THE PHENOMENON OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN CENTRAL ASIA: THEORETICAL APPROACHES, SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS, AND SCHOLARLY RESEARCH BY UZBEK RESEARCHERS

Ataullayev Fazliddin Fahriddin o'g'li
Associate Professor, Department of English, Uzbekistan National Pedagogical University named after Nizami
E-mail: Fazliddin-0292@mail.ru

Abstract. This article examines the theoretical and methodological foundations of the middle-class phenomenon in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, its socio-economic characteristics, and the processes underlying its formation. It systematizes sociological, economic, and security-based approaches to defining the middle class. A comparative analysis of the middle class in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is presented, focusing on its quantitative indicators, economic stability, and social stratification processes. Particular attention is paid to the scholarly perspectives of Uzbek researchers on the middle class, including the influence of income, property ownership, education, professional activity, entrepreneurship, and digital technologies on its formation. The findings highlight the need for a multidimensional approach to defining the middle class and substantiate its significance for social stability and the development of civil society.

Keywords: middle class, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, civil society, social stratification, socio-economic stability, income, property ownership, entrepreneurship, education, digital technologies.

Аннотация. В данной статье анализируются теоретико-методологические основы феномена среднего класса в Центральной Азии, в особенности в Узбекистане, его социально-экономические характеристики и процессы формирования. Систематизированы социологические, экономические и основанные на социальной защищённости подходы к определению среднего класса. На примере Казахстана и Узбекистана проведён сравнительный анализ количественных показателей среднего класса, его экономической устойчивости и процессов социальной стратификации. Особое внимание уделено научным взглядам узбекских исследователей на средний класс, включая влияние доходов, собственности, образования, профессиональной деятельности, предпринимательства и цифровых технологий на его формирование. По результатам исследования обоснована

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.24240560

необходимость многокритериального подхода к определению среднего класса, а также раскрыто его значение для общественной стабильности и развития гражданского общества.

Ключевые слова: средний класс, Центральная Азия, Узбекистан, гражданское общество, социальная стратификация, социально-экономическая стабильность, доходы, собственность, предпринимательство, образование, цифровые технологии.

Аннотация. Ушбу мақолада Марказий Осиёда, хусусан, Ўзбекистонда ўрта синф феноменининг назарий-методологик асослари, ижтимоий-иқтисодий хусусиятлари ва шаклланиш жараёнлари таҳлил қилинган. Ўрта синфни аниқлашга доир социологик, иқтисодий ва ижтимоий хавфсизликка асосланган ёндашувлар тизимлаштирилган. Шунингдек, Қозоғистон ва Ўзбекистон мисолида ўрта синфнинг миқдорий кўрсаткичлари, иқтисодий барқарорлиги ва ижтимоий табақаланиш жараёнлари қиёсий ўрганилган. Мақолада ўзбек тадқиқотчиларининг ўрта синфга оид илмий қарашлари, жумладан, даромад, мулк, таълим, касбий фаолият, тадбиркорлик ҳамда рақамли технологияларнинг ўрта синф шаклланишига таъсири ёритилган. Тадқиқот натижасида ўрта синфни аниқлашда кўп мезонли ёндашув зарурлиги, унинг жамият барқарорлиги ва фуқаролик жамияти ривожланишидаги аҳамияти асосланган.

Калит сўзлар: ўрта синф, Марказий Осиё, Ўзбекистон, фуқаролик жамияти, ижтимоий табақаланиш, ижтимоий-иқтисодий барқарорлик, даромад, мулкчилик, тадбиркорлик, таълим, рақамли технологиялар

Introduction. The proposition that a sizeable intermediate stratum underpins political and social stability has a long intellectual pedigree, and it has acquired renewed salience in post-Soviet Central Asia. Lipset's classic modernization thesis associated democratic stability with economic development and a large middle class [1], and policymakers in the region frequently invoke comparable reasoning when they link economic reform to the cultivation of a stable, property-owning and consuming population. Nevertheless, the notion of the “middle class” remains conceptually contested, and its operationalization varies considerably across disciplines, institutions and national contexts. This paper accordingly pursues three interrelated aims: to systematize the principal theoretical approaches to the concept; to synthesize the available evidence on the socio-economic profile of the middle

class in Central Asia, with particular reference to Uzbekistan; and to appraise the ways in which Uzbek scholars have conceptualized and measured the phenomenon.

Theoretical approaches. The relevant literature may be grouped into four broad traditions. The sociological tradition, rooted in Weber's work, conceives of classes in terms of shared life chances in the market, which are determined by the possession of property and of marketable skills; this framework accommodates both the property-owning petty bourgeoisie and the educated professional stratum [2]. The development-economics tradition, by contrast, relies on absolute thresholds of income or consumption. Banerjee and Duflo, examining households that spend approximately US$2–4 and US$6–10 per person per day, found that the middle class is distinguished less by entrepreneurial inclination than by stable employment, lower fertility and heavier investment in health and education [3]. Kharas, adopting a global perspective, defined the middle class as those spending US$10–100 per day in purchasing-power-parity terms [4].

A fourth, security-based approach shifts attention from the level of welfare to its durability. López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez define the middle class as households with a low probability of lapsing into poverty, thereby distinguishing them from a "vulnerable" group that has escaped poverty yet remains exposed to adverse shocks [5]. This distinction is analytically consequential: because the vulnerable population often constitutes a plurality in middle-income countries, even modest changes in the chosen threshold may reclassify very large numbers of people. Table 1 summarizes the approaches and their operative criteria.

Approach	Operative criterion	Source
Political modernization	Large middle class as precondition of democracy	Lipset [1]
Sociological	Market position, property, marketable skills	Weber [2]
Consumption threshold	2–4 and 6–10 USD per person per day	Banerjee, Duflo [3]
Global threshold	10–100 USD per day (PPP)	Kharas [4]
Security-based	Low probability of falling into poverty	López-Calva, Ortiz-Juarez [5]
Multi-criteria (local)	Income, property, education, occupation	Appazov et al. [6]; Karimova [9]

Table 1. Approaches to defining the middle class

Socio-economic characteristics in Central Asia. Evidence from the region suggests that the middle class is both modest in size and fragile. In Kazakhstan, the most prosperous economy in Central Asia, a recent study that combines income with occupational status, homeownership, savings, education and cultural capital estimates the middle class at merely 10–15% of the population and characterizes it as unstable [6]. The authors contend that income alone is an inadequate criterion,

and their findings suggest that stringent, multidimensional definitions tend to yield conservative estimates.

Uzbekistan presents the most striking recent trajectory. According to the World Bank's 2026 poverty and equity assessment, the poverty rate declined from 17% in 2021 to 5.8% in 2025, while the middle-class share rose from 37% to more than 72% of the population; over the same period, the vulnerable share fell from 45.7% to 22.1% [7]. Panel-survey evidence for 2019–2024 indicates that 44% of the population moved into a higher economic category, whereas only 11% experienced downward mobility, and that the upper tier of the middle class in Tashkent more than tripled, although progress was also recorded in other regions and in rural areas [7]. Figure 1 depicts the redistribution of the population across these categories. Notably, the increase of roughly 35 percentage points in the middle-class share corresponds almost exactly to the combined decline of the poor (11.2 points) and vulnerable (23.6 points) shares, which is consistent with an expansion driven chiefly by upward mobility from below.

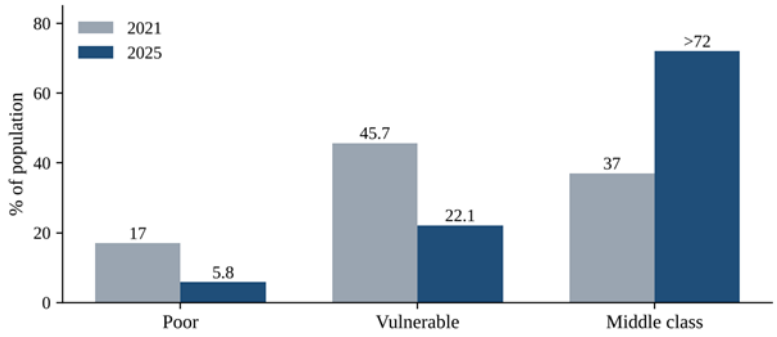


Fig. 1. Poor, vulnerable and middle-class shares of Uzbekistan's population, 2021 and 2025 (%). Source: compiled by the author from [7]

Two methodological caveats deserve emphasis. First, headline shares are acutely sensitive to the thresholds adopted, so that cross-study comparisons are hazardous unless definitions are harmonized. Second, aggregate gains may mask spatial heterogeneity: the concentration of the upper middle class in Tashkent implies that the security and quality of middle-class status differ appreciably between the capital and the regions.

Scholarly research by uzbek researchers. Indigenous scholarship on the middle class is comparatively recent and has developed along economic, sociological and technological lines. The Center for Economic Research estimated that between 28% and 30% of Uzbekistan's population could be classified as middle class and that a further 45–48% constituted a “reserve” of the middle class, which might, depending on circumstances, either join it or fall into the low-income category; the Center advocated doubling the middle-class share by 2030 [8].

Contemporaneous commentary underscored the definitional vacuum: an official minimum consumption basket and subsistence minimum had not been established, and in an informal online poll of 1,553 respondents 67% described themselves as middle class, a result that largely reflects self-defined status [8]. Expert projections cited in the same commentary anticipated that the middle class would comprise 60% of the population by 2030 and ascribed to it a stabilizing role, as a stratum that generates demand for change while rejecting political violence [8]. The discrepancy between the domestic estimate of 28–30% and the World Bank's figure of over 72% [7] probably reflects divergent definitions and reference periods as well as genuine change.

More recent contributions broaden the conceptual repertoire. Karimova contends that, in the Uzbek context, income alone is an insufficient criterion and must be complemented by family financial stability, property ownership, higher or specialized secondary education and entrepreneurial activity; she further argues that artificial intelligence and the expansion of the IT sector are reshaping middle-class occupations, simultaneously endangering routine office, banking and accounting roles and opening new pathways into the middle class, albeit with benefits concentrated in Tashkent and other large cities [9]. From a sociological perspective, Kalonov conceptualizes stratification (tabaqa) in Central Asia in terms of shared origin, occupation and endogamy, and stresses the inherited obligations that group membership entails; although his study does not address the middle class directly, it implies that status in the region cannot be reduced to income and is mediated by kinship and tradition [10].

Taken together, the Uzbek studies reviewed here converge on a multidimensional understanding of the middle class, yet they also reveal two limitations: a reliance on international or secondary data for measurement, and the absence of an officially adopted definition.

Conclusion. Three conclusions emerge from this review. First, the middle class in Central Asia is expanding unevenly, and Uzbekistan's recent gains, although substantial, are sensitive to definitional choices. Second, Uzbek scholarship has progressively broadened its focus from income and property to education, occupation and digital competencies, but systematic household-level research by national authors remains limited among the sources examined. Third, policy would benefit from an officially adopted and transparent definition, from targeted support for the still-vulnerable population, and from measures that distribute high-quality

employment beyond the capital. Future research should exploit panel data to examine the durability of middle-class status and its social and political correlates.

References:

1. Lipset S.M. Some social requisites of democracy: economic development and political legitimacy // American Political Science Review. 1959. Vol. 53, No. 1. P. 69–105.

2. Weber M. Economy and Society. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

3. Banerjee A.V., Duflo E. What is middle class about the middle classes around the world? // Journal of Economic Perspectives. 2008. Vol. 22, No. 2. P. 3–28.

4. Kharas H. The emerging middle class in developing countries. OECD Development Centre Working Paper No. 285. Paris: OECD, 2010.

5. López-Calva L.F., Ortiz-Juarez E. A vulnerability approach to the definition of the middle class // Journal of Economic Inequality. 2014. Vol. 12, No. 1. P. 23–47.

6. Appazov A., Adambekova A., Simanavičienė Ž. Socio-economic aspects of middle class identification: criteria and challenges // Economic Series of the Bulletin of L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. 2025. No. 2. P. 101–122.

7. World Bank: Poverty in Uzbekistan falls to 5.8% // UzDaily. https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/world-bank-poverty-in-uzbekistan-falls-to-58/

8. Who is considered a middle-class representative in Uzbekistan? // Kun.uz, 11 May 2019. https://kun.uz/news/2019/05/11/ozbekistonda-kimlar-orta-sinf-vakillari-hisoblanadi

9. Karimova G.A. Middle class and artificial intelligence in Uzbekistan // Worldview Horizons of Artificial Intelligence Development: conference proceedings. 2025. P. 427–432.

10. Kalonov K. Social features of stratification in Central Asia // Modern World Social Landscape and Transformation of Social Structures: conference proceedings. Tashkent: National University of Uzbekistan, 2023. P. 59–61.