Encountering the multiple semiotics of marshrutka surfaces – what can marshrutka decorations and advertisements tell us about its everyday actors?

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Encountering the multiple semiotics of marshrutka surfaces – what can marshrutka decorations and advertisements tell us about its everyday actors?

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ABSTRACT

Marshrutka minibuses are in charge of providing daily transport services for millions of passengers in the post-Soviet space. In doing so, they shape the perception of public sphere and contribute to the production of community. In this sense, the interior design of marshrutka minibuses contribute to a number of publicly negotiated discourse formations on collective identity patterns, such as nationhood, memory culture, as well as folkloristic values. Drawing on empirical evidence from Kyrgyzstan and Russia, we try to deconstruct multiple layers of marshrutka signposts. In their heterogeneity and contrariness, the marshrutka semiotics unveil the minibuses as a place of encounter and conflict, where fluid social institutions are consistently calling for negotiation. Triggered by the question how cultural trajectories of identity are performed, we will choose a number of marshrutka messages like official licenses, advertisements or patriotic proverbs and analyse them in the local setting of application. The expected insight of this paper is twofold: firstly, we contextualise societal struggles, which are reproduced in everyday marshrutka encounter and secondly, we contribute to a better understanding of the mobility practice as such, pointing to general deficits in the broader marshrutka enterprise, read out from visualised statements in the social space of marshrutka.

Introduction: marshrutkas as a place of encounter and negotiation

Entering into a random marshrutka ride somewhere between L'viv and Vladivostok, Bishkek and Murmansk, Dushanbe and Tbilisi always involves an element of surprise and imponderability. Possibly, you catch one of the tidied up buses with a few official announcements and a designated spot for adverts, where you can sit on uniform padded synthetic leather seats signified with a corresponding car brand. Nonetheless, perhaps already in the next minibus – depending on location, time or route line; the driver, operator, the city and the city hall; the district and country – one might get a very different impression of the very same mobility mode. Indeed, entering into a marshrutka, where often loud music is being played and all sorts of human scents lurk in the air, one can easily get overwhelmed by 13 m^2 full of more or less decodable messages, orders, anecdotes but also religious icons, political statements or cultural signifiers just next to their ironic refractions. Individual designed curtains and seat cushions, carpets and ceiling decoration evoke the association of a guest room rather than a minibus cabin. Even daily commuters who have been dependent on marshrutka mobility for

decades can be observed with astonished faces when climbing into an extraordinary-designed marshrutka exterior.

It is particularly the randomly distributed presence and absence of vast heterogeneity as well as the complexity of multiple marshrutka semiotics, negotiating the state of art in one moment on so very different layers as social cohesion, transport labor dispute, performances of commemorative culture, the rigorous exercise of discipline as well as a permanent exceed of steadily claimed rules and norms that hold us spellbound. Everything is present, although almost nothing is literally articulated but conveyed through signposts and billboards, transit ads or lovingly designed cabin interiors. The sociotechnical arrangement of marshrutka encloses as a multi-layered space of meaning, a space of postulation and struggle but also a projection surface for creativity and artificial intervention characterized by a high degree of fluidity and non-determination.

Fascinated by the empirical richness of daily cultural performances and individual enactments of drivers or other actors in the field, we do not aim to romanticize marshrutka mobility encounters. Quite the opposite, we intend to apply an interpretative focus on inner-marshrutka cabin struggles unveiling systemic conflicts, injustice and insurmountable contradictions in the broader mobility network as such. In this sense, the empirical presence of signposts and law texts takes us quickly to an antagonistic and often unrealistic legislation frame conducted by a misleading transport policy as well as to a conflict-torn marshrutka enterprise structure determining inconsistencies in the daily cabin performances. Taking an inductive approach, we want to explore marshrutka cabins as a complex sociotechnical assemblage that materializes important discursive layers of social life. The fluidity of marshrutka cabin's arrangements mirrors contemporary negotiation processes on a macro level, but equally enables a perspective on micro-performativity that is determining the conduction of everyday mobility practices. Therefore, starting from the manifold and multilayered decorations of marshrutka cabins and surfaces, we detect the ambivalent messages conveyed as an attempt of the actors involved to solve social antagonisms inscribed in the broader causalities of the marshrutka business, daily mobility challenges and transport policies.

An in-depth analysis of daily marshrutka semiotics appears worthwhile to us as marshrutkas are still the leading public transport service in most of the post-Soviet successor states, carrying millions of passengers every day through villages, towns and cities and creating, therefore, an important place of encounter, where common beliefs and values are constantly justified, contested and reconsidered. Moreover, marshrutka services are widely criticized and challenged in the urban settings of our case studies, which makes them a significant political issue on the local level. In addition, marshrutkas play an ambivalent role in maintaining (non-)accessible urban mobility networks. On the one hand flexible marshrutka modes extend the public transport supply and enable a stable connection to urban mobility flows thus including huge parts of citizens to urban service resources, workplaces, leisure activities, etc. On the other hand, marshrutkas, as a commercial and too loosely controlled transport mode, are more expensive than their municipal counterparts, do not apply concessionary fares for elderlies or students, and do not provide any kind of boarding aid infrastructure, thus excluding significant parts of the population systemically.

In Bishkek, for instance, more than 120,000 passengers rely daily on the urban and suburban marshrutka services. Despite the publicly announced constraints concerning rude driving patterns, overloaded and dirty cabins, low car quality, or misbehavior of single drivers, people continue to use marshrutka due to lacking alternatives. The municipal transport operators in Bishkek, for instance, provide 250 buses and trolleybuses to run on 21 routes, which is far from sufficient to answer the daily passenger volumes in a city of over a million inhabitants.

Not least, marshrutka operators dominate the transport market and dispose as the main urban mobility engine over significant power resources. This could be observed on 2 April 2018, when the transport network in Bishkek collapsed due to an organized marshrutka protest (Regnum, 3 April 2018). Marshrutka reforms, which were elsewhere implemented a decade ago as the obligation to provide accident insurances for passengers, were prevented due to the driver's ability to enable a standstill of the city. The recent marshrutka workers' strike illustrates insistently the

essential role of marshrutkas in the economic and social everyday life of post-Soviet cities. However, it also illustrates a main failure of the local administrations, which show powerlessness or unwillingness to change the current mobility assemblages to the detriment of poorer population strata, which are unable to afford individual mobility devices.

In this article, we are triggered by the question of how marshrutka semiotics are performing as mediators to ensure everyday mobilities in a challenged and widely fluid setting of transport institution. In a first step, we want to work out how different signs, advertisements, law texts, pictures and national symbols are assembled in marshrutka environments and ask for the discursive function of cabin arrangement. Once such a framework is established, in a second step we ask, what kind of mobility mode is actually taking place in the marshrutka cabin and how the sole presence of at first glance little noteworthy signposts is able to guide diverse transport practices through a consistent institutional framework? Asking these questions, we are trying to contribute to grasp everyday transport mobilities as an important encounter of publicity that is equally determining our perception of a collective identity but also enabling leeways of individual intervention.

We pick up empirical evidence from Bishkek and Rostov on Don in order to discuss differences and common ground between marshrutka performances in very different local settings. The decisive fact that marshrutka mobility is formative in different urban assemblages encourages us to describe local forms of sociocultural identity performances in the microcosm of marshrutka. By detecting social space of negotiation in the marshrutka sphere, we point on macro-social controversies beyond the local phenomenon and try to link them back to the micro-sociological appearances, determining the status quo in our case studies. Methodologically, we are applying a multi-layered conception of movement in the marshrutka cabin. As Law and Urry famously pointed out, this needs a reconsideration of methodological proceed, as '[existing methods] deal poorly with the non-causal, the chaotic, the complex' (Law and Urry 2004, 405). The marshrutka may serve as an obvious example, where more than the physical movement, it is the complex moving of rules, identity markers and decoration styles that is shifting the associations, ideas and passenger behavior's throughout the ride. Following the (transformability of) visualities in marshrutka cabins, we want to grasp the complexity of mobility systems beyond unilateral power-hierarchies and also unveil the heterogeneous nature of performing, organizing, conducting and counteracting what is to be mobile in a marshrutka (Büscher and Urry 2009).

In this sense, what is striking about marshrutka encounters in contrast to other mobility arrangements is the semi-private sphere, caused by the exceptional proximity, the necessity to interaction as well as the individual design of marshrutka interiors by the individual drivers. Therefore, we detect marshrutka images as a significant agent in the production of socio-cultural knowledge. In this perspective, the marshrutka emerges as a starting point for the exploration of multi-layered cultural mobility performances within societal structures, which determine and enable specific action patterns (Jensen 2011). The former minibus vehicle transforms into a place of (re-)assembling social and sociotechnical life, only by serving as a marshrutka. To sum it up, a marshrutka ride may appositely be described as a multiple communication process, a social encounter of different kinds, and the setting of a hierarchical catalog of rules, inviting for discussion and challenge.

Literature review and theoretical insights

The paper conceptualizes public transport as a constant fluid but still consistent public space that has explanatory potential for individual social behavior as well as structural determination through a collectively established habitus of individual mobility performances. Understanding ways of being mobile as a crucial sociological category (Sheller and Urry 2006; Sheller 2014), the design, coverage and organization structure of public transport devices needs to receive special attention as a complex governing tool of perceiving and producing publicity in general but also on a daily

and very individual level (Bærenholdt 2013; Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004; Bonham 2006). In this sense, many anthropological studies dealing with public transport refer to the significance of social interaction and inter-individual or interpersonal encounters in public transport space (Bissell 2010; Adey 2017; Koefoed, Christensen, and Simonsen 2017).

Although there have been some noteworthy publications in area-related mobility studies focusing on urban marshrutka assemblages (Sgibnev and Vozyanov 2016; Turdalieva and Edling 2017), problematic labor relations in marshrutka enterprise structures (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b) and locally applied transport policies (Akimov and Banister 2010; Grdzelishvili and Sathre 2011), the post-Soviet region, and especially a Central Asian focus on cultural mobility themes, remains understudied. Especially an in-depth analysis of marshrutka cabin semiotics as a promising tool for anthropological mobility research is so far missing. There are, however, some considerable contributions from other paratransit research examples. In this sense, in order to approach the mediating function of signposts, slogans, decoration, images and law announcements in daily re-performed marshrutka interactions, it might be worthwhile to have a look on a couple of anthropological research studies, which analyze the meaning of interindividual minibus slogans, designs and culture in very different contexts, countries and transport settings. Researching the literature, it becomes quickly evident that the cultural practice of vehicle decoration, written or illustrated identity performances as well as the conscious use of messages to conduct and determine the mobility practice is by far not limited to the post-Soviet marshrutka mobility phenomenon but a common and well-described creative practice in many semi-formalized minibus mobility modes all over the world. However, in light of this observation, it is rather a surprise that the post-Soviet marshrutka decoration styles and inner-communication habits have been given little consideration, despite a continuously growing literature about minibus slogans, design and pop-culture in for instance African or Caribbean countries.

In this sense, Oltunde Byo Lawuyi mentions already in 1988 how the use of proverbs and slogans in the taxi vehicles directly reflects the harsh working conditions and entrepreneurial dreams of the transport workers in Nigeria (Lawuyi 1988). Through the individual driver's selection of specified phrases and illustrations, Lawuyi detects a very complex hierarchy entanglement between operators, drivers and assistants, which are mirrored in rather fate-devoted sayings correlating with the state of (in)dependence and individual promotion opportunities of the transport workers. Lawuyi rightly states:

> The creation and diffusion of the slogans is the consequence of their being a form of language that makes social life meaningful and consequently provides the reader with a vital key for understanding the experiences of an important sector of Nigerian society.(Lawuyi 1988, 11)

In a similar way, Mbugua Wa-Mungai analyses matatu-minibus subculture performances as a rich source of cultural expression, identity construction and discursive negotiation. The matatu as a multi-layered place of encounter, which brings people of all kinds together in a random but daily varying basis, makes it to 'a microcosm of larger Kenyan realities [...] To understand matatu is to begin to understand Kenya' (Mutahi 1996 in: Wa-Mungai 2003, 42). Nevertheless, Wa-Mungai points out that matatu expressions and cultural productions should not be equated with the often low reputation of matatu work, although they of course interrelate and refer mutually towards each other. However, a careful analysis and interpretation of the material semiotics of matatu services may actually help 'to make a balanced examination of matatu culture, which has been categorically described as "chaotic" and "anarchical" in the popular press' (Wa-Mungai 2003). Indeed, they reveal rather strict institutions and hierarchy structures beyond the superficial fluidity of the everyday practice. Impressively, Wa-Mungai shows how matatu decorations claim a significant and independent contribution in broader discourses about affiliation, nationhood as well as local challenges and contradictions in the everyday work of the actors, while they remain at the same time determined by broader societal contexts, perception and stereotypes, which reciprocally reproduce the resources of self-images as well as a limited repertoire of symbolic meaning. In accordance with Wa-Mungai, Calvine Kayi expands on the

matatu slogans and brings them in a close relation to the driver's life and their direct working environment, desires and youth subculture. Reflecting on the comparison of matatu culture and Hip-hop enactments Wa-Mungai assumes:

> Just as hip hop visibilities its identity through spectacle, matatu culture makes itself conspicuous by marking itself in all the 'offensive' forms of behaviour it can muster [...] In the process, crews achieve the cultural capital that marks their difference and standing within the urban set up. (Wa-Mungai 2003)

Turning attention to the mobility modes in Caribbean countries, Wolfgang Ahrens took notice of the high variety of vehicles' names, which convey messages beyond their spelling (Ahrens 2009). In this sense, many vehicle names include religious affiliation or refer to certain character traits of famous idles among the driver's community. Nina K. Müller-Schwarze follows up with a detailed description of Panamanian identity constructions through the illustrations on painted buses in Panama City. In the practice of artificial bus paintings, the author detects a mode of competition, through which drivers try to attract more passengers through extensive and well-elaborated designs and decoration styles. In this sense, Müller-Schwarze confirms that a major motivation to costly paintings was to use them as an advertisement strategy in the hope to sustainably increase passenger volumes. Furthermore, the author observes that many paintings and slogans directly relate to the neighborhood and surrounding bus drivers are offering their service to. The Panamanian case underlines how intense the relation of passengers and drivers can become through the application of common narratives, identifiers and common experiences mediated through the unique decoration of a neighborhood's bus, which is both a marker of collective identity construction and a customer loyalty program at the same time[1]. Müller-Schwarze continues:

> Passengers reaffirm their identity, history and cultural values as they view artwork and hear music on the bus. Chang [one interlocutor] identifies seven themes in bus painting: country vies, national symbols, popular artists, landscapes, animals, family members, and national identity symbols. (Müller-Schwarze 2009, 442)

The insightful evidence carefully carved out by the researchers mentioned in the case studies of Nairobi, Yoguba and Panama City, unfortunately, do not find a counterpart in the existing marshrutka literature discussing the minibus mobility mode in post-Soviet settings. Although a few researchers have tackled the issue of proverbs, myths and anecdotes in marshrutka cabins, they have not included the multi-layered negotiation and interaction procedures conducted and affirmed through those signposts. In this sense, Sergej Tichomorov confines himself to a thorough analysis of the language use and interprets the function of for instance anecdotes through the lens of a passenger's perspective considering marshrutka minibuses a source of folklore patterns (Tichomorov 2011). Anna Sanina contributes to the marshrutka analysis in the Russian contexts by describing habituative stopping patterns and communication practices as well as characteristic seat arrangements but misses the significant role of signposts and interior design in the description of her case studies (Sanina 2011). She describes the start of any marshrutka ride, as follows:

> A man or a woman becomes a marshrutka's passenger even before he or she physically enters a taxi. The actions that hail a moving marshrutka are symbolic; they are intended to establish a visual contact with a driver. Typically it is raising of one hand, suggesting the existence of a mutually shared, role based context. (Sanina 2011, 214)

Furthermore, Natalia Sorokina mentions the existence of didactical signposts in her analysis of the everyday life of marshrutka drivers but does not refer to the multiplicity of messengers besides the driver (Sorokina 2008). Therefore, although all the contributions cited above provide rich data and empirical insights about the everyday life of marshrutka mobility practices, we hope to contribute to the discussion by focussing on the multi-layered construction and perception processes of passengers, operators, drivers and politicians alike mainly mediated through the cabin interior design.

In contrast to the Nairobi case as well as to the Panamanian setting, the decoration style in our case studies is less prominent and eye-catching. Furthermore, the marshrutka setting seems to be

more diverse in our case studies in terms of varying enterprise structures and ownership relations, which significantly influence the decoration styles. For instance, a significant mutual relation between the HipHop culture and the matatu drivers detected by Wa-Mungai, which is re-performed on the vehicles surfaces, cannot be adopted to the post-Soviet setting as both the drivers' age structure and background, as well as the vehicle ownership structures, are apparently more diverse than in Nairobi. Nevertheless, there is clear empirical evidence that transport workers in the post-Soviet setting try to use their vehicles as an expressive projection surface.

Another point of reference is the political intervention of local administrations. In this regard, Müller-Schwarze observes how the individual decoration styles of self-owned buses became by and by a political issue. Since 2003, a Federal law forbids the individual design of public transport devices, which was pushed through under menace of high punishments.Elsewhere, the outside as well as the inside surfaces of the buses are since then increasingly used for registered advertisement campaigns beyond any interference opportunities of the drivers. The author concludes that

> the bus interior, once a semi-private space belonging to residents of a specific neighbourhood, is being redefined as a so-called public by large transportation businesses and new laws governing the aesthetics of buses. (Müller-Schwarze 2009, 451)

Hence, it is arguably interesting to discuss the unique feature of minibus-spaces normatively described as public or private space in the respective local settings. Hypothetically, we have already established the marshrutka as a semi-private sphere in the introduction. However, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the public/private divide in relation to space in general and to particular marshrutka environments in particular. Neil Smith and Setha Low differentiate public space from private space 'in terms of the rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behavior sanctioned in specific spaces and rules of use' (Low and Smith 2013). In their interpretation, the inner space of marshrutka salons appears as clearly regulated in terms of access and behavior sanctions. Marshrutkas as commercial, privately owned public transport offers are indeed more exclusive than municipal transport means comparing, for instance, the transport fees. However, at the same time, the marshrutka space enables the intimacy to negotiate about rules and occasionally even about transport fares, which blurs the borders of applied rule regiments. Smith and Low continue their definition:

> "Whereas private space is demarcated and protected by state regulated rules of private property use, public space, while far from free of regulation, is generally conceived as open to greater or lesser public participation. "Public space" has very different meanings in different societies, places, and times, and as all of this suggests, its meaning today is very much bound up with the contrast between public and private space. It is impossible to conceive of public space today outside the social generalization of private space and its full development as a product of modern capitalist society" (Low and Smith 2013).

Relating to degrees of public participation, marshrutka salons appear at the same time as highly public in a sense that they are open for negotiation and diverse action scopes. They are a place where political struggles, but also demonstrative non-participation may take place. However, the notion of marshrutkas as a private sphere is equally imprecise as it can be interpreted on the one hand as a protected place, owned and decorated by the driver, or on the other hand as a private, commercialized environment determining its social interactions mainly through the purpose of moneymaking. Obviously, the characters of both categories of privacy intertwine and merge in the daily marshrutka routine. This is inter alia reflected in the very individual decoration style of the drivers, who give themselves the freedom to treat the marshrutka salon as a private sphere but also in order to conduct passenger flows smoothly[2]. Despite that, marshrutka salons provide obvious signifiers of a private space in a commercial sense. The manifold advertisement billboards are only the most obvious evidence for commercialized marshrutka saloons.

Moreover, as Low and Smith point out, it seems reasonable to consider different societal perceptions of public/private space in various contexts. In this sense, a multi-layered performed post-Soviet heritage, which amongst others might include a certain skepticism against public

spaces due to inter-individual historical experiences, could be stated for the here discussed settings (Greenfeld 1992). Viktor Voronkov and Ingrid Oswald comment on the academic discussion about private/public spheres applied on the post-Soviet Russian context, as follows:

> "The distinction between public and private spheres was of a different nature than that we know from the West. This is, first of all, due to the fact that the distinction between private and public spheres was related to social spaces ruled by different concepts of law. The public or, rather, the 'official' sphere was the realm of society, which was ruled by formal law and repression through state authorities. All other social realms were regulated by norms of everyday life" (Oswald and Voronkov 2004, 107).

From this perspective, one could also add that marshrutkas, which emerged as a mass transport mode only in post-Soviet times, were able to profit from this particular public-private-spheres-divide in the society, building a bridge between new emerging capitalist markets and business models and the negotiable social realms of everyday life. Thus, the marshrutka sphere is always more than an automated passenger transit as it relies on inter-individual communication processes between passengers, drivers, operators and state legislator alike, all present through mediators in each marshrutka ride.

Encountering marshrutka semiotics – publication of legal frameworks and code of codex

In Bishkek and Rostov on Don, official marshrutka rules are primarily conducted by the transport department of a city. Law texts and enterprise regulations, as well as tariff fares, are therefore published and constitute a fixed component of marshrutka cabins. As intermediaries, official legacy sheets represent an imaginative picture of marshrutka mobility provision through the lens of administrative institutions. However, their relevance is easily read out by the signposts' arrangement, when illegibly small-printed legal announcements are fixed next to colored advertisement sheets or huge tablets, announcing the fare. It becomes quickly evident that municipalities' regulation frameworks are not the main mode of conduction, when it comes to marshrutka mobility provision.

Image 1 and 2 show the non-appealing exhibition of official route lines, price tables, seat capacity and code of conduction. Only from close up, one can read through the long texts and might already guess that marshrutka mobility arrangements are only unsatisfactory described through these signposts. Indeed, the message one perceives is quite misleading, marshrutka ride practices are highly institutionalized and rule guided, however in reality, they will only accidentally follow the prescribed lines. In this sense, price categories, although fixed by local authority may be up to negotiation, depending on distance and day/ nighttime, official bus stops are only a general orientation, rather than a predictable route planning, a code of conduct is omnipresent in marshrutka living worlds, but stands, however, in a very loosely relation to what actually happens on the ground, during the daily performance of marshrutka practices.

In this sense, although passengers will rarely ever read the regulation frames, the inner arrangement of official statements in marshrutka cabins are interesting to analyze as they mirror certain communication system that we are trying to decode. In Bishkek's minibuses, for instance, recently appeared signposts informing about complaining opportunities at the transport department in case of rule violations (see image 4). Asan, a marshrutka driver in Bishkek, comments:

> I agree that these signposts are very important in the marshrutka cabin. Along with me, they regulate behavior patterns of both the drivers and the passengers. They calm down the situation inside the vehicle. However, it happens that passengers try to frighten us drivers, which is not so polite of course. (Asan, 34 y.o. the driver of 224 route)

Comprehensibly, the driver's interest to put those signposts clearly visible is rather low. Although they are obliged to announce those numbers, drivers use defense strategies to hinder passengers to complain through the use of small prints, wrong numbers or eye-catching decorations in the direct surroundings.

At this point, it is interesting to note that drivers and marshrutka operators use very different strategies to conduct the behavior codex in the marshrutka arrangement. In this sense, drivers often use humorous sayings, poetic quotes from epics or decontextualized citations of political leaders in order to attract the attention of the passengers. Intentionally, these signposts appear in sharp contrast to the strict and boring language and design of official statements. Despite various contents, authorships, and stylistic means, signposts also differ in their use of language. This means that the regulation rules coming from the city authorities are mostly written in Russian, while the operators and drivers use Kyrgyz language to create a closer connection to their passengers. However, the use of language is far from unified. Kyrgyz proverbs and quotations of political leaders or epics are often written in both Kyrgyz and Russian language. However, official statements, tariff fares as well as rules of conduct are almost always in Russian, despite the didactic proverbs from Kyrgyz folklore which obviously convey their message better in Kyrgyz language (see Image 5 and 6). Nurjamal, a local official at the state structure from Bishkek:

> Firstly, the translations in public transport devices should increase the safety of the passengers. Secondly, citizens may practice their Kyrgyz language skills and finally, it is a source for tourists to learn Kyrgyz language. (Nurjamal, 40 y.o. state official)

Besides that, the example shows that drivers try to connect to the passengers through common narratives of a cultural heritage or historical experiences. This can inter alia be seen in a quotation of Iskhak Razzakov, a Communist leader, which is misused to remind passengers to keep the marshrutka cabin clean:

> "If you and I are white and clean, then the marshrutka remains clean. (Sen ak bolson, men ak bolsom, marshrutka taza bolot", "If you and me are clean, then the society remains clean" by Iskhak Razzakov, the communist leader and first secretary of CP of Kyrgyz Soviet Republic in 1946-1964 (Moldokasymov 2010, 79)[3]

A further strategy to get the attention of the passenger is to present behavior expectations in an entertaining way[4], stating 'The station "somewhere here" will become the station "somewhere over there"'[5] or 'If you speak up too quiet, you will keep on going'[6]. The quotes relate to the stopping pattern of marshrutka mobility, which does know a scripted route but will only stop, when passengers ask to leave the cabin. This has the advantage that passengers can be dropped out almost everywhere on the street beyond officially designated bus stops. On the downside, the verbal communication between drivers and individual passengers in sometimes overfilled buses, racing down the streets, can become a challenge on its own. The usage of humor can be interpreted as a tool to mediate the potentially conflictual interaction in the cabin that is increasing the tolerance of ambiguity in the setting. Thus, the application of humor creates a certain relation between passengers and drivers, which underlines the sense of a semi-private sphere. To an extent, humorous signposts serve as a compensation strategy for a deficient mode of service and communication. Alan Dundes states accordingly:

> Among its functions, folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way. It is precisely in jokes, folktales, folksongs, proverbs, children's games, gestures, etc. that anxieties can be vented. (Dundes 1976, 1521)

Therefore, there is already one major function of marshrutka salon's signposts detected, mainly the attempt of drivers to reduce direct communication with the passengers while still conducting their behavior in the cabin in order to maintain a conflict-free mobility ride.

Political statements in marshrutka cabins

Another layer of marshrutka signposts is added, when political campaigns in the run-up to presidential and parliamentary elections become present on the intermediate sphere of marshrutka places. As image 7[7] illustrates, marshrutka operators and owners take use of the advertisement banners inside a marshrutka to support certain candidates in the elections. We detected many

forms of political articulations within the marshrutka assemblage. For instance, many marshrutka drivers of Rostov on Don oppose the local law that obliges marshrutka operators to accept reduced tariffs in accordance with the municipal guidelines (image 8). The signpost hints towards a long ongoing discussion in Russian transport policy, where municipalities try to implement a social ticket system to commercial minibuses but without introducing a transparent compensation system for the drivers (Sgibnev and Vozyanov 2016). As drivers depend on the daily payroll due to highly exploitative working conditions (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b), they are comprehensibly refused the obligation to accept reduced fares, which in turn strengthens the widespread, but simplified reputation of marshrutka drivers as ruthless businessmen[8].

Generally speaking, marshrutka interior mirrors all sorts of relevant discussions or major societal events through the decoration and announcements in the cabin. In Bishkek, this could recently be seen from marshrutka signposts referring to the World Nomad's Games, an increasingly popular international competition of traditional games held in Central Asian countries. During the Games in 2014, 2016 and 2018, marshrutka cars were decorated with patriotic slogans referring to the legendary Manas epic in order to increase the anticipation and consent of this costly mega-event (image 9).

Some drivers also use the marshrutka surface to convey their own political messages. Those signposts can refer to nationalist symbols as well as to concrete comments on contemporary political events or simply describe a nostalgic remembrance of the Soviet past (image 10)[9]. Therefore, besides the observation that marshrutka cabins are a vivid trajectory of collective identity constructions, it is also interesting to note that the illustrations, advertisements and decoration devices are temporary changing and always related to contemporary discourses in the society. Furthermore, they may trigger and mediate political statements and beliefs, which reflect back into the local assemblage and into the public discourse of a society.

Marshrutka commercials – multi-layered faces of transit advertisement

A further important layer of conveyed marshrutka semiotics are diverse sorts of marshrutka commercials. Understandably, transit advertisements are popular among agencies because of their high coverage in public space for relatively low costs. Further advantages are the flexibility of advertisement size, location and time. Although it appears a bit antiquated in times of digital advertisement profiles, one main argument for transit media has been the relatively precise reach of a target group depending on districts, neighborhoods or in the near surrounding of representative buildings. At the same time, transit advertisements in marshrutkas include also some disadvantages from a marketing perspective. For instance, the already mentioned fluid ownership structure might generate conflicts among drivers, operators and the local government as all three actor-groups might apply very different demands.

Being aware of the often narrow application of the term transit media, we use transit media in its broadest possible sense, which includes all possible visual and literal mediation tools that can be found in a marshrutka. Research about transit media is abundant in both the Global North and South, especially concerning the applied performance of mass advertisement in different contexts of law, policy and social perception (Tristano 1998; Miciukiewicz and Vigar 2012; Smith, Razzouk, and Richardson 1990). Here, we want to point to the multi-conceptuality, the manifold scopes of interpretation as well as the changing meaning of advertisement messages beyond their primary function. Furthermore, the term transit media points to the fact that the manifold billboards and signposts assembled in a marshrutka cabin follow a certain logic, namely a messenger-recipient communication, which is at first glance one-dimensional and hierarchically organized, although the reaction and interpretation remain on the recipient side.

Thinking about the bad image of marshrutkas in both of our case studies in Kyrgyzstan and Russia (Meduza, August 18, 2016; Regnum, April 03, 2018), it does not appear straight away as a proper place for product advertisement. At the same time, the high usage of the minibuses gives a comprehensible incentive to place transit ads in marshrutka cabins. In this sense, it is indeed

interesting to note that not all kind, but rather particular advertisements can be found in marshrutkas. Only a minority of the used transit media devices in Bishkek are classical product advertisements, but rather small trade services or local retail shops. As most advertisements are not provided by special agencies, but rather directly organized through the marshrutka operator or even individual drivers, a majority of the advertisements are locally bounded to the neighborhood or districts of a unique marshrutka line.

A formerly chaotic and little regulated marketing policy has been gradually formalized by the transport department. Since 1998, the official advertisement on transportation should be carried out based on contracts or agreements between vehicle owners and advertisement agencies (Zakon o reklame, 1998). At the same time, a certain supervision system was implemented to control the application of advertisement supply on public transport means (Law about the advertisements of the Kyrgyz Republic 1998). Similar legal acts were introduced in the Russian Federation in the late nineties. The initial difficulties to implement a successful control institution for non-registered advertisements was finally successful, when major marshrutka reforms triggered the upcoming of large-scale marshrutka enterprises, which had a self-interest to conclude contracts with official marketing agencies.

Despite all, marshrutka cabins are to this day determined by commercial advertisement campaigns of mainly local providers. Commercial marshrutka advertisement mostly appears in the form of small flyers fixed in the cabin or glued on the transit vehicle. Content-wise, marshrutka advertisement is usually locally bounded to the city. In Bishkek, the most popular commercials advertise for private schools, particularly language courses. Although the increase of foreign language schools is not primarily a marshrutka specific topic, the example shows that marshrutka spaces are of course related to socio-political developments and challenges. In this sense, foreign languages, especially English and Russian, became a necessary skill due to the low economic performance of the state, which pushes high percentages of the citizens to leave the country as labor migrants or to study abroad. Therefore, as especially young working people, as well as students, rely on marshrutka services to reach their school, university or working space, the commercials in Kyrgyz marshrutkas turn indeed out as targeted and expedient.

Another type of commercials in marshrutkas is that of local service providers as barbers, repair services for electronic devices, computer courses and so on. Overall, the advertisement reflects the rapid change of demanded work requirements, which developed as elsewhere into a profitable market in Bishkek and the entire country. Besides that, all kind of cafes and restaurants advertise in marshrutkas as well as services connected to the so-called toi-economy, e.g. the celebration of different passages of life. In this sense, the commodified prolongations of community building traditions find its shadows in the marshrutka microcosms and teach the attentive observer about idealized conceptions of societal commitments and reproduction, long embedded into capitalist systems of a feasts industry called among Kyrgyz a 'toi' (Turdalieva and Provis 2017).

As already stated, marshrutka commercials play a limited role in Russian marshrutka devices as operators and the legislator try to oppose non-registered small-scale advertisement for local retailers or service providers. However, especially big carriers increasingly use their vehicles as official advertising space and collaborate with major marketing agencies. Therefore, even big brands such as McDonalds or Uber have recently entered the marshrutka interior, however, in the form of glossy posters or on the seat covers of the cabin.

In this respect, the marshrutka design in both case studies allows us to reach conclusions on the enterprise structures. Especially the independent ability of marshrutka drivers to act, to decorate or to publish an opinion, a patriotic proverb or even a small commercial depends significantly on the employment relationship as well as on the fact, whether they provide a self-owned car or not. Similarly, a comparison between Bishkek and Rostov on Don shows that marshrutka operators in Bishkek have much more influence on marshrutka appearances, for instance in form of election advertisements, which enable them to convey messages into the public sphere or simply to gain some extra money through advertisement banners.

Discussion and conclusion: marshrutka billboards' as a signifier of identity construction and power relations

At the beginning of this paper, we established marshrutka cabins as a semi-public place in urban space, which determine the relation of different actors involved in a continuously changing sociotechnical assemblage. It is a public place because it allows in a wider sense to create publicity concerning the transport policies at stake but also beyond concerning issues of relevance in the local discourse or urban setting. Furthermore, the state intervenes into marshrutka cabins and is represented through various signposts and billboards proposing an institutionalized mode of operation. At the same time, marshrutka minibuses consist of elements of a private place, as they are from a legal point of view private property of a third person used for commercial reasons. Besides that, transport workers occasionally use the cabin and the surface of their vehicles to create an intimate sphere of coziness and hospitality, which underline the notion of privacy in Marshrutka minibuses. Lastly, the opportunity and necessity to discuss certain rules to engage personally with the driver during the ride as well as to interact with other passengers increase flexibility and scope of actions for all participants.

Indeed, it is the diverse scope of the individual as well as the collective leeway, which marks the major difference to more fixed institutionalized transport counterparts. It is the fact that the major mobility offer, marshrutka, relies on normative and routinized, however, extremely fluid and negotiable interaction practices, conducted by passengers, drivers and material arrangements, which seemingly share nothing than temporary transit need to another urban destination. However, like all social interaction and communication processes, marshrutka negotiation implies more than just the purpose of being mobile. Religious symbols, folkloristic-styled curtains, placates with worldly wisdoms of all kind mark certain narratives of belonging and identity construction strategies. Speaking in terms of Appadurai's sense of social imaginary,

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. [...] imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai 1990, 31)

Therefore, they are used as a marker of identity construction, commercial advertisement as well as political mobilization on different layers. It is precisely the combination of private and public elements in a marshrutka that may characterize this unique place of encounter. As marshrutkas are not perceived as state-owned; political statements, cultural expressions as well as media commercials are gaining a certain authenticity as the authorship is generally related to the driver. However, this is rather an illusion as different signposts in the marshrutka interior are published from very different authors as operators, car owners, state administrations or the driver.

Comparing the marshrutka signposts in our case studies, we estimate mainly three different authors that create different types of marshrutka signposts, namely references to behavior patterns, advertisement billboards and identity creating decoration symbols (see Table 1). The behavior codex is distributed by the marshrutka operators or to a lesser degree by the local transport department (1), the marshrutka advertisement lays under the responsibility of vehicle owners (2), while the drivers themselves mostly fix the interior decoration, political statements or religious symbols (3). As the authorship of different messages is not evident to the passengers, the different contents merge into an overall impression of marshrutka interior design.

Nevertheless, there are a couple of interesting commonalities. For instance, we observed that the design of messages and signposts correlates with their period of validity. This means that official announcements, which belong to the basic equipment of each and every marshrutka and can, therefore, be found in all minibuses, are normally in a restrained design often printed out on white DinA4-sheets (see image 2). These sheets normally build the background of all marshrutka interior designs. Another special feature is the driver's use of anecdotes to underline certain behavior codex. In contrast, the short-dated political campaigns or statements, which often refer to specific events and therefore become quickly outdated, often receive the most prominent places in the

marshrutka cabin and may be characterized as very expressive, colorful and eye-catching. In between election campaigns and rule guidance, the marshrutka commercials, which are depending on the official status often small in size, may last relatively long in the cabin, once they have made it into the marshrutka signpost assemblage. As locally adjusted commercials, they represent the urban space behind the tinted glass, referring to a meta-dimension of the direct urban environment, a marshrutka is providing services to. Exceptions are large-scale advertisement campaigns of national or international brands, which rent, similar to the political ads, the marshrutka billboards for a relatively small amount of time. Moreover, Table 1 illustrates that the different temporalities of signposts correlate with the salience of the design. Short-living billboards tend to be more ostentatious, while the basic announcements are sidelined in a continuously changing and transforming interior setting.

Another angle from which transit ads and marshrutka decorations can be analyzed is to look at their spatial arrangement inside and outside the cabin (see Figure 1).

Similar to the time frame the spatial distribution of marshrutka signposts influences the semiotics of the given arrangement. In this sense, we observe how personal statements and icons of identity patterns are arranged in the direct environment of the driver, while advertisements are mostly found at the back of the cabin. The intermediate space in the cabin is mainly used as an information board for the mobility practices and the passage code of conduct, which includes the announcement of the

Table 1. Types of signposts in marshrutkas and authorship in Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

	Legal frameworks of public transport provision	Commercial ads	Political/ideological statements
Local Transport Department	Rules of conduct, law texts, terrorism warning information		
Marshrutka Operator/ Car Owner	Scheme of marshrutka routes, tariff regulation, licenses, complaining numbers	*Large-scale advertisement campaigns*: Uber/McDonalds	Campaigns of mega- events, political statements referring to nationwide or international relations (election advertising)
Marshrutka Driver	Anecdotes with educational character	*Local advertisement campaigns*: Announcements of new shops/ stores, Toi- economy, Retail Services, Education courses and private school programs, cafes, restaurants	Proverbs, quotes from Manas epic or famous people, political statements referring to local discourses (transport policy, memory culture)
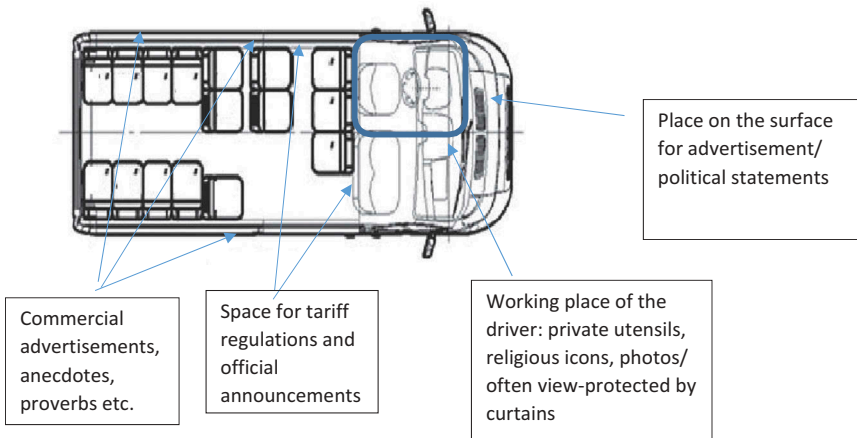
Figure 1. Spatial arrangement of signposts in the marshrutka cabin.

tariff fares and behavioral rules. Obviously, this division of inner-marshrutka space is rather hybrid and fluid and can vary from vehicle to vehicle. There is also a clear and logical comprehensible trend from the public to the private/intimate being positioned nearer to the driver.

This is reflected in the passenger's ride experience as well. For instance, while passengers on the back rely on inner-marshrutka-ride-institutions as the practice of handing over the money from passenger to passenger through the entire cabin, the role of passengers in the intermediate space is much more active and flexible, as they directly interact with the driver and take the role as internal intermediaries and mouthpiece of the driver. The two passengers sitting at the very front of the minibus have anyways a special role resulting from the spatial separation from the cabin and the proximity towards the driver. This is again occasionally reflected in special signposts on the right front door inviting heteronormatively beautiful women, often in a pseudo-humorist, sexist manner, to sit more comfortably and intimately next to the driver[10].

Therefore, looking on the performances of transit media devices in marshrutkas allows us to detect a number of crucial discussions and identity signifiers in the respective local settings but also unveils techniques of communication and conflict solving strategies, which characterize the fluid appearance of everyday marshrutka practices. In this sense, major conflicts of marshrutka mobility in a city are assembled in the marshrutka interior. Entering into a marshrutka is not only traveling from A to B, but involves the representation of homeland, hierarchy systems, and social conflicts. As Monika Büscher has mentioned five interdependent mobilities as a starting point for mobile research, the marshrutka consists of a multi-layered experience of corporeal travel, physical movement, imaginative travel, virtual and communicative travel (Büscher and Urry 2009, 101).

In this sense, marshrutka cabins materialize physical movement; they enable corporeal travel but are only able to maintain their widely flexible structure through a system-immanent usage of communicative, virtual and imaginative mobility patterns. Relating to a common basis through collective knowledge resources (humor, proverb, patriotic slogans, etc.) defines an associative action scope that enables the urgently needed cooperation (Wa-Mungai 2003). Imaginative representations of the urban outside might help to orientate but more importantly create a symbolical affiliation to a certain neighborhood (Müller-Schwarze 2009). It is, therefore, this very purposeful usage of cultural signifiers, marked as marshrutka semiotics that allow for a fluid mode of transport that enables reliable services but also allows for negotiation (detours, tariff fares, driver's behavior are fixed and regulated but anyways potentially up to discussion) (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018a).

Therefore, the cabin emerges as an open field of struggle, where transport departments try to settle their power and show presence in response to citizen complaints. At the same time, drivers and operators find strategies to cooperate and to avoid conflicts. This is by no means an easy task, as drivers have to oppose strong negative sentiments and a majorly pejorative public discourse against marshrutka mobility. Therefore, the difficult circumstances of marshrutka drivers in post-Soviet cities caused by structural deficiencies, lack of security and a subliminally perceived low reputation in the majority society encourage individual interaction strategies. In this sense, the application of patriotic symbols, cultural heritage and historical narratives or the imitation of guest room hospitality might be interpreted as an attempt to compensate for the insufficiency of the service.

Marshrutka cabins are semiotically connected to the urban life and infrastructure, thus establishing a unique place of encounter. In contrast to the in-comparison strictly regulated municipal public transport offers, marshrutka services maintain a fluid and broad margin of development opportunities. This appears possible through symbolic markers of a temporary-created collective sense that is opening space for negotiation and contestation. On the downside, the currently applied intervention policies of local transport departments try to thin out well-established communication tools in the marshrutka cabin, which serve as a compensation mechanism for drivers and passengers alike. This has already two observable consequences, it destroys the fluidity of marshrutka mobility, and it mutually alienates passengers and drivers from each other. Both would be all right, if drivers could rely on fixed salaries and transport quality would be increased, which is so far sadly not the case.

The contribution tried to show that the inner-semiotics of marshrutka decorations may help to interpret deficits in the transport policy and shortcomings of the present mobility service. Beyond that, marshrutka semiotics inherit sources of societal common sense-making, cultural identity performances and social conflicts of interest, which fulfill an important function in the marshrutka cabin as well as for the broader citizen community. Thus, we experience the described decoration signs as particularly relevant and academically worthwhile in order to engage a bit deeper into the microcosms of semi-public marshrutka spaces.

Notes

1. An interesting comparison to draw is the graffiti culture in Panama and elsewhere, which uses similar images and symbolic emblems to create commemorative culture, collective identities as well as political statements in public space. Applying this perspective would further strengthen the notion of marshrutka vehicles as public space that is contributing – through moving images on the surface of the vehicles – to community building in a society (Mubi Brighenti 2010; Truman 2010).
2. For instance, many drivers decorate the marshrutka salons in the style of a guestroom with curtains and seat upholsteries. In interviews, those drivers declare that they have the desire to serve hospitality to their clients.
3. The words said by Ishak Razzakov 'Sen ak bolson, men ak bolsom. The marshrutka drivers paraphrased Koom taza bolot' – "If you are clean, I am clean, and then the society is also clean. 'Sen ak bolson, men ak bolsom, marshrutka taza bolot' – 'If you and I are clean, then the marshrutka remains clean'.
4. 'Ala-Too is the cradle of the Kyrgyz' (Ala-Too Kyrgyzdardyn beshigi).
5. «Остановка «где-нибудь здесь» будет где-нибудь там!».
6. «Тише скажешь-дальше выйдешь».
7. In 2017 elections, Babanov was the candidacy for the President, while in 2015, the party Ata-Meken was among six parties winning the parliamental seats.
8. As pointed out, local transport departments are refusing their responsibility when accusing drivers of anti-social behavior. Drivers work widely as outsourced self-dependent service providers under very low conditions. Their fight against reduced ticket fares is therefore rather a symptom of working precarity in the sector, rather than a subsumed profession character.
9. «Хочу в СССР» (I want back to USSR).
10. The perception of gender attributions are strongly reproduced in the marshrutka sphere. Perceived as a male–dominated space (female drivers are very rare, although existent). The experience of woman, confronted with assaulting behavior in the often overcrowded minibuses, sexist proverbs but also implicit markers of difference, constitutes a very important research objective that would need further attention in the future (Turdalieva and Edling 2017).

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