In limbo between state and corporate responsibility: Transport infrastructure in the oil village Verkhnemarkovo, Irkutskaya Oblast in Russia

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Abstract. The village of Verkhnemarkovo is located in a remote oil region in the Irkutskaya Oblast in the Siberian part of the Russian Federation. Active socio-economic development of the village began with the discovery of an oil field near settlement in the middle of the 20th century. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union the once thriving oil village faced massive out migration and also decay of the once good transportation infrastructure. This article shows the changes of the provision of transport infrastructure and mobility practices in this village of around 2500 people. It raises the issue of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and that of the state for care and maintenance of roads in particular. The results highlight the state of the village and its inhabitants being in a limbo between the two main bodies who are expected to be responsible for facilitation of good transport infrastructure: the state and the companies operating in the region.

1. Introduction
Verkhnemarkovo is a remote village of around 2500 inhabitants in the Irkutskaya Oblast in the Siberian part of the Russian Federation located approximately 50 km north of the regional center Ust-Kut and around 600 km (bee line) north of the district center Irkutsk. It is directly on an oil field, the Markovskoe Mestorozhdenie. This makes the village distinct from the many other small villages in Siberia which very often have poor economic conditions, declining living standards and substantial out migration. This article focuses on transport infrastructure relevant to inhabitants of Verkhnemarkovo. While it introduces the everyday mobilities of the population, reasons for travel and transport conditions, the article raises in particular the important topic of transport for the oil related workforce going back and forth to the oil fields on a rotational shift work basis.

The article tackles the following research question: In what ways are the people of Verkhnemarkovo impacted in their everyday lives and level of mobility by the conditions of transport infrastructure and how does this interplay with questions over responsibility for the provision of good transport conditions. Furthermore, we ask how the local perception of responsibility links to (post-)Soviet conditions in the sense of state paternalism and to new structures under neoliberalism that shape the oil industry.
2. Theoretical embedding
Travelling and being mobile is tightly connected to transport infrastructure and thus also a matter of politics. Furthermore, all embodied mobile practices have complex histories and geographies [1]. Larkin’s notion of “poetics of infrastructure” [2] highlights that roads are a matter of public discourse as well as quality of life and individual yearnings: “roads and railways are not just technical objects but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire” [2]. This relates to the notion of “enchantment” by infrastructure as described by Harvey and Knox [3] who explored the enthusiasm for roads in terms of their capacity to enchant. People from Verkhnemarkovo are not enchanted, they are rather disappointed or just resigned to the lack of new roads and poor road maintenance. In this sense “infrastructural violence” is a key issue for people dependent on the roads with only little say in such developments. Rodgers and O’Neill [4] researched city infrastructure, but much applies also to a village like Verkhnemarkovo. Materiality, morality and inequality are at the center of their theory. They emphasize not only the aspect of people interacting on an everyday basis with such infrastructure but scale it up to the political economy level to those people and stakeholders who have responsibility for thinking about a just setting as well as those who undermine such thinking [4].

3. Methods
This paper is based on geographical and anthropological fieldwork in 2014, 2016 and 2018 in Verkhnemarkovo consisting of participant observation, focus group meetings, qualitative interviews and questionnaire surveys. The semi-structured interviews included youth, mid-aged population and pensioners as well as politicians.

4. People and transport infrastructure in the village

4.1. Demographic profile of Verkhnemarkovo
The history of Verkhnemarkovo is closely connected with the oil industry. Until the mid-twentieth century the village Markovo was a big agricultural settlement on the right bank of the river Lena. The way of life in the village changed significantly in 1962 when oil was found on Lena’s left bank. From this time onwards the Lenskaya Oil and Gas Exploratory Expedition (Lenskaya expedition) attracted for the next few decades a workforce from all over the Soviet Union. It was not just individual specialists who arrived, but whole families. A new settlement expanded near the oil fields on the left bank of the river which was named Verkhnemarkovo and the older village Markovo was downsized to a micro district. During the years of the Lenskaya expedition, the population increased significantly from 3637 in 1979 to 4259 people in 1989. The crisis of the 1990s changed the situation in the village dramatically. More than ten years later, the population had substantially decreased to 2464 people in 2002. In the following decade, the 2000s, migration outflow slowed and by 2010 the local population counted 2385 people (according to official Census data for these years). In recent years, the population has stabilized and even marginally increased. Today, there are 2467 people living in Verkhnemarkovo [5]. The unemployment rate is about three percent. More than 70% of unemployed people are women [6].

4.2. Jobs in Verkhnemarkovo
Verkhnemarkovo has a rather diversified economic base in terms of the labor market, albeit sharing many features of a single-industry oil town. The local school, kindergarten and the village administration employ public workers. The many shops in the village provide substantial jobs to shopkeepers. To some extent small businesses such as a taxi company or small scale transport companies also employ locals. The majority however, especially men, work for the two major oil companies Irkutskaya Neftenaya Kompaniya (INK) and Dulisma as well as their subcontracting companies. People are employed in the oil sector primarily as drivers, heavy vehicle operators and machine operators. A small number of inhabitants are specialists in higher ranks and have rather high paid jobs. The men in the oil fields earn decent money compared to public sector jobs receiving
around 40 000 Rubles per month (i.e. 80 000 Rubles per shift) while the latter earn around 30 000 Rubles per month. However, these are average numbers that can vary based on qualifications and level of position.

4.3. Transport infrastructure within the village

The road network within the village is widespread due to the substantial spatial size of the settlement. However, the roads are primarily dirt roads and where they are paved the concrete is crumbling and poorly maintained. The roads are characterized by potholes which allows only very slow driving and bypassing the potholes is dangerous. On the roads are pedestrians, private cars, bicycles, motorbikes, lorries and other oil extraction related heavy vehicles. Responsibility for road maintenance is threefold: federal, regional and municipal government for the various types of roads. At the same time the company INK steps in for certain maintenance, especially for public roads that are of crucial interest to the industry. In some cases INK also organizes snow plowing in winter, but not everywhere and not regularly. The best road conditions occur in winter when snow covers the surface. In summer the roads are dusty while in spring and autumn the roads are muddy. The heavy vehicles used by the oil companies are seen as one of the main reasons for the bad state of the public roads. People would like to see the oil companies paying compensation for their use of the roads.

4.4. People’s mobility

In general people are highly mobile within the village and in relation to the regional center Ust-Kut. Everyday duties like going to work or doing shopping can be exhausting on foot due to the distances involved and pedestrians end up in clouds of dust when cars and lorries pass by. The key means of transport is therefore by private car. Given the rather good economic position of people compared to other small and remote villages in Siberia, nearly every household owns a car. Especially for inhabitants of Zayarnovo, a subdivision located a few kilometers outside Verkhnemarkovo, transport infrastructure is essential. A school bus runs on an everyday basis, but people remember when there was bus transport for everyone until the collapse of local state businesses in the 1990s. Since there is no bridge over the river Lena, private boats – no ferry is operating – are the most important means of transport for inhabitants of the Markovo subdivision located on the opposite side of the Lena. In Markovo primarily pensioners live and the few families who have to move into their relatives’ houses during the time in spring and autumn when the ice breaks up or is not yet sufficiently frozen (rasputica) in order to be able to get to work and to school. There is thus a high dependency on various means of transport in Verkhnemarkovo.

Traveling to the regional center Ust-Kut is essential for health and administrative issues or banking etc. People do grocery shopping and buy other items in Ust-Kut which are more expensive in Verkhnemarkovo or not available at all. The minibus leaves at 7 am for Ust-Kut and returns at 4 pm. This provides only a tiny window for doing all the duties necessary in town. The costs are also substantial especially for pensioners and other people with low income. The trip back and forth by minibus costs 1 500 Rubles, while the more flexible taxi to Ust-Kut is 6 000 Rubles one way. Considering the above-mentioned income level, the latter is a substantial pressure on the household budget. Therefore, many people stay overnight with friends or relatives when they have early appointments at the administration or in the hospital. Such social networks are essential, as is also car sharing.

4.5. Movement of Vakhtoviki workers

Besides a few jobs at the local oil field (Markovskoe Mestorozhdenie) for INK, the majority of the oil related workforce long-distance commutes to oil fields further away from the village such as Dulisminskoe, Yaraktinskoe, Verchnechonskoe or Danilovskoe. A common saying is that “all our men are Vakhtoviki.” Vakhtoviki are also known as fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) workers [7-8]. Primarily men, but also some women – the latter work in the service sector or in
administration on the oil field – commute on a roster of 28 days on shift followed by a 30 days’ rest period at home. Such a pattern is widespread in the oil and gas industry across Russia [7].

The movement to and from work is different in the four seasons. In summer the Viluy Highway brings inter-regional (coming from all over Russia) and intra-regional (coming from the Irkutskaya Oblast) workers from the regional center Ust-Kut on so-called vakhtovka (a lorry-like truck with a passenger cabin) to Verkhnemaranko. There they are met and travel further by road to the oil fields when the road conditions are good. When the road connection is unreliable workers from Verkhnemarkovo need to go first to Ust-Kut and are flown from there by helicopter or airplane to the oil fields. In winter the Viluy Highway, for its most part a gravel road, that is turned into a winter road (zimnik) – Mirnyskaya Trassa – that leads to some of the oil fields. Especially in spring and autumn, when roads become muddy (rasputica), helicopter is the favorite means of transport. The Verkhnemarkovo helicopter-airport becomes then a busy hub for workers from Ust-Kut who are transported by vakhtovka to Verkhnemarkovo and get there on the helicopter. This is also the most convenient way to go to work for Verkhnemarkovo people. The travel is facilitated by the oil company and free of charge for workers.

4.6. Quality of long-distance transport infrastructure
For these long-distance commuters and the oil companies a well-functioning transport infrastructure is essential. A substantial problem is road safety. The winter road is described as decent since it has a solid snow cover. However, accidents happen from time to time due to icy conditions and driving at high speeds or risky overtaking. The latter two are also crucial dangers in other seasons when dust is heavily occurring. Very often, as also witnessed by the authors, dangerous overtaking in conditions of no visibility due to the dust puts people at risk and stops the traffic when incidences happen. People do not feel comfortable on the road due to such dangers. Not infrequently blown out tires can also interrupt the ride for quite some time. Furthermore, comfort is low when it comes to transport in vakhtovkas. These heavy vehicles for passenger transport are badly heated and shaky on bumpy roads which impacts on the health conditions of workers who are exhausted after such a trip, but have to go to work the next day. The roads are also used by the timber companies which, as it was frequently reported, sometimes block the roads, delaying transport for a couple of hours.

4.7. Maintaining the roads and caring for road safety
The Viluy Highway is a federal road and is thus maintained through federal government funds. Constant work on the road is visible, but due to the heavy use of the road to transport cargo, passengers, timber and oil operation equipment as well as the high volume of private cars, the road is constantly in a bad condition and potholes make driving exhausting and ruin the vehicles. Furthermore, permafrost and climatic changes contribute to the poor condition of the Viluy Highway. Currently around 35 kilometers of the road outside of Ust-Kut is paved with asphalt. The rest of the highway is gravel. While the government has announced it will extend the asphalt parts, people are waiting for the fulfillment of such promises and are disappointed. The oil companies maintain themselves their own company roads close to the oil fields. In certain incidences, such as is the case with INK in Verkhnemaranko, companies also maintain public roads that lead to oil production facilities or to the helicopter-airport.

5. Conclusion
Everyday mobility is of utmost importance to people in Verkhnemaranko since the village is spread out over seven kilometers. People use various means of transport such as going on foot or by bicycle, motorbike, car or taxi. The taxi transport and minibus connection to the regional center Ust-Kut is crucial for managing administrative issues or going to the hospital, doing shopping and the like. Even fuel needs to be hauled in from Ust-Kut since there is no gas station in the village. Especially for pensioners public transport which is actually provided at reasonable prices by a private company is
expensive. Therefore, social inequality is visible when it comes to the level of mobility which is severe especially for old people and those without jobs. Stasis is often not a wanted choice but a condition.

The state only weakly takes care of the transport infrastructure, while the INK oil company – as the biggest one operating in the region – takes over certain public responsibilities in the framework of its Corporate Social Responsibility programs (CSR). However, INK maintains primarily only infrastructure that is crucial for its own operations. This has a positive side effect for inhabitants but does not solve the problem. INK does not necessarily intend to step in for actual state responsibilities such as maintaining the roads.

Since many people still remember the former flourishing Soviet state companies, which had the task of providing infrastructure, they still see such a model as the ideal. Thus, they are disappointed by new structures of responsibility which do not meet their mobility demands in terms of quality and convenience. We can speak here of post-Soviet structures that under neoliberal conditions leave the inhabitants of small villages alone with their needs and demands. People feel the state is not interested in their problems and does not allocate sufficient funds for their everyday mobility – which is necessary under conditions of living remotely from urban centers.

At the same time people expect from oil companies support – such as was the case in Soviet times when the state companies looked after towns. However, besides a lot of other CSR activities such as sponsoring social and cultural infrastructure, INK provides primarily maintenance for transport infrastructure where it is crucial for its own operations. Since the roads in town are public, INK does not necessarily see an obligation to care for these too. The absence of good roads and transportation infrastructure in general can be coined as infrastructural violence. People are stuck in limbo between the state and the company, neither taking on the actual responsibility for care of the transport infrastructure which is so much needed in a village such as Verkhnemarkovo. State paternalism – which prevails in the context of the overall economic development of Russia’s natural resources and thus investment into such infrastructure is strong – fails in the context of everyday mobilities and related demands of the population.

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