

Social Life on the Last Stop: Understanding Tbilisi's Urban Inequalities through Marshrutka Hubs

Introduction

In this research I analyze Tbilisi's hubs of mobility, specifically social life on marshrutka last stops in Tbilisi. The overarching purpose is, through analysis of these "small urban spaces," (Whyte 1980) to reveal spatial inequalities existing and reproducing around public transport and marshrutka travel specifically. The guiding question, therefore is: *how is spatial and social inequality structured in the Tbilisi peripheries? What can the social life and the spatial arrangements on the marshrutka last stops reveal about it?*

The last stops – defined as both the starting and the ending point of the marshrutka route - are mostly located in the peripheries of Tbilisi. They are either in the centres of the periphery – the final stations of the not so vast metro network, or in the peripheries of the periphery – the final stops of the marshrutkas that take people from the final metro around the neighborhoods. The people using these last stops, both passengers and other actors are, one would think, the most disconnected from the city life. These social spaces, at the same time pulsate with life locally but are spatially far from the vital city services – jobs, recreation and other activities. Because the last stops are usually located around monofunctional neighborhoods, mostly sleeping districts, they are even more prone to social exclusion. They constitute perfect *loci* which serve as an entry point to decipher Tbilisi's social and spatial inequalities.

Context of the Tbilisi's marshrutka system on a macro Level

At the first glance, history of Tbilisi's marshrutka system since Georgia's independence is not very original. Emerging mainly¹ after the collapse of the Soviet system, it neatly divides into three periods: In 1990s, when it was an invaluable and almost exclusively informal provider of mobility with the loss of central public transportation (Finn 2008). In early 2000s state interfered in two directions: it started issuing marshrutka "line permits" to "line owners" or bundlers to which drivers paid certain amounts, along with reintroducing larger buses (ibid). Finally, the start of the third period is marked by a takeover of the whole network of around 190 marshrutka routes in 2011 by a single private company on a 20 year lease. Since then the marshrutkas serve as an alternative, private and in many ways parallel system to the Tbilisi's two other municipally owned transportation options, buses and metro. There are two main types of marshrutka routes – ones that crisscross central parts of the city and the ones that take the passengers from local centres (usually metro stops) to their homes in the periphery. These two types differ drastically in prices, distance and time traveled and role in the urban system (see table 1).

¹ While limited number of marshrutkas served the city during late soviet years their significance was small to negligible

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Table 1: Tbilisi Marshrutka Routes Statistics²

Type of Route	Number of Routes	Price (GEL)	Average length (km)	Average duration (min)	Av. number of route Metro Stations
City-Crossing	89	0.8	17	44.6	5
Peripheral Short	87	0.3 to 0.6	6.1	16.5	1
Outskirt Routes	14	0.8 to 1.5	22.1	45.4	2

Theoretical Considerations

Existing studies of Tbilisi's marshrutka system do not travel beyond quantitative analysis of perceptions of public versus private transport (Grdzlishvili and Sathre 2011), sketch depicting murky ownership of marshrutka lines (Muehlfried and Diakonidze 2006)³, largely descriptive comparison of Tbilisi system with two other cases (Finn 2008), rudimentary game-theoretical analysis (Galdava and Biermann 2013) and critique of monopoly on marshrutka transportation (Chitanava 2013) and therefore reveal a distinct lack of thorough qualitative analyses, historical, spatial or sociological. On the other hand, there is a host of scholarship regarding "small urban places" (Whyte 1980). and interactions on the local level, as well as literature concerned specifically with small urban places understood socially in Georgia (Zakharova 2010, Curro 2015) and finally social life in Tbilisi's Soviet micro districts specifically (Asabashvili 2012). Here I try take political understanding of the public space – the one that sees public space as a space of contestation (Neal 2010, Orum and Neal 2010) and try to combine it with socio-spatial understanding of it – concerned with the forms of the last stops, the interactions taking place there, the small and temporary installments and finally people's mental images of them. Finally, on a broader theoretical level my research will be based on the literature on mobilities, with a post-soviet focus (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2014, Jensen 2009) and specifically the literature concerned with immobilities (for example, Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006), or "spatial fixes" (Harvey 1989), the "necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities" (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 3), " which are in fact the last stops of the marshrutkas. A handy concept here is "motility" (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008), which is defined "the manner in which an individual or group appropriates the field of possibilities relative to movement and uses them" (p. 45). Post-soviet spatial inequality can be read as people having a low degree of motility while being highly mobile.

Methodology, design and research plan and contribution

The proposed research lends itself well to a variety of chiefly qualitative methods. The first natural fit is participant observation on these last stops which I choose as my initial starting point, which is then to be

² Own work based on information on routes by LTD "Tbilisi Microbus", available at <http://tm.ge/routes/scheme.php>

³ Available through wayback machine at

http://web.archive.org/web/20061201064125/http://www.caucaz.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=268

followed by the interviews with the marshrutka drivers, users of the both types of marshrutka – with particular emphasis on passengers who ride it “end-to-end” or at least use one of the ends, and interviews with other actors on the last stop social space – the ‘dispatchers’ of the routes, the neighbourhood shopkeepers, loiters, the all-knowing social hubs, “public sidewalk characters” described by Jacobs (1961) and other actors. These interviews will also give up a temporal picture of inequality, since interviewees will sketch out their mobilities over time, specifically the three periods of marshrutka systems. Finally the third part of the research would be the mental mapping of the travels with the marshrutka, which will reveal how the subjects of the study practice the city and how different are these practices across different routes, in different times of day or working days/holidays. I will be doing this both with the “city-crossing” and “peripheral” routes and will be trying to understand how inequality works in either of them.

One notable but foreseeable difficulty is the problem with entry into the field. Since the whole research is concentrated on a single (on paper) private company, it could be suspicious of a prying researcher and try to impose roadblocks. This I believe can be overcome through personal contacts, legal and informal assurances and deep and prolonged immersion into the field which blunts the wariness.

This research will contribute to the large project with bringing in novel bottom up understanding of social and spatial inequality and the study of the transformation of the Tbilisi periphery that is still underresearched. It will relate to the broader questions of the social transformation of post-soviet life through understanding of inequalities that are produced in these mostly peripheral and Soviet-built Tbilisi neighbourhoods.

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