

*Irina Tagirovna Abdulova,
Researcher of the Independent
Social Research Centre
Irkutsk, Russia
abdulova@mail.ru*



DOI 10.31554/978-5-7925-0571-1-2019-2-189-194

NEW MICRODISTRICTS OF IRKUTSK: BETWEEN THE SUBURBS AND THE “SLEEPING” DISTRICT

The article discusses the formation of new suburban areas of Irkutsk, the formation of the community in them and the prospects for development. Using the methodology of qualitative sociological research the author studies one of the new suburbs of Irkutsk-the micro-district Berezovy. The research focuses on the motives of moving as well as life strategies and mobility of the population.

Keywords: urbanistics, suburbanisation, Irkutsk, suburbs, urban environment.

Post-soviet cities are facing serious changes. This is especially noticeable in Siberia, where the establishment and growth of cities quite often were not "natural" processes, but the result of state planning [Meerovich 2017]. After the state had left that field, the situation changed. The construction of cities ceased to be exclusively a matter of state, there was private ownership of land, there was an opportunity to build, to sell and to buy houses.

The second important reason of changes in the cities plays a global role. These are processes of suburbanisation which are going on all over the world. In short, this is a process of the growth and development of suburban area, where the middle class is moving searching for comfortable conditions. These changes have recently become the subject of analysis of sociologists, demographers and urbanists. Speaking about regional specifics it is

necessary to mention the works written by K. V. Grigorichev [2013] and A. S. Breslavsky [2017], dedicated to Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude, respectively.

Apart from “classical” suburbs in Irkutsk we can see relatively recent interesting phenomenon— mass construction of new microdistricts consisting of three and five-storey houses. Such microdistricts formally belong to the suburban Irkutsk district and they are situated on its lands. However, in fact, these are typical urban blocks, in which working in Irkutsk people live. Most often they are built outside the city boundaries and/or adjacent to them. The Economic basis of appearing such kinds of suburbs is simple: on the one hand, the high demand for economy class housing, on the other—the lack and high cost of urban land for large-scale development. Lands of rural areas which are close to the city have not been built up yet, they are cheaper, moreover, there is an opportunity to "attach" to the municipal infrastructure of the city. The feature of Irkutsk is a shortage of land – the city is old enough, its central streets are narrow, many buildings have the status of historical and architectural monuments, that makes urban development mostly point and expensive.

Flats in these microdistricts are of economy class (rough finish, small square) and they cost cheaper, than in the city, that allows the government to use them in programs of settling in shabby housing, resettlement from the north territories, for realization of housing certificates of the militaries. Besides, this kind of apartments are bought by young families and elderly people, who stop sharing housing with relatives.

There are several districts of this type around Irkutsk. The subject of my in-depth research¹ was one of the districts of the left Bank of the Angara river—the microdistrict Berezovy (Markovskoe settlement of Irkutsk district of Irkutsk region). In many respects it can be studied as a model. Among any analogous districts Berezovy impresses by its size. It is one of the biggest, its square is about 50 hectares. In addition to that, it isn't adjacent to the city boundaries, but it is located distantly. That is why, the problems which are easily solved in other neighborhoods, are urgent here. First of all, I mean the problem of accessibility (public transport), social security (clinics, school, kindergarten).

There are about 240 houses in Berezovy¹, however, even after conducting research, it is impossible to say exactly how many residents are

¹ New houses are constantly being rented out.

there. Berezovy is not taken into account by statistical services separately, data can be obtained only for the Markov municipality as a whole². Markovsky municipality is the largest in the Irkutsk region, according to official data, 32525 people³ are registered there. According to expert estimates, these figures can be safely doubled. According to expert estimates, from half to third of all residents of the municipality live in Berezovy, that is from 10 to 15 thousands of people. Anyway, it is necessary to take into account the flaws of official statistics-not everyone who lives in Berezovy is registered. Often it is because of social problems: "registration" in another area gives the right to "attach" to the school or clinic.

If we return to the methodological side of my research, its main questions were: what is the fate of areas like Berezovy? Are we facing the prospect of new ghettos on the outskirts of cities? Who lives in Berezovy and are the neighborhood community and favourable urban environment developing there?

If we talk about a typical suburb "in theory", so its inhabitants just leave the city life-the crowds and noise. For those who buy apartments in Berezovy, the main argument is to minimize costs. "Good ecology", which the developer advertises, for them it is rather an optional bonus. But the "urban" signs of a place to live are important: available public transport, social services, inexpensive shops near the house. In this sense, Berezovy is a suburb only geographically, with its neighbors, cottage settlements it shares only the place, not the values.

On the organization and rhythm of life it is more similar to the sleeping area of the Soviet era, minus the improvement and free service. So, for example, fully loaded minibuses in the morning and in the evening is the evidence of the direction of flows of people.

My hypothesis is that if a suburban resident wants to leave the city, so residents of areas such as Berezovy, on the contrary, want to "enter" the city and settle in it with the lowest costs. Therefore, the idea of "joining Irkutsk" is discussed from time to time among the residents.

People move to Berezovy consciously, this is not the most luxurious choice, but not "no hope". The most important thing - relatively low cost of

² We can not even take into account the number of voters, because the constituencies that include Berezovy include neighboring horticulture and cottage villages.

³ <https://irkutskstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/1Jan2019.xlsx>.

apartments. It allows people even with limited resources a freedom of choice: “this is the only affordable opportunity”. For example, you can change one large five-room apartment for three, for elderly parents and two children with families. Or you can change one “two room apartment” on two “one-room apartment” (it is good for a mother who wants to stop sharing housing with the adult son). Within Irkutsk it is impossible: “we could afford only this and Novo-Lenino” or any other variants are even worse. An additional advantage is that apartments can be bought nearby and maintain family ties (first, grandmother looks after her grandchildren, then she needs help).

Young families are willing to come to Berezovy. The cost is affordable: “it is good to start with something”. Perhaps because of this the district seems to be new, both houses and residents are young. Buying cheap apartments, people are ready for some drawbacks: “we knew what we got, still it is not luxury housing” – poor sound insulation and finishing flaws seem reasonable compensation for the low price. They say more critically about the shortcomings of social security: there is no clinic, bank, post office, school in Berezovsky, there are no places in the newly built kindergarten: “*we’d already had children, but there were neither school nor clinic*». Transport is served by private companies, so they often face official barriers⁴.

New neighborhoods are built by private developers, and by law the developer is not obliged to provide them with social infrastructure. This leads to the situation that the new areas seem to be “up in the air”: they do not have much that creates urban living conditions. Irkutsk authorities, which residents of microdistricts appeal to do not have the right to create social infrastructure on the “foreign” territory, and the district authorities do not have the resources for this.

Due to the reduced “entrance threshold” – the low cost of apartments or the issuance of these apartments under various state programs, people or families with low social resources find themselves in Berezovsky. I mean both a small amount of money, low salary, lack of savings, and low social capital, the level of education, lack of social networks, young or old age.

⁴ For example, the road on which the majority of private cars and minibuses pass in Berezovy has no official status of the road. It sounds ridiculous, but therefore it is impossible to agree on the route of public transport. It is impossible to spend budget money on its repair and improvement for the same reason.

Obviously, the demands of these families to the quality of the social environment are high and crucial. Since they simply do not have an opportunity to use paid options. They are not sufficiently fitted into the style of the city in order to solve problems using “contacts”. And this imposes a special responsibility on the authorities, understood in the broadest sense of the word: from the developer to the local administration and deputies.

For many people Berezovy serves as a kind of gateway to the urban life of Irkutsk, it is a place where you can learn new rules and regulations and accumulate resources. At the same time, under unfavorable circumstances, the district can become a trap—a place of accumulation and reproduction of poverty and dependence.

According to my observations, the people who settled in Berezovsky have several strategies for future life. The first strategy is temporary residence. In this case, the person or family increases social and material resources, changes jobs or other life circumstances and leaves for a place that seems more acceptable to him. In the second case, even understanding the shortcomings of Berezovy, a person does not leave, for example, for material reasons. With various degrees of activity he can contribute to changing the environment for better life. The person himself, or together with neighbors (and here it is appropriate to talk about the formation of the community) takes some steps: puts and collects signatures for the project of the Public Quarter⁵, improves playgrounds, goes to the cleanups, gets compensation from the developer.

Thus, the "good" scenario for Berezovsky is to become an important part of the city, a kind of "improved model", combining urban convenience and comfort of the suburbs. Probably, Berezovy could be an ideal place for young families. The negative scenario is to become “ghetto”.

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⁵ The project to create a public space in Berezovsky and a number of necessary social facilities: schools, clinics, shopping center. Currently, its construction can not begin because of unresolved land issues.

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