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## Russia's Social Upper Class: From Ostentation to Culturedness

This article discusses examples of strategies employed by representatives of Russia's new social upper class to acquire social distinction. By the late 2000s many of the upper-class Russians included in this study distanced themselves from the conspicuous ostentation ascribed to the brutish 1990s. Instead, they strove to gain legitimacy for their social position by no longer aggressively displaying their wealth, but instead elaborating more refined and individualized tastes and manners and reviving a more cultured image and self-image. These changes found their expression in various modes of social distinction ranging from external signs, such as fashion and cars, to ostentation vicariously exercised through the people these upper-class Russians surrounded themselves with.

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### Introduction

This article discusses the strategies adopted for social distinction among representatives of Russia's new upper class as a means of gaining legitimacy for their position in society. These strategies will be explored using examples of adornment, such as sartorial displays and female companions, attitudes to transport as well as the striving for a more cultured image by aligning themselves with the intelligentsia. Central to my analysis are the strategies by which these social actors reinterpreted their experiences and reoriented their demeanour and tastes in order to keep up with the social changes in post-Soviet Russia and, in particular, towards the end of first decade in the new millennium.

Whilst the 1990s had been dominated by a small group of oligarchs, during the course of the 2000s the organization of social life went beyond the basic liaisons which had been necessary for survival in the 'dog-eat-dog' world of the 1990s. Against the background of the oil boom, a wider layer of the wealthy emerged and established a place for itself close to but below that of the top elites. By the late 2000s, upper-class members seemed to have become accustomed to their material wellbeing. Things other than money began to matter. Especially with the arrival of the 2008 economic crisis, a concern emerged about how to strengthen their position and status in society and have them become enduring. This article

takes as its starting point the assumption that for social relationships of domination to be enduring the dominating classes have to be considered legitimate and that this legitimacy is derived from a valid source of authority.

As Weber (1978[1922]: 213) reiterated, authority originates in both the belief in legitimacy [*Legitimitätsglaube*] and the prestige of exemplarity and ideality [*Vorbildlichkeit*]. Authority is considered legitimate when it conforms to the values dominant in society and when it satisfies normative expectations (Beetham 1991: 10ff.). In this quest to gain worthiness and legitimacy for their position in society, the holders of power, status and wealth try to convince themselves and others that they have what they have because of who they are, that is, because of the quality of their own being. One important way in which dominating classes achieve exemplarity and legitimacy is, alongside merit-based achievements and care for the less fortunate, by demonstrating their social worth through distinction from others. Using a Weberian framework, this article seeks to analyse which strategies are deployed by representatives of Russia's contemporary upper class to obtain legitimacy through practices aimed at achieving social distinction, in society in general as well as vis-à-vis their peers, people in adjacent classes further up and down the social ladder and, not least, themselves.

The forms through which the upper-class members considered in this study attempted to obtain social distinction by the late 2000s differed strongly from the demonstrative ostentation and conspicuous consumption of the 1990s (cf. Lipovetsky 2003; Oushakine 2000; Shlapentokh 1999). This article suggests that the new manners and demeanour these individuals feature, and the tastes they claim to identify with, is a reworking of culturedness, or *kul'turnost'*. One way to understand *kul'turnost'*, a term which goes back to the 1930s, is to see it as a behaviour code that guides civilized consumption, tastes and manners; however, it is more of an internalized unconscious disposition – not unlike Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*<sup>1</sup> – than explicit formal rules of good behaviour (Gronow 2003: 147).

Dunham (1976: 22) described the evolution of *kul'turnost'* in the 1930s as first denoting little more than personal hygiene and a minimum knowledge of high culture and good manners. In the late Stalin era, however, it began to mean the self-image of dignified citizens and turned into 'a fetish notion of how to be individually civilized'. The special function of *kul'turnost'* was to 'encode the proper relationship between people through their possessions and labels; between mores and artifacts' (Dunham 1976: 22). According to Dunham, *kul'turnost'* 'might even shake the individual's grip on his possessions: for instance, a strategic abstinence from acquisitiveness for the sake of displaying "good taste"'. In this trajectory, *kul'turnost'* bestowed attributes of dignity and virtue on material possessions (Dunham 1976: 23), and it functioned as social glue between cultural and material goods (Kelly and Shepherd 1998: 304). This article's claim is that today, again, *kul'turnost'* serves the quest for social distinction, thereby bridging the gap between money and culture.

This article further argues that *kul'turnost'* is one of the main pillars that bestow on their holders the discreet and seemingly natural superiority which Bourdieu (1984) ascribed to dominant classes. For the feeling of superiority to develop a more discreet nature, modes of distinction had to change from primarily quantitative to more qualitative strategies, and various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) had to be converted into others, in particular economic capital into cultural capital. These processes were, in some ways, following a shift from the typical Veblenian forms of aggressive ostentation (1994[1899]), to what Elias (2005[1989]) considered to be the norm in industrialized societies, where one feels able to enjoy great prestige without having to provide permanent public proof of it through costly display and where people's habits and manners are subject to ever-stricter control. However, this is not a linear process, and in particular in Russia, against the background of the country's distinctive post-Soviet economic and social developments, these processes have been full of reversals, tensions and ambiguities. Therefore, following Daloz (2009), who has compared the ways in which elites in different cultures display themselves publicly, it is crucial within the Russian context to also include ostentatious forms of distinction.

For present-day visitors to Russia, conspicuous consumption might still seem omnipresent. Indeed, several types of social logic exist in parallel. In the 2000s, newcomers made their way up into the ranks of the rich and kept Russia's 'glamour culture' flourishing (Goscilo and Strukov 2011; Menzel 2008). Putin's elite started to rise. Russian provinces became stronger. Resource-rich former Soviet republics produced new layers of wealthy people. For these groups, visible pomp and opulence appeared to be indispensable and they started living their new wealth, in a Veblenian sense, ostentatiously.

Veblen (1994[1899]: chapter V) and later Simmel (1919) argued that new fashions, introduced via the elite, would pass down through the status hierarchy. Aspiring middle-class groups in Russia have acquired a fixation on certain branded clothes, expensive cars and glamorous leisure time activities. Due to their visibility, these are the groups which are still the most prominent in the public consciousness, and which have been the focus of popular stereotypes.

My empirical data include 40 qualitative narrative-biographical interviews, conducted in Moscow and in London between 2008 and 2011, with rich businessmen, businesswomen, their spouses and their (adult) children as well as with public figures in the arts, media and politics. These people come for the most part from the lower end of the richest one per cent of Russian society; they are millionaires and multimillionaires, but (with four exceptions) not billionaires.<sup>2</sup> I have updates to the present time for about a third of them, either because they regularly feature in the news, because they are friends of friends, or because they have become friends with me on Facebook. In addition to these elite interviews, I carried out participant observation, and I researched the lives and activities of upper-class Russians online (using blogs, media reports and interviews in newspapers). I also undertook approximately 40 additional interviews with people who have known the wealthy from a particular perspective, the type of people

Goffman (1951) called curator person- nel, among them wealth managers, personal assistants, journalists, art experts and interior decorators.

The article first traces the changes of the last twenty years, evolving from the demonstrative ostentation of the 1990s to new forms of flamboyance in the late 2000s, as expressed in the interviewees' lifestyles. The second section will discuss two forms of adornment: first, the expression of superiority and status through sartorial signs; and, second, vicarious ostentation via female companions. Another, though less obvious, expression of modified tastes are attitudes to means of transport, the Moscow Metro in particular. A final section will discuss the importance of the Russian/Soviet intelligentsia as a bridge between money and culture<sup>3</sup> as expressed in my interviewees' statements.

### **Post-Soviet transformation**

The break-up of the Soviet Union left a vacuum in terms of what constituted markers for social distinction. People were thrust into a context in which many of their assumptions about status, professionalism and respectability no longer held in their familiar ways (Patino 2008: 6). The New Russians of the 1990s had no established role models to emulate (cf. Graham 2003). A specific of post-Soviet society was that everybody with money had acquired it just recently. Thus, in economic terms, everybody who became rich was a parvenu.

In this specific context, economic resources were the primary basis for the social position of the new moneyed classes, as well as their most prevalent virtue (Goscilo 2003: 10). In many aspects, Russia's nouveaux riches followed the logic described by Veblen (1994[1899]: 24) in relation to Chicago's leisure class of the 1890s, where private property had become the basis of esteem and the new rich marked their social position through the parading of wealth. As in the USA a decade earlier, in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s the quantitative element and conspicuousness in consumption dominated (cf. Oushakine 2000). Many people eagerly embraced everything that was new and superlative in size, quantity and novelty, of which they had felt deprived in Soviet times. Naked economic power was aggressively put on display. By bluntly displaying their quickly and often brutally achieved success, the nouveaux riches exhibited quite plainly the arbitrary force by which they originally accumulated their wealth (cf. Bourdieu 1996).

In the course of the 2000s, however, some parts of the elite began to distance themselves from glitz and glamour. Two famous people in public life illustrate this recent development. Kseniya Sobchak, born in 1981 and the daughter of the first post-Soviet mayor of St Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, became a household name as Russia's Paris Hilton and the 'it girl' of the Putin era. (Putin is, incidentally, widely rumoured to be her godfather.) Goscilo and Strukov (2011: 11) excluded her from their volume on glamour in contemporary Russia because of the nature of her notoriety which rendered her a too-

obvious case. In the winter of 2011/12, however, Sobchak became one of the faces of the opposition movement and joined the street protests. During these months, she dated the political activist Ilya Yashin, born in 1983, who stood in stark contrast to the elderly rich businessmen she previously chose as boyfriends. While still being a media celebrity, she now enjoys new prominence as a journalist and political activist, rather than as a glamour queen.

The second example is Mikhail Prokhorov. Formerly the richest Russian and the stereotypical playboy oligarch, he was detained on his holiday in the French ski resort of Courchevel in the winter of 2007 on suspicion of providing prostitutes for his male entourage. Since then, Prokhorov's public image has changed radically. He launched the media project Snob with which he endeared himself to upper-middle-class intellectuals, and ran for the presidency in 2012. The projection of this new and serious image was enhanced by the oligarch's highly educated and articulate sister, the founder of New Literary Observer, one of the first intellectual journals and publishing houses in independent Russia, who supported him in the election campaign.

Both these examples are certainly not uncontested, and many criticize these individuals both for their pasts and for their current half-hearted positions between Putin's regime and the opposition. However, they reflect a shift away from an endless party lifestyle to more discerning, cautious tastes and values and to a 'new modesty'. Modesty in this study is not to be understood in terms of a frugal lifestyle or radical cuts in one's expenditure. It means, in the first place, that people, to some extent, turned away from the ostentatious behaviour and the demonstrative display of wealth which was typical of the preceding years.

To refrain from the open display of wealth was important for Arkady4, one of Russia's longest-standing businessmen. The 49-year-old earnest and quiet man from a Jewish intelligentsia background touched upon the changes of the last two decades:

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*At first we tried to understand what kind of opportunities we had based on our material resources, but now we don't think about that anymore. We started to live in a different way. We started to think in a different way.*  
”

For his wife, Larissa, modesty did not mean self-restraint. She explained her idea of modesty to me while we were driving in her Porsche from her house to a nearby restaurant:

*What is modesty? Modesty can express itself in many things. I can't quite say that I live*

*ascetically. I think that modesty is the antonym to ruthlessness, and ruthlessness is absolutely “the worst thing you can find in a person.”*

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The couple's affluence posed a challenge in the upbringing of their two sons. Larissa explained:

“*We know a huge number of golden youth; they are destroyed by money and opportunities from the very beginning. Back in the Soviet era that was less the case, though it did exist then as well. It's not in the children's interests. I tried hard to limit the influence of our affluent material conditions on my children . . . We had to think about it all the time and control the process very strictly.*

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Larissa and her husband Arkady are trend-setters for some aspects of new tastes. The couple's summer house is located in a new housing complex in the north of Moscow which was built in conscious dissociation from the 1990s grandiose palaces of the *nouveaux riches* found in Moscow's notoriously luxurious suburb of Rublyovka, where Putin has his residence. The housing in their area is newly built in the traditional wooden style with modern elements similar to the contemporary wooden architecture in Scandinavia and Switzerland, albeit in far bigger dimensions. The individual houses 'disappear' into the forest and thus follow the trend to stay private and be invisible to observers. There are also globally recognized luxury features: yachts and other boats, a sailing club and a golf club. Arkady stressed the exclusivity of the area:

“*This is a kind of a closed club. There is nothing comparable in the whole country. I think even in the West there are only very few such places . . . The most renowned architects have worked for us, Russian and foreign architects. Many architects dream about working for us.*

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After a day out at this dacha, Arkady explained to me that his aim was to show me that his family has little in common either with ordinary Russian, or the 'tasteless' rich.

Thirty-two year-old Maksim, a businessman and lawyer, rejected some forms of ostentatious behaviour. However, he indulged in others. Social distinction does not necessarily exclude eclecticism and cultural 'omnivorousness', as Peterson and Kern stated (1996) and Bryson (1996) corroborated vis-à-vis musical taste. High-status groups not only participate more than others in high-status activities, but also tend to participate more frequently in many different kinds of leisure activities, partly even 'poor chic' (Halnon

2002) – a ‘recreational’ and temporary ‘consumption of poverty’ which she described as a short, safe, socially-distanced and sanitized experience. It was precisely the eclecticism in his lifestyle which this young businessman (who, according to the contact person who gave me his phone number, had first made his money by trading in Duma seats in Russia and trading in land mines in Africa) seemed to enjoy. This father of two (his older child, a son, is already 13) likes gambling in casinos, going to strip clubs, indulging his extravagant eating habits, and staying only at the best hotels when travelling. Yet in some matters he also exercises practices that could be described as a flamboyant reversal from these norms (shopping at cheap street markets and upholding some liberal and left-wing views, vocally defending gay rights, sending his children to the Pioneers and admiring Stalin). During our opulent dinner, he reached for his wallet and pulled out a Metro ticket:

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*I can waste money on ‘deluxe’ hotels but I can just as easily take the Metro . . . I travel by Metro every day. I even have a monthly travel card. Have a look! My friends always make fun of me. I can allow myself to do that.*

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### **Adornments: sartorial signs and women as means of display**

Changing tastes and social hierarchies are easily gleaned from how people dress (cf. Klingseis 2011). According to Simmel (1919), fashion is an excellent means of achieving, on the one hand, cohesion or group identity, and, on the other, differentiation and individuality. Through fashion people align with a certain group and differentiate themselves from others, and at the same time fashion is a widely understood way of expressing one’s status, wealth and power. The display of the people one surrounds oneself with can be part of ostentation. Particularly visible in Russia are female companions. Veblen (1994[1899]), and later Sombart (1967[1913]), linked the first conspicuous form of property to the ‘ownership’ of women. In Veblenian terms (1994[1899]: 27), youthful wives and mistresses are ‘trophies’ designed to show off a man’s success, not only suggesting sensual pleasures and, in their quantitative dimension, promoting an image of exceptional virility (Daloz 2009: 142), but often carrying added enhancements (dress, jewels, etc.).

Fashion statements identified by this study mirror the trend away from glamour culture and the rising prestige the intelligentsia now enjoys. The fashion historian Alexandre Vassiliev observed that ‘glamour is out’ (Klingseis 2011: 105). There is instead a new trend emerging – ‘“new modesty”, with fashion becoming intellectual’. However, this process is far from linear and unambiguous. The ‘new modesty’ in fashion is characterized by two codes; first, avoiding being overdressed (and preferably being slightly underdressed) and, second, dressing appropriately for every specific situation and occasion. This does not mean spending less money on clothes or a greater relaxation in dress codes but rather a new form of

conspicuousness. Dressing down is less standardized and reveals more of one's individual tastes, which symbolically constitute the sum of the holdings of one's cultural capital (cf. Savage, Warde and Devine 2005: 40). Misconceived aesthetic decisions might convey even damaging messages about the self (Warde, Olsen and Martens 1999: 120). Moreover, it involves getting changed frequently. (Now foreigners in Moscow are easily identifiable by their 'inappropriateness'; for example, Russians would not go to certain upmarket nightclubs in suits, but Westerners do when they come straight from work without getting changed.)

According to his self-presentation, Maksim was the height of ostentation with regards to dressing down. (This young man was rather large, so it was difficult for me to make out the cut and style of his jeans and shirt.) He described his shopping behaviour:

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*I can buy myself a shirt for 1000 dollars but I wear a shirt costing 100 roubles [GBP2], because that's not important to me at all. For my wife it's a little more important, but not fanatically so. She likes comfortable clothes, and the problem is that comfortable clothes are usually branded clothes, which are expensive. Just recently she took ages looking for a pair of glasses. In the end she bought Gucci glasses which were incredibly expensive. She didn't buy them because they were from Gucci but because they really fitted well. If she had found suitable glasses for 500 roubles [GBP10], she would have bought them. By the same token she can buy shorts for the kids at the market for 250 roubles [GBP5] and shorts in a boutique for 250 dollars . . . These jeans, I think, I bought second-hand.*

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There is no guarantee in Russia that the people Maksim encounters possess sufficient 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1989) to be able to evaluate his statements of 'new simplicity'. The entrepreneur is aware of this, and so were other interviewees, which is why they often combine their 'simple' clothing with carefully chosen luxury items that signal more conventional status markers.

These are primarily watches, shoes, and, most importantly, delicately mani-cured hands. Maksim uses an ultra-expensive phone:

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*The only little thing that is important to me is my phone. I've got a golden mobile phone. I don't like expensive watches. But sometimes in meetings it's necessary to show a phone that is more expensive than an average car. This will put the opponent in the right place.*



The advantage of using a phone as a status marker is that it can remain invisible if the owner wishes.

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Dressing down is not a mass phenomenon, and the various new fashions exist alongside old ones among the people I could observe. In particular, at semi-formal events such as private receptions, it is not unusual to see men in their best suits and young model-like women in designer dresses alongside sloppily dressed male guests (for ‘dressing down’ is generally a male phenomenon, with the exception of some highly successful females). Breaking free from certain conventions is one way of asserting one’s superiority over others (Daloz 2009: 68). Fashion choices seemed to reflect the status hierarchies among the guests at a preview party hosted by Sotheby’s, which took place in 2008 at Barvikha, a town of villas in Moscow’s luxury suburb Rublyovka. The scruffily dressed guests were all big names; owners of publishing houses, famous art collectors and wealthy businessmen.

Dressing slightly scruffily is not uncommon among privileged circles in many cultures, for instance, among some English aristocrats. There were a fair number of the latter at an art opening in Norfolk in May 2013 which was exhibiting masterpieces from the Hermitage. Prince Charles was the exhibition’s patron. His helicopter was met by the wife of the lord who was hosting the event; she was dressed in what one of the guests called pyjama trousers and a vintage blazer. The former model, 23 years younger than her husband, later joined a table with her similarly informally dressed friends. Meanwhile, the sponsors of the exhibition were queuing up to greet the Prince of Wales. One of the sponsors waiting patiently was Alexander Lebedev, the funder of the *Independent* and *London Evening Standard*. The Russian billionaire was in white high-top basketball shoes, a jacket, a waistcoat, a thin tie and super-skinny black jeans. He was accompanied by his wife, a model 26 years his junior, who was wearing a long, low-cut, very tight dress which showed off her slender figure.

It could be argued that the ‘sloppy’ attire of some of the status-high individuals at both of these events served to stress their superiority over the common guests, who, with the exception of some artists, stuck to the rules and dressed smartly. Yet the basic codes were very different. The Russian billionaire, although securing a handshake from the Prince of Wales and presumably showing some respect by means of his waistcoat and tie, at the same time alluded to his merit-based success by emulating Bill Gates more than the English aristocracy. The youthfulness and exceptional beauty of the two wives referred to above were vicarious assertions of these men’s status, however different the women’s fashion statements were, with the hostess demonstrating that this was her home and the billionaire’s wife stressing her femininity.

A strong accentuation of femininity and physical attractiveness was characteristic for post-Soviet Russia and was intensified through the ‘trade’ some engaged in, seeking material security and financial benefits by making a ‘good deal’ (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005: 110). The economic meltdown of the 1990s

further strengthened the commodification of personal relationships. One of my interviewees, Dmitry, a well-known politician, aged 36, made the point that flaunting stunningly beautiful wives and mistresses, dressed in the most elegant and expensive attire, was a substitute for buying yet another Mercedes which nobody would notice anyway. However, even here the quantitative dimension and sensational beauty have lost some of their importance for social distinction in Russia. Indeed, Nikita, the head of a large consulting agency, asserted that socially inferior women, regardless of their beauty, might now even undermine one's standing in society: 'The fashion to go out with and maybe even marry models has disappeared here in Moscow. This has moved to the provinces and lower social strata.' Instead, women who were still unquestionably attractive but at the same time highly sophisticated could boost one's image more effectively. As he put it: 'Now women must be very well educated and cultured'. In addition, some of my interviewees remarked that having a long and stable marriage had become an insignia of distinction in today's Russia, and this was even more the case if the marriage predated the acquisition of riches.

All the same, keeping mistresses appeared to be tolerated, if not almost expected. Even if my male interviewees stressed their conservative family values and were proud of their stable marriages, some of them still alluded at some point in the interview to extra-marital activity, including hints about prostitutes. Pyotr is a businessman who is also highly regarded among the Moscow intelligentsia and considered to be one of the 'cultured' entrepreneurs. This man, in his early fifties and a married father of three, was born into the intelligentsia and taught at a prestigious Moscow university. I met him again 18 months after the interview at a conference on a Greek island, which was financed and hosted by a Russian oligarch and featured ultra-conservative speakers from all over the world advocating traditional family values. Pyotr was accompanied by a young woman who was not his wife and who looked as if she was in her late teens. When I expressed my surprise about the age difference to the friends I was sitting with, i.e. male sociologists from Moscow, they defended the businessman by referring to the West where men were simply more hypocritical and pretended to be 'prim and proper'. My friends, who were the same age as Pyotr, acknowledged that they would not be able to enjoy comparable female company themselves due to their meagre university salaries, but they very much approved of the businessman's achievements.

## **Vehicles and transport**

Vehicles and other means of transport satisfy various needs and desires. These needs and desires can be practical as well as symbolic (Daloz 2009: 76). They provide distinction vis-à-vis other classes (this is especially the case with the visibility of cars), protection from observers (e.g. cars with opaque windows) and differentiation between elites themselves, as demonstrated by the world of yachts, helicopters and private jets.

The connection between social hierarchies and vehicles has had enormous significance throughout cultures and history. Gronow and Zhuravlev (2010: 133; 132–40) analyse the role of cars, scarcity and luxury in stratifying Soviet society. The highest ranks of the leadership travelled in Chaikas. These black seven-seater limousines were produced in small numbers at the Gorky car factory after 1958 exclusively for the highest-ranking state and party officials. KGB officers and other privileged members of society used chauffeur-driven black Volgas. In theory these could be bought by ordinary citizens, but as only a relatively small number were produced, to drive one's own Volga was, as Gronow reminds us, probably the greatest unattainable dream of many Soviet citizens.

Aleksei, a 49-year-old businessman who built up a brand empire every child in Russia knows and who is listed at about 100 on Russia's Forbes rankings, recalled a childhood memory:

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*Back then a black Volga was an important status indicator. It was a sign that its owner had achieved something. You had to be a boss or a director. I always wanted to be a director and drive a black Volga. It was the smell of this car. My father often took me on business trips to Moscow. You had to get up early. Then you had to wait for this car to come out of the factory gates. The town was still asleep, so you could hear the car minutes before you would see it. Then the road, the conversations in the car. It's a memory so vivid and close, as if I was this little boy again. Now I've got many cars and no longer any Volgas. But, sadly, the excitement has gone. Everything becomes routine. But exactly these feelings of youth and these desires can move and motivate a person to achieve something in life.*

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In contrast to adornment and sartorial considerations, elite modes of transport also have concrete functions of comfortableness and rapidity (Daloz 2009). When they come with a chauffeur, they clearly facilitate everyday life, enabling the owner to make use of the time spent travelling. This logic does not pertain just to the vehicles themselves but also to certain 'accessories' and how vehicles are used. Russia's elites appropriated advantages for their own benefit which were designed for special public purposes. Certain number plates and emergency sirens confer the right to exceed the legal speed limits. Express lanes in particular are a huge practical convenience when the streets leading from the luxury suburbs to Moscow's city centre are blocked by traffic jams, which are frequently caused by street closures to let high-ranking officials pass at high speed.

Following the near collapse of the city's road infrastructure, some of my interviewees have adopted traditional symbols of the lower strata and started using Moscow's Metropolitan Transport System. Boris Groys (1992: 160–6) described Stalin's grandiose prestigious project with its beautiful stations as both utopia and hell. It is one of the most brilliantly designed underground systems in the world, not always

pleasant to use but quick, efficient and comprehensive. As expected, for most of my interviewees, the idea of using the Metro was utterly absurd. They treated the Metro with indifference or disdain. Viktor, 42, a businessman from a Jewish intelligentsia background who had also set up a foundation for social science research, was surprised at the suggestion: 'No, I never use the Metro. I've got my driver. My children? No idea.' Many passed on their disdain to their children. Twenty-one-year-old Andrei, the son of a businessman who had set up the second largest company in its field in Russia, told me:

“  
*When I went to the kindergarten, I already had a driver. I only used the Metro on weekends to meet up with friends when the driver had a day off. Public transport is very unpleasant, stuffy, the queuing. The Metro is just terrible.*  
 ”

All the same, some people are slowly changing their minds as Moscow's traffic jams have begun to make it impossible to get to their destination. The oil-businessman Ivan, in his early sixties, lives in Surgut, an oil-rich city in Siberia. He tries to avoid using the road when in Moscow:

“  
*In Surgut I go by taxi, in Moscow by Metro. I simply can't stand these traffic jams here. I'd go completely mad . . . I know, I'm an absolute exception. Nobody else goes by Metro. I love it that my life is so different from that of other people of my kind.*  
 ”

Ivan is not actually as exceptional as he might think. The businessman Aleksandr, also in his early sixties, returned to using the Metro after one and a half decades of abstinence:

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*In the early 1990s, I stopped using the Metro. But two or three years ago when these crazy traffic jams started, I started using the Metro again when I had to get somewhere quickly . . . I enjoy going down to the Metro. It works very well and there aren't actually that many people . . . You can see normal people there and I like watching their faces.*  
 ”

I asked Aleksandr, a calm person and originally a trained accountant, how people reacted when he arrived at his destination by public transport. My question provoked surprise. 'How would people know?' The businessman usually sent his driver on the long traffic jam route hours ahead of him, so that he could be picked up shortly before reaching his final destination.

A certain nostalgia for the Metro as it used to be is evident in Aleksei's remark:

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*Recently, about four months ago, when the traffic was just terrible, I used the Metro. I'm not scared to go down there. The only thing is that, compared to two years ago, I can clearly see how much poorer the folk have become. What unhappy people there are! And it's dirty, very dirty. My Metro is definitely cleaner. My Metro is the Metro of the 1980s; my Metro represents Moscow.*

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Vitaly, a real estate developer, made a similar observation: 'I use the Metro twice a year. It's shocking sometimes what you see down there. The atmosphere has become so much worse compared to what it was like in Soviet times.'

Some of my interviewees made their children use the Metro as part of their upbringing. Kirill, a slick and earnest businessman and art collector in his early forties, was concerned that his daughters were getting spoilt:

“  
*I came from a simple social background. I've seen everything. I served in the army. There is nothing much that can surprise me. Of course, I want my children to start off at a very different level than I did. But this involves the risk that they might not be aware that life can be very different as well. Our children use the Metro. We made a point of teaching them how to use it. We want them to use it as well as wanting them not to think that fashion is the most important thing in life but to develop different interests.*

”

### **Kul'turnost' via the intelligentsia**

The accumulation of economic capital during Perestroika and in the post-Soviet period was heavily dependent on non-economic resources, such as cultural capital and social networks. Post-Soviet studies have suggested that many supposed newcomers to the upper layers of the 1990s were not real *parvenus* from simple social backgrounds, but were the descendants of privileged and/or highly educated families (cf. Hanley, Yershova and Anderson 1995; King 2002; Szelényi, Eyal and Townsley 1998). They made practical use of their cultural capital in the first years of social transformation, often assisted by the social capital they acquired in prestigious educational institutions or the *Komsomol*, which they turned into economic capital. In the new millennium, there has been a further shift in the dominance of capital forms. The accumulated economic capital has been increasingly transformed into

cultural and symbolic capital.

This continuity of social class was also frequently evident in the interviews I conducted. Many of my interviewees had inherited cultural capital through their families, some over several generations. The overwhelming majority of my interviewees were born into socially and culturally privileged families, many of them belonging to the Soviet intelligentsia. One of these is Russia's most famous gallery owner Marat Guelman:

“  
*It's a bit of a paradox, but I would place myself amongst the intelligentsia. First, because of my family background; my father was a famous playwright. Gorbachev called him the father of Perestroika because he influenced Gorbachev a lot. They are still friends. Second, the nature of my professional activities; I deal with art. Third, I work with my mind. I'm a political consultant and for a long time I've worked as a spin-doctor [politekhnolog] for the president, which is like being a playwright in politics.*  
 ”

Many interviewees' parents, and in many cases also their grandparents, had pursued successful careers during Soviet times, mainly in science or engineering. There were also whole dynasties of people in academia. The family of the businessman Gregory is an example of a prestigious intelligentsia family. Gregory's parents were geophysicists: 'They did groundbreaking work in engineering back in the 1960s. My father received a state award for what he had discovered and his name was entered into one of the republic's encyclopaedias.' The shy IT-entrepreneur in his mid-forties, whose start-up business put him on Russia's rich list, is in some ways an idol for Russia's creative intelligentsia scene. His business biography features in a 2013 movie.

However, there was a novel aspect to this situation that came across strongly in my interviews: people ascribed symbolic significance to their social backgrounds and utilized them to position themselves in society. Social distinction needs to extend back into the past, and in particular to the grandparents' generation. Whereas in the early post-Soviet years it was fashionable to discover aristocratic roots, today a Soviet intelligentsia background provides the ideal provenance for upper-class Russians. The intelligentsia has, as Gessen stated (1997: 102), with the exception of a short break in the 1990s, produced a steady stream of trends and fashions. Now, references to the intelligentsia have returned as a basic ingredient for *kul'turnost'*, and people from a prestigious intelligentsia background, such as the IT-entrepreneur Gregory, have gained in status among upper-class Russians.

Karina and her husband, a wealthy businessman, offered an example for this shift: 'Financially, we belong to the upper class. But we'd certainly like to ascribe ourselves to the intelligentsia, beginning from

our grandfathers' generation. Of course, there are artists and writers in our circle. That's a must.' The 38-year-old woman explained further:

“

*You can place us in the intelligentsia also in terms of our attitude to life and our moral and spiritual values, such as support for others, friendship, love, mutual understanding. The most important values are certainly integrity, propriety and good manners as well as ethical and aesthetic values. But of course, without money it's all difficult.*

”

Karina's statements are reminiscent of how Patico (2008: 77) traces *kul'turnost'* in her research. Social and hereditary factors were understood to play a significant role; however, individuals were implicitly held responsible for their own level of *kul'turnost'*.

Many of the mythologies historically surrounding the intelligentsia, including its late-nineteenth century humanistic search for truth and its desire to serve the people, are not very relevant today. Nor is the dedicated, self-effacing, quixotic character which is often ascribed to the intelligentsia (cf. Leatherbarrow and Offord 2010). In fact, some of these features were already irrelevant to the Soviet intelligentsia, which was particularly status-anxious and concerned to keep its distance from the ordinary people (Gessen 1997). Nevertheless, this does not challenge the intelligentsia's symbolic power and its elitist connotations. Boris, a 24-year-old banker, is the son of a businessman who made a fortune in the 1990s, and yet he sees himself as part of the intelligentsia:

“

*In Russia there are two major social groups in society, the intelligentsia and the majority of the population. These two groups have no relation whatsoever with one another, except that they live in the same territory. The majority of Russians are totally different; I've got nothing in common with them.*

”

Boris's understanding of the intelligentsia and of the structure of Russian society reflects the hierarchies and gaps between the classes. He was born into an intelligentsia family with a Jewish background. His grandfathers were scientists. His father quickly became one of the first three hundred richest men to appear on the worldwide Forbes rich list and used to be a player in Russian business. Boris's upbringing in a luxury suburb was remote from the lives of ordinary Russians. In addition to this, it could be argued that his understanding of society as being based on two diametrically opposed groups, the intelligentsia versus the ordinary population, is the product of the interplay between the historically developed social hierarchies in Russia and the ways in which people in Russia have learned to

understand the world (not least through classical literature).

The symbolic significance of the cultured classes today is embodied by the businessmen among my interviewees who now spend most of their time on their art projects. According to Bourdieu (1984: 55), the fundamental advantage gained from membership of a privileged class is distance from economic necessity. This has resulted in some people becoming dismissive of their own involvement in business. Yevgeny's wife has taken over business matters so that he can devote almost all of his time to art. He explains why:

“  
*I belong to the professional intelligentsia. My business is just a means to an end. I'm interested in dealing with global cultural projects. I belong to the part of the intelligentsia which seeks answers to eternal, philosophical questions [ishchushchaia intelligentsiia].*  
 ”

Yevgeny, 60, sets the tone for members of an upper class who do not need to concern themselves with money-making but are free to ponder their individuality.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to analyse strategies of distinction and symbolic expression of status which the upper-class Russians included in this study pursued in order to entrench their legitimacy. Using a Weberian framework, the article began with the assumption that these individuals wish to feel worthy of their positions in society, and they wish to be convinced that they deserve their position because of who they are and because of their qualities. To this end, they had to reorient their demeanour, manners and tastes in order to keep up with the social changes in post-Soviet Russia. The search for more enduring modes of distinction became particularly intense at a point of time when new wealthy layers in Russia had gained distance from economic necessity after the years of the 2000s oil boom, and yet they saw their position challenged by the arrival of the 2008 economic crisis, which confronted them with increased pressure for legitimation.

In addition to Weber, Bourdieusian concepts proved helpful in tracing this search. Many of my interviewees, in one form or the other, converted the economic capital they possess in abundance into cultural and symbolic capital: i.e. ostentatious behaviour turned into a more moderate and private affair. The area where Arkady and Larissa built their dacha is an example of this where the logic of the housing complex is based on privacy and exclusivity. The modern woodwork aims to dissociate their tastes from the tastes of other upper ranks who built grandiose palaces in the 1990s. All the same, they have adapted to globally recognized luxury tastes.



With their closeness to the intelligentsia, individuals of the kind analysed here potentially set the preconditions of the *'classe dominante'*, as formulated by Bourdieu: a social class dominating not only the economic and political sphere, but also culture and society. Many of my interviewees ascribed great significance to their intelligentsia roots and social circles, which served as an important pillar of elitist distinction and helped with the articulation of bourgeois ideas, such as those embodied in *kul'turnost'*. Both in historical and contemporary contexts, *kul'turnost'* has bestowed attributes of dignity and virtue on material possessions. It has instilled more discerning tastes, 'good manners' and civilized consumption into its holders, thereby acting as a bridge between economic capital and cultural capital. Some of my interviewees aimed to make this bridge more durable, and ensured that it reached into the future, by passing on *kul'turnost'* to their children.

However, these processes are far from linear. Most of the changes described carry their own new forms of flamboyance. Dressing down appears to be one

straightforward, yet conspicuous way of demonstrating superiority over one's peers. Moreover, Maksim's golden mobile phone might not only be seen as a strategy to assert wealth and power, but also as an expression of status-anxiety. Apparent 'democratic' openness to crossing social boundaries by sharing social space with ordinary people, such as public transport, might not automatically imply that these practices will become routinized. Not least, competing norms and expectations, partly anchored in Russia's patriarchal structure, might reverse a move to more privacy, as seems to be the case regarding the permissibility of openly displaying mistresses. In more general terms, it is still open which changes the latest political developments will bring to Russia's social structure and what this will mean for the social and economic position of these individuals and, hence, for the symbolic expression of their status and their understanding of *kul'turnost'*.

## Notes

1. Against the background of unstable systems of dispositions in the late Soviet period and in early post-Soviet Russia, people consciously experimented with their socially learned dispositions and skills in order to mobilize their resources. Unlike Bourdieu, I consider the dominating practices and ideas to be, at least in part, more of a conscious process than a case of forgotten history because in post-Soviet Russia routine daily practices had to be newly established. This is why I talk of strategies and not of habitus.

2. Both class and status considerations were important in my study. According to a Weberian understanding, class is defined in terms of property and status in terms of the principles of the

consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life (Weber 1978 [1922]: 937).

3. To put it simply, the intelligentsia can be described as an educated populace (intellectuals and professionals engaged in the cultural and educational sector), from a culturally privileged background, imbued with certain (even if minor) social obligations. This group is not homogenous. My interviewees primarily mingled with elitist representatives of the intelligentsia, such as successful artists, filmmakers, writers and journalists, not with the poor(er) mass intelligentsia (cf. Shlapentokh 1999).

4. I have changed the names of my interviewees.

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