

SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: ORIGINS, EVALUATION, BARRIERS

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Abstract: The objective of the paper is to evaluate the level of social stratification as the key issue of the contemporary Russian society. Methodological basis of the research are both general scientific cognition methods and particular methods for evaluation of social inequality (index numbers, expert evaluation, graphic method). The paper discusses questions associated with causes generating social inequality. Regional social inequality is evaluated. The research has shown that at present, the society faces social polarization of the population conditioned by the cumulative nature of social processes. The research findings can be used by the state authorities for substantiating social policy, in elaborating social and economic development programs and strategies.

Keywords: social inequality, income of the population, subsistence minimum, income difference, wages.

1 Introduction

One of the clearest issues of the contemporary Russian society is the extreme difference in incomes of its citizens, which promotes severe social stratification. For the people, inequality provokes limited access to resources of both spiritual and material consumption. It should be noted that the issue of social inequality emerged simultaneously with formation of the human society. However, in the last two decades, Russia has seen especially acute exacerbation of differences of the population according to their income level. One can watch the gap between the super rich and the extremely poor ones, the so-called underclass, grow bigger and deeper. What is more, the issue is aggravated by growing arrearage of wages, with size of the wages (for the significant majority) and social transfers (social benefits, scholarships, pensions) ranging at the lowest level to make matters worse.

The epoch of market transformations has led to intensive social and economic stratification of Russia's population. There are data about the quintile ratio of income difference (R/P) growing from 2,5-3 times at the end of 1980s to 7-9 times in 2001 (Zaslavskaya, 2001), and the decile ratio hitting the 15,6 times score in 2019 (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. a.). It is safe to assume polarization taking place in the country, i.e., social and economic mobility tending to the poles of social structure (Balabanov & Balabanova, 2003).

In conditions of social and economic life getting continuously more complicated, and given accelerated economy growth rates, the correct and timely consideration of relationships between social and economic aspects becomes the principal advantage; by contrast, underestimating them leads to quite substantive losses (Shabanova, 2007). Given this, overcoming social inequality is one of the key tasks the system of ensuring sustainable and secure development of the state has to deal with.

In Russia, the issue of social inequality is urgent due to its objectively high level of poverty and difference of the population according to incomes and property. It is also acute due to pronounced egalitarian attitudes rooted in the mass consciousness plus doubtful legitimacy of a significant part of capitals and their holders. Social and economic inequality gets perceived as a less urgent issue, first of all, as soon as the level of nominal income and consumption grows for the basic stratum

of the population. Currently, social inequality remains the most tangible and persistent source of social injustice for Russians.

2 Literature Review

The issue of social inequality finds extensive theoretical elaboration within studies of both foreign and Russian economists and sociologists.

The earliest reflections over stratification of people into the rich and the poor were mentioned back in the works of the famous Ancient Greek philosophers Plato (2005) and Aristotle (2019). In his dialogue "The Republic", Plato argued that the correct state can be substantiated scientifically instead of looking for it by touch, fearing, believing, and improvising. In the latter society, people are haunted by fear and lack of confidence. Aristotle provided some realistic contemplation about stability of the state (Popper, 1992).

In the history of social thought, no-one has argued about the sources of social development and substantiated class structure of the society as definitely as K. Marx (Karl Marx and the modern philosophy, 1999). In Marxist tradition, the criteria for stratification are the relations to property, including its availability, nature, object, and amount. The classic of the world sociological theory, M. Weber (1990) has played the decisive part in establishing the modern ideas about the essence, forms, and functions of social inequality. In Weberian tradition, several grounds for social stratification are singled out – economic situation (property, income, education, skills), status (prestige of the position occupied within the particular cultural tradition), features of culture (worldview, lifestyle) that allowed identifying life chances for representatives of various classes.

In the Modern Age, social functions of the state were also studied by philosophers J. Locke (1998), G. Hegel (1978), and P. J. Proudhon (1908).

Analysis of the recurrent nature of social processes is presented in structuration theory of A. Giddens (1979) considering the effect of causal cycles.

At present, the cumulative nature of social processes is paid much attention in the concept of social exclusion. Unlike the established in previous decades tradition of studying poverty as a static phenomenon, the new concept focuses itself on dynamic aspects of inequality (Abrahamson, 2001; Paugam, 1996; Martin, 1996).

In the last decade, Russian researchers have started using the notion of social exclusion, too. With regard to this, the most well-known are works of F. M. Borodkin (2000). Russian literature on the relevant problems has also taken up discussing poverty issues in terms of the cumulative nature of social processes (Boikov, 2001).

Among the contemporary foreign researchers of the problem range of social inequality, redistribution, and welfare state, one can name A. Daguerra (2011), P. Copeland, M. Daly (2014), I. Koch (Koch et al., 2021), T. F. Liao, F. De Maio (2021), and M. Zajko (2021).

Works of E. Balatskiy (2010), T. N. Zaslavskaya (2004), N. M. Rimashevskaya, L. A. Migranova (2016) and some others have won renown among the leading contemporary Russian scientists exploring various aspects of the said problem in the format of social stratification and income distribution inequality.

In recent time, there has been a broad and extensive discussion of innovations in the dimension of middle class formation, and particularities and criteria for identifying middle class have been studied in detail. With regard to this, one can note works of E. M. Avraamova (2008), E. Sh. Gontmakher (Gontmakher et al., 2008), T. M. Maleva (2007), et al.

3 Research Methodological Framework

The objective of this research is to provide integrated evaluation of social inequality and to analyze barriers preventing its mitigation. So, this research implies completing the following tasks:

1. Detailing the essence of social inequality and developing the system of criteria required for evaluating the extent of social inequality in an integrated way;
2. Evaluating the extent of social stratification in individual subjects of the RF in terms of their development trends, using the index method and weight coefficients;
3. Analyzing the level of population's income difference as the key barrier preventing mitigation of social inequality.

The study of changes occurring in the area of social inequality in the contemporary Russian society relies on using a wide range of general scientific and special methods: structural and functional, institutional, comparative analysis, scientific generalization, the methods of index numbers and graphic construction. The Russian specific circumstances of actual reality in relation to social inequality have been analyzed based on the results of studies of T. Yu. Bogomolova, V. S. Tapilina (2001), I. L. Lyubimov (2016), A. Yu. Shevyakov (2008), and many other authors. Methods of comparison and index numbers, systemic and structural analysis are used as the methodological framework. In particular, the comparison and index methods have enabled the authors to provide an integrated evaluation and analyze social inequality change trends in regional dimension. As for the systemic and structural analysis, it has contributed to identifying their unity and diversity. This research into social inequality change trends in the contemporary Russian society relies on works of the leading Russian economists, sociologists, analytical and theoretical concepts of the modern Russian researchers which grant a more profound understanding of social inequality change pattern in the contemporary Russian society.

4 Results and Discussion

Relying on income differences of the population, social inequality involves differences between people and between social groups in their provision with material goods and in opportunities to meet their needs.

Let it be noted that A. Yu. Shevyakov (2008) subdivides social inequality into the optimum one – characterized by income distribution among the population strata extensively participating in economic processes – and the excessive one. The latter is associated with low incomes of those strata of the population who have no significant effect on macro-economic processes.

Social inequality is difference of the population according to various attributes which determine the level of meeting an individual's material and spiritual needs. This kind of inequality will persist in any society which produces more than consumes at any one time. It cannot disappear, may it grow or go down (Shevyakov, 2008). As for a perfect social order, this cannot exist: neither gradual evolution, nor, least of all, radical social changes – coups and revolutions – are able to bring one about. For evaluating social inequality, it is expedient to determine groups of criterial constituents as follows (Table 1).

Table 1 Characteristics of criterial constituents of social inequality

Criterial constituent group	Characteristics of criterial constituents
Economic investment inequality	For calculating the EII index, indicators are used that characterize the country's level of economic development (GDP, amount of investment into inequality (EII), fixed capital, budget deficit, inventors' initiative) and the development level of its social infrastructure
Social demographic inequality (SDGI)	For calculating the SDGI index, reproduction of the population (both natural growth and migration inflow, infant mortality) and life expectancy are considered

Criterial constituent group	Characteristics of criterial constituents
Social stratification inequality (SSI)	For calculating the SSI index of the population, scientists use population income indicators (per capita income, wage size, resources of households), the population stratification ones (Gini coefficient, R/P 10% ratio, poverty level, the proportion of subsistence minimum to per capita income), as well as households' estimates of their financial standing, availability of savings in cash, provision with material goods, the value of essential spending, household debt, and the population's professional level
Social depression inequality (SDI)	For calculating the SDI index, attention has to be focused on deviant forms of human behavior mostly
Housing inequality	Integral estimation of housing inequality is conducted with housing per capita, its level of provision of amenities, disrepair, dilapidation, and some other parameters

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Let social inequality be evaluated with the help of criterial constituents, using the example of subjects of Volga Federal District (VFD) (Table 2). The indicators were united using the index method and weight coefficients identified by the expert evaluation method, with the official statistic data analyzed.

Table 2 Evaluation of social and economic inequality of VFD subjects for 2017 (in fractions)

Subject	Index name					
	Economic investment inequality	Social demographic inequality	Social stratification inequality	Social depression inequality	Housing inequality	Social inequality
Republic of Bashkortostan	0,597	0,498	0,497	0,531	0,742	0,573
Republic of Mari El	0,319	0,362	0,376	0,596	0,522	0,435
Republic of Mordovia	0,153	0,482	0,411	0,607	0,889	0,509
Republic of Tatarstan	0,876	0,889	0,698	0,789	0,779	0,806
Udmurt Republic	0,257	0,485	0,490	0,366	0,605	0,441
Chuvash Republic	0,290	0,659	0,383	0,613	0,715	0,532
Perm Territory	0,539	0,436	0,453	0,054	0,522	0,401
Kirov Region	0,247	0,485	0,480	0,545	0,151	0,382
Nizhny Novgorod Region	0,511	0,335	0,644	0,554	0,734	0,556
Orenburg Region	0,484	0,183	0,510	0,473	0,784	0,487
Penza Region	0,387	0,583	0,455	0,490	0,582	0,499
Samara Region	0,562	0,549	0,496	0,581	0,749	0,587
Saratov Region	0,303	0,533	0,505	0,590	0,517	0,490
Ulyanovsk Region	0,362	0,377	0,481	0,391	0,746	0,471

Source: Compiled by the authors according to the data of the Federal State Statistics Service at <http://www.gks.ru/> (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. a.).

It can be noted from Table 2 that the highest economic investment inequality (EII) index is objectively recorded in Tatarstan which is a certain leader in VFD according to all the fundamental economic indicators and investment activity. Bashkiria, Perm Territory, Nizhny Novgorod, and Samara Regions stand out, too. By contrast, Mordovia, Udmurtia, Chuvashia, and Kirov Region score lowest on economic and investment development. In general, most subjects of VFD are characterized by reduction of budget income and increase of budget deficit. Regional inequality is boosted by economic growth, too.

In terms of social demographic inequality (SDGI), the best situation is in Tatarstan: they have higher natural (1,7%) and migration (1,9%) growth of the population and the longest life expectancy in the said district (73,12). In Mordovia, Nizhny Novgorod and Penza Regions, the natural population loss is high (-4,7%); in Orenburg Region, migration outflow is more intensive (-4,1), landing it with the worst social demographic situation in the district. Infant mortality is high throughout the district. Summing it up, it is Tatarstan that has the most favorable demographic situation.

It becomes clear that according to social stratification inequality, it is Tatarstan, Nizhny Novgorod and Samara Regions, Perm Territory, and Bashkiria that have the highest population's income indicators. Lower income and higher poverty levels, respectively, are registered in Mordovia (18,6%), Mari El (22,7%), Chuvashia (19,2%), and Saratov Region (17,4%). It should also be noted that there is a consistent trend of higher society stratification levels in economically developed regions. That is, the higher its level of social and economic development is, the higher the region's level of society stratification according to income is. For example, R/P 10% ratio (correlating incomes of the richest and the poorest) ranges from 19 in Samara Region to 11 in the Republics of Mari El and Chuvashia.

Analysis of social depression inequality has shown that higher levels of alcohol abuse are observed in Perm Territory, Penza and Ulyanovsk Regions, while mostly Muslim republics, Tatarstan and Bashkiria, and the rich Nizhny Novgorod and Samara Regions feature lower alcoholism levels. Drug abuse is more widespread in mostly Russian language speaking and rich regions (Nizhny Novgorod and Samara Regions, Perm Territory). So far, the high crime level in Perm Territory, Udmurtia, Kirov and Samara Region has been difficult to correlate with the economic development level, incomes or confession composition. As a result, the social depression inequality index is higher, which means, the situation is relatively better in Tatarstan, Chuvashia, and Mordovia. It is Perm Territory that proved to be the most troubled one.

Integral evaluation of regions' housing inequality has shown that Mordovia has the highest level of housing. Kirov Region is distinguished by a low level of housing per capita, as well as by its worst level of provision of amenities, a high disrepair and dilapidation of housing.

Income differences of the population act as the principal barrier to mitigation of social inequality. Let three measures of inequality that are used for analyzing the income proportion be considered:

- Decile difference ratio (R/P 10% ratio);
- Income concentration index (Gini coefficient);
- Distribution of income amounts according to 20% income groups.

Beginning from 2000-2008, the decile ratio increases in the contemporary Russia on a regular basis: in 2000 it was 13,9 times, while in 2008 – 16,8 times. Among other things, it has to be noted that this indicator features a downward trend starting with 2010-2018, which is confirmed by the data of Table 3.

Table 3 Differences in wages of workers in the Russian Federation over time

Indicator	Year								
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Gini coefficient	0,421	0,417	0,42	0,419	0,416	0,413	0,412	0,412	0,41
Decile ratio, times	16,6	16,2	16,4	16,3	16	15,7	15,6	15,5	15,3

Source: Compiled by the authors according to the data of the Federal State Statistics Service at <http://www.gks.ru/> (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. a.).

Analysis of the data of Table 3 shows that in Russia, the behavior of Gini coefficient features a downward trend. According to the data of FSSS (Rosstat), Russia's lowest value of this coefficient was registered in 2018 making 0,41%. If the figure is compared to that of 2010, it had a 0,011% decrease. It should be noted that although the indicator shows a downward trend, it remains higher than the threshold value (the threshold value is 0,3%). In 2018, R/P 10% ratio went 1.3 times down as compared to 2010 and made 15,3 times. In spite of the decrease, this figure is higher than the threshold value, too, the latter being set at the 8 times mark. Such a situation confirms that in the Russian Federation, the issue of social inequality in income distribution has become aggravated during the crisis years. In its

turn, this is indicative of the excessive social inequality being currently an active process in the society.

The institution of money income redistribution is actually down, social tension is on the rise, and meanwhile, almost half of all the country's money income is accumulated in hands of the top income 20% population group. Under such conditions, groups of the population who have the lowest and insignificant incomes get into the "poverty trap", and they have no chance to improve their welfare while caught in it.

It seems expedient to analyze the behavior and proportion of the minimum and average wages in the RF (Table 4).

Table 4 Proportion of the minimum and average wages in the RF over time

Indicator	Year						
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Minimum statutory wage, thousand rubles	4611	5205	5554	5965	7500	7800	11168
Average wage, thousand rubles	26629	29792	32495	34030	36709	39144	43381
Proportion of the minimum and average wages, %	0,17	0,17	0,17	0,17	0,20	0,19	0,25

Source: Compiled by the authors according to the data of the Federal State Statistics Service at <http://www.gks.ru/> (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. a.).

As it can be seen from Table 4, for the period of 2012-2018, the minimum value was not achieved, and the threshold value for the indicator "Proportion of the minimum and average wages" equals 0,33 times (i.e., the ratio is 1:3).

Let the structure of the RF population's money income be considered over time, broken down according to revenue sources (Table 5).

Table 5 Structure of the RF population's money income according to revenue sources, % over time

Indicator	Year					
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Money income, total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Wages, including hidden payments for labor	64	64	65	65	66	66
Social payments, pensions included	19	18	18	18	19	19
Proceeds from property	6	7	6	7	5	5
Earning from enterprise	9	9	9	8	9	8
Other income	2	2	2	2	2	2

Source: Compiled by the authors according to the data of the Federal State Statistics Service at <http://www.gks.ru/> (Official website of the Federal State Statistics Service, n. a.).

It is evident from Table 5 that in 2018, in the structure of money income of the population, there was observed a higher proportion of wage against the background of reduced weight of other components, namely, earning from enterprise and proceeds from property. The proportion of earning from enterprise (mainly from individual entrepreneurship) had a 1% decrease over 2013-2018. The proportion of proceeds from property

(dividends, interests on deposits, payments on securities) is going down, too. In 2018, this category accounted for 5% of the total income of the population, which is the minimum value as compared to 2013. Meanwhile, the share of social payments remains at a high level in the structure of population's money income.

Due to transition to new, more autonomous conditions of economic activity, social inequality of the population has gained an even more urgent nature. The current excessive inequality means that a part of resources serving the high incomes can be handed over to the low-income ones – in such a way, that the productivity increment (the scale at which various socially important human functions are performed) of the low-income ones will exceed the reduction in productivity of those from whom the resources are withdrawn.

As for the present time, Russia comes up to the new development stage of its social structure that can be identified as institutionalization of inequality or, in P. Sztompka's definitions (2010), emergence of a solid hierarchy of privileges and deprivations in terms of access to desirable goods and values. Relying on a number of sources (Voronkova, 2007; Coudouel et al., 2002; Krasilova, 2007) and findings of this research, one can rightfully argue that social inequality is a profoundly social and economic issue, and not always can it be assessed by direct quantitative measurement. So, in her studies, the well-known social scientist N. M. Rimashevskaya (2016) shows that the division of income of Russia's citizens has led to the actual break of the society, due to which there has been a full-scale wreck splitting the top strata and the principal mass of citizens. This huge gap was formed at the place normally occupied by the middle strata in the social structure (Savina, 2007). N. M. Rimashevskaya (2016) gives grounds for "two Russias" seeming to have formed. The first one incorporates big and biggest proprietors (top business tycoons) only, while the "other Russia" is represented by the mass of population (majority of the public) – with about a half among them lagging below the poverty line. It is not only in the material welfare level that the "two Russias" differ: they have different preferences and consumer demand, and they come to different consumer markets which feature not only different sets of goods and services, but so much as different prices and currency of payment. They have their own social standards and stereotypes of public behavior characteristic for them. However, the most important is that they have essentially different systems of values and priorities. Certainly, such a situation generates social tension among the public, a sense of social injustice, reduced potential of the human capital; it also poses a threat for social welfare through the decline of economic growth (Fedorova, 2017).

5 Conclusion

Summing up the problem under study, one can make a number of conclusions.

Social inequality is a versatile concept. As a social and economic phenomenon, its origin has causes rooted in each sphere of social life. So, it is determined by such notions as wealth and income, because it is using these indicators that quantitative and qualitative estimates of the state of affairs for this question can be given and the behavior of their changes can be estimated. In the most general terms, the process of the rich accumulating their advantages can be described as a large set of examples of the cumulative nature of social inequality. Suggestions can also be made about factors to promote and prevent the Matthew effect.

Polarization of Russia's population according to income has gained a consistent and threatening nature. It generates fragmentation of the previously united social structure into numerous autonomous strata and groups that are isolated from each other. It results in undermining the public solidarity and, ultimately, in "crowding out" individual categories of the population both from public production and social life. Social inequality curbs the human potential growth and reduces the upgrade level of institutions. Given the conditions formed, it is distribution of national income that is the pivotal question in

developing the model of social policy. Meanwhile, the distribution mechanisms have to determine both the level and quality of life of the population, to fill social relations with actual content, and to redefine the concept of "social justice" more specifically.

Therefore, social inequality is one of the important issues demanding attention and mitigation measures.

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