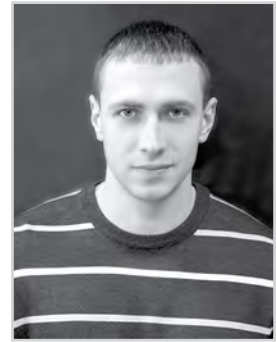**Liana Pasechko**
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Poverty in Russia:
theoretical and methodological issues of research

Abstract
The authors research the lowest stratum in modern Russia, consider the key approaches to determine poverty, analyse the applied criteria, and their relevance. The lowest stratum of the Russian society is a heterogeneous entity. Its structure and definition of boundaries remain controversial. The research problem involves the contradiction between theoretical approaches to the study of poverty extent, and the practice of social policy aimed at poverty reduction. One of the weaknesses of this policy is that the state takes into account the subsistence level as the only poverty criterion. In the article, the relevance of this criterion is analysed, its inconsistency under contemporary economic realities is shown. The major aspects of scientific research of poverty are explored, poverty criteria in Russia and in developed countries are compared, and main social characteristics to determine whether an individual belongs to the lowest stratum of Russian society are given. The structure of the lowest stratum and its restructuring are described. The real values of poverty in Russia which vary from 13.3% (official statistics) to 41% (independent studies) and the ways for its reduction are determined.
Keywords: The Lowest Strata; Poverty; Subsistence Level; Social Polarisation; Russia
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Теоретико-методологічні проблеми дослідження бідності в Росії

Анотація
У статі розкрито проблеми дослідження бідності в сучасному російському суспільстві, розглянуто основні підходи до визначення бідності. Проаналізовано релевантність прожиткового мінімуму, співставлено індикатори бідності в різних країнах. На основі офіційних статистичних даних та розрахунків незалежних дослідників визначено основні групи рекрутування російської бідності.
Ключові слова: нижчі прошарки; бідність; прожитковий мінімум; соціальна поляризація.

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Теоретико-методологические проблемы исследования бедности в России

Аннотация
В статье раскрываются проблемы исследования бедности в современном российском обществе, рассматриваются основные подходы определения бедности. Проанализирована релевантность прожиточного минимума, сопоставлены индикаторы бедности в различных странах. Определены, на основе официальных статистических и независимых исследовательских данных о количестве бедных, основные группы рекрутирования российской бедности.
Ключевые слова: низшие слои; бедность; прожиточный минимум; социальная поляризация.

1. Introduction

More people in Russia migrate to the lowest strata. That trend produces growth of protest moods in the society, enhances criminal potential, consolidates marginal practices of social interaction, downgrades overall educational and cultural level in society, lowers average life expectancy, deteriorates population's health indicators, leads to the shortage of high-skilled specialists, results in decline of geopolitical potential, etc. In recent years, this problem has been aggravated amid the economic sanctions, thus, numbers of the poor in Russia increased further, presumably making this social stratum the most numerous in the country.

The rift between theoretical approaches to the study of poverty and the one to determining poverty as addressed by public social policy is substantial obstacle, while coping with the issue. It is not sufficient to use the subsistence level as the only poverty criterion.

2. Brief Literature Review

Contemporary international sociology and economic studies developed poverty and social inequality as specific areas of scientific research. Methodological basis of poverty structure research was formed by two approaches: social-egalitarian, or egalitarian (K. Marx, F. Engels), and social Darwinism (A. Smith, D. Ricardo, T. Malthus, H. Spencer).

In the sociological perspective, cultural and structural approaches to poverty are the most prominent. Socio-cultural determination of poverty was substantiated in O. Lewis's works (1966); the place of the poor in the social hierarchy was described by A. Giddens (1973), and F. Parkin (1979) [1-3].

H. R. Rodgers (2006) examined the characteristics of fighting poverty in the United States, while J. Stiglitz (2016) criticised unregulated market and approached its social consequences [4-5]. J. Wicks-Lim and P. S. Arno (2017) analysed the correlation between poverty and population health [6]. S. Ayllón and A. Fusco (2017) research was dedicated to study of individual strategies to fight poverty [7]. Corporate social responsibility to aid in overcoming poverty was studied by Ruta Šneidere and Inese Vigante (2014) [8]. S. Awaworyi Churchill and R. Smyth (2017) revealed the relationship between poverty and ethnicity [9]. Indicators and characteristics of poverty in Asian countries and South America were considered in the works by H.-C. Liou (2017) (Taiwan), J. Yang, P. Mukhopadhaya, Y. Liu, J. Liu, Y. Zhou, X. Hua, J. Yan, Y. Zhang, X. Hua, J. Yan, and Y. Zhang (2017) (China), K. Yenneti, Y. D. Wei, and W. Chen, (2017) (India), S. Morley (2017) (Peru) [10-15]. K. Roelen (2017) revealed multidimensionality of poverty [16], poverty as the factor of social exclusion is substantiated by K. Samuel, S. Alkire, D. Zavaleta, C. Mills, and J. Hammock (2017) [17].

Many researches are devoted to the problem of Russian poverty, which emphasises its paramount importance. The works by research teams from the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Higher School of Economics are among the most serious and systemic ones. The trends of social perception of poverty in Russian society, and the number of the poor are analysed in the collective monograph «Poverty and the poor in modern Russia» (2014), published by the Russian Academy of Sciences [18].

We value contribution by M. N. Rutkevich, T. I. Zaslavskaya, M. K. Gorshkov, N. E. Tikhonova, V. V. Petukhov as the most valuable to the study of the structure, lifestyle, the spins of formation, and other aspects of the lowest strata of contemporary Russian society. Exceptional contribution to the topic by Natalia Tikhonova should be noted, as she remains one of the most prolific scholars in poverty research. N. E. Tikhonova and V. A. Anikin»s scientific articles «Poverty in Russia against the background of other countries» (2014), «Poverty and inequality in the BRICS countries: Russian features» (2016) are comparing Russian poverty with foreign countries [19-20].

However, despite the abundance of works on the issue, there are no other clear criteria for the poverty in Russia than the subsistence level, and the problem of exact number of the poor is left for discussion.

3. Purpose of the research is to define the main criteria that determine the social actor's mapping into the lowest strata of the Russian society, the one used by the scholars, and the other applied by the government authorities, to compare them, to describe their composition and the channels of the recruitment to the lowest social strata, and to determine the approximate share of the poor in the society.

4. Results

There are several approaches to determine and analyse poverty. The most common are «relative», «absolute», «subjective», and «by deprivation». The first one dominates in wealthy, developed countries, and determines poverty in wage terms as 50-60% of the median salary in the country.

The absolute approach is prevalent in not wealthy countries. It also prevails in Russia, where those people whose income is lower than the officially established subsistence level are considered poor. The subjective approach is based on self-identification by person as the poor.

The deprivation approach is considered to be «the most sociological» one, because, when applying it, the deprivations that hinder the lifestyle, adopted in a given society, are taken as the basis for defining poverty.

Let us note that with regard to the substructures of the Russian society, the terms «stratum» (as by N. E. Tikhonova and most researchers) and «class» (as by T. I. Zaslavskaya, etc.) [21] are used. The choice depends on theoretical and methodological approaches chosen by the researchers. In this paper, we are not going to dwell on the peculiarities of each approach, since we do not see these differences as fundamental; instead, we will use both terms as identical. In our opinion, the term «social stratum» seems to be more precise, since in the modern Russian realities, the transitional, polymorphic, intermediate state more accurately characterises marginal elements of the Russian society than «class» as a historically formed, more definite and stable structure. At the same time, taking into account the stable dynamics, it is possible to say that the formation of classes, with all the attributes inherent in them, is a matter of time in the Russian society.

The lowest stratum of the Russian society is a heterogeneous entity, and its structure and boundaries verification remain controversial. Only the main criterion to determine the localisation of social actors in this stratum cast gives no doubt - it is low financial security. It should be noted that in addition to this criterion, characteristics such as ownership of real estate, car, or other durable goods, their value, savings, the opportunity to use paid medical, educational and other services, etc., are considered. To determine poverty boundaries is traditionally a difficult issue for sociologists and economists; moreover, it is heavily influenced by the political reasoning and correctness.

While discussion on the criteria of Russian poverty is ongoing among scholars, for practical reasons it is seen being connected to the subsistence level, established by the Government of the Russian Federation at the federal level and by the executive authorities of the entities of the Russian Federation at the regional level.

According to the Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 352 of March 30, 2017, the amount of the subsistence level in the Russian Federation averaged RUR 9,691 (USD 170.35) per capita per month for the fourth quarter of 2016; for the working age population it was RUR 10,466 (USD 183.97) per capita per month; for retirees it was RUR 8,000 (USD 140.62) per capita per month; for minors it was RUR 9,434 (USD 165.83) per capita per month [22]. Subsistence level increased by more than RUR 1,600 (USD 28.12) since 2014. However, while government data showed inflation at 12.9% in 2015, other estimates claimed that prices for basic goods and services grew by one third in the same period.

According to the official data published by the Federal State Statistics Service, 19.8 million people, or 13.5% of the Russian citizens, are poor, i.e., have income below the subsistence level. These numbers are higher by 700 thousand people than in 2015. At present, according to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service, the number of poor in Russia is almost the same as in 2008.

The relevance of the subsistence level itself raises question, yet, it is the matter for another research. We agree with those scholars who believe that in Russia subsistence level manifests not the edge of poverty, but that of extreme poverty, of physical survival, deprivation of any opportunities for self-development [23]. This statement is supported by numerous experiments conducted by the officials and journalists.

The value of the Russian poverty threshold in the form of a subsistence level is several times lower than in developed countries. For example, in the USA the poverty threshold is an income slightly higher than USD 1,000 per capita per month. In the European Union, the indicator of monetary poverty prevails; it is based upon the number of citizens with real incomes lower than 60% of the national average. In the UK, the poverty threshold is about EUR 1,100, and in Denmark EUR 1,200 [24]. One of the poorest countries in the European Union, Bulgaria, has the poverty threshold at USD 183 per person per month [25]. At the same time, in China, the country with one of the biggest economies of the world, the poverty threshold is CNY 6.1 per capita per day (USD 1 per day, i.e, about USD 30 per month) [26]. To

Tab. 1: **Distribution of the number of employees by the amount of the accrued salaries, %**

Including by the amount of the accrued salaries, RUR

Year	All employees	below 1,800.0	1,800.1-2,600.0	2,600.1-3,400.0	3,400.1-4,200.0	4,200.1-5,000.0	5,000.1-5,800.0	5,800.1-7,400.0	7,400.1-9,000.0	9,000.1-10,600.0	10,600.1-13,800.0	13,800.1-17,000.0	17,000.1-20,200.0	20,200.1-25,000.0	25,000.1-35,000.0	35,000.1-50,000.0	50,000.1-75,000.0	75,000.1-100,000.0	100,000.1-250,000.0	More than 250,000.0
2000	100	57.8	15.1	9.3	5.5	3.5	2.3	2.6	1.5	0.8	0.8	0.4	0.4							
2001	100	49.7	15.3	10.2	6.6	4.6	3.2	3.8	2.2	1.3	1.3	0.7	0.7		0.3		0.1			
2002	100	31.5	15.5	12.8	9.2	7.0	5.2	6.6	3.9	2.4	2.5	1.3	0.7	0.6	0.6		0.2			
2003	100	25.8	13.5	11.7	9.2	7.6	6.0	8.3	5.3	3.5	3.8	2.0	1.1	0.9	1.1		0.1	0.1		
2004	100	17.6	11.1	10.7	9.1	8.1	7.0	10.3	7.3	4.9	5.7	3.0	1.7	1.4	1.2	0.6	0.2	0.1		
2005	100	11.8	8.8	9.1	8.4	7.8	7.0	11.2	8.8	6.5	8.0	4.5	2.6	2.1	1.9	0.8	0.4	0.2		
2006	100	8.1	6.8	7.2	6.9	6.8	6.3	11.6	9.4	7.5	10.2	6.4	4.0	3.4	3.0	1.4	0.6	0.4		
2007	100	3.9	4.4	5.1	5.7	5.7	5.5	10.9	9.4	8.2	12.8	8.4	5.7	5.2	4.9	2.4	1.1	0.7		
2008	100	2.0	2.8	3.3	3.8	4.1	4.2	8.5	8.2	7.7	13.2	10.0	7.7	7.8	8.2	4.8	2.3	1.3		
2009	100				2.6	6.9	4.4	8.7	8.2	7.8	13.9	11.2	8.5	8.8	9.6	5.3	2.6	1.5		
2010	100				1.8	3.5	5.0	8.0	7.5	7.2	12.3	11.3	9.1	9.8	11.5	6.7	3.4	2.1		
2011	100				1.5	4.7	3.3	6.9	6.6	6.6	12.4	11.1	9.3	10.5	12.6	7.9	4.1	2.5		
2012	100				0.9	1.9	3.1	6.1	5.8	5.7	11.1	10.4	9.3	11.3	14.8	10.2	5.7	3.8		
2013	100					1.0	2.7	4.3	4.8	4.9	10.1	10.0	9.3	11.7	16.4	12.7	7.4	2.4	2.3	
2014	100					0.7	1.3	4.0	4.1	4.3	9.0	9.1	8.7	11.7	17.5	14.1	9.2	3.4	3	
2015	100						1.4	3.1	3.4	4.0	8.5	9.0	20.9		18.6	15.2	9.4	3.3	2.8	0.4
2016	100						1.0	2.6	3.2	3.6	8.0	8.3	20.1		19.1	16.1	10.6	3.9	3.3	0.4

Note: For the IVQ of 2016 the amount of the subsistence level for the working age population was RUR 10,466 (USD 183.97) per capita per month. Salaries below this amount are shown in grey colour.
Source: [28]

compare properly the absolute poverty criteria in different countries, it is necessary to take into account the cost of the necessary minimum of material goods and services, such as food prices, expenditures for health care, education, and entertainment, loans interest rates, etc. International think-tank «Legatum Institute» compiles comprehensive ranking of countries in terms of living standards, so-called «Prosperity Index». In addition to the level of wages and salaries in the country, it includes the state of education, health care, the correlation of prices and real material opportunities for citizens in different countries. According to 2016 Prosperity Index, Russia was ranked 95th out of 149 world countries, between Nepal and Moldova [27]. The same ranking puts Kazakhstan at 82th, Georgia - at 84th, China - at 90th, Belarus - at 98th, Armenia and Tajikistan - at 99th and 100th places respectively.

According to Eurostat data, almost quarter of the EU population is in the risk zone for poverty and social exclusion. In this respect the most endangered and poor countries of the EU are Latvia (30.9%), Hungary (31.8%), Greece (36.0%), Bulgaria (40.1%), and Romania (40.2%). Until recently, Bulgaria was showing even worse results, up to as low as 49.3%, which made this country lagging far behind by the rest of the EU.

In Russia, official status of people with low income requires complicated bureaucratic procedure to be undergone at least twice a year. After being granted this status, social actors receive subsidies for housing and utility payments, besides insignificant benefits and compensations established by regional authorities, slightly affecting their financial situation. Many Russians with low income do not apply for official status because of insignificant state support and bureaucratisation, or even because many of them are unaware of their real social status. In this regard, it can be assumed that the official data do not fully correspond to the reality. At the same time, one cannot deny the fact that not all «officially poor» are the poor as such, as they may have undeclared incomes, or property registered to third parties, but considering small state preferences, their share is insignificant.

It should also be noted that significant part of Russian citizens is neither employed, nor registered as unemployed, because presumably around 40 million of economically active people are employed in the grey sector. Respectively,

state bodies do not have reliable data on their income, which can be either above or below the subsistence level. Taking into account all the above mentioned, the official data on the number of the poor in Russia appear to be controversial, and the poverty threshold in the existing amount of the subsistence level is significantly underestimated.

These facts can be proved if we consider the structure of the poor. Based on Russian Federal State Statistics Service's data, we may conclude that 10.4% of employees get salaries below the subsistence level established for the working age population, and 8.0% of employees earn less than RUR 13,800 (242.57 USD) per month. Thus, even according to the «optimistic» official data, about 20% of the employed Russians actually earn less than or actually at the boundary of subsistence level (see Tab. 1). This group consists of more than 14 million people, and 4.2 million officially registered Russian unemployed can be added to this figure.

Retirees are another mass recruitment group of the poor. All not employed Russian retirees get a social pension supplement to get their subsistence level established in a particular region, hence, officially, there are no poor retirees in Russia. However, in 2016 an average pension in the Russian Federation was about RUR 12,600 rubles (221.45 USD), making median one even lower. It can be assumed that the majority of 42.7 million retirees have incomes at, or slightly higher than the subsistence level. Taking into account the fact that some of the above-mentioned retirees, who constitute more than 27% of the population, have dependents, one can only imagine the true latent poverty incidence.

The share of «the relatively poor» should also be taken into account. For example, families with children, where only one spouse works, as the other is on the maternal leave, or lost his/her job. Unplanned expenditures for household needs, medical services, expensive drugs, and other unexpected events can result in situational poverty due to spikes of imbalance in families' budget.

The data on the number and proportion of the poor in the Russian society obtained by sociologists are somewhat different from the official ones. Thus, according to N. E. Tikhonova, the share of the poor in the Russian population depending on the approaches to the phenomenon of poverty can be as high as 40% [29]. According to the results of Higher School of Economics monitoring, 41% of

the Russian citizens do not have enough money for food and clothing, i.e. according to self-assessment, all of these respondents are poor [30]. According to the current world practice, countries can be considered as poor if the population's costs for food and other urgent needs make up more than half of their budget. Under current crisis, the poverty situation in the Russian Federation rose to the level of national disaster, spreading like a tumour. Leading Russian scientists unanimously note that poverty determines a specific way of life, values, patterns of social interactions, and biographical strategies.

5. Conclusions

We agree with the opinion of a number of scholars that in Russia it is viable to apply a relative approach to poverty, since the median incomes of the majority of Russians are rather low. However, the absolute poverty approach, based on the subsistence level as the main poverty criterion, is criticised by experts and the public due to its insufficient validity. The poverty threshold defined as the subsistence level does not correspond to modern economic realities.

Therefore, the criteria for determining poverty need further scientific elaboration. The number of the poor in the Russian Federation has increased significantly over the past three years, disregarding the applied techniques of counting. At the moment, their share varies from 13.3% (official statistics) to 41% (independent studies). It should be noted that Russian poverty is not directly related to unemployment, the official level of which is not high even in comparison with developed countries, or with an antisocial way of life. Its main reason is extremely low salaries, pensions, student grants, and other social payments. The bulk of the Russian poor are low-paid employees. The majority of retirees, families with two or more children are also in this risk group.

It is necessary to study carefully additional poverty criteria, and improve the methodology for calculating the subsistence level. It is also important to expand social guarantees for the poor, and to develop strategy for levelling social polarisation as one of the priority goals for social policy of the state [31].

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