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Preprint / Preprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Weicker, T. (2020). Marshrutka (in)formality in southern Russian cities and its role in contentious transport policies. *Geoforum*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-77732-1>

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## Marshrutka (in)formality in southern Russian cities and its role in contentious transport policies

### Abstract

Most Russian cities are currently facing major transformation processes in the public transport supply. Commercial paratransit services, known as marshrutkas, have been criticised heavily for unsafe and uncomfortable facilities as well as for anti-social business behaviour, prone to tax evasion and daily penny wars on the street. Consequently, many municipalities have enforced various strategies to restrict informal marshrutka services. This article compares the distinct policy strategies of two municipalities, Rostov on Don and Volgograd, and discusses the different outcomes. When analysing the case studies, two prevailing discourses seem to have informed the locally applied transport policies: a neoliberal, free market approach that perceives the loosely regulated commercial transport operations superior to state-led services and a rather neo-modernist perception of informal transport operation, calling for a rigorous push back of marshrutka mobility. Prominent in both policy discourses is the notion of informality as an instrument to govern the transport setting.

Reviewing the developing field of informal transport studies, the article argues that the governments of the respective cities have employed (simplified) notions of informality as a legitimisation argument to take action. A closer perspective on the daily operations, however, unveils a socially institutionalised transport service full of complex operation practices beyond policy-strategic divides between the formal and informal. The contribution utilises the formal/informal nexus successfully developed in urban studies and applies it to international transport studies. Thus it enables the unveiling of insufficiencies in urban transport provision without falling in the trap of superficial modernisation narratives.

Keywords: marshrutka, public transport policy, informal transport, Russian cities

Word count: 8954

## Introduction

In August 2016, the city government of Moscow implemented an extensive public transport reform, merging all commercial marshrutka minibuses<sup>1</sup> providers under one private operator, offering integrated public transport services synchronised with the municipal transport services. Promoting the beginning of the end of an era in Russia's capital, the head of the city transport department, Maksim Liksutov, proudly announced:

"In all civilised cities around the world, marshrutkas are nowadays a relic of the past. Now it is also time for Moscow to stay no longer in the past"<sup>2</sup> (Liksutov in Meduza 2016, p.2).

Marshrutka minibuses have provided mass paratransit service all over the Russian Federation since the early years of transition. The commercially operated minibuses continue to serve up to two thirds of the daily public transport passenger share in Russian cities. Regarding their operator structure as well as their competing relationship to municipal transit services, they share some obvious similarities to other paratransit services around the globe which also brought them in the focus of international transport studies from the late nineties onward (Gwilliam 1999; Finn und Nelson 2002). As other paratransit systems, they have aroused interest among international transport geographers as a particularly "flexible mode of passenger transportation that does not follow fixed schedules" (Behrens et al. 2015, p.1). Recently, they are discussed in two major ways. On the one hand, paratransit services are perceived as possible 'smart' on-demand solutions for the overstrained traffic infrastructure in developed cities of the Global North (Atasoy et al. 2016; Jokinen et al. 2011). On the other hand, they are described as a threat of cities in the Global South, where paratransit services are cannibalising municipal transport offers and therefore hindering modernisation and progress, while generating a competition advantage out of weak regulation schemes and illegal operator structures (Shimazaki und Rahman 1995; Finn und Mulley 2011; Ferro 2015). Furthermore, the tendency in paratransit literature seems to equalise all paratransit services of the Global South as similarly non-regulated, traffic causing and chaotic (Finn 2008; Cervero 2000)<sup>3</sup>, while reviewing paratransit services of the Global North individually and under the given circumstances in a respective city (Schwanen 2018; Neumann 2014; Weckström et al. 2018).

Without denying local difficulties and necessary contestations, this article is critical towards this prolonging dichotomy in the literature. Instead, the applied comparative framework seeks to make sense of marshrutka mobility as a crucial encounter of social life as well as an everyday producer of the urban assemblage. Attentive to the risk of too general comparisons between cities, urban research requires a strategy of transparency that envisions the selection process of certain comparison frames (Jazeel and McFarlane 2007; Ward 2010). In order to deconstruct power hierarchies, researchers as Robinson or Roy and Ong have insistently called for alternative forms of comparative research and opened new units of comparison:

"Attention to circulations would draw many different combinations of cities into the same analytical or political space and the relationships of comparison invoked would be very different from those

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian term 'marshrutka' has German roots and can literally translated as 'marching route'.

<sup>2</sup> To improve readability, all quotes original in Russian language are translated into English.

<sup>3</sup> Famously, Brendan Finn provides a deductive comparison scheme between minibuses systems in Ghana, Russia, Georgia and Kazakhstan. Robert Cervero is comparing 'informal' minibuses services across three continents (Latin America, Africa and Asia). The present article tries to oppose these too generalist comparisons without admitting certain obvious similarities. This is particularly important as predominantly promoted policy solutions are majorly informed by such universalistic approaches with problematic consequences to be discussed in this contribution.

suggested by the formal, territorializing spatial imaginations of conventional comparativism” (Robinson 2011, p.25).

Therefore, the study follows a relational comparison approach that opposes mono-causal concepts of comparison. Urban assemblages are contained in very unique scales of space, place, history and structure composition but they invite the drawing of common trajectories (e.g. marshrutka mobility) that may bring two distinct settings in a productive encounter of commonalities and difference in relation to an urgent public issue (Roy 2003). This is particularly important as urban comparison schemes are an empirical fact of our everyday life. To demonise comparative perspectives would, thus, similarly conceal implicit comparisons in mind, which are informing both the academic discourse as well as urban policies on a global and regional scale (McFarlane 2010). Gillian Hart subsumes:

“Instead of taking as pre-given objects, events, places and identities, I start with the question of how they are formed in relation one another. In this conception, particularities or specific cities arise through interrelations between objects, events, places and identities; and it is through clarifying how these relations are produced and changed in practice that close study of a particular part can illuminate the whole” (Hart 2002, p.14).

In this sense, the marshrutka as socio-technical materiality and a locally embedded institution certainly constitutes a mode of urban life in Rostov on Don and Volgograd. While the case study discusses contemporary changes in the Russian context, the article strives to develop theoretical arguments which hold significance beyond the analysed local setting but denies clear attributions of an assumingly developed or underdeveloped transport system in accordance to Western settled standards. In demarcation from that, the chosen case studies provide the empirical normalcy of ‘inbetweenness’, thus questioning simplistic arguments of backwardness and civilisation (see Liksutov in Meduza 2016). Furthermore, the research framework follows a comprehensive perspective on urban transport and engages critically with the discursive divide of (in)formality. Its findings could be transferred to other transport studies dealing with the informality of paratransit services in manifold Latin American or African cities (Paget-Seekins et al. 2015; Muñoz et al. 2009; Mutongi 2006; Rizzo 2017). Besides, the methodological frame also clearly invites for a comparison to case studies from the Global North (Jaffe and Koster 2019). The struggles in European cities caused by the introduction and quick expansion of Uber services could serve as closely related example, where the discursively established formal/informal divide would probably allow for new insights in the field (see Dudley et al. 2017; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b). Thus, the article elaborates a methodological conceptualisation which could grasp better the multi-layered functioning of formal/informal divides in contemporary cities. It tries to tackle informality not as an explanatory tool but rather as the initial object of investigation to research urban modernisation processes on a broader scale without losing sensitivity for local peculiarities.

### Background of the study

Mirroring the pejorative view on paratransit minibuses, Russian city administrators as Maksim Liksutov are indeed actively reproducing an arguably improper equation of actually very diverse paratransit phenomena in cities of the Global South. Thus, despite the fact that marshrutkas are of course embedded in a dense regulation system, which provides a widely accessible transport option for millions of citizens to an expansively stretched route network, they are dominantly depicted as a daily safety hazard on Russian streets, an anti-social transport offer and prone to tax evasion (Vvodin 2016; Koltashov 2015; Zacharkin 2016).

Notably, this was not always the case. The marshrutnye taksi has existed as a route taxi since the early Soviet period, although less prominent and dominant, and was introduced to transfer passengers between major tourist attractions and transportation hubs, such as railway stations or airports in the

metropolises of the country (Sgibnev and Vozyanov 2016). Later they were integrated into the state-led public transport network as a substituting service mainly in suburban areas. They developed into a mass transit service only in the aftermath of the Soviet Union breakdown, when financially underfunded state-led transport parks tried to compensate their lack of maintained buses and trolleybuses with introduced minibus networks. As, due to an internationally prescribed cost saving and deregulation policy, the financial situation of the municipalities didn't improve, loosely organised collectives of minibus drivers started to provide self-reliant services on a commercial basis, thus establishing private marshrutka enterprises (Sapir 2000; Dale 2011; Zhajtanova and Kuznetsov 2014).

The quickly expanding paratransit service in the nineties soon established itself as the predominant transport offer in almost all Russian cities. Introduced as a faster and more reliable alternative to the outdated municipal transport, marshrutka services were widely appreciated by the users in the early years of transition (Sanina 2011). This positive attitude started to change in the early 2000s when criminal cartel building, tax evasions and irresponsible driving patterns became a public issue (Sorokina 2008). The following policies of consolidation have diverged from city to city and the outcomes with regards to the service quality and convenience of users and transport workers alike have also varied<sup>4</sup>. Generally, the city transport departments succeeded in establishing recognised and officially registered transport enterprises, thus bringing the daily marshrutka operations under certain control through tendering processes or route licenses and into the tax net (Vorobyev et al. 2016). While this appears to be an effective formalisation process from a legal perspective, the transport policies have had negative effects on the daily working conditions of drivers, thus increasing the exploitation of vehicles and causing so-called penny wars<sup>5</sup> among drivers on the street (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b). This, in turn, has led to a decrease in service quality, giving rise to a strongly negative perception of the transport system among the users and a pressing call for political action.

Within this trend of imagining public transport modernisation by elimination of marshrutkas, the host cities of the Soccer Championship in 2018 received special attention during the last years, as substantial federal funds were transferred to the city budgets in order to renew, inter alia, their public transport network (Pravitel'stvo Rossijskoj Federatzii 12/27/2016). In this process, the two southern Russian cities Rostov on Don and Volgograd introduced strategy plans to majorly re-structure their public transport supply in the period from 2016-2018 (City Administration of Volgograd 2016; City Administration of Rostov on Don 11/29/2013). As will be shown, both city departments, although following almost distinct approaches towards the reform of their respective transport networks on their streets, faced major challenges in the implementation of new operation modes and substantially failed to remedy the shortcomings and systemic deficits of the service.

The present article is part of a three year research project that investigated the urban mobility mode of marshrutka from interdisciplinary perspectives in different post-Soviet cities of the Russian Federation, Central Asian as well as the Caucasian countries. This study draws from empirical data collected from 40 extensive qualitative expert interviews of crucial actors involved in the daily

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<sup>4</sup> Due to different regulation frames, marshrutkas may appear in a very different format from city to city. Some cities apply standard fares, other differentiate between the lines and distance. Certain transport departments have regulated the car brand and vehicle quality to ensure a homogenous public image. Others do hardly give any requirements concerning the vehicles. Furthermore, the enterprise size of transport operators both in terms of route licenses and vehicle fleets may differ castly from city to city, which has significant effects on the working conditions of drivers ergo on the passenger experience and service quality.

<sup>5</sup> "Penny wars" describe the daily competition between minibus drivers. Drivers normally have subcontracts with the operator, which allow them to serve a specific route. While they have to pay a fixed price for this license their personal income depends on the number of passengers they are able to carry. This encourages a harsh competition between the drivers and leads to risky driving behaviours and manoeuvres near the bus stops to snatch away passengers from each other – called the "Penny War".

marshrutka business network (e.g. operators, drivers, activists, local politicians, and passengers) of Volgograd and Rostov on Don. Moreover, anthropological methods as participant observations, go along interviews as well as an extensive analysis of the inner public discourse through newspaper reports, law texts, and public speeches have been applied during three fieldwork periods conducted between 2015-2018. The research was conducted using a flexible approach to fieldwork with the aim of gathering knowledge about locally adjusted organisation regimes of marshrutka mobility provision and their inner-legislation structure in commercial enterprises of the two respective cities (Wamsiedel 2017).

The article aims to show how marshrutka policies are legitimised by an implicit concept of informality, which helps to establish influential power hierarchies in the city. It will be argued that a reductionist perception of informality is applied in two very different marshrutka transport policy discourses. The article empirically lays out predominant neoliberal arguments that have been used to justify transport modernisation in Rostov and compares them with a neo-modernist, interventionist approach in Volgograd. Both public debates suggest a specific understanding of informality, which directly affects the different actors involved in the respective urban mobility assemblage.

Against this backdrop, the contribution underlines two major arguments on a theoretical level: Firstly, it demonstrates the entanglements of transport practices that play out in settings of formality and informality alike, blurring the borders between the terminology, which makes a more complex theoretical assessment of (in)formal transport operation necessary. Instead of a reductionist deficit oriented perspective, widely present in informal transport literature (Cervero 2001, Gwilliam 2002; Finn and Mulley 2011), the study shows that informal transport practices enable major insights into the daily urban fabric of my case studies and should be perceived as a fundamental mode of making, developing and negotiating urban life, as an axiomatic “domain of urban constitution” (McFarlane and Vasudevan 2014, p.6).

Secondly, the article depicts the discursively established strategies which simplify perceptions of informality in the public debate as a mighty but improper misuse of power, concealing very complex operation practices in a formal/informal continuum of the established transport assemblages. For the given case studies, the article suggests that a simplified notion of informality is consciously used as a power instrument of exclusion as a strategic use of a state of exception (see Roy 2005, p.153). In the next section, I will give a short literature overview and situate the present paper in a critical urban transport debate with a special focus on informal transport literature. Then I will describe the recent marshrutka abolition policies in Volgograd and Rostov on Don, showing that although very different policy approaches were applied, the inherent utilisation of informality as an effective governance tool is present in both cases.

### [Embedding marshrutkas in critical urban and informal transport debates](#)

Brendan Finn and Kenneth William have conceptualised marshrutka transport operations in a broader frame of global paratransit practices, which are commonly understood as a rather flexible and usually loosely institutionalised transport offer that emerged in the absence of financial resources and political assertiveness during a certain historical period of state failure (Gwilliam 2002; Finn and Mulley 2011). Paratransit transport on a global scale is depicted in these debates either as a threat that should be overcome through a presence of “strong political leadership and effective regulatory networks [which should establish] a controlled transport market with quality-based entry” (Finn and Mulley 2011, p.101) or as a viable alternative as “in some cases, [...] [...] jitneys satisfy the needs of consumers more than modern “formal” carriers” (Cervero and Golub 2007, p.456). In a rather problematic a priori division of deficient but flexible paratransit in the Global South and well-institutionalised but rigid

public transport system in the Global North, many transport scholars have asked for what to learn from the informal paratransit practices worldwide, which often ends in a concluding call for more competition, similar to that of the Global North which is guided by the supposedly effective free-market rules (Cervero 2001; Enoch 2005; Ferro 2015).

In contrast to this perspective, an increasing number of contributions challenge the previous statements on two main dimensions: Firstly, a few newly published articles engage critically with the analytical division between paratransit phenomena in the Global North, extensively perceived as a smart mobility solution, and their less advanced counterparts in the Global South, as a post-colonialist perspective that hinders an analysis of systemic struggles and shortcomings, for instance in labour exploitation, which is omnipresent in both settings (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b; Kasera et al. 2016; Eisenmeier 2018). Secondly, those latter urban transport perspectives are critical of widespread depoliticised, one-sided and often solely technocratic perspectives on urban mobility issues. These perspectives, the argument goes, need a broader consideration of socio-technical determinants and a closer engagement with directly related questions of urban (in)equality through spatial distribution in the debates (Kębłowski and Bassens 2018; Kębłowski et al. 2016; Timms et al. 2014; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018a).

Thus, informal transport has been recognised as a still underresearched but urgent topic of global cities. Recognising the fact that informal infrastructures are an ever-increasing mode of urbanisation for large parts of the global population, those practices of everyday mobility become a central category of urban space and an important analytical category in Human Geography (Evans et al. 2018; McFarlane 2012; Waibel 2016). However, a comprehensive account of diverse forms of circulation in urban settings needs to establish informality as a constitutive form of urbanisation, beyond Global North and Global South dichotomies, which further needs to overcome a perception of informality as an endless state of exception but rather consider it an omnipresent practice of actors involved (Robinson 2002; Roy 2013). In this sense, this contribution adds to the critique on dominant informal transport literature that applies an undercomplex notion of informality (Cervero and Golub 2007; Kumar et al. 2016; Golub et al. 2009) and calls for a wider consideration of informal practices in a diverse set of economies (Gibson-Graham 2008) playing out in the locally adjusted transport markets (Paget-Seekins et al. 2015; Agbiboa 2016; Parsons and Lawreniuk 2017). Besides, the article gives reason to interpret informal transport as a constituting mode of the urban, as “a mobile process through which often precarious lifeworlds are assembled [which may help to develop] a critical urbanism as a product of mobile informal architectures” (McFarlane and Vasudevan 2014, p.4).

Informal Economy studies in post-Soviet settings have emphasized the fatal role of weak state institutions, pushing entrepreneurial actors as well as all interacting individuals into informal practices of paid favours and into informal self-employment (Feige 1997; Ledeneva 2013, Williams 2010). Uncertain property rights, abstruse formal rules and non-reliable legal systems are considered the main driver of informality from such a perspective (Routh 2011). In contrast to these debates, the post-Soviet informal transport has been mostly viewed through a new-institutionalist lens, which describes informal marshrutka operations as a de facto viable solution to the transport challenges in post-Soviet cities (Kornai 2000; Abdih and Medina 2016; Slonimczyk and Gimpelson 2013). Following De Soto’s argument, which interprets informality as a rational and economic viable answer to failed state institutions, non-reliable regulation frameworks and tax systems, some scholars argued that individuals have created their own economic institutions that serve the purpose of exchange better than any conceivable alternative in the respective settings (Soto 1989; Becker 2004; Schneider 2005). Although this interpretation scheme is still very present in public debates and serves as a political legitimisation narrative (Thelen 2011), it has also been criticised as a concept that misses the social aspect of economic exchange as well as a notion of informal practices beyond economic rationales

(Rekhviashvili 2017). Williams and Round have shown in an evaluation on informal entrepreneurs' motives in Moscow that informal economy practices are not one-dimensional determined but include necessity- as well as opportunity-driven behaviour patterns, thus complexifying the social setting and environment interactions in informal enterprises (William Round 2008). This criticism of the new-institutionalist interpretation has led to a reconceptualization of diverse post-socialist economies calling for an imminent recognition of power hierarchies involved in a predominant capitalist system, which causes and denies certain forms of economic behaviour including formal and informal practices (Smith & Stenning 2006). Recently, Morris has continued the discussion on informal economy patterns introducing the notion of complex imbrications pointing to the multi-layered entanglements of (in)formal economy systems. Thus, Morris invites to grasp "informality as part of the adaptive transformations of social institutions and practices" without losing a critical perspective on the realised transactions and labour relations (Morris 2019, p.27).

Against this backdrop, the marshrutka empirics informing this paper will highlight the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, the continuous interplay of formal and informal practices. The case studies which will be outlined in detail in the following may demonstrate that marshrutka operations, including both formal and informal practices, depend on social networks and on mutually established norms or values in order to constitute certain market conditions that enable economic exchange. In this sense, this study is critical of the modernisation perspective which predict the decline of marshrutka services as a "byproduct of transition" (La Porta und Shleifer 2014), but follows a post-structural stance to interpret informality,

"as a myriad of (economic, social and cultural) practices spread on a spectrum between the legal, the extra-legal and illegal, some of which cause direct harm to fellow citizens while others undermine the state as institution or its symbolic power and others may be regarded not only as non-harmful but even as positive, allowing an organisation or a state to perform its function more effectively and efficiently" (Polese et al. 2016, p.16).

### Diverse notions of informality in the public discussion about marshrutka abolition

Since the emergence of mass marshrutka mobility in the midst of municipal public transport decline in the early nineties, marshrutka operations have been discursively connected as the informal opposite to formal transport providers. In contrast to contemporary discussions about marshrutka services, the clear distinction between 'official' transport on the one hand, and commercial, bottom-up services on the other, was a major selling point for the newly emerged urban transport mode in the nineties (Sanina 2011, p.213). The same is true for the first independent transport workers of that time, who were admired and mistrusted by the passengers at the same time. Anatol Breslavskij describes the multifaceted metamorphosis of jobless drivers, terminated by the municipal transport providers, to self-made marshrutka entrepreneurs in Barguzin, Siberia:

"On the one hand, they were highly respected members of the local community; each of them embodied the personification of a successful, business-oriented entrepreneur, who has good earnings and high prestige. [...] On the other hand, their wealth and independence [...] evoke a different perspective on their activities. Some conversations of passengers were full of envy and even detestation: 'They only take advantage of the situation, profiting from other people's life needs'" (Breslavskij 2006, p.66).

With time the good reputation of transport workers vanished and were replaced by images of anti-social, selfish drivers which prevail to this day. However impactful this rhetoric might be in terms of legitimising certain transport reforms, evidence shows that municipal transport services also rely on informal practices to retain their underfunded services. For instance, as Pavel Zyusin and Anton Vorobyev have pointed out, many municipal buses were used for non-registered rides off the schedule and without ticket issuing to improve the transport workers income. Moreover, blatant manipulations



of passenger statistics with the aim to sustain subsidies have been frequently reported over the last decades (Vorobyev et al. 2016; Zyusin 2010).

Therefore, it is interesting to observe that informality in the marshrutka sector first served as a self-description of drivers to distance from the collapsing municipal services but with time reversed into an argument of transport politicians to construct these services as the state-led counterparts. Depending on the local transport politician you ask, marshrutka operators appear either as a threat of municipal providers cannibalising the public infrastructure and avoiding their tax obligations, or as smart self-made entrepreneurs, who bypass the rules but build the better alternative to obsolete municipal services. The political argument derived from this observation is similarly either a strengthening of the formal sector accompanied by an extensive reduction of informal marshrutka services, mostly articulated from the public authorities, or a far-reaching legalisation which would formalise marshrutka operations as the better alternative to the deficient municipal counterparts. Concerning the latter, Jurij Belousov, representative of the private carriers' organisation in Volgograd, postulated already in 2014:

“The main and only thing the city government has to do is not to divide the municipal transport, which receives all the subsidies and benefits, from the commercial providers, which have to survive on their own. [...]. Right now, commercial operators in passenger transport struggle to survive. And within the struggle are drivers, and owners, and carriers” (Belousov 2014, p.4).

Under equal preconditions and without major state interventions, the argument continues, Volgograd would receive a better public transport network, based on commercial interests and market competition.

Indeed, the initial image of marshrutka entrepreneurs as self-made men or women in the post-Soviet society greatly influenced the local marshrutka policies in Russian cities especially in the late nineties. Following the neoliberal agenda of deregulated markets that reduce the government's functions to a mere night-watchman to allegedly release the potential of free competition, most city departments in post-Soviet countries introduced a formalisation policy with the aim of ensuring only a minimum of safety standards and traffic reliability without affecting the supposed 'market competition' in the sector (Zyuzin & Ryzhkov 2016).

However, the public authorities of Volgograd and Rostov who are currently undertaking major changes in the transport networks of their respective cities seem to have moved from justifications used in the 1990s and early 2000s. Conspicuously, critical statements of local transport politicians about contemporary deficits in the marshrutka market have increased in the last few years. Igor Novikov, chairmen of the transport department in Volgograd, stated exemplarily in 2015:

“Private carriers avoid tax revenues, that is no secret. Passengers pay their tickets in cash, which means that they cannot be taken into account! Sitting in the minibus, how often did you receive a ticket? Yes, almost never” (Burmenko 2015, p.2).

If only, marshrutka mobility providers would play by the rules, there wouldn't be a problem in the urban transport supply, the argument goes. Moreover, especially the official statements in Volgograd refer to the 'fact' that illegitimate marshrutka services are cannibalising the formal sector of public transport offers. Trapped in a vicious cycle, the municipal transport offers cannot compete against an informal transport service, denying concessionary fares and basic safety standards, which decrease the passenger numbers, the income rates and the coverage density due to financial losses. The governor of Volgograd district, Andrey Bocharov, claimed in 2016:

“Until 2014, the municipal and state-led public transport companies had a share of only 15 percent of passenger traffic. The rest, 85 percent, was conducted by private carriers. However, at the same time, municipal carriers provided 85 percent of the obligatory tax revenue, and private companies 15 percent” (Bocharov in Karasev and Sudarčikov 2016, p.1).

In this sense, current marshrutka policies in Volgograd are majorly guided by the conception that informality in the transport sector would only disappear once a viable municipal transport sector replaces the unpopular minibuses.

Only from this short paragraph it becomes apparent that clear formal/informal attributions are not only arbitrarily connected to certain sectors and not to others but also inattentive to diachronic developments. Transport research that follows such a superficial divide (Gwilliam 2002; Finn 2012; Cervero 2001) ultimately falls short of grasping the deficiencies in the system. Much more, informality has always been inscribed or 'imbricated' (Morris 2019) into public transport operations (of both municipal and commercial providers), simply the local appreciation, public abilities and wider economic circumstances in the field have significantly changed over the years. It should be noted that the current turn in transport policies is, although to different degrees, a rejection of long established marshrutka policies inspired by a neoliberal idea of bringing competition into most crucial infrastructure provision. What today is publicly damned as informal, used to be an applicable solution for underfunded transport departments for years. Informality continues to adopt to contradictory regulation frameworks and insufficient support by the government, thus sustaining the "urban constitution" (McFarlane 2010; 2012) against a widely insufficient transport policy.

In what follows, I give two empirical examples of how a neo-modernist approach in Volgograd and a further developed neoliberal approach in the transport policy of Rostov on Don play out in the respective urban settings.

### Marshrutka reformation attempts as a formalisation policy in Rostov on Don

Since the early 2000s, the transport department in Rostov on Don has been struggling to formalise the public transport services in its city. As many other city councils, Rostov on Don followed the strategy of reducing non-profitable state-led transport services<sup>6</sup>, which were replaced by a superficially monitored marshrutka network that quickly expanded over the entire city area and beyond (Ryzhkov 2014). In the last two decades the city transport has been conducted by up to twelve different operators, most of them providing mixed services (e.g. marshrutka lines and bus lines). Only a few operators provided solely marshrutka services in the less lucrative suburban areas. In contrast to Volgograd, marshrutkas were widely formalised, in a sense, that the legislators enforced a unified car brand, fixed fee schedule, and clearly visible responsibilities laid out on each minibus in the city. Nevertheless, beyond the surface, transport operators provide very heterogeneous employment and vehicle ownership forms, which cause problems in the sector.

*(Insert) Image 1 A particularity of the marshrutka system in Rostov on Don is the homogenous vehicle brand (@author)*

The most striking consequence of the formalisation policy in Rostov was the degradation of drivers' working conditions. While drivers used to possess their own car and organised their working shifts in close cooperation networks with colleagues, the newly established structure encouraged large-scale investments in vehicle fleets by third-hand leasers, which are then rented out operators or individual drivers. Concretely, this means that drivers not only have to pay for the route licence (weekly fee to the operator), but also for monthly loan instalments for the vehicles. One consequence is that drivers no longer have incentives to ensure the vehicle maintenance. This has two direct negative effects: firstly, the technical status of the vehicles is insufficiently controlled, thus creating a safety danger on

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<sup>6</sup> In the late nineties, the city government destructed eleven out of eighteen tram lines and reduced the trolleybus network to only 75 km (Zyusin and Ryzhkov 2016, p.77, p.84).

to the street as vehicle park owners want to exploit their investments as much as possible. Secondly, drivers are prone to non-sustainable driving patterns and feel irresponsible for the condition of the vehicle or cabin<sup>7</sup>.

Most importantly, after losing the ownership of the route and vehicle, transport workers in Rostov do not possess any negotiation capital to improve their working conditions. While self-owning drivers showed significant resistance against further worsening of their position, for instance through temporary strikes, contemporary drivers in Rostov are excluded from any decision-making process in the enterprise. Another important point is that the vehicle ownership used to be an important drive for cooperation between drivers, who met at designated garages and helped each other out with knowledge, spare parts or even money (Tolik and Vladimir, Marshrutka Drivers 5/13/2016). With the transformations in the ownership structure, solidarity networks gradually vanished, and many well-established drivers quitted their work. As contemporary commercial operators provide only subletting contracts, newly hired drivers find themselves widely isolated as quasi self-dependent service providers, forced to systemic overtime hours, often becoming an obvious safety hazard on the streets:

“According to the regional traffic police, since the beginning of this year, 37 traffic accidents happened due to the fault of public transport drivers, as a result of which 6 people died and 57 were injured. The main problem of urban transport [...] is the shortage of drivers: today the transport enterprises in Rostov need 1235 drivers” (Gromovich 2013, p.2).

In the past five years, this shortage was largely alleviated through foreign labour-migrants from the Caucasian and Central Asian states. While this is a fitting solution for the marshrutka operators' obligations towards the city government and their profit margins, the drivers are forced to work in a highly competitive transport market under extremely precarious conditions.

Since 2016, following constant complains about the bad quality of public transport supply in the city, the local government announced a step-by-step reduction of marshrutka services, which aimed to dismiss marshrutka services from the extended city centre to the suburban areas as feeding lines to a newly established bus and tram network. Within two years, the city purchased 150 new buses and 30 new tramways. In May 2018, the city manager Vitalij Kuzhnarev announced that marshrutkas will disappear from all roads, whereas big size buses provide their services. This decision, according to him, should ease the daily traffic, improve the gas exhaust emissions and solve the problem of driver shortages in the city (Gopalo 2018; Urbagaeva 2018). However, what happened in November 2018, when the city department implemented their new transport scheme, was a literal collapse of the public transport network (Stepanov 2018; Ulianov 2019), primarily, because of significant driver shortages, as drivers and operators had repeatedly emphasised:

“The reform was conceived with the good goal of freeing the roads from outdated transport devices. City authorities have changed urban transport routes and the number of carriers, but there is nothing good to be gained from it. The carriers simply did not have enough drivers for new routes” (Kurginjan 2019, p.1).

And this is little surprising, as, in fact, the city government only abolished the minibuses but not the underlying operation modus of the marshrutka system. Quite to the contrary, the transport department supported established marshrutka providers to transfer their mobility services to big size bus operations, including the predominant employment mode of sub-contracted freelancers. In this

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<sup>7</sup> Most obvious, this can be observed in the vanishing of cabin decorations inside a marshrutka. As in many other paratransit transport services worldwide, self-owned marshrutka vehicles were often cosily furnished with curtains and seat covers. This form of indirect communication and interrelation between drivers and passengers often interpreted as host and guests has also disappeared, thus strengthening the opposition between passengers and transport workers (Sorokina 2008; Brown-Glaude 2008; Tichomorov 2011).

way, private operators expanded their sphere of action, continued to exploit drivers' workforce and employ them as subcontracted freelancers on leased buses. This, however, is an inconvenient offer for trained bus drivers, while recent marshrutka drivers, used to the obstacles, usually do not possess valid driver license for big size buses (Larina 2019). The drivers left continue to operate marshrutka like services, just in brand-new big size buses. Rightly, passengers complain that drivers continue to boycott the obligatory e-ticket validators, which enable fee concessions to the passengers but disadvantage the drivers (Rasskasov 2019), or that the introduced night buses do not show up in non-profitable and less frequented daytimes (Rytchagova 2019). As a result the city council in Rostov fired leading officials in the transport department for major planning errors of the reform (Lenevskaja 2019; Erben 2018), but continues to praise the liberal competition in the public transport network without considering the fatal deficiencies for transport workers and passengers alike, dependent on the daily service.

Relating back to the informal transport theory, there are two points to make at this stage. At first, the empirical findings contradict De Soto's claim to interpret informal trade relations as viable alternatives to inefficient formalised sectors. Instead, transport workers in Rostov are forced to react on the institutional insufficiencies and try to balance out the insecurities involved as well as the systemic exploitation of their working force simply to survive in the transport market. Secondly, a point can be made that a superficial understanding of informal formal dichotomies misleads transport policies. The failure to reform the marshrutka market simply by purchasing big size buses might exemplify that a holistic understanding of informal practices in the respective transport markets would be needed to reach progress.

### Marshrutka abolishment strategies as a reversal to informality in Volgograd

For a long time, the dominance of marshrutka services in the public transport network of Volgograd was even more significant than in Rostov. More than 2000 minibuses provided 85% of the public transport volume in the long-stretched city near the Volga riverbank. Compared to Rostov on Don, the distinction between municipal and private transport enterprises remained salient until the reformation plans in 2016. In this sense, two municipal transport providers served the relatively low performing tramway<sup>8</sup>, trolleybus and bus network in the city, while up to 80 different commercial operators provided marshrutka services on 99 different licensed lines (Zyusin and Ryzhkov 2016, p.92).

Thus, the enterprise structure in Volgograd differs significantly from the big-scale carrier organisations in Rostov on Don. Many operators provide only a single route, some of them work themselves as drivers or mechanics in the company. Timofej, a marshrutka operator from Volgograd comments:

"It is divided fifty-fifty. Some drivers get hired by us and some drivers are small operators on their own. [...] you only provide your drivers with a schedule, you may sit at home and relax, the car is driving for you. However, if the car is new, then it's better to drive it yourself, because the hired drivers will destroy it in six months [...] Two friends of mine, who are working for me, they bought a new car together. They are father and son, riding the car together. It works out pretty well" (Timofej 6/16/2016).

Thus, self-owning drivers, as well as small enterprise formats were retained in Volgograd until recently. From a labour perspective, this has two advantages: firstly, drivers generally show ability to cooperate, intervene or compensate within collectives and have a say in enterprise decisions, and secondly, the capital of a self-owned car gives drivers the opportunity to choose more independently their working place. Furthermore, the organisation structure favours locally embedded drivers, providing services in neighborhoods they are well acquainted with, which invites for subversive action scopes of solidarity among colleagues but also among passengers and drivers. Lastly, car-owner drivers care about the riding conditions, have an interest in sustainable driving manners and look after the marshrutka interior. In this sense, the marshrutka organisation structure in Volgograd provides some noteworthy

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<sup>8</sup> An exception is the fast light rail that connects northern living districts with the city centre and is sufficiently working to capacity (Skorobogatov 2012).

advantages not only from a driver's but from a passenger's viewpoint (see also Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018b).

From a public authority's perspective, the widely independent working enterprises consist of opaque agreements and organisation structures that remain invisible for the administration. Moreover, the influence and supervision tools on daily services are even more limited than in Rostov. Therefore, although the working conditions and service quality in Volgograd are significantly better than in Rostov, the rhetoric against marshrutka operations as such is more aggressive. Indeed, it is also easier for the local government to blame commercial transport practices because the transport departments did not actively advertise a liberalisation of municipal transport services in the last two decades, to the contrary they always proposed a strengthening of municipal services. In 2015, the city administration argued:

"Due to a sharp increase in the number of marshrutkas, there is an outflow of passengers to be observed, which does not allow municipal operators to compete [which leads to a] reduction of urban electric transport (MUE "Metroelectrotrans") and low rates of high-speed transport construction, such as a subway" (City Administration of Volgograd 2015, p.75).

Consequently, the mayor of Volgograd announced in June 2016 that 85 % of the marshrutka vehicles will be shut down in 2017. Despite the protest of operators and drivers alike, the government issued the withdrawal of route licenses. In spring 2017, major marshrutka lines disappeared from the streets. On paper, they were replaced by a newly developed transport scheme, heavily dependent on new purchased buses, which were provided by a newly founded subcontracted transport company. With this step, the transport department made itself unpopular among municipal as well as among small scale enterprises. The great transport reform, as it was called, also affected municipal providers as they decided to reduce subsidies and pursued the shutdown of trolleybus lines in suburban neighbourhoods. The commercial transport operators accused the government of an unfair intervention into the market referring to the federal policy guidelines to protect and enforce the competition of small- and middle-sized enterprises in the country. Even the Federal Antimonopoly Service stated publicly in March 2017 only weeks before the planned shutdown:

"To improve the conditions of healthy market competition, passengers should be able to choose on their own between different transport modes in the city. If marshrutkas, as the administration of Volgograd asserts, are no longer needed by the population, then it is not necessary to eliminate them, because they will naturally leave the market" (Regnum 2017, p.1).

*Insert here: Image 2 Reassembled transport network consisting of state led tramway, private-public buses and commercial marshrutka services (@author)*

Nevertheless, the local authorities forced the official shutdown of marshrutka lines in April 2017. Similarly to Rostov, in the following weeks a state of emergency ensued in the city. Hundreds of workers were unable to reach their working places, the new buses were not capable of answering the passenger demands and were literally stuck in the narrow streets of the city, and whole neighbourhoods were cut off from the transport network overnight (Bloknot 2017; Chodunova 2017; Sergeeva 2017).

The situation worsened to such extent that only weeks after the official shutdown of marshrutka services, non-registered minibuses replaced the major gaps in the new transport scheme. Although the 'illegal' minibuses were harshly criticised by the local transport department and public announcements warned the population not to use those illegitimate transport services for safety and juridical reasons, the so-called 'zakaznyj' (pre-booked) marshrutkas were unstoppably on the rise in all districts of the city and even in the city centre (Babanova 2017). The new emerging, self-organised

transport system relied on the internal knowledge of citizens replicating former marshrutka lines under a new name. Legally, the drivers and operators, used a loophole registering their cars as rental vehicles. In the first weeks after the transport reform, passengers had to sign a paper stating that they have pre-booked the individual ride.

*Insert here: Image 3 'Zakaznoj po 15s' - Pre-booked marshrutka following the abolished route 15s (@author)*

In autumn 2017, approximately 1000 informal minibuses served the mobility demands of the citizens (AiF 2017). However, under remarkable worsened conditions, as drivers have to fear daily police controls and harsh fines, which are negotiable. Without any legal framework, transport workers are understandably unwilling to invest in new cars, hence they organise long-ago-scraped vehicles and utilise them for their commercial purposes (Gretshuchina 2017; Zheltov 2017). The Volgograd government criminalises not only drivers and operators but also the passengers, threatening with fines for illegal usage of non-registered transport services (Borisov 2017). The situation has become problematic, as many citizens do not have feasible alternatives to reach required facilities in the city. Under such circumstances, one could argue that the transport department should be grateful for the capability of non-facilitated, self-organised support structures that enable the continuation of the daily urban life without admitting to political failure.

Therefore, what can be observed in contemporary Volgograd is the criminalisation of marshrutka services that is pushed to the suburban areas but continues to be the only viable response to existential commuting demands of geographically disadvantaged citizens. Central neighbourhoods, may indeed profit from the newly established bus systems. Thus, the in-many-ways-problematic discursive attribution of informal/formal is manifested in a deplorable outcome when mobilising class stratification in the city through selective (non-)access to transport. Reviewing the governance strategies of the two cities further proves Ananja Roy's observation that precisely the regulatory inconsistencies serve as the "basis of state authority and serve as modes of sovereignty and discipline" (Roy 2009). Informal minibus operations (in Volgograd) or informal transport workers (in Rostov), pushed into the illegal sphere, arise as a convenient solution for the local government. They can be tolerated as their services are needed, they can continuously be blamed for the insufficiencies in the system and they can finally much easier be abolished, if desired.

Besides, the Volgograd example also shows that marshrutka services are much more than simple cost-benefit considerations (Rekhviashvili & Sgibnev 2018a). The sheer fact that drivers show ability to sustain services without the official institutional frame, shows how deeply they are embedded in social networks of cooperation. It might also be noteworthy that drivers did not increase the tariffs, although the individual risk to receive fines increased significantly. Instead, an elaborated warning system has been installed among drivers to refuse police controls and, on a negative side, already scrapped minibuses re-appeared for short-term profits. Ironically, the effort of marshrutka drivers to stay in the market without any license is helping the local government to rescue their transport network. Indeed, as Polese pointed out the informal endurance of the system helps "the state to perform its function more effectively and efficiently" (Polese et al 2016). Moreover, they saved the city from a disaster.

## Discussion

The local discussions and applied marshrutka policies have been broadly categorised in two major approaches. Originating from the idea that municipal transport offers provide overall formalised services while private minibus operations are prone to informality, the neo-modernist concept to marshrutka policies establishes a clear distinction between the two operation modes. Consequently, large scale marshrutka abolishment attempts are justified as the only proper solution to current

transport challenges, replicating the old modernisation narrative in informal literature that informality will vanish once transition is received (Williams und Round 2008; Hart 1973; Moser 1977) Instead of overcoming alleged backwardness, this leads to spatially divided inequality, where certain neighbourhoods are literally cut off from the transport network as most municipalities do not possess the financial capital or the political will to replace the entire marshrutka network by municipal transport providers.

Despite the manifold outlined negative consequences of a one-sided use of informality, the applied 'marshrutka as informal'-discourses seem to fulfil a system-immanent function as a legitimisation narrative for the ambivalent transport policies in question. In this sense, the permanent discursive production of 'informality' helps to justify both an apathetic non-policy enactment in the transport departments widely present in the past two decades as well as the recent locally restricted interventions including their eclatant failure. Such instrumentalisations of informality to exclude certain actor groups from the public negotiation as well as the self-legitimising call for order, inhibit a careful analysis of an indeed problematic marshrutka market that produces services of poor quality, dangerous competition frameworks and exploitative working conditions. Substantial changes would require a serious reconsideration of established informal institutions beyond its populist degradation.

In contrast to that, the neoliberal standpoint proposes an independent interplay of market forces to overcome deficient transport services. Developed out of the partially substantial reduction or shutdown of state-led public transport devices, its proponents have argued that the marshrutka systems could serve as a viable alternative to non-sufficient and highly subsidised state-led transport parks. This approach often includes a further standardisation as well as loosely installed control systems through route tendering and certain operation requirements (Zyusin and Ryzhkov 2016). As has been shown, this has two-fold effects: On the one hand, the operation structure of marshrutka enterprises was formalised in a sense that it received recognition by the city council. On the other hand, the re-structuring of marshrutka enterprises negatively affected the driver's working conditions, which found themselves isolated in large scale enterprises as pseudo-self-employed service providers. Therefore, the service quality further decreased in the process of formalisation exactly because important sources of informal compensation within driver collectives were demolished (Polese 2014; Morris 2019).

Both argumentation lines overlap in their fundamental consideration of informal marshrutka operations as categorically distinct from the formal public transport sector. In this sense, the two policy approaches are misleading as they hide the multifaceted nature of combined forms of informal and formal labour and undermine the harsh and exploitative conditions of deregulated markets, especially among neoliberal representations (see Roy 2005, Mc Farlane 2012). This remains to some extent surprising, as the artificially settled categorical distinction between supposedly formal/informal transport modes entirely disregards the quite successful historical coexistence of marshrutka services and further public transport systems in the Soviet Union, which equally produced its informal practices and institutions beyond formalised operation modes (Mun and Rubetz 1986; Vorobyev et al. 2016). On a second glance, this is, however, a very common phenomenon all over the world, where paratransit services are first deprived as non-sufficient and then inadequately replaced by formal transport systems often supported by Federal or international development funds (Wood 2015; Ghosh und Schot 2019; Muñoz und Gschwender 2008).

This underlines how different paratransit services on a global scale come together not as a homogenous transport mode of modernisation, but as a target of transport reform, justified by criminalising the actors involved and informalising their business structure. As most prominently and recently seen in the case of Santiago de Chile, abolishment policies, including large-scale

modernisation at the cost of urban peripheries, have great potential for contestation (Muñoz et al. 2014; Martínez et al. 2018). Paratransit literature should take these undesirable socio-spatial outcomes more seriously before suggesting great scale transport reforms to stakeholders involved. As has been shown here, abolishment policies are not only very unlikely to be successful but argumentatively justified through a power-politically intended misinterpretation of deficits in the respective transport networks. What can be learnt from the Rostov case is that the attempt to formalise the 'informal' produced a shift in the organisation framework to the disadvantage of drivers and passengers alike. The effects of the big-bang approach in Volgograd to solve the marshrutka problem through the withdrawal of licences illustrates even more clearly the system-immanent function of informal counterbalancing in a mutual relation to formalities that is creating a very fluid form of urban mobility performances (Sgibnev & Rekhviashvili 2018b; Smith & Stenning 2006). Therefore, a more promising approach would be to strengthen the so far excluded positions and voices in the urban transport settings. In Moscow, the transport reform transferred minibuses into the municipal frame, which worked very well as drivers profited from social security standards in the company. This shows how ridesharing could evolve its potential, not only in Southern Russia but on a global scale (Rogers 2015; Isaac und Davis 2014), namely through lasting job security and passenger-independent salaries. Referring to the marshrutka market in Volgograd and Rostov, it is the transport worker who is suffering the most from the described exhausting labour conditions but similarly from the strong accusations against their daily practices determined as criminal/informal. A promising policy approach would have to start from this threat in the system to gradually improve the transport service in the two cities.

## Conclusion

The paper proposes to complexify the debate on informal transport literature by applying a relational comparison approach along the informal/formal nexus of contemporary city transport operations. Taking the discursive consolidation of (in)formality divides as an entry point opens up an insightful and promising perspective to grasp the heterogeneity of local urban assemblages and their governance structure. The empirical examples have shown how seemingly similar informal transport services and policies evolve in significant different ways with far reaching consequences for people affected. This underlines the argument that the discursively drawn line of formal and informal divides appears as a fundamental mode of urban production. A marshrutka route is fascinating because it involves all the regulating regimes of the city authorities, is prone to a mutually developed enterprise structure and reacts in ad-hoc situational communication processes on the respective passenger/driver needs (or not). None of the mentioned institutions are fixed or unavoidable but realised in permeable interactions between actors involved. A line to draw between formal and informal practices in this interwoven structure of reciprocal reference seems widely artificial. Indeed, it is rather the imbrication of informal and formal practices (Morris 2019), which invites for further research in urban transport contexts and beyond.

Referring back to the post-Soviet informality debates, the introduced marshrutka cases support a perception of informality, which counterbalances certain intended or unintended effects of shifting regulation sets and ongoing fights for sovereignty. In this respect, this study has offered a number of interesting observations: Namely, the forceful shift of transport institutions in Volgograd did, arguably, formalise certain sets of transport regulations. However, the policy intervention also enforced informal reappearances due to a fatal underestimation of marshrutkas' crucial role in the daily urban mobility flows. Something similar happened in Rostov, when transport policy makers tried to replace marshrutkas by 'proper bus services' but actually transferred the marshrutka network and its deficits into the established bus network. Both examples underline that it might be easy to completely shift the blame on marshrutka operators, but that this alone doesn't solve any of the deficiencies described.



The main difference though, comparing Rostov and Volgograd, is the different ability of informal compensation practices to mobilise. To replace large scale transport services over night without any official recognition was possible due to a long term established collaboration and compensation network, an embeddedness of the drivers in the transport enterprises, which actors involved were willing to rely on (this involves all possible actors: passengers were willing to take the 'illegal' marshrutka, operators were confident that they will not be imprisoned, and drivers trusted in the system to prevail at least for a while). A similar reappearance of informal but adaptive minibuses services is hard to imagine in Rostov, which could be praised as a success of formalisation policies from a law and order perspective, but is rather the result of a long-term insensitivity in the transport sector exploiting deprived labour migrants on non-equipped buses, which might lead to further protest of passengers in the near future. To come back to the question of whether marshrutkas are simply a byproduct of transition, the study provides a clear answer: the minibuses might eventually disappear, the interplay of formal and informal institutions and practices which ensure a "systematised form of deregulation" in the urban transport sector clearly will not.

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