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### **Marshrutkas: Spinoffs of Post-Soviet Urban Mobilities**

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Here and there marshrutkas appear as an arena of action. Local newspapers, scholarly articles, poems, MA and PhD theses, TV and fiction report on marshrutkas in passing as a place where something important is happening, where social relations are produced (Ziemer, 2013; Walker, 2010; Stella, 2012; O'Neill Borbieva, 2012; Naterer, Godina, 2011). By now it is more or less obvious that marshrutka is the whole world in itself with its own economy, technology, language and semiotics, local orders of gender, ethnic relations and emotional work. This world highly deserves scrutiny and analysis. However social science literature directly addressing features of this type of urban mobility is still scant (Drdzelishvili and Sathre, 2008; Finn, 2008; Sanina, 2011; Akimov and Bannister, 2011). We would like to argue that the picture it shows is still much simplified.

This paper presents the first results of ongoing research on urban public transport in Volgograd. The research is still in its early stage and therefore our analysis has inevitably preliminary character and lacks analytical precision and substantial evidence. Our presentation concerns politics of mobilities (Cresswell, 2010) within the network of marshrutkas (fixed-route taxis) in post-Soviet Volgograd. Our research draws on: 1) interviews with public officials and persons concerned with public transportation issues, 2) participant observation of the Committee on Transportation of the City Council, 3) participant observations in marshrutkas' saloons.

Theoretically we draw on Bruno Latour's idea of cosmopolitics and try to trace the moments in the strange trajectory of the marshrutkas issue (Latour, 2007).

#### **Bruno Latour: Cosmopolitics and five meanings of the word "political"**

Latour suggests to think about politics not in terms of essence or domain but in terms of mode and movement. The term *mode* means that politics is not a region with its own substance but is a mode of existence that has its own style of ordering of whatsoever heterogeneous elements of the world. As a mode of existence politics deals not with its proper materials but with any stuff of the world at hand that is also available to the other modes of existence (morality, technology, religion, chains of reference etc). That is why we need to watch our language and speak not about noun "politics" or adnoun "the political" but about adjective "political" or preposition POL that refers to politics as a mode of existence (Latour, 2013). In that respect "*political*" is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what

*qualifies a type of situation.*” (Latour, 2007: 814). The term *movement* means that politics is something that has trajectory. It is a movement of “progressive composition of common world”. Following Isabelle Stengers Latour speaks about cosmopolitics. Cosmopolitics means not an internationalism, but a politics of cosmos equally dealing with humans and non-humans.

The notion of cosmopolitics has two important theoretical consequences:

1. It turns politics around from “subjects” to “objects” or better to issues, imbroglios, entangled situations. There is no much sense to talk about politics in the absence of any matter of concern, a scandalon, an issue around and about which actor enter into relations. Adjective “political” define not the properties of objects and not the competences of subjects, but qualifies the types of situations.
2. The notion of cosmopolitics suggest that everything is political. There is no such thing that could be totally irrelevant to the politics. As a result there is no much need in defining proper political entities. However it is needful to differentiate the adjective “political” as to show a variety of political qualification of types of situations and “*qualify different moments in the trajectory of an issue with different meanings of the adjective ‘political’*” (Latour, 2007: 815).

Latour detect five meanings of the word “political” that refer to different stages in the trajectory of a certain issue (see Table 1). This means that one and the same issue in its life course could be political in five different ways.

**TABLE 1**

Summary of some of the successive meanings of political through which a given issue might pass

<i>Meanings of ‘political’</i>	<i>What is at stake in each meaning</i>	<i>Examples of movements that detected it</i>
Political-1	New associations and cosmograms	STS
Political-2	Public and its problems	Dewey, pragmatism
Political-3	Sovereignty	Schmitt
Political-4	Deliberative assemblies	Habermas
Political-5	Governmentality	Foucault, feminism

(Table 1 is from Latour, 2007:818)

This theoretical framework allows us:

- 1) to study practices of progressive composition of common world through tracing the sequences of different political meanings of the same issue and to quarrel about the boundaries of the political.
- 2) to include the sociotechnical complexities of post-Soviet marshrutkas’ issue into political theoretical analysis.

### Marshrutkas as a solution?

Until recently collective-taxi (or fixed-route taxi) networks were literally ubiquitous in post-Soviet cities. This is relatively new type of urban public transport that usually uses imported or locally produced privately owned mini-vans called “marshrutkas”. *Marshrutkas* as an important part of urban transport system appeared in the cities of former Soviet Union in early 1990s. Since mid 1990s marshrutkas spread widely in Volgograd and considerably changed its urban space as well as other cities of the former USSR.

From 1990s to nowadays marshrutkas trace peculiar or rather strange political trajectory in Latourian sense. Though afterwards mini-van GAZ-322122 (Fig. 1) will be widely used in passenger transportation its invention in 1993 have not received much public attention. It saw the light of day with a little more discussion than the discovery of new extra-solar planetary system. Partly it was due to the fact that GAZ-322122 appeared as a result of modification of light truck GAZ-3302 (Fig. 2). To simplify the matters GAZ-322122 is a 13 seat cabin installed on the running gear of GAZ-3302. Later in 2000s this birthmark will become a matter of controversy between Russian Ministry of Transport and OJSC “GAZ” (Danilov, 2006)

*Fig. 1. GAZ-322122 on the streets of Volgograd*



*Fig 2. GAZ-3302*

ГАЗ-3302



In some sense invention of GAZ-322122 is a spin-off of the invention of GAZ-3302. This moment in trajectory of GAZ-322122 is political-1 in Latourian sense. A new vehicle appeared in the world. One more machine that produces more or less new association between humans and non-humans. Another one redistribution of tasks and competences between drivers, passengers, vehicles, road etc. It is political-1 within the framework of STS because it could be otherwise, it could be and actually was a part of discussion between transport scientists and engineers. The world will never be the same than before its invention. This mini-van has a cosmopolitical potential to transform our common world, to become an important element of its progressive composition as well as some potentially habitable planet outside solar system. However GAZ-322122 is not political in a sense of traditional political theory, because (back than in 1993) it did not aroused some public or media controversy, it did not generated public of concerned actors around itself, it did not become a topic of discussion in parliament etc.

Posessing a mediocre appearance of “yet another mini-van” and without attracting much attention GAZ-322122 (and its modifications) became by the end of 1990s the most successful medium that convey people, goods, viruses, money and so on through marshrutkas networks in post-Soviet cities. It is important to stress that marshrutkas organize itself in networks not in systems. Unlike traditional urban public transport systems (trams, buses, trolleys lines) the appearance of marshrutkas on the streets of post-Soviet cities was not a distinct event covered by media. It was the case with metrotram in Volgograd (the only one in Russia). However marshrutkas networks were not commissioned, but emerged here and there as decentralized grassroots initiatives, incrementally increased its fleet and routes, flexibly changed its configuration. These networks rhizomaticly spread from many places to many places coalescing with other networks of the cities.

Transition to long marshrutkas networks was the more smother the more citizens were familiar with marshrutkas in Soviet period. In Soviet Union marshrutkas usually were not used for mass passenger transit purposes as it is the case with post-Soviet cities. Marshrutkas connected separate not densely populated locations. For instance, in Volgograd marshrutkas (RAFs) conveyed people to recreational areas on the outskirts of the city (“datchas”).

Being ordinary and routinely used in commercial passenger transportation since mid 1990s mini-vans GAZ-322122 as well as the marshrutkas networks itself become political-5 in Latourian sense. Within a short time marshrutkas rose through the ranks from the technical novelty (political-1) to the self-evident silent part of everyday life (political-5). This immediate passage from political-1 to political-5 is strange enough because marshrutkas although being an innovation in the realm of public transport have bypassed somehow three intermediary stages (political-2, -3, -4 in Latour’s scheme) that are more commonly associated with traditional politics.

Such a short circuit of political trajectory has become possible mainly due to peculiar sociohistorical circumstances. It is widely considered that marshrutkas appeared as a consequence of deregulation and lack of financial support for

traditional soviet transportation systems in late 1980s (Wondra, 2010). Marshrutkas on the one hand formed networks that paralleled trolley, tram and bus lines, and on the other hand provided service where there was no public conveyance at all. Marshrutkas filled the transportation void after the collapse of the Soviet Union and survived in saturated environment of urban transportation.

Initially mini-vans appeared in Volgograd in early 1990s for the purpose of passenger mass transit not so much to parallel traditional public transport as to fill in the gaps on the bus lines. Gaps emerged because of functional loss of fleet. Though bus lines were public some marshrutkas were privately owned. It is interesting to underscore that private marshrutkas initially were introduced by local passenger motor transport enterprises to sustain operation of traditional public transport. Thus marshrutkas emerged as a solution, a ready made solution to the transportation void problem after the collapse of the USSR.

### **Marshrutkas: Uncertainty and Inflexible Flexibility**

After a short period of ‘silent’ operating as a matter of fact marshrutkas turned into an audible matter of concern within various public controversies and discussions in media, Internet, regulatory agencies, jurisprudence, antimonopoly services etc.

Unlike traditional urban public transport (buses, trams, trolleys) the sociotechnical assemblage of *marshrutkas* is an area of multiple contradictions and conflicts. Marshrutkas networks as well as Gazelle vehicles are both the site and the source of uncertainty. An ordinary ride in a marshrutka is much more unpredictable than an equally ordinary ride in a bus not to speak of tram or trolley.

Normal operation of marshrutkas networks entail a sort of “interpretative flexibility”. Drivers and passengers need to interpret numerous uncertain situations. There is uncertainty about time (route time tables, trip travel time), place (pick-up and drop-off paces, place in the traffic flow), and actions (whether this particular wave of hand is an attempt to hitch a ride or not (Fig. 3.1 and 3.2), whether this particular stop is a stop for pick-up/ drop-off or it is because of hindrance in the traffic and so on). Drivers and passengers of marshrutka are skilful but unacknowledged practical hermeneuts. In marshrutkas it is not always clear whether some particular situation is “normal” or something went wrong. “Normal” state of marshrutkas is a precarious balance between “functional” and “dysfunctional” operation. Unlike traditional public transport marshrutkas are very demanding in terms of cognitive and interactional involvement of passengers and drivers in the process of transportation.



Fig. 3.1



Fig. 3.2

*Fig. 3.1 and 3.2. Uncertainty: whether this particular gesture is an attempt to “catch” marshrutka or not.*

The described uncertainty of marshrutkas is the result of flexibility of this type of urban transport (cf. Mulley and Nelson, 2009). Flexibility comes in different shapes.

*Flexible routes.* In variety of occasions marshrutkas’ drivers could change vehicle route at their own will. These cases could be as follows:

- 1) Avoidance of a traffic jam.
- 2) Not going to the final stops of the route in order to minimize risk of conveying people from one terminus to another.
- 3) Cutting off a detour on the route if there are no passengers to drop-off.

*Flexible fares.* Rates vary depending: 1) on the segment of the route, and 2) on the day time (after 9 p.m. passengers should pay maximum rate on the route as if they were going from one terminus to another) (Fig. 4. table to the right).

*Flexible rules of transportation.* 1) Pick-ups and drop-offs on demand in almost every point of the route usually regardless of formal rules (Fig. 5.1 and 5.2.). 2) Individual (or even idiosyncratic) requirements of the drivers to how passengers should close vehicle door, hand over money, demand next drop-off (Fig. 4. announcement to the left) etc.

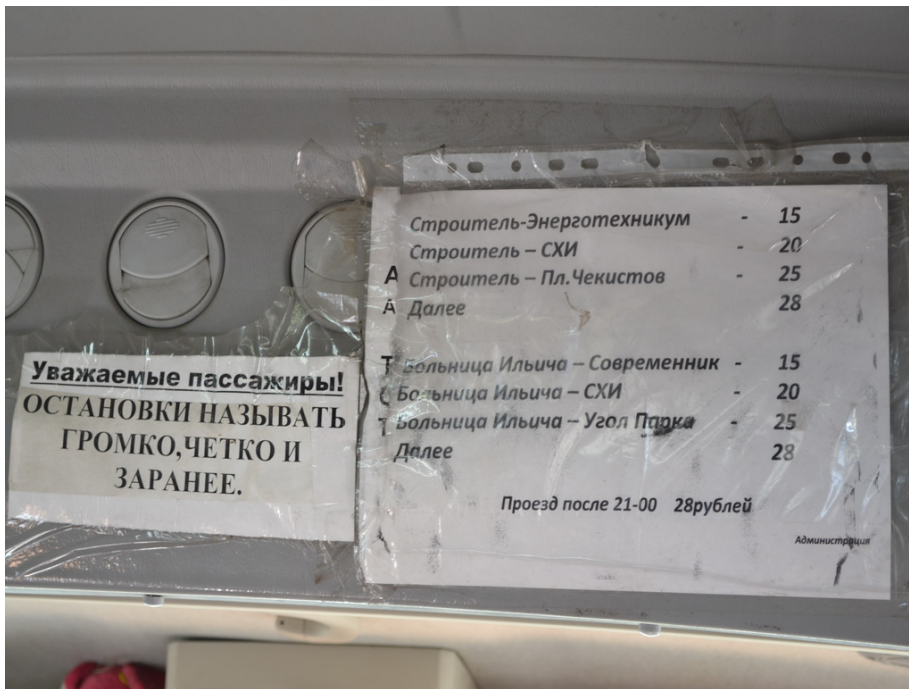


Fig. 4. To the right: Table of fare zones. Line at the bottom "After 9 p.m. fare is 28 roubles". 28 roubles is the maximum fare on this route.

Fig 4. To the left: Announcement: "Dear passengers! Call stops loud, clear, and in advance".



Fig. 5.1



Fig. 5.2

*Figs. 5.1 and 5.2. Drop-off (5.1) and pick-up (5.2) on demand at every point of the route regardless of formal stops.*

This flexibility is probably connected with uncontextualized operation of marshrutkas as a public transport. As a vehicles marshrutkas have an infrastructure that help them to survive in urban environment (i.e. roads, gas stations, motor depot, car workshops etc). But as a public transport mashrutkas have no such infrastructure. Marshrutkas have not their own stops, tracks, working formal regulations. Until 2009 marshrutkas were not recognized as a certain type of public transport (NEWSru.com, 2009). On closer examination marshrutkas appear as an object without infrastructure, without context. However this object does not exists in the void. Marshrutkas invade and parasitize on infrastructures of buses, trolleys and cars (Fig. 6). If Latour is right and “all innovations are born dead and become alive through contextualization” (Latour, 1996) then marshrutkas are living deads or zombies haunting our post-Soviet cities. It is a crucial question whether post-Soviet cities should make marshrutkas dead or alive?

Aforementioned flexibility could probably be the reverse side of inflexible rules of employment in marshrutkas networks. Every day a driver must give a fixed amount of money (so called “plan”) to his employer no matter how much he earned. In this situation drivers are forced to minimize a variety of risks so as to “execute a plan” and to earn some money for their own living also. In attempts to minimize risks drivers flex fares, routes, rules of transportation.





*Fig. 6. Marshrutkas “invade” trolley stop.*

Robustness of employment system in marshrutkas networks is complemented with inflexibility on sociotechnical level. Usually traditional urban public transport is much less flexible in terms of rules and infrastructure but it is flexible in terms of quantity of passengers it could convey. In rush hours traditional public transport can “compress” passengers so as to make transportation supply elastic to demand (cf. Latour, 1996: 91). Marshrutkas in Volgograd that use mini-van GAZ-322132 as well as Aramis in Paris with its high-tech system cannot benefit from “compression” because every passenger in a cabin should sit down. Every fourteenth passenger becomes a problem for every thirteen-seat cabin of GAZ-322132 because she/he need another vehicle unless a driver flex the rules and install additional seats in the cabin or decide to transport standing passengers (Fig. 7). Relation of supply to demand in marshrutkas networks is almost non-elastic. Being flexible in respect of fares, timetables, rules, routes marshrutkas are inflexible in respect of drivers’ “plan” and passenger capacity.



Fig. 7. Inflexible cabins of marshrutkas.

Conflicts and controversies that aroused around marshrutkas gradually made this type of urban public transport not a solution but an issue.

### **Marshrutkas as an issue and a problem?**

From the beginning of 2000s marshrutkas turned from the solution to an issue. Marshrutkas become a convenient target of media criticism. Local newspapers castigate marshrutkas as unreliable, uncomfortable and dangerous transport.

Such inherent features of *marshrutkas* as flexibility, informality, and consumer-orientedness are considered by persons concerned with public transportation issues definite signs of “distorted” traditional urban transport. They attribute this distortedness to irresponsibility of private parties and inappropriate behavior of drivers. We suggest that this is a simplified vision. Conflicts are located not only on the level of human relations, but also implicated in the sociotechnical arrangement of *marshrutkas* network.

Local university based transportation engineers also turned their attention to the marshrutkas. Technical specialists in their analysis of marshrutkas trace unexpected connections between economy, professionalism, ecology and security.

Marshrutkas become both political-2 and political-4 in Latourian sense. Three elements of existing situation indicate that marshrutkas are political-2. 1) Politicians and especially public figures recognize that urban mobilities could produce and be produced by power relations, i.e. could be a political matter. 2) They also recognize the need for rules and regulations to handle the issue. This indirectly suggests that local administration and government cannot find a rule for marshrutkas. 3) Marshrutkas starting to generate heterogeneous public that consists of activists, lawyers, transport engineers.

But marshrutkas are also political-4 in the perspective of civil servants. They deny political dimension (in traditional sense) of public transport. From this stance

marshrutkas are not an issue that needs some heterogeneous public to take care of it but a problem that hinders the development of public transport system in contemporary Volgograd. Civil servants consider problems of public transportation as a matter of policy. These problems could be solved by purely technical and administrative decisions. Such decisions could be produced in deliberations between experts without a wider dialogue with all interested parties. It is also interesting to note that civil servants, while denying political dimension of public transport and considering problems of public transportation as a mere technical and administrative matter, are highly reluctant to give interviews and to speak about these matters.

All this indicates that marshrutkas become one of those imbroglios so loved by STS scholars. But it indicates strange trajectory of this imbroglia also. Though marshrutkas were new urban public transport they received little attention both from public and from local authorities. Marshrutkas did not generate controversies and conflicts from the start as usually described in STS case studies. There were no public discussions concerning whether Russian post-soviet cities (or Russian automobile industry) need this or that particular minivan (or minibus). There was no public debate about what type of vehicles to be used in marshrutkas networks. And it is still to be investigated why marshrutkas networks in Russian cities were organized around different vehicles (e.g. PAZ-3205 in Tomsk, and GAZ-322132 in Volgograd). There was no public discussion of economic, moral, ecological consequences of marshrutkas for urban environment. No spin-offs were anticipated. In 1990s – early 2000s while they were weak marshrutkas had surprisingly few enemies, they virtually met no organized resistance. Only when they become strong and so to say put their roots in the urban ground, only after they become an integral part of urban transport system marshrutkas were recognized as something new and significantly different from traditional urban public transport.

In an attempt to understand this history of marshrutkas issue we suggest the notion of “implicit innovation”. This means innovation that was not recognized as such. Marshrutkas were not recognized as innovation at all. They appeared not suddenly at one moment but gradually, crawling from one street to another from one area of the city to another. Citizens were familiar with marshrutkas in Soviet period and saw nothing new in pos-Soviet marshrutkas. Only when we look at how this form of mobility changed its place and role in urban transportation in pos-Soviet period we could see something new. In Soviet Union marshrutkas were not used for mass passenger transit purposes as it is the case with post-Soviet cities. Marshrutkas connected separate not densely populated locations (airports, datchas, suburban townships).

Marshrutkas considered being purely technical replacement for deteriorated Soviet urban transport. However it turned out that marshrutkas have brought with themselves a bunch of economical, moral, legal, semiotic, folklore innovations. For instance, initially “marshrutka” was not a name of certain vehicle but a certain moral status of all sorts of vehicles (varied from mini-vans (RAF) to standard buses (Ikarus) through middle-sized ones (PAZ et al)). This status implies

abolishment of all concessionary fares. Fares on the same line were different according to passenger capacity of the vehicle. It is only later that word “marshrutka” became the name of a certain vehicle (GAZ-322132 or Gazelle).

We described trajectory of marshrutkas issue using language of Latourian cosmopolitics. But indicated trajectory could help us to pose two questions to the theoretical framework itself.

1) In Latourian scheme it is unclear whether particular issue should go through different stages of its life history (that correspond to different meanings of political) successively or not? When an issue right after political-1 becomes political-5 and then political-2 and political-4 at the same time is this trajectory abnormal or not? If it is normal then how to explain normality of succession? If not then how to understand difference between successive and dancing (non-successive) trajectories? What this difference could say us about conditions of cosmopolitics?

2) It is also unclear does Latour’s cosmopolitical framework allows situation when an issue takes two meanings of political at the same time. So far our ongoing research shows that marshrutkas are the matter of concern for heterogeneous though nascent public and the problem for local government at the same time. Public tries to politicize (in traditional sense) marshrutkas by suggesting that the issue cannot be handled routinely. Local government tries to depoliticize the issue by suggesting that experts can solve the problem administratively. How to define what type of situation do we have here? And who is supposed to decide this?

Unfortunately we cannot yet answer aforementioned questions. But we can use these as a guide for our future research. In conclusion we will put another question?

### **Can marshrutkas become political-3?**

*Marshrutkas* that originally emerged as grassroots initiatives by individual entrepreneurs in the deregulated environment of the early 1990s were overlooked by authorities for a long time. Currently local authorities switched in their politics from to control to elimination. Flexible and unruly *marshrutkas* that tend to fuel public debate should be replaced by rigid system of traditional public transport subject to public policy. But now the *marshrutkas* have gained enough power to ignore regulatory attempts and demand laissez-faire. Present situation allows us to put the question: can marshrutkas become political-3, i.e. can *marshrutkas* in Volgograd put the transport sovereignty of local authorities at stake? Surely we should wait for future to get exact answer to this question. But there some indications that one of the spin-offs of post-Soviet marshrutkas is that transport sovereignty of local authorities can be put at risk.

So far as the sociotechnical arrangement of *marshrutkas* has a higher level of indeterminacy compared to traditional public transport so drivers and owners of *marshrutkas* forge their own informal regulations and expertise on their network. Though officials have power to decide the future of *marshrutkas* they lack expertise because drivers and owners are reluctant to give information and seek

local sovereignty (cf. Humphrey, 2004). Local authorities to legitimize their decisions appeal to passengers' knowledge of conflicts in *marshrutkas* and to groups of activists (cyclists) who oppose *marshrutkas* as if they were blurring the boundary between expertise and intervention.

In some sense local authorities become victims of their own previous "policy of let go/drive". Municipality mainly controlled access to the market. They issued licenses (initially to individual drivers and since 2000 only to organized operators) but did not make an assessment of the routes and did not make investments in the infrastructure of *marshrutkas*. Satisfied that *marshrutkas* buy licenses, pay taxes, and convey people local authorities let them drive. *Marshrutkas* turned into a rival for traditional public transport and formed parallel network of conveyance. They not only survived but displaced most of bus lines that were operating in Volgograd before the collapse of Soviet Union. As a result municipal public transport has become even more unprofitable and local authorities have to increase its subsidies. Since 2006 local politicians, civil servants, engineers and activist have been talking about shutting down *marshrutkas* but they are still in their place.

Whether local *marshrutkas* in Volgograd will gain a kind of sovereignty as was suggested by Caroline Humphrey for Ulan-Ude is a question for future research. Such future investigation could be enriched if we look at post-Soviet *marshrutkas* in the light of history of Soviet urban transport. Martin Crouch's analysis (Crouch, 1979) shows that main features of Soviet urban transport were as follows: 1) soviet transportation system was unified on state level, but complicated and un-coordinated and local level; 2) there was disbalance between bus services and electric urban transport. Soviet cities became more and more dependent on bus services. Our study shows that Post-Soviet *marshrutkas* inherited and amplified those Soviet features.

To conclude we could say the following. On the one side being an arena of numerous contradictions and conflicts *marshrutkas* are one of the main roadblocks on the way to coordinated and sustainable transportation system in contemporary Volgograd. On the other side it seems that today almost everybody in Russia "hates" *marshrutkas*. But *marshrutkas* have already become so intimate part of our lives, part of our "we" that to "hate" *marshrutkas* today means to "hate" ourselves too.

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