It is hard to study marshrutkas. They are elusive; there are no clear criteria on what a marshrutka is or on what a marshrutka is not. They differ by color, size and shape. They differ in whom they serve, who drives them, who owns them, who governs them. They differ in the ways they operate, the way routes are laid out, the way they are standardised. Rules of behaviour in a marshrutka also differ. They are quietly codified, not easy to comprehend, requiring familiarity and insiders’ knowledge. They change, adjust, and adapt quickly. They shrink and expand, they occupy public space but at points become invisible. They simultaneously enable and confront. They signify diverse, and at points contradictory, things for different people at different times. They have been markers of the decay of Soviet infrastructure and of a Soviet vision of modernity. They have also signified a new entrepreneurial spirit of capitalist modernity, of flexibility, freedom of choice, and the power of consumer demand. They have been demonized for being pre-modern, unruly, overcrowded and dangerous, while simultaneously representing locally divergent forms of solidarity, sociability, reciprocity, and sharing.

It also is easy to study marshrutkas. They are unforgettable. Everyone who experienced a marshrutka ride has their own story about it. They are omnipresent and indispensable to the everyday experience of mobility in a majority of urban and rural spaces of the post-Soviet region. People might talk of marshrutkas with hate, fear, and tiredness, or alternately, with love, humor, empathy, and nostalgia. But, they will always talk passionately and enthusiastically. It is easy to relate to marshrutkas. It’s easy to have personal stories. Often the intimacy of a marshrutka space unites a diversity of narratives. Intimacy as a sometimes-unwanted consequence of a tight physical space, but also a result of the lack of rules, a constant need to negotiate—hence to communicate, perform, and confront one another, and to claim norms, identities, and desires. Marshrutkas adapt to occupy existing spaces and infrastructures, while they also transform and construct new spaces as they do so. They bring vehicles together, but also people, commerce and knowledge. They create rhythms, benchmarks, place names. Marshrutkas are interwoven with local politics—subject to politician’s promises of affordability and access, on the one hand, or removal and replacement on the other. Through it all, marshrutkas drive on—and with consummate ease erase some of the more enduring binaries between social processes and spatial forms that otherwise resist easy theoretical closure.

The following visual archive does no justice either to the complexity of the marshrutka mobility phenomenon nor to the three year’s long research pursued by doctoral and post-doctoral researchers of the Marshrutka Project, officially known as ‘Fluid mobilities for cities in transformation: Spatial dynamics of marshrutkas in Central Asia and the Caucasus’, generously funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. Instead, it offers a modest and inconsistent collection of marshrutka-related stories and visuals. It exposes a tiny share of the diversity of ways marshrutkas can be an entry point to understanding post-Soviet socio-spatial and political-economic transformations.
The Marshrutka Project
‘извини браток работа такая’ – ‘Sorry brother, the job is like this’ is written on the back window of a marshrutka vehicle in Bishkek. This is an apology from one marshrutka driver to another, to drivers of buses, trolleybuses and private vehicles. The driver apologizes because he will overtake other vehicles, will speed up, will compete, will break rules. But at the same time he insists that no one should take it personally, it is his working environment that shapes his driving habits. Passengers try to discourage drivers from speeding. ‘You don’t carry firewood’, ‘You go slower, we will come further’, or in Kyrgyz ‘Shashkan shaitandyn ishi’ (‘you are like a devil when you are in a rush’) are the essential vocabulary of marshrutka travel. Yet, to be sure, such proverbs rarely succeed in slowing down the pace of a marshrutka ride.

Indeed, competing for passengers is a systemic feature of the marshrutka mobility system. Drivers depend on farebox revenues for their income. Ride fares are extremely low in Bishkek, so to cover vehicle maintenance costs, official taxes and informal rents, and on top, to also earn a living, drivers are desperate for each passenger, engaging in risky driving behaviour. All the while, drivers try to avoid accidents at all costs, given that they have no vehicle insurance, no third party damage insurance and most probably no health insurance. The culture of reckless driving is hence conditional upon the structural features and constraints of the marshrutka mobility system.
When, in the spring of 2017, the city administration of Volgograd started to abolish major parts of the marshrutka fleet with high public visibility, a friend of mine told me: “Don’t worry, Tonio, they will not close your research object. I promise you, after the football championship, at the latest, marshrutkas will ride through the city as wild and chaotic as ever”. In hindsight, he was right and wrong at the same time. In fact, it took only a couple of days for the first abolished marshrutka drivers to re-emerge under a new enterprise frame: officially offering pre-booked ride services, but in reality working on the exact same route, in the same conditions, and within the same time interval as before. The only exception was a small sign reading ‘zakaznyj’ (booked) on the marshrutka surface, which revealed the uncertain legal status of their daily enterprise.

While the city council first called for a resolute approach against illegal marshrutka drivers and entrepreneurs, soon, they had to recognise that the newly purchased substitute buses were unable to adequately respond to the daily transport demand in the city. As a result, ‘illegal’ marshrutka drivers continue to work in over 1000 un-registered vehicles in the city, and while tolerated, are left to informal structures of supply and organisation. At the same time, the tediously enforced reforms of the last decade—to modernise the vehicle fleet and to bring private transport companies under the tax net—are being neglected. Therefore, it is the passengers and drivers in particular who have to rely on an outlawed transport practice, and who take daily risks and face ruthless exploitation in the absence of any legal control. However, my friend was right that the football championship would influence the transport network as such: following the tournament, as the shiny new buses began to gradually disappear, it left space and demand for new marshrutka lines to emerge, albeit, so far, on a non-formalised basis.
A friend from Bishkek told me a story that, as a young boy, he dreamed of growing up and earning his own living, just to be able to avoid travelling on marshrutkas. He had two reasons: he was and still is a tall, relatively large man, while marshrutka interiors are often designed to fit as many people as possible. Imported, second-hand vehicles are locally repurposed from cargo into passenger vehicles. Vehicles with 8 to 10 person capacity are remade to accommodate up to 15 seated passengers, while up to 10 more might be standing in-between the seats. So this friend of mine felt squeezed, felt the need to shrink himself, to make himself smaller to fit the space. More than that, as a young boy he was the last one entitled to a seat. The entitlement to a seat in marshrutka follows tight social hierarchies, with older women on the top of that hierarchy and younger men on the bottom. As yet another friend, a woman in her mid-thirties, explained, only recently marshrutkas became a comfortable transport for her, as she is now recognised as a middle aged woman, and younger women, younger men and even men of the same age now offer her a seat. Here, we can see how dynamics within marshrutka are often a reflection of pre-existing social hierarchies; a stage for re-enactment of localised perceptions of justice and entitlement. Importantly, this performance of entitlement is what makes marshrutka into an explicitly public transport, and the ways in which it begins to outline an explicitly public space. In other places, such as in Tbilisi, entitlements and hence, the public-versus-private character of marshrutkas is more contested. Young people sometimes claim their entitlement as customers, they pay for it as everyone else, and as such after waiting for a seat are unwilling or hesitant to give it up.
At Dushanbe’s busy Sadbarg intersection, pedestrians, private cars, taxis, marshrutka minibuses, big buses and the city’s distinctive green-and-white trolleybuses juggle their way through the dense traffic. Teenage boys in purple waistcoats stand on the small ladders to the rear of trolleybuses. With one hand, they clutch the ladder staves, and with the other, firmly hold the rope dangling from the trolley poles. Some metres prior to the intersection, the trolleybus boy would tear down the rope, and thus lower the contact poles. The trolleybus keeps rolling, through inertia – without electricity supply, brakes aren’t working anyway – while the boy holds the poles down with the help of the rope. Once the trolleybus has reached the other side of the intersection, the boy would jump on the street and run after the rolling bus, firmly holding the ropes, in order to prevent the poles from rebounding and becoming entangled in the overhead wires. The boy carries on, half running, half jumping, and, still in motion, dexterously releases the rope, so that the poles, sparklingly, re-join the overhead wires. The loosened rope in hand, the boy jumps back at the ladder, the engine re-starts, and the bus carries on towards the terminus in front of the railway station.

The reason behind this stunning, skilful, graceful dance, starring a boy and a bus, is fairly simple: the switches at the Sadbarg intersection broke down a while ago and the boys double as living switches, helping the bus to cross the intersection. Switches are among the most fragile parts of the wiring system, and thus among the most labour-intensive in terms of maintenance and repair. Almost all public transport networks throughout the former Soviet Union have shed feathers following the economic decline and the political turmoil of the 1990s – most saliently in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, where only a handful of systems have survived out of the many dozens from back in Soviet times. The ageing rolling stock was decaying and no funding was available for the purchase of new vehicles, spare parts or the maintenance of overhead lines, paving the way for the subsequent surge of informal minibus-based transport offers, the renowned marshrutkas.

Affective Politics of Disinvestment

Wladimir Sgibnev

Dushanbe

2010
Tbilisian marshrutka drivers like to tell an anecdote from the 1990s: ‘A man said he was deceived by his son-in-law. Before marrying his daughter, the boy said he was a marshrutka driver, but later he appeared to be a doctor’. It makes sense. Marshrutka drivers indeed often earned better and more stable income than high-skilled professionals. Marshrutkas thrived in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the Soviet public transport infrastructure had decayed, unemployment was high, and the marshrutka vehicle was an easy initial investment and cheap to maintain for individual investors. It enabled passenger mobility in urban contexts, while becoming more than this in peripheral areas—taking on postal and news delivery roles, along with part-time freight. It created employment for many individuals, sustaining livelihoods of many families. Marshrutkas spread most readily in places most affected by public transport collapse, primarily Central Asia and South Caucasus, but also peripheral regions of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. At their height of service, they were also omnipresent in the capitals and largest megalopolises across the former Soviet Union. Thirty years after, marshrutka driving is neither a good-paying job, nor are the vehicles nearly as ubiquitous as they once were. But they did not completely disappear either, as initially expected. They were thought of as a temporary, transitory fix to transport pressures at that specific moment in history. In some places, policy makers actively marginalised them, often without considering social consequences. Still, with the exception of Astana (capital of Kazakhstan), success in eliminating marshrutkas is extremely rare. This is in part because the marginalisation of marshrutka is not always accompanied by alternative public transport offers. But more importantly, we can see in their persistence the ways policy makers fail to recognize how marshrutkas are no longer a temporary ‘fix’, but have grown into a peculiar socio-cultural institution.
It is the right of every man to earn a living with their hard work. Everyone has families, everyone needs to earn money—say Bishkekian drivers. Becoming a marshrutka driver is fairly easy in this city, which intensifies competition. Drivers know that the more competition there is, the less earnings each driver takes home at the end of the day. But whoever is willing to work cannot be denied work, they assert.

Marshutka mobility is certainly a lot about competition. But beyond this, it is also about exploited and self-exploited labour, lengthy working hours, little income, endless expenses, and increased responsibilities for drivers. However, these conditions are only viable because marshrutka labor is also about solidarity, sharing, and mutual support. A degree of solidarity shapes relations on different levels: between drivers and passengers, among drivers, between drivers and operating companies, and sometimes even between operating companies and state authorities. Solidarity practices between drivers is possibly the most important to the social reproduction of labour and to the reproduction of marshrutka mobility itself. Having no insurance of any kind, and all responsibilities on their shoulders, drivers would never survive without each other’s support. They share labour, they share work, and they even share property. They collect money for one another’s weddings and funerals, as well as of their kin. They share the cost of accidents and costs of unexpected health challenges. They share everydayness: food, chat, rest, shelter. But of course, the depth of sharing depends on the length of relationships. In some cities, drivers change work places often, searching for better operating companies and working conditions. In others, drivers stay working on a single route for decades. They know the neighbourhood, their passengers, and their colleagues the best; and it is here that they form the strongest and most resilient collectives.
From the suburban terminal of the 504 line, I travel to the other end of the line, to a terminal in the city center of Tbilisi. There I meet a dispatcher, Lado, a neatly dressed man in his 50s. Lado immediately takes me to a nearby store and orders a coffee for both of us. Everyone knows Lado there; they don’t ask questions, nor take money, as they prepare coffee for us. Then he shows me around. He has built a little bench and a table in an abandoned corner of the street. He has even has planted some grape-vines. In winter he usually hangs out inside the store though, as it’s impossible to stay outside all day. At other terminal stations, drivers and dispatchers find yet more elaborate solutions. An old bus standing at the end station is immobile. A drivers’ collective has asked neighbours for help and stretched an electricity line from nearby residential blocks. They arranged light and heating in the bus, while in front of the bus they have arranged seats and tables to hang out during sunny days.

Dispatchers carry around lists and make notes. They remind drivers who leaves next. Sometimes drivers are slow to leave. They relax at terminal stations, have lunch or coffee, and chat with colleagues. Some dispatchers can become pushy, making sure the next vehicle departs on time. When I first started my research, I thought dispatchers were working for operating companies to discipline drivers. Soon, however, I learned that drivers are the ones hiring dispatchers, informally of course. Dispatchers regulate intervals between vehicles of the same route. If a Marshrutka driver leaves too soon after the previous one, then he will have no passengers. If he leaves too late then the driver after him will have too few passengers. The dispatcher is there to help ensure that drivers have an equitable passenger load, and to avoid competition among drivers of the same route. Drivers say they hire a dispatcher as a form of self-discipline: “some of us are lazy, some of us like driving too quickly. It is the best for all of us when someone else keeps an eye on our intervals. Sometimes dispatchers even balance our relations and solve our conflicts.”

This way, beyond self-regulating, marshrutka drivers also create additional jobs. In some cases, they hire accountants to help with tax declarations. Elderly ladies cook warm tea and coffee, and sell sandwiches even on cold winter days. Small shops and cafes work primarily for drivers. Vehicle repair places and gas stations are also located nearby. Sometimes informal creditors come around, collecting rent or offering more credit. Marshrutka mobility systems create places of social and economic flows. Here everyone knows everyone, all are dependent on each other, and each survives with one another’s support.
Gendered Employment

I have never met, nor even heard of, a female marshrutka driver in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere. Women are typically less likely to find employment in the urban transport sector of Kyrgyzstan, particularly as a driver of a marshrutka, bus, or taxi. A share of women’s employment in transport and cargo storage was 8% in 2012, 4.7% in 2013, and 6% in 2014. By comparison, in healthcare, education, and social services, women comprise 85.9% in 2012, 85.1% in 2013, and 83.3% in 2014 of all employed persons in these fields.

In the marshrutka business, women sometimes work as dispatchers, recording arrival and departure times of minibuses at terminal stations. But most often women work as caterers for the sector. The old railway carriage is installed at the terminal station and offers simple, unpretentious service to marshrutka drivers and dispatchers. Two women usually work in this improvised cafe, playing the roles of manager, cook, cleaner, and sometimes psychologist. One of these women has worked as a cook in such a cafe for 15 years. She tells how she has witnessed and sometimes mediated numerous conflicts among drivers.

Their salary ranges from 10,000 to 15,000 Som (120-180 Euro) per month, which is not too bad a wage in the context of widespread unemployment in the country. For instance, among trolleybus drivers, 20% are women and their salary is 12,000 Som per month (150 Euro). In general, the wage of women is typically low in all professional spheres, which may be considered a sign of ‘occupational segregation’. 
Marshrutka are indispensable to women’s urban mobility, but they also reflect and reproduce gender inequalities. Domestic and social responsibilities compel women to use marshrutkas at a disproportionate rate, subjecting them to risks engendered by marshrutka travel such as the threat of injury from car accidents, harassment, and theft. In the case of Bishkek, these risks and pressures cut across social class to some extent. However, women who work and commute to crowded and sometimes remote places like bazaars are especially vulnerable. The same applies to residents of more than fifty suburban districts, so-called ‘novostrokas’ outside of the central and older microrayons of the city, which are currently under-served by alternative modes of transport like taxis (which can be prohibitively expensive) and buses.

Marshrutka facilitate the mobility of women insofar as it is quicker, more flexible form of transit than buses, and less expensive than taxis. However, marshrutka space also becomes a site of social exclusion for women, and severely and uniquely limits their mobility. Sexual harassment is one of such challenges, compounded by a general avoidance of sharing harassment experiences. This may be caused by shame and/or a cultural perception that sexual harassment is a minor abuse, a tolerated violence, or a normalised type of discrimination towards women. Sometimes younger women in their early 20s share that they have frequently experienced unwanted touching on marshrutkas. However, none of them spoke out at the time; instead, they got off the vehicle or changed places within the vehicle. Difficulties, threats, and inconveniences associated with marshrutka mobility oblige women to opt-out of certain activities because they want to avoid the inconveniences associated with marshrutka trips. Which is to say, there are activities and ventures that women might have pursued but have chosen not to due to the hassles, discomforts, and risks engendered by marshrutka travel.
Mobility cards and e-ticketing are an often discussed mechanism toward formalizing marshrutka services in urban transport networks in Russia. While many cities have introduced mobility cards to their municipal transport services in the last years, private service providers mostly resist the introduction of e-ticketing. They fear incisions in their scope of action and new traceability of their currently rather vague accounting practices. However, the main opponents of digital ticketing are the marshrutka drivers. Shortly after the introduction of enforced e-ticketing, many drivers either destroyed the new devices or claimed that they were out of service, in order to maintain their income. These new technologies reduce the daily income of drivers, and, more importantly, serve as surveillance technologies, since they register passenger numbers and working hours. A successful implementation of e-ticketing would therefore necessitate a reform of the transport enterprise, and especially require regular employee contracts for the drivers, which would make them independent from the daily flow of fares. Instead, what we have seen in Rostov on Don, are ways that the city has tried to exert pressure on operators, which pass the new regulations on to drivers, but who simultaneously tolerate their individual defence strategies. As a consequence, the first provider of mobility cards has declared bankruptcy due to low revenues. After long judicial proceedings, the transport department of the city recently introduced a new mobility card that should include private and municipal transport provisions alike. Indeed, the card is now widely used, as discounted fares are only available through the e-ticketing service. Naturally, this increases the potential for conflicts, when passengers rely on the new technology for concessional fares but drivers continue to sabotage the new system.
Here is a map of bus connections in Astana. I compiled it using public data on the public transit system. Nodes are bus stations, lines are routes. The distribution may tell you a thing or two about the city—such as the fact it is divided by a river, is composed of a number of shifting block patterns, and follows an overall radial set of connections. A bit more interesting, however, is the node right in the centre of the map. Note that unlike other stations, its connections are long and span across the city. At first I thought it must be a shopping mall or a bus terminal. But it turned out to be something different, not even a physical object, rather a whole metaphysical category of a ‘request stop’, which emerged because I had aggregated and sorted stops by their names. The fact that this artefact dwells close to the city centre tells you that “request stops” may be found all across the city, and wherever you go—if you do so until the end—you will pass through a sort of a terra incognita, a piece of the city fabric that is so insignificant that it doesn’t even have a name.
In March 2017, I held a lecture on the transformation of marshrutka mobility systems in Tbilisi. I asked the audience to name up- and downsides of the monopolisation of the marshrutka sector in the hands of one company, and the standardisation of the physical marshrutka fleet, since 2012. “Marshrutkas became more impersonal” one of the persons said. “Before, I recognised all different vehicles at my neighbourhood station, knew which vehicle was cleaner, which driver was chatty. Now it all seems the same”. Marshrutka mobility is often about intimate social interactions. Indeed changes in Tbilisi somewhat challenged this fluid space of negotiation. Vehicles all look the same. They are all equipped by e-ticketing systems. Companies discipline drivers. GPS trackers make it impossible for them to alter a fixed route. Standardisation and surveillance means routes or prices can no longer be negotiated. Hence, marshrutkas lost a share of their flexibility and charm, but also gained in terms of safety and predictability. Despite standardisation, the marshrutka system in Tbilisi has retained some of its most characteristic features—most importantly, a degree of personalised relationships survived these changes. Passengers know drivers, their moods, their driving and communication styles. Drivers also know regular passengers. They know where some of the passengers live, which regular routes they take. Perhaps it is precisely here that we might locate a defining characteristic of this system: if marshrutkas lose all of their flexibility, sociability, and subtle familiarities, then they will no longer be marshrutkas.