

Research Proposal

“Spatial Dynamics of Marshrutkas in Central Asia and the Caucasus”

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Re/consideration of Social and Cultural Identity through the Marshrutka Space in Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

The collapse of the USSR has brought to the former Soviet republics, like Kyrgyzstan, not only independence, renewed identity and consciousness, but also new forms of public mobility and urban transformation. During the first decades of post-Soviet development of Kyrgyzstan the transport sector was intensively privatized (Osmonov and Asankanov 2002, p.477) and traditional means of Soviet public transport, such as buses and trolleybuses in the capital Bishkek, started to compete with private public transportation, such as marshrutkas and taxis. Marshrutkas have taken a very special place in the context of the whole transportation system in Kyrgyzstan: on one hand, marshrutkas manifest the development of private ownership and capitalist modernism, on the other hand, they reflect the larger transformation and diversification of the urban space, by becoming one of its most essential symbols and phenomena. Marshrutkas were imported and sold locally, and in spite of their high cost, people bought them even taking loans from banks or relatives. Marshrutkas, like bazaars, were among the very few regular sources of daily income in the times of harsh economic crisis. Even today, they remain one of the most popular source of revenue in large and small towns and villages of Kyrgyzstan.¹

There are now more than 31,000 minibuses operating in the system of public transportation in the Republic. They connect nearly 2,000 various local districts and villages. In Bishkek, for example, 2400 to 2600 marshrutkas take back and forth more than 120,000 passengers daily.² The role of marshrutkas in the country is tremendously high in terms of meeting the transportation needs of people, contributing to the earnings of marshrutka drivers, and facilitating internal migration, intraregional mobility and urbanization. They are also a place where people are connected socially and culturally, where ethnic and religious identities, power relations, social statuses, gender hierarchies, and intergenerational exchanges are manifested verbally, nonverbally, physically and symbolically.

The purpose of research

This project aims to study marshrutka as a space where (re)production of new urban identities takes place, which simultaneously overlap with other forms of identity such as ethnicity, regional origin, gender, etc.

I am interested in learning to what extent these identities incorporate the element of change and transformation as a result of a regular and frequent process of communication in the space of marshrutka.

The first section of the research elaborates on the development of marshrutka business in Kyrgyzstan and its connection with post-Soviet market economy. How was the marshrutka business formed in the era of market and bazaar economy;³ and what state-power relations, transport management and city regulations do influence its current development? The second section describes how the social differentiation process in Kyrgyzstani society may be affected by the marshrutka space. Finally, the third section is devoted to the gender and age issues. Women and elder riders are expected to receive a special attitude and be offered seats, usually in the front space. However, from my preliminary observations, it was noticed that young people nowadays

are quite reluctant to follow the “moral obligation”. This research will further provide insights to how individualism and new “urban” mentality might challenge social traditions depending on the route destination, urban territory, time of ride, and other social and cultural factors.

Literature review

By setting various scholarly works about the mobility paradigm, (Sheller, 2003; Urry 2003; Urry 2007, Richardson and Jensen, 2008), this project aims to explore the extent to which the marshrutka phenomenon opens up new ways of understanding the social mobility, which involves different kinds of movement of people, ideas, information and objects” (Urry, 2007: 43).

Theories of “culture, place and space” have a special role in my research. Using the theoretical foundations of Kokot (2004), Appadurai (1991), Gupta and Ferguson (1992) about the complex connection between space and culture, I would like to see how the cultural identities of riders and drivers are being embedded in the process of negotiation and interaction.

Being a regular marshrutka passenger myself and having had some preliminary observations, I argue, that marshrutka, being both ‘solid’ and ‘fluid’ space (Law, p.96), has significant impact on how people make sense of themselves and of their society. Such a space, on one hand, solidifies people’s identities and thus conveys some sort of rigidity, but on the other hand, urban culture threatens people’s perceptions and confirms Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992, p.6) notion that cultures “... are no longer fixed in places”.

Although collective taxis in some cities of the world have been already researched (see Sanina, 2011, Sgibnev 2014), but in terms of Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet countries, the research of this transportation, and phenomenon is comparatively new and it has not received much attention yet.⁴ Particularly, it has not been well scrutinized in terms of its impacts on the identity formation, social cohesion and power relations. These gaps are especially noticeable in Central Asia and the Caucasus scholarship.⁵

Research Methods

Participant observation will be one of the main methods used in this research. I am planning to spend hours and hours of marshrutka riding in the search of insights on marshrutka “habitus” and marshrutka communications. In addition, I am planning to conduct in-depth interviews with passengers, drivers and transportation specialists varying by age, gender, occupation and socio-economic status. This will help to build up an empiric database on marshrutka systems in Kyrgyzstan. The study will also incorporate a quantitative component in the form of questionnaire survey. It will engage in the spatial analysis and use mapping techniques to visualize the routes of marshrutkas, main destinations and types of territories they connect. In most of cases, the comparative analysis will be provided with other countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, where marshrutkas are also the main type of public transportation.

What is marshrutka business like in Kyrgyzstan now?

As in many post-Soviet republics, the history of marshrutka service in Kyrgyzstan also started in 1990s with the collapse of the USSR and deterioration of public transport system, when the numbers of buses and trolleybuses were reduced and many routes were shut down. The transport crisis provoked the refit of RAF modeled cars, before used only as ambulance and police cars. The RAF-22039 became the public transportation with 13 seats and later they were remodeled to accommodate 15 seats. Since 2000s, more comfortable Gazelle and Mercedes Benz Sprinters buses with more seats, replaced RAFs. These models became popular because of the formation of several big automobile markets in Bishkek. The need to connect different areas of capital and oblasts with Alamedin, Osh and Dordoi bazaars resulted in the popularity of larger Mercedes

Sprinters. Another reason of substitution was the economic interest: it was more profitable to have more passengers. In 2000s, the protests of marshrutka drivers were common. They demanded to reconsider the administrative fines for riding the standing passengers. Now the administrative fine is 3,000 soms (\$40), but drivers still break the rule and ride with both seating and standing passengers.

The marshrutka fare has been constantly changing with inflation and growing cost of gasoline. The latest changes were in 2012, which brought the cost of riding in marshrutka increase to 10 soms from 6AM to 21PM and 12 soms from 21 PM to 24PM. In express-marshrutkas riding from Dordoï bazaar to different destinations of Bishkek the daytime fare is 12 soms. According to the 2012 regulation, pensioners and pupils should pay 5 soms, but marshrutka drivers are not satisfied with it, which is why they appeal for the increase of both fares. Another great dissatisfaction and protest of marshrutka drivers is the constant intention of municipal administration to substitute of marshrutka lines by the buses from China. This intention is particularly threatening in Bishkek.

All these formal changes have been made on the basis of such laws as the Administrative Code of KR (2007/2012) and the Law about Public Transportation (2011/2013). There is also a hot line to reach the Bishkek transportation department and report about the work of marshrutkas. But, in most of the cases these and other minor rules and laws are constantly violated and marshrutka transportation service has become a part of Kyrgyzstan's shadow economy.

Unemployment in the regions and intensive internal migration result in high rates of urbanization and large number of people coming to Bishkek. According to various estimates, the population of Bishkek is now more than one million. It uses 2,636 minibuses versus 250 buses and 87 trolleybuses on daily basis.⁶ Administratively and territorially, Bishkek is divided into four rayons (districts), and each of them has several new settlements called *novostroikas* located in the periphery. The total area of Bishkek is 169,9 km., and all logistics of marshrutkas including the schedule, destination, hour management and accessibility/remoteness of stops and lines have been configured and adapted to the new city plan. However, marshrutkas often do not follow on the regulations about stopping only at the officially designated bus stops, instead they stop anywhere they passenger asks to stop. This makes marshrutkas convenient for passengers, but it also contributes to the chaos on the streets, traffic, which often results in accidents. The marshrutka (un)safety is always discussed by the society and authorities and as a solution, they suggest purchasing more buses and trolleybuses from neighboring China. Another reason is the fact that the main income from the exploitation of minibuses goes to more than fifty private companies, which now manage the marshrutka business in Kyrgyzstan.

Marshrutkas in Kyrgyzstan are classified as *country-to-country* (mostly from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan), *intercity*, *city-village* and *city* mini buses. Marshrutkas also vary by the physical specifications, technical quality, and profitability. Collectively, all these traits influence passengers' mentality, expectations and perceptions about marshrutka and their relation to it.

The intercity and the village-city marshrutkas are quite different even in the context of Bishkek. Novostroikas are some sort of hybrid places. They administratively belong to Bishkek municipality, but at the same time they look like villages because of poor material conditions, including facilities and infrastructure in those areas. Population here also can be called as semi-rural and semi-urban. What is interesting is that their adaptation to the urban culture and environment can also be explored by studying as Richardson and Jensen pointed out (2008:218) the material spaces of mobility, which in the case of marshrutka include the administratively specified and non-specified

stops, routes and destinations. For instance, marshrutka #224, starts its route in Kelechek novostroika, it goes via all city on some of its major streets, such as Sovetskaya and Chui to some important urban destinations like Dordoi bazaar, Osh bazaar, and Zapadnaya bus transit center before it arrives at its final stop in Sadovoe village. The whole length is more than 40km and the full journey in traffic can take more than 1-1,5 hours.

Production of social inequality in marshrutka system

The deterritorialization of Bishkek has happened immediately after the Independence and it started to be recognized through such spatiality as the 'hyperspace and borderlands'. Economically stable and rich people populate mostly the hyperspace associating with the center, microrayons and new neighborhoods. Such areas are well fit with suitable infrastructure (road communication, water, canalization, electricity and etc.). In contrast to hyperspace, the neighborhoods located in the north of Bishkek, are considered as the unprivileged districts because of the lack of infrastructure, bad natural environment and concentration of migrant lodgers there. The connection between these two actual and symbolic spatialities are covered by marshrutkas and marshrutkas' space, which is often used as a space of representation of class identity and social status. This is mostly visible in the marshrutkas going to wealthier neighborhoods, such as the *Tsarskoe selo*, *Kirghizia*, *Kalys-Ordo*, *Yntymak*, and *Manas-Ordo*. Residents there usually use cars, but their school and student children, elderly parents and domestic helpers often use marshrutkas.

Another kind of administrative-territorial unit in Bishkek is 'microrayon' (micro-district) – the residential area with multi-stored housing built during Soviet times. Marshrutkas get service to the microrayons and connect them with different parts of Bishkek and especially with its main bazaars. In contrast to novostroikas, microrayons and the city center are ethnically much more diverse, they include Kyrgyz, Russian, Kazakh, Ukrainian, German, Tajik, Korean and other ethnic groups. The population is also more diverse in regards to their religious affiliation. For example, Muslim, Russian Christian Orthodox and representatives of various evangelical and protestant churches inhabit these districts.⁷ The interaction of 'cultural practices' as proposed by Bourdieu (1977) and 'cultural differences' as pointed out by Appadurai (1991) is expressed verbally and non-verbally and varied by the destinations and length of journey. For instance, in novostroikas, marshrutkas are generally used by monoethnic Kyrgyz population while in microrayons the passengers, as mentioned above, are quite diverse. Thus, the space of marshrutka becomes a multicultural spot where the interaction and communication gets its own specific ethnocultural and ethno-linguistic strategies, clues and readings.

Marshrutka is a space of construction of gender and age

Finally, I would like to mention the role of gender and age. Automobility affects not only local public spaces and opportunities for coming together, but also the formation of gendered subjectivities, familial and social networks. (Sheller and Urry, 2006:209).

The city marshrutka usually has the standard number of 12 to 18 seats and the first four places are usually reserved for elders, women and children. However, demographically different passengers do not always follow this rule. As a university student, 22, says: "When a woman with children or an elderly people enter the marshrutka, I try to give them a seat. However, it depends on a few circumstances. If I seat in the front or I am going to my home in Archa-Beshik district, I usually give them my seat. I also usually give seats to Kyrgyz women and elders. If I seat at the back, I rarely give my seat to someone. We have the same right and young people are getting tired as any other person. In marshrutka we, young people, try to get some rest by seating and listening to music on headphones." Another passenger, a woman, 36, shared with me: "When I am in the marshrutka

going home from the Osh bazaar, I try to get some nap. I do not want to give my seat even if an elder passenger enters the marshrutka."

In other words, marshrutkas, on one hand, may be considered as a space of manifestation of respect to elders, and women and by this recognizes the social hierarchy, collectivist mentality and adherence to the national traditions. In this sense, the space of marshrutka can be taken as a space of solidarization of nation and unification of imagined communities (Anderson 1983). But on the other hand, it shows the growing detachment of young generation from the traditional culture, which is becoming more and more individualistic (Kochkunov: 2013, p.52). Thus, we can see how marshrutkas become the spaces of daily emergence of gender and intergenerational ruptures. In some oblasts of Kyrgyzstan, the construction of gender and intergenerational connections in the space of marshrutka may have different manifestations due to the regional and ethno-cultural connections, surroundings and norms. All these will be deeply investigated during the fieldtrips to the oblasts.

In conclusion, I would like to point out, that the preliminary research shows that marshrutkas in Kyrgyzstan have become the agents of urban mobility and dynamics, which connect spatially distinctive peoples and cultures. In this frequent and constant process of connectivity, people interact with each other verbally or nonverbally, directly or indirectly and get information about each other, society and the world. Marshrutka, in this way, may be considered as a medium or a facilitator of information/knowledge sharing, identity (re)production and negotiation.

At the same time, referring Ferguson and Gupta's (1992) views on the cultural difference and space, marshrutka is also involved in the processes of production of difference and otherness. Such words, like 'we' and 'them', 'I' and 'you', locals and strangers obtain unique meanings in the space of marshrutkas. The research of marshrutkas as a space of interaction can produce diverse discourses and help develop recommendations for not only improving the public transport system of Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet countries, but also help explore cultural, social and political dynamics within the society.

Notes:

¹At Voенно-Antonovka car market the cost of marshrutka is varied from 5,000\$ to 15,000\$. See the Internet-shops available at www.cars.kg, <http://auto.desko.kg/> on 18 August 2015.

² Public Transportation accessed at <http://timothynunan.com/2011/07/09/marshrutkanomics-or-the-economics-of-post-soviet-public-transportation/> on 28 June 2015.

³ We use this word considering Clifford Geertz's definition about bazaar, as a place of formal and informal trade and communication see C.Geertz. (2008): the Bazaar Economy: Information and Search in Peasant Marketing in The American Economic Review, Vol. 68, No. 2, p.29.

⁴ The research in order to provide transit information based solely on existing Cellular and GPS networks in Bishkek. See Anderson R., Brunette W, Johnson E. Experiences with a Transportation Information System that Uses Only GPS and SMS at <http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/ict4d/ictd2010>, accessed on 1 February 2016.

⁵ Fluid mobilities for cities in transformation: spatial dynamics of Marshrutkas in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Project of the Institute for Geography in Leipzig (the project head is W. Sgibnev).

⁶ Povyshenie kachestva uslug obshestvennogo transporta v gorode Bishkek <http://serep.kg/index.php/publications/public-transport>, accessed on February 1 2016.

⁷ Skolko veruushikh v Kyrgyzstane at <http://www.milli-firka.org/content/31061528>, retrieved on 18 August 2015.

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