as the society stability factor between the "positively privileged class" of owners and "negatively privileged class" of lumpen proles. When researching the middle class Weber prefers to support that part of it which derives material revenues from its skills and qualifications. According to Weber this stratum of the middle class will increase most intensively [6].

The issue of middle class recognition criteria remain open. If we pay attention to the criteria used to determine the Russian middle class, we can note Beliayeva L.A. She supposes that the rate of welfare determining the living standard along with the possibility to use high technology household appliances and services; level of culture and education which allows carrying out highly qualified work should be used as the parameters to distinguish the middle class. [7].

The criteria to distinguish middle class are quantitative indicators like the level of revenue and revenue distribution, as well as qualitative parameters like the nature and the contents of work, way of life, stabilization role of the middle class in the dynamics of any state. According to the up-to-date sociologic concepts social groups can be referred to middle class by four main criteria which are the level of income, and possessing property; level of education; highly qualified work and self identification. Subjective perception of the individual of its position also plays a great role. Kazakhstani middle class has not established yet since the criteria of the middle class recognition and its limits have not been determined yet. Statistics data as to the living standards and peoples' welfare are not always objective and complete. Sociologic data is also not sufficient.

According to the Kazakhstan political expert G. Matayev, the middle class owes its origin to the developed society infrastructure based on the developed economy and social relations which correspond it which means that the middle class is the result of progressive and well balanced society development. At first sight it may seem that the main criterion of belonging to the middle class is the level of revenue. But the deeper analysis shows that in the countries with transit economy such as Kazakhstan the rate of revenue as the middle class criterion should be added with such characteristics as the structure and the source of revenue, as well as it happens in the developed countries [8].

The main point of the middle class identity should be recognized as the set of comprehensions as to the social reality and their place in it which characterizes the representatives of this group. These comprehensions are to regulate their life activities and to some extent differ of those of the representatives of other social classes [9]. Emerging of new

social life quality standards is the important indicator of successful middle class establishment.

Thus, the social standards become actual subject for research. In order to study them we have chosen the city of Almaty as the research subject since it is the only megapolis of the country where the middle class is widely represented. This is one of the most expensive cities of the country and the citizens of Almaty have higher rate of revenues as a whole. Thus, average monthly salary here in the first half of 2012 made 134 thousand tenge, while throughout Kazakhstan it was 127 thousand tenge [10]. Currently compact location of the middle class in the Almaty suburbs can be observed which reflects the world trend of the cities' suburban areas development. New living standards of the middle class include prospects for life quality improvement, ecologically friendly and social living environment, security, etcetera. Achieving these standards by the families is more probable in case of locating in the new cottage estates or modern multi-storey buildings with "isolated" territories.

One of the reasons to choose the way of life of the Almaty suburb residents as the research subject is based on the fact that the modern suburb is the perfect place for self-protection and keeping one's principal life values and ideals. The suburb is "pluralistic", interchangeable while being tolerant and psychologically comfortable. Here individual and family autonomy prevail along with interpersonal communication the circle of which is limited with neighboring interests and the advertised climate of friendly support and interest [11].

The subject of our research have been the understanding of the middle class regarding social and economic life standards to which it strives as well as possible strategies to achieve them. Particularly special attention has been paid to the strategy of purchasing or building a house in the suburban areas which possess the set of the most favorable conditions for living. For this purpose the case study has been carried out in the Jana Kuat Cottage Estate the construction of which has commenced and is being developed for the last few years. Housing in it does not belong to the elite class and the prices are available for the general public. Questionnaire survey of its residents carried out by us in 2011-2012 allows us to study the perceptions of the middle class on the new social and economic standards of living and the strategies to achieve it through relocating the forming middle class into the suburban area. Its identification within the survey has been accomplished by objective and subjective criteria like the rate of revenue, possessing real estate, education and self identification.

Totally forty households have been polled. 58% of the pollees suppose that the amount of the monthly revenue of a middle class representative for the family of four people should make 150-300 thousand tenge. 90% of the pollees noted that they have this rate of income. Middle class is characterized by quite high rate of social well-being and revenues, higher education, certain lifestyle and striving to increase the life standard, real estate and car (though not the most expensive one) possession, possession of household appliances, their possible purchase in credit. Respondents

noted the advantages of living in the cottage estate in comparison to their previous city life. The reasons they pointed as to why they purchased cottages were "the possibility to live in the suburb, nearer to the nature" and "it is prestigious to live in the private house". The survey results confirmed that purchasing house in the suburb allows families realize new middle class standards. In our point of view, developing city territories including suburbs in terms of providing social standards of the middle class living will allow create institutional conditions to expand it. Improving life standards of this socially minded part of population will in a specific sense become the driver of the economy and society development.

The data resulted in the course of sociologic research "Livelihoods Strategies of Private Households in Central Asia: A Rural-Urban Comparison in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan" have shown quantitative component of the life standards of the Almaty and suburban area households.

Within the frame of this project the middle class representatives determined the main problems associated with living in the city of Almaty. Middle class representatives acted as the research objects. The analysis of the obtained answers has shown that the main problem for the middle class are economic issues including inflation, high prices for food products and low salaries take major place in the structure of economic problems thus making 40.8%. Approximately one third of the pollees noted high prices for housing. They were 21.4% of all respondents. Thus we can conclude that main issues which middle class is concerned about are of economic nature.

Availability of the households and other kinds of movable and immovable property under study which are necessary for comfortable life has shown that only 87.2% of the respondents possess their own housing (including the housing owned on hire purchase terms). Only 49.3% possess their own land. This type of real estate is important only for rural citizens which were only 50 among other respondents.

TABLE I
THE PROPERTY OF HOUSEHOLD

	Percentage
House/apartment	87,2
Land	49,3
Car/motor cycle	67,3
Refrigerator	93,3
Washing machine	82,0
Sound system	48,7
Computer	66,7
LCD / plasma TV	64,7
Complete renovation	42,7
Datcha	6,7
Livestock	8,0
Agricultural machinery	3,3

Actually all respondents have refrigerators and washing machines (93.3% and 82% respectively). Nearly half of the respondents have computers, sound systems and LCD/Plasma TV sets at home. This data shows that home appliances are not a piece of luxury for the middle class any more.

Thus, social living standards obviously influence the formation of the middle class in Kazakhstan. However the

existing situation in Kazakhstan with consumer loans, mortgages and other kinds of lending is worth noting. Advertising widely promoted and well realized by the commercial banks creates an illusion of successful and independent middle class. Middle class representatives currently have the possibility to purchase any appliances, cars or houses on credit. But this no way makes them financially independent. Not having sufficient rate of profits to purchase durable goods people lie to themselves that they can afford them. In other words in this society the expectations and actual achievements of the middle class may not coincide.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, in terms of realities of the Kazakhstan society we can speak of creating the social living quality standard system where social standards represent the established level of consuming of some or other benefits recognized by the population or the group as acceptable for themselves.

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