

THE ROLE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY: A POLITICAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

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The article examines the role of the middle class in the development of civil society from political, legal and socio-economic perspectives. The study proceeds from the premise that a stable stratum of owners, entrepreneurs, professionals and economically active citizens is not merely an economic indicator, but also a political and legal factor that strengthens social balance, civic responsibility and institutional participation. The paper analyzes classical views on the middle class, its transformation in modern industrial and post-industrial societies, and the legal-institutional conditions shaping the middle class in New Uzbekistan. Special attention is paid to property rights, entrepreneurship, poverty reduction, privatization, the “people’s IPO” mechanism, and the constitutional recognition of employment and poverty reduction as state responsibilities. The article argues that the middle class becomes a real actor of civil society when ownership, legal culture, civic participation and social responsibility are formed as mutually reinforcing elements.

Introduction

In contemporary political and legal thought, the middle class is usually understood not only as an income group but also as a social stratum capable of supporting institutional stability, lawful economic behavior and civic participation. A society in which a broad group of citizens possesses stable property, professional qualifications, entrepreneurial initiative and a culture of legal responsibility is less vulnerable to radical polarization between wealth and poverty. For this reason, the study of the middle class is directly connected with the theory of civil society, the rule of law and the social state.

The relevance of this topic for Uzbekistan is determined by several interconnected circumstances. First, the renewed Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan recognizes the right to property, guarantees the legal basis of civil society institutions, and establishes the duty of the state to take measures aimed at employment protection and poverty reduction [1]. Second, the updated “Uzbekistan — 2030” Strategy, approved in 2026 on the basis of the results achieved in 2023–2025, places strategic planning, measurable indicators and monitoring mechanisms at the centre of national development policy [2]. Third, ongoing reforms in the areas of entrepreneurship, privatization, capital market development and poverty reduction create new institutional conditions for the formation of a sustainable middle class.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the political and legal role of the middle class in the development of civil society and to identify the main factors that transform a property-owning stratum into an active civic subject. The object of the study is the middle class as a socio-political and legal phenomenon. The subject of the study is the relationship between the formation of the middle class, property rights, entrepreneurship, poverty reduction policy and civil society institutions.

The methodological basis of the article consists of historical-comparative analysis, political and legal analysis, structural-functional analysis and document analysis. Classical political philosophy, sociological approaches to the middle class, modern theories of civil society and recent normative documents of Uzbekistan are used as the principal source base.

Theoretical and historical foundations of the middle class concept

The idea that the middle part of society performs a stabilizing function has deep historical roots. Aristotle’s “Politics” already contains the view that a polity based on the “middle” citizens is more stable than a polity dominated either by the extremely rich or by the extremely poor [8]. The value of this classical argument lies not in its numerical precision, but in its

political logic: moderation in property status can reduce social conflict and create a social basis for lawful public order.

Later European and American thought transformed this idea in accordance with the development of capitalism, urbanization, industrialization and professional specialization. The early modern term “middle class” is often associated with James Bradshaw’s 1745 pamphlet, while the nineteenth century gave the category a more concrete socio-economic content connected with merchants, artisans, small manufacturers and property owners [9]. In the United States, S. M. Blumin analyzed the emergence of the middle class as a distinct social experience in the American city from 1760 to 1900 [10]. M. Archer and J. Blau related the formation of class characteristics to changes in employment, business development, urban residence and a common way of life [11].

In the twentieth century, the middle class ceased to be defined only by ownership of small property. Human capital, professional status, managerial competence and education became central criteria. M. Halbwachs examined the social morphology of middle classes in Europe [12], while M. Savage and his co-authors distinguished entrepreneurs, managers and professionals as important internal groups of the modern middle class [13]. Thus, the modern middle class includes not only owners of small and medium-sized enterprises but also professionals, employees with stable income, managers and qualified specialists.

For civil society theory, this evolution is important because it expands the middle class from a purely economic category into a social and political one. S. M. Lipset’s classical analysis of democracy emphasized the relationship between economic development, social structure and political legitimacy [14]. R. Putnam’s research on social capital showed that civic networks, trust and horizontal associations influence institutional performance [15]. These approaches allow the middle class to be interpreted as a bearer of social capital, legal culture and public initiative rather than merely as a statistical income group.

Middle class, property rights and the rule of law

A sustainable middle class cannot exist without legally protected property. Property rights provide citizens with economic independence, long-term planning capacity and incentives for lawful participation in economic life. At the same time, the existence of private property alone does not automatically generate civil society. Property must be embedded in a legal order that protects ownership, contracts, entrepreneurship and fair competition.

H. de Soto’s theory of capital is useful in this respect because it emphasizes the importance of formal legal institutions in transforming assets into active economic resources [16]. This argument is particularly relevant for societies undergoing economic transformation: when

ownership is legally secure, transparent and transferable, property becomes not only a personal asset but also a mechanism of broader economic inclusion.

In the Uzbek constitutional framework, property rights and social obligations of the state are not isolated norms. The Constitution recognizes the right to own property and also provides that the state shall take measures to ensure employment, protect citizens from unemployment and reduce poverty [1]. This combination is significant from a political and legal point of view. It demonstrates that the formation of a middle class is not only the result of market mechanisms, but also the outcome of legal guarantees, social policy and institutional modernization.

The rule of law is the basic environment in which the middle class can become an active subject of civil society. Entrepreneurs, professionals and owners are able to defend their interests, create associations, participate in public debate and demand accountable governance only where the rules of economic and social interaction are predictable. Therefore, the middle class is both a product of the rule of law and one of its social supports.

Entrepreneurship and small business as a social basis of the middle class

Small and medium-sized enterprises perform a dual function in the formation of the middle class. Economically, they create employment, income and market flexibility. Socially, they cultivate responsibility, initiative, risk assessment, organizational competence and a culture of self-reliance. In many countries, the development of SMEs has been one of the principal mechanisms through which citizens entered the middle class.

International practice shows that definitions of small and medium-sized enterprises vary from country to country. Some states use the number of employees, others use annual turnover, capital volume, sectoral criteria or a combination of these indicators. For that reason, direct statistical comparison must be approached carefully. Nevertheless, the general tendency is clear: SMEs are essential for employment, private-sector development and innovation. The Asian Development Bank's Asia Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Monitor treats MSME data as a core resource for evidence-based policy design in Asia and the Pacific [5].

In Uzbekistan, support for entrepreneurship has become one of the strategic directions of economic policy. Measures connected with simplified business regulation, access to finance, tax stability and protection of entrepreneurs are aimed at expanding the social base of ownership and self-employment. Recent official communications also emphasize the need to support small business, simplify liquidation procedures for small firms without tax debt, and maintain tax predictability for entrepreneurs [6].

However, the middle class cannot be reduced to business owners only. It also includes professionals, qualified employees, teachers, doctors, engineers, civil servants, service-sector specialists and other groups whose social position is based on education and stable income. The quality of the middle class depends on whether these groups are able to acquire property, invest in human capital, participate in associations and influence public decision-making through lawful mechanisms.

The middle class in New Uzbekistan: political and legal factors

The formation of the middle class in Uzbekistan has passed through several historical stages. In the Soviet period, private ownership and independent entrepreneurship were ideologically restricted. After independence, the transition to market relations created new opportunities, but also generated sharp social differentiation, unemployment, labor migration and informal economic practices. The more recent stage of reforms is distinguished by the attempt to combine market mechanisms with targeted poverty reduction and social protection.

The poverty reduction agenda is directly connected with the expansion of the middle class. In constitutional terms, poverty reduction is now defined as a state responsibility [1]. In policy terms, employment support, vocational training, family entrepreneurship, preferential lending and local social registers have been used as mechanisms for moving vulnerable groups into more stable economic positions. According to the World Bank country overview, pro-poor growth in 2025 reduced the national poverty rate and improved the Gini coefficient between 2024 and 2025 [4]. This trend is important because a stable middle class cannot be formed if a large share of the population remains economically insecure.

At the same time, poverty reduction and middle-class formation are not identical processes. Moving a person out of poverty does not automatically mean that this person has acquired the values, legal culture, managerial competence and civic behavior associated with a mature middle class. A newly formed income group may still remain vulnerable to economic shocks, lack business experience, depend on state support and avoid civic risk. Therefore, the consolidation of the middle class requires time, institutional education and stable mechanisms of participation.

One of the important reforms in this sphere is the reduction of state participation in the economy and the development of broader ownership through capital market mechanisms. The State Assets Management Agency reported that the Presidential Decree of 24 March 2023 on additional measures to reduce state participation in the economy provided for public trading of state share packages, auctioning of state property, and the sale of state shares in 40 large companies and banks through a “people’s IPO” mechanism [3]. This measure is politically

significant because it can transform citizens from passive consumers into shareholders and participants in corporate governance.

The updated “Uzbekistan — 2030” Strategy also matters in this context. The 2026 decree updates the strategy for 2026–2030, links it with measurable performance indicators, and establishes digital monitoring of target achievement [2]. From the viewpoint of civil society development, this creates a more accountable framework in which economic reforms, social protection and institutional modernization can be evaluated through concrete indicators rather than general declarations.

Civil society functions of the middle class

The civil society role of the middle class can be grouped into several functions. First, it performs a stabilizing function. A broad middle class reduces the social distance between the rich and the poor, thereby weakening the risk of radical polarization. This does not eliminate inequality, but it creates a social buffer that makes peaceful negotiation and institutional reform more likely.

Second, the middle class performs an associational function. Owners, entrepreneurs, professionals and qualified employees are more likely to create professional unions, business associations, consumer organizations, neighborhood initiatives, homeowners’ associations and other forms of self-organization. These institutions do not always pursue broad political goals, but they cultivate the skills of cooperation, representation and lawful defense of interests.

Third, the middle class performs a normative function. When property, education and stable income are combined with legal culture, citizens become more sensitive to the quality of public services, transparency of governance, fair taxation, property protection and social justice. In this sense, the middle class can act as a transmitter of civic standards and responsible public behavior.

Fourth, the middle class performs an economic modernization function. Entrepreneurs and professionals introduce new technologies, management standards, service quality, investment practices and labor discipline. Their activity supports the transition from a state-dominated economy to a more diversified market economy. OECD analysis notes that Uzbekistan’s outsized state role and underdeveloped domestic capital market remain constraints, which confirms the importance of expanding private financing and market institutions [7].

Fifth, the middle class performs an educational and cultural function. Families belonging to the middle class generally invest more in education, professional development and social mobility. This strengthens human capital and expands the future base of civil society.

However, this function becomes socially productive only when education is connected with legal responsibility, civic ethics and tolerance.

Discussion: risks and limitations

The expansion of the middle class is a positive tendency, but it also contains several risks. The first risk is formalization without internalization. Citizens may acquire property or business status, yet not immediately develop the legal consciousness, civic initiative and long-term responsibility expected from an active middle class. This is especially true for groups that recently moved out of poverty and still face psychological and economic insecurity.

The second risk is dependence on state support. If income growth is maintained only through subsidies, preferential credits or temporary programs, the new middle class may remain fragile. Sustainable consolidation requires independent market activity, access to skills, predictable regulation and fair competition.

The third risk is excessive inequality within the middle class itself. Entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, salaried employees and new shareholders may have very different interests and levels of civic activity. A differentiated middle class can become a source of pluralism, but it can also become fragmented if there are no institutions capable of articulating common interests.

The fourth risk is weak civic organization. The existence of property owners does not automatically create civil society. Associations, public councils, business unions, consumer protection structures, professional chambers and local self-government bodies are necessary for transforming individual economic interests into collective civic participation.

For these reasons, the development of the middle class should be viewed not as a purely economic outcome, but as a long political and legal process. Its success depends on the interaction of property rights, legal education, transparent governance, social mobility, fair access to markets and active civil society institutions.

Conclusion

The middle class occupies a central place in the development of civil society because it connects economic independence with social responsibility and civic participation. Classical political philosophy already emphasized the stabilizing role of the “middle” part of society, while modern sociology and political theory show that the middle class contributes to social capital, institutional trust and democratic legitimacy.

In Uzbekistan, the formation of a broad and sustainable middle class is linked with constitutional guarantees of property and employment, poverty reduction policy, entrepreneurship development, privatization and the expansion of capital market

participation. These processes are not merely economic reforms; they shape the social base of civil society and the rule of law.

At the same time, the article shows that the middle class becomes an effective actor of civil society only when ownership is combined with legal culture, professional competence, public initiative and institutional channels of participation. Poverty reduction can create entry into the middle class, but consolidation requires time, stable income, independent economic behavior and civic values.

Therefore, the strategic task is not only to increase the number of middle-income citizens or property owners, but also to form a socially responsible, legally literate and institutionally active middle class. Such a class can support social stability, strengthen civil society institutions and contribute to the long-term modernization of New Uzbekistan.

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