

Seen from this philosophical angle, the movies represent an attempt to decouple/liberate the domain of “bare”/“natural” life from its political “weight”. However, the realm of “natural life” may contain strong political components of its own, since within it there is much room left for individual choices which are always personal. Perhaps this is what might be dubbed “non-sovereign politics”.⁴ The priest has to make his own choice between defending “any life” and a “politically qualified life” that is predicated upon a friend–foe distinction. This is also the case of the Soviet officer who in “One War” was ordered to transport the women and their kids to the camp but ultimately released them, having paid the highest price for his individual—and explicitly anti-systemic—decision, arguably more heroic than his previous military deeds. The killing of Franz was not a sovereign act of punishment either, but an individual gesture of grass-roots vengeance.

The analysis of these movies makes clear that the political claim of Russia’s status as the successor of the USSR does not automatically translate into the deriva-

tion of the Russian identity from the “good old” Soviet times. The post-Communist Russian identity certainly keeps sharing the legacy of the Great Patriotic War as a historical proof of Russia’s great power status, yet this legacy, in cultural terms, is not static (i.e. it is not attached to a well fixed set of meanings) but rather mobile and open for some rethinking. The changing cinematographic language in Russia makes clear that the inscription of the war **problématique into identity discourse** requires moving from the simplistic dichotomies like “falsification of history” versus “adherence to objectivity” to accepting the value of different interpretations of the past. Arguably, it is the language of artistic representations, images and metaphors that is more suitable for uncovering new meanings in the war narrative than the much more conservative language of politics. Yet the later will definitely have to react to the multiple attempts to raise new issues in cultural terms and thus offer a more complicated view on the historical foundations of Russian identity.

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⁴ Matthew Calarco. *Jamming the Anthropological Machine, Sovereignty and Life*. Edited by Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 163.

ANALYSIS

The *Marshrutka*—An Overlooked Public Good?

By Nicholas M. Wondra, Tbilisi

Abstract

In the former Soviet Union, one of the most persistent fixtures of life is the *marshrutka*. Even in the smallest towns where there are no other public institutions, the *marshrutka* fulfills important economic roles. The importance of the *marshrutka* has only increased with the collapse of Soviet institutions and transport infrastructure. The *marshrutka* deserves serious academic attention because it is one of the few institutions which survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a mode of transportation, goods conveyance, postal service, news carrier, and provider of other indirect services, the *marshrutka* has been overlooked and undervalued by academics and students of development. *Marshrutki* serve in important roles for which there are often no, or poor, substitutes. Additionally, they provide numerous positive externalities. Future research should identify new methodologies to study this difficult-to-measure, wide-ranging fixture of post-Soviet life.

Introduction

To live or study in the former Soviet Union (FSU) with little income is to know the shared taxi: the *marshrutka*. In the large-scale context, *marshrutki* (pl.) act as a net-

work: connecting people, towns, and productive capabilities. For many, this is the only form of conveyance, encompassing personal transport, news and goods distribution, and an informal postal network. By default

it has no or few substitutes, and the network of drivers enforces a clear set of rules over the *marshrutka* market. Ultimately, the *marshrutka* is more than just a taxi. A close examination of its secondary and tertiary services shows that *marshrutki* provide useful public goods in addition to moving people where they want to go.

There is little written about *marshrutki*, perhaps because they are so ubiquitous in the FSU that they seem unworthy of note. However, they deserve much greater attention because the *marshrutka* may be the most robust Soviet institution, one that survives essentially unchanged to this day. *Marshrutki* fill many necessary roles and comprise an informal system which presents many development opportunities. While *marshrutki* are mentioned in the literature, they are not the focus of specific research among foreigners. This is possibly due to the fact that the primary observers (i.e. academics and expatriates) typically choose more prestigious modes of transportation, like taxis or even private cars, with or without hired drivers. This leads to few observations, and even fewer technical considerations of the importance of *marshrutki*.

Background

A “*marshrutka*” is a shared taxi, often a ramshackle vehicle, which from a western perspective looks as though it has risen from a junk yard. It is usually a poorly maintained 15–20 passenger van with redistributed seats and handles which maximize occupancy and minimize leg-room. However, it is also much more. Variations on this mode of transport can be found all over the world from Africa to South America. This type of vehicle, and the term *marshrutka* is widespread in the former Soviet Union. The word, *marshrutka*, which is of Russian origin, means “transport.”

The method of catching a *marshrutka* is similar throughout the FSU. The *marshrutka* indicates where it is going either with numbered routes or sometimes with the destination on a placard under the front windshield. One hails the *marshrutka* with a raised arm. If the driver has space (sometimes only standing room) he will slow to a stop, often cutting through traffic to do so. You slide open a typically noisy, rusty door and enter, closing the clamorous door behind you. The driver takes off again on his fixed route, stopping when asked by passengers and picking up those who hail him on the street; you ask him to stop at the given point on the

route where you need to be, and pay the driver the fixed price, regardless of distance traveled (if you did not pay when you entered the van), and exit. Even in big cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, passengers can ride from one side of the city to the other for a reasonably priced fare.

Inter-city *marshrutki* are similar, leaving from de facto motor stations where honking and yelling is commonplace due to inadequate space and little or no official oversight. Embarking from the suburbs is similar to the process within cities, passengers hailing the driver on the sides of roads, then packing in their cargo wherever it will fit, sometimes on the roof. The primary difference is that journeys are longer. Because the network is a permanent de facto organization, information is not readily available in one place, but one can usually contact a driver, via other drivers, by mobile phone. Seats can sometimes be reserved and special pickups arranged in this manner.

History

Marshrutki first appeared in the USSR in the 1930s in Moscow, running fixed routes around the city. In the post WWII period, *marshrutki* became commonplace in other cities as well. The low cost and high effectiveness made official and unofficial operation of the conveyances attractive. The vehicles did not initially provide a niche service since they often ran parallel to uncoordinated public transport services and the duplication led to economic inefficiencies which are well-addressed in the economic literature. For example, factories would operate buses for their own workers along identical routes to public buses, or run transport at times of day when it was not needed. It is telling that *marshrutki* survived even in intra-city transport-saturated environments, alongside buses, trams, and trollies. The *marshrutka* paradigm was, by its nature, more reactive to the economic environment. It did what other Soviet institutions never could: pushed responsibility and decision-making down, rather than up. Drivers could select their own routes and set prices. They could make loose timetables with other drivers. They could “own” routes according to their relations with other drivers in the network. There were direct feedback mechanisms which were incentivized. The small size of the vehicles virtually eliminated the free rider problem, as drivers could keep track of who had paid. It is perhaps because of these primary



Photograph © Nicholas Wondra

reasons that the *marshrutka* is one of the few fixtures of the USSR which survived into the post-Soviet period. For these reasons, it has even flourished.

Marshrutki gradually filled roles that other modes of transport, like the metro, trams, trolleys, and buses, could not. It is possible that this is due to the institution itself: in a command economy, the *marshrutka* was one of the few market-sensitive institutions. During the disintegration of public institutions and services which accompanied the collapse of the USSR itself, privately-run *marshrutki* became a primary mode of transport and began to fill roles previously serviced by public conveyance. Public transportation became more difficult to maintain and operate than *marshrutki*, thus the private system survived and succeeded when other forms of transport did not. This was spurred by problems not only in the management and funding of public transportation systems themselves, but also problems in supplementary goods provision, such as electricity to power the metro or trolley, or unique parts to service machines which were out of production. It is the flexibility and relatively low cost inputs for *marshrutki* that allowed the system to be successful. The vehicles were ubiquitous in the USSR for other commercial purposes, and were easily converted into a mode of transport.

Modern populations in the FSU are not as static as they were in Soviet times. Much of the Soviet economy became defunct following the collapse of the USSR, and as such the transportation infrastructure no longer reflected the economic realities or needs of the transition. *Marshrutki*, by virtue of their flexibility and low inputs, filled the void. *Marshrutki* became and remain an efficient means to move people and things between communities. The conveyance is cramped, but the cost is borne by all who ride, making a rather affordable, albeit uncomfortable means of getting person and property from place to place. This holds especially true in communities where there is little more than a single school which comprises the public sector— relative efficiency is easy to achieve in the context of zero substitutes.

Secondary and Tertiary Functions

The primary purpose of a *marshrutka* is transportation for people. Without much regulation, however (safety or otherwise) the *marshrutka* has become a primary means of goods transport as well.

The network of *marshrutka* drivers and routes functions as something of a multipurpose service-provision mechanism. In smaller countries, such as Georgia and Armenia, this network is flexible and robust, encompassing just about every reach of road which is accessible year-round. Drivers trade their routes, buy them, and engage in collusion to fix their routes and prices. On busier routes, there is more competition. In some cases, there is a ticket booth and an organizer who coordinates between drivers and ticket sellers. There are redistributive economic effects and other positive externalities which require a closer look.

The network is key and functions as a de facto “Western Union.” In Georgia, packages and news come on board with each stop and are delivered en route to the final destination. Packages often travel unaccompanied, and I have even observed envelopes of cash (several instances of

hundreds of US dollars) dutifully passed on to their recipients. Interestingly, the only place that I have seen this is in Georgia. In some cases, those asking that packages be delivered offer a small sum to drivers to compensate travel expenses. This is significant because many places in the FSU lack a unified formal system of addresses or a functioning official postal service. This affects other developmental aspects, such as democratization associated

with election administration, as voters have no official addresses, as the OSCE has pointed out in its election monitoring reports. The system is dependent upon the personal networks throughout the towns and villages along the *marshrutka* route. For example, while passing through a village, a *marshrutka* driver will pass a package on to the first local resident he sees, trusting that the package will be dutifully delivered by a neighbor. Completing a feedback loop in the sector of residency could improve aspects of representative democracy.

Tertiary functions are both positive and negative. The tight network of drivers which may control one or a series of routes may effectively prevent transport alternatives from creeping into the market, reducing competition. This may limit the supply of goods, which then has effects on a local economy. Collusion may mean passengers are paying too much. One route may cannibalize another, leading to inefficiencies. There could be artificial scarcity due to predatory scheduling. A tangential issue is that the fixture is so robust, discrimination can



Photograph © Nicholas Wondra

occur in who can even become a driver. The author on one occasion was traveling from an ethnically-mixed region of Georgia, when members of an ethnic minority were asked to move to the back of the *marshrutka* in order to give their present seats to Georgians. Such observations are troubling, considering the civil rights ideals to which Georgia professes to aspire.

Alternatively, the human touch is not lost on drivers from small communities. Drivers sometimes do go to great efforts to ensure good quality service. To travel from Yerevan to Gyumri, in Armenia, calling ahead is necessary, but you can be picked up at home if you live in the right part of the city. On a Georgian *marshrutka* from Zugdidi to Mestia, Svaneti, a remote region of Georgia, the driver was willing to travel 10km off-route to drop passengers at their homes. In other rural areas, it is common to request to be picked up at one's home. This particular *marshrutka* to Mestia was weighed down with supplies which were unaccompanied, and received at their destination by a designee. Residents of small villages in the southern part of Azerbaijan often take weekly trips to Iran to purchase produce, and bring back 20 kilo bags of fruits or vegetables on *marshrutki*. These are areas which are not reachable by bus and prohibitively expensive to reach by taxi. Hiring a truck is unimaginable. Individuals from these regions do not have the means to buy private cars, making the *marshrutka* absolutely essential to isolated residents and businesses. It is necessary for citizens' inclusion into other institutions, as well. This is all the more true in circumstances where there is a lack of communication resources such as a post office, telephone, or Internet.

Prospects for Development

With regard to development, considerable gains could come from building and improving the existing *marshrutka* network into one which can more directly impact economic development. Transparency and regulation must be increased whilst quality research is undertaken. In one applicable example relevant to the study of economic development, an internally displaced family in west Georgia uses the system of *marshrutki* for their blossoming flower business. Without private conveyance, they would have no way to get their lilies to market. The arrangement is made with the driver, who saves a regular space for the flowers in addition to carrying regular passengers.

In rural areas of the FSU, the *marshrutka* is the closest thing to resembling an "institution." While the longevity of the institution is evident, the physical endurance of the vehicles is not. Traffic accidents and mechanical problems are common, but can be expected with vehicles running almost exclusively with more than 500,000 km

on their odometers. While there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence about crashes, roll-overs, and other misfortunes, which one might think would dissuade travelers, the absence of transportation substitutes means riders continue to brave the *marshrutka* regardless of the risks. Despite all this, the network of *marshrutki* presents a basis upon which to build and grow other economic sectors. Conversely, good policy must answer the safety needs of the population.

One way to capitalize on the de facto network would be to grow and improve it. This would mean adopting incentive schemes to suit the current network, with the goals of firmer, more predictable schedules and improved transit safety. Formalizing the existing network would certainly be commensurate with recent economic changes in Georgia which have seen relocation of informal vendors and the use of tax police. A main difference here is that there are no real disincentives for improving transit safety across-the-board, on all types of conveyance. The current state of the *marshrutka* network seems entirely dependent upon personal contacts and held together logistically by the mobile phone network. While introducing technology or formal structure may be ill-received at first, being labeled a "restriction on rights" or "government interference," this may be the only effective means of establishing universal seat belt laws or ensuring appropriate loading/unloading facilities for passengers, and ample parking space for the vehicles themselves. Formalizing the system will make it safer, easier to navigate, and less intrusive upon other vehicles.

Another way in which the network could be improved would be expansion into commercial transport. My heritage is not too far removed from the dairy trucks that came around to my parents' farm in rural Wisconsin, whereupon the driver was authorized to purchase produce and then deliver it to the rest of the distribution network. This is possible in the south Caucasus, albeit on a smaller scale. Agriculture sector expansion is often touted as a possible growth sector in Georgia, but because of timidity in incorporating land and resources both vertically and horizontally (some Georgians refer to it as the "new collectivization"), Georgians are hesitant to fill the void by risking their own capital. Without pooling resources, there are few options for a small farmer. Transport is among the larger hurdles. If transport could be first subsidized to collect and distribute produce, small-firm agriculture may follow apace.

Conclusion

Marshrutki are more than meet the eye. More research is warranted on the subject and in particular, where *marshrutki* are being under-utilized. The permanent de facto network of drivers and vehicles which reach to

the far corners of the FSU constitutes a service that is directly and indirectly beneficial to the populations at large and paid-for by the clients who use the service. The effects of redistribution and goods transport on the economy are undeniable, though currently need measurement and quantification. It is certain that without the *marshrutka* network, many towns would be isolated from governance structures and may cease to function within the greater economy.

More work is needed in measuring de facto networks and the positive externalities they provide. The

simple fact that *marshrutki* exist at such a high density and that there are few substitutes makes this a useful subject for study. The academic community ought to give the *marshrutka* serious economic consideration and view it not just as a burden on the eye, but as the workhorse of post-Soviet middle-classes. What else has survived from the USSR? The simple resilience of the institution warrants its serious consideration as an important economic component of the FSU.

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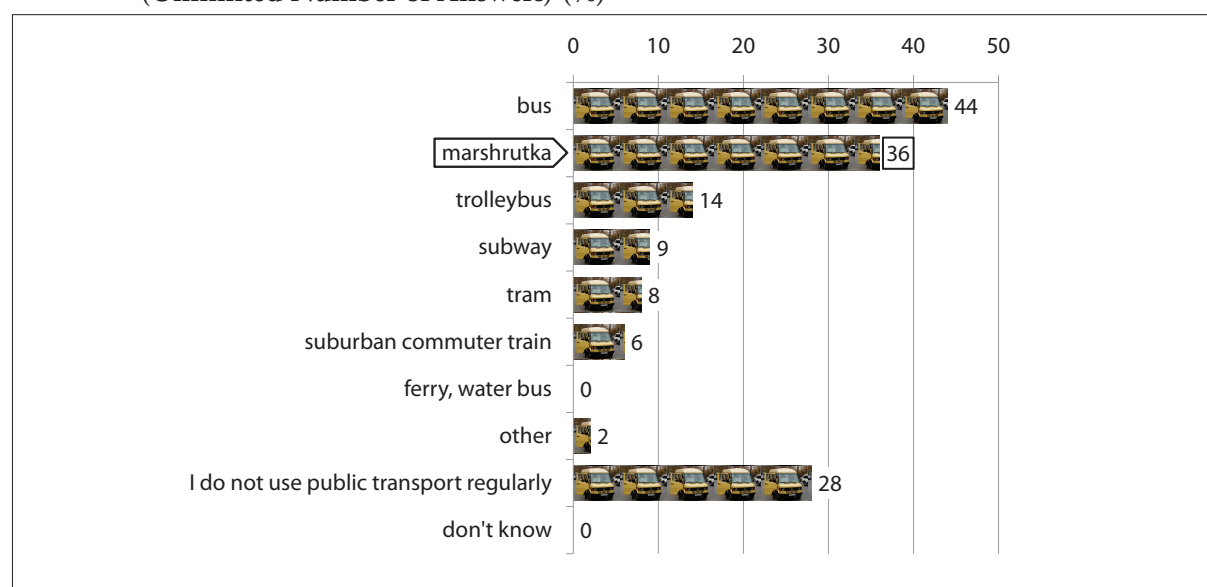
Recommended Reading

- Crouch, Martin. "Problems of Soviet Urban Transport." *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, April 1979, pp. 231–256.
- Grava, Sigurd. "Urban Transport in the Soviet Union." In Henry W. Morton and Robert C. Stuart, eds., *The Contemporary Soviet City*. Armonk, N.Y. M. E. Sharpe. 1984, pp. 180–201.
- OSCE/ODIHR. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on the Municipal Elections in Georgia. 30 May 2010.

OPINION POLL

“They Go Everywhere”: Opinion Poll On *Marshrutki* in Russia

Figure 1: Which Means of Public Transport Do You Use on a Regular Basis?
(Unlimited Number of Answers) (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by the Public Opinion Fund (FOM), 11–12 October 2008, <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/d084124>

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