



## The Alienated Homeland in Sasha Filipenko's *The Former Son*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Sasha Filipenko's *The Former Son* – a book written in Russian about contemporary Belarus – was published in 2014 in Russia to critical acclaim. The following paper will study the elements of hybridity in the novel and the ways Filipenko models the sense of alienation from one's homeland through characterization and the depiction of physical spaces.

Keywords: Homeland, Identity, Hybridity, Sasha Filipenko, Belarus

### Abstract

*The Former Son* (L'ex figlio) di Saša Filipenko è un romanzo sulla Bielorussia contemporanea, scritto in lingua russa e pubblicato in Russia nel 2014 con il plauso della critica. Il seguente articolo studierà gli elementi di ibridazione nell'opera nonché i modi in cui Filipenko modella il senso di alienazione dalla propria patria usando la caratterizzazione e la rappresentazione degli spazi fisici.

Parole chiave: patria, identità, ibridazione, Saša Filipenko, Bielorussia

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## Belarus as an “in-between” space

*The Former Son* (*Byvshyy syn*, 2014) is Sasha Filipenko’s debut novel. He is a Belarusian who left Belarus in 2013 and worked for several prominent Russian TV stations as a screenwriter and a presenter (Pervyy kanal, Dozhd, and RTVI). Filipenko still has strong personal ties and an active political stance towards his native country.<sup>2</sup> His professional biography as well as the essence of his debut novel sparked my interest because of their apparent “in-betweenness”, or even “hybridity”, which I will hopefully illustrate in this text. The obvious reason for such observations lies in the fact that his debut novel was written in Russian and was published by a Russian publishing house. It was even recognized by the jury of the *Russian Award* (*Russkaya premiya*), which recognizes writers who write in Russian but do not live in Russia (*Russkaya premiya* 2017). Even in Belarus, this book is marketed as a “Russian” book. (Indeed, one of the biggest online retailers in Belarus, *oz.by*, lists it in its “Contemporary Russian Prose” section.) However, several Russian literary critics have defined it as a *Belarusian* novel (e.g., Dark 2014; Kostyrko 2014), which, in the end, does not seem surprising since this novel is “saturated” with Belarus and its most recent history.

The concepts of “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” which I refer to in relation to Filipenko’s text simultaneously function here at several levels – at the level of the text itself, at the level of the writer’s national identity, and at the level of the general cultural situation. Speaking about the latter,

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<sup>2</sup> Filipenko is rather active on his personal page on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/sasha.filipenko.9>), which may provide a valuable insight into his political views and “extraliterary” life.

it should be noted that the concepts of in-betweenness, hybridity, and even transculturation, as well as the concepts of the border and *pogranichye* (borderland), are key to the academic discussion addressing the current state of Belarusian culture and collective Belarusian identity. For transculturation, one can turn to the observations of Mladina Tlostanova, who states:

Транскультурация [...] как новая всеобъемлющая эпистема эпохи глобализации [...] основывается на полигlossии и культурном полилоге, исключающем синтез как прежний идеал культурной динамики, переставший соответствовать сегодняшней реальности. Один из наиболее плодотворных вариантов транскультурации, на мой взгляд, это гибридизация или креолизация, если воспользоваться карибским термином. Ее суть состоит в культурном взаимодействии, при котором культуры частично смешиваются, но при этом не гомогенизируются в одно сплошное и единое целое. В результате возникает культура-палимпсест (Tlostanova 2004, 380).<sup>3</sup>

These observations seem to correspond to several discussions inside the Belarusian academic community. In analysing the post-Soviet development of Belarus, the Belarusian writer and philosopher Igor Bobkov has interpreted the Belarusian experience within a postcolonial paradigm and expressed the idea of today's Belarus as a country with a "repressed" identity. According to him, Belarusian identity cannot be easily explained

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<sup>3</sup> «Transculturation [...] as a new comprehensive episteme of the globalization era [...] is based on polyglossia and a cultural polylogue that excludes synthesis as a former ideal of cultural dynamics, which has ceased to correspond to today's reality. One of the most fruitful variants of transculturation, in my opinion, is hybridization – or creolization, to use the Caribbean term. Its essence lies in cultural interaction, in which cultures are partially mixed; however, at the same time, they are not homogenized into one continuous and unified whole. The result is a palimpsest culture». The translations herein are mine unless stated otherwise.

due to the fact that the country's transculturality and existence has been defined by the real and imaginary borders surrounding it (Bobkov 2005, 127-136). Bobkov is also one of those scholars who popularized the idea of *pogranichye* as the quintessence of the state that the Belarusian identity finds itself in. Filatov synthesized Bobkov's idea of *pogranichye* as follows:

<Идея пограничья> призвана указывать на уникальность социально-культурной ситуации Беларуси, связанной с длительным существованием “между”, на границе различных сил имперского характера, что вызвало внутреннюю фрагментированность, транскulturность и мультivoкaльнoсть, проявляющихся в том числе и в процессах трансформации, начавшихся после распада СССР и получения республикой независимости (Filatov 2007, 22).<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Belarus, the natural reasons for this approach lie in the country's historical, cultural, and linguistic development. As I see it, the Belarusian identity does not have a proper shape; it is not always confined to a country's geographical borders and can transform under different circumstances. In various studies, the Belarusian identity is seen as “hybrid”, “split”, “Creole”, and even “non-existent”.<sup>5</sup> In the simplest terms, it addresses the presence and different proportions of inclinations towards the country's medieval and Soviet past in its historical self-determination, today's Russia, and a collective (although often imaginary) “Europe” in its geopolitical and cultural orientation.

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<sup>4</sup> «The idea of *pogranichye* (borderland) is meant to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Belarusian sociocultural situation, which is marked by a prolonged existence “in between”, on the borders of different imperial powers, all of which led to internal fragmentarity, transculturation, and multi-vocalism manifested in the transformative processes taking place after the collapse of the USSR and the republic's independence».

<sup>5</sup> See White & Feklyunina 2014; Ioffe 2003; Bekus 2014.

The “in-betweenness” of Belarus takes shape in several phenomena of everyday life and cultural contexts. Understandably, the most dramatic of these is the language situation in the country today: Russian dominates all spheres of everyday life and Belarusian is on the margins.<sup>6</sup> As Tlostanova notes:

Более чувствительна к гибридизации массовая и повседневная культура постсоветских пространств, которая рождает примеры гибридности легче, чем литература или тем более гуманитарные науки. В языковом смысле это касается и украинского суржика, и белорусской трасянки, как случаев так называемого полуязычия (semilingualism), возникающего чаще всего при близкородственности языков (Tlostanova 2004, 319).<sup>7</sup>

As one might see from the example of such novels as *The Former Son*, these manifestations of general cultural hybridity and the experiences of *pogranichye* are reflected in fiction, particularly at the level of the writer’s identity as well as at the level of the text. The former can be illustrated by

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<sup>6</sup> According to Glottolog, Belarusian is “vulnerable” and its AES status is defined as “threatened” (Glottolog, Belarusian). Official census results from 2019 show that from almost eight million people who identified themselves as Belarusian, only 28.5% claimed that they used Belarusian at home (Natsionalnyy statisticheskiy komitet Respubliki Belarus 2020). This can be seen as one of the outcomes of several “waves” of Russification (during the periods of Russian Empire, the USSR, and most recently Lukashenko’s rule).

<sup>7</sup> «The mass and everyday culture of the post-Soviet space is more sensitive to hybridization, which gives rise to examples of hybridity more easily than literature or even more so the humanities. In a linguistic sense, this applies to both the Ukrainian *surzhyk* and the Belarusian *trasianka* as cases of ‘semilingualism’, which most often occurs when languages are closely related».

Filipenko's contemplations about his literary "nationality", which he characterizes in a rather "cosmopolitan" spirit. When asked if he considered himself to be a Belarusian writer, Filipenko made the following point:

Я пишу на русском языке, но не считаю, что русский язык принадлежит России – он принадлежит всем. Я считаю себя белорусом. Когда я получил одну из первых премий в Беларуси, мне намекнули, что дальше надо писать по-белорусски, если ты хочешь быть белорусским писателем. Но язык – это средство коммуникации, а не политический жест. Если ты в Беларуси говоришь на белорусском, значит, ты за все хорошее и против всего плохого, если говоришь по-русски, значит, ты за Империю и прочее. Мне это кажется странным. [...] Никогда не мыслил себя белорусским или русским писателем. Я всегда хотел стать европейским писателем, чтобы меня читали в разных странах (Salimova 2021).<sup>8</sup>

Filipenko's European sentiment is close to the aspirations of other Belarusian writers, such as Viktor Martinovich, whose works are translated in Europe. Martinovich strives to ensure that in the process of reading translations of modern Belarusian literature, «из голов европейцев исчезли определенные клише. Хочется быть гордым за страну» (Poleshchuk 2018).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> «I write in Russian, but I don't think that Russian belongs to Russia; it belongs to everyone. I consider myself a Belarusian. When I received one of the first awards in Belarus, they hinted to me that I should write in Belarusian from then on if I wanted to be a Belarusian writer. But language is a means of communication, not a political gesture. If you speak Belarusian in Belarus, it means that you root for all the good and against all the bad; if you speak Russian, it means that you root for the Empire and so on. It seems strange to me. [...] I never thought of myself as a Belarusian or a Russian writer. I have always wanted to become a European writer and be read in different countries».

<sup>9</sup> «Certain clichés disappear from the heads of Europeans. I want to be proud of the country».

### **A former son of Belarus**

Filipenko was born in 1984 in Minsk. He studied at the Lyceum of Arts and then entered the European Humanities University in Minsk, which due to a decision by the Belarusian authorities was forced to close in 2004 and had to “emigrate” to Vilnius.<sup>10</sup> After the closure of the university, Filipenko finished his studies in Russia, where his professional career began to take shape – initially as a journalist and television worker and then as a writer. In 2021, Filipenko lived in Switzerland as a guest at the writers’ residence of the Jan Michalski Foundation. Filipenko has so far published five novels: *The Former Son* (2014), *Intentions (Zamyshy)*, 2015), *The Badgering (Travlia)*, 2016), *Red Crosses (Krasnyy krest)*, 2017), and *The Return to Ostrog (Vozvrashcheniye v Ostrog)*, 2019). He has also written several prose collections. As already mentioned, his debut novel, which was published in Russia, aroused the interest of Russian critics, and logically attracted attention in Belarus as well. Belarusian media reacted to the book mainly by publishing texts under the general slogan «a novel written by a Belarusian received an award in Russia».<sup>11</sup> Among other novels written by Filipenko, the greatest attention was drawn to *Red Crosses*, which included unique documents about the history of contacts between the USSR People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the International Red Cross during the Second World War.

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<sup>10</sup> See Posokhin 2015, 169-170.

<sup>11</sup> Normally, I would have put a reference to tut.by, which was the largest online media site in Belarus, and which covered Filipenko’s success (Izdatelstvo Vremya 2014). However, this media was liquidated by the Belarusian authorities in 2021, and fifteen of its editors are now in prison. As a result, the archives of tut.by and any links to them are not accessible.

Until 2020, Filipenko's biography and career had been shaping up to be the biography of a post-Soviet emigrant who had practically made a clean break with his homeland and assimilated into the host (albeit not so "foreign") culture. The subjects and fictional spaces of his novels generally followed this path, shifting from the "Belarusian focus" of his literary debut to Russia-oriented themes in *The Badgering* and *The Return to Ostrog*. In *Red Crosses*, however, one can observe a sort of a "return" to Belarus, since the action in the novel starts to develop in Minsk. Here, however, Belarus appears as an unfamiliar space. In order to model this space, Filipenko starts a paradoxical game with the reader, providing the "I"-narrator with only distant knowledge about Belarus and filling the descriptions of this space with epithets of unfamiliarity and alienness (hereinafter, the italics in the quotes are mine):

Будто выброшенный крушением мореплаватель, я решаю изучить *неизвестный остров*. Город Минск. Зачем я вообще приехал сюда? Пускай и братская, но все же *чужая* страна. Красный костел и широкий проспект, *какой-то лысеющий поэт* и гроб Дворца Республики. Десятки построек и *ни одного воспоминания*. *Незнакомые* окна, *чужие* лица. Что это вообще за страна такая? Что я знаю про этот город? Ничего. Здесь у моей мамы вторая семья (Filipenko 2016, 7).<sup>12</sup>

In 2020, the year of the most recent presidential elections, Filipenko returned to Belarus mentally and, in a sense, also physically. He was especially active in the pre-election and post-election periods, giving critical

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<sup>12</sup> «Like a seafarer thrown out by a wreck, I decide to explore an unknown island – the city of Minsk. Why have I come here at all? A fraternal but still foreign country. A red church and a wide avenue, some balding poet, and the coffin of the Palace of the Republic. Dozens of buildings and not a single memory. Unfamiliar windows and strange faces. What kind of country is this? What do I know about this city? Nothing. Here lives my mum's second family».



statements about the Lukashenko regime. Filipenko became one of the prominent figures of the post-election protests and a regular guest on TV programmes and podcasts about Belarus; he wrote several open letters to international organizations urging them to take an active stance in relation to events there.<sup>13</sup> In the same period, by historical circumstance, the message of his debut novel also turned out to be relevant for the unfolding processes in Belarusian society. It seems to have returned “home”, becoming a novel not only for foreigners about Belarus but also for Belarusians about themselves. While discussing the awards he received throughout the years, the writer brought up this comeback in leaving a notable yet emotional comment:

Свою самую главную награду я получил в этом году. Мне написали из тюрьмы в Беларуси, что книгу «Бывший сын» читают в камерах и передают из рук в руки. Я впервые в жизни подумал, что сделал что-то важное (Salimova 2021).<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Filipenko is now being actively translated into foreign languages: his novels, particularly *Red Crosses*, have been published in English, German, Czech, Spanish, French, and other languages. This elevated interest also reveals the paradox of the “in-between/hybrid” type of writer which Filipenko can be considered to embody. As the interest towards Belarus and the demand for proper Belarusian intellectual production spiked after August 2020, it was Filipenko’s prose, albeit written in Russian

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<sup>13</sup> The most famous being the letter to the president of the Red Cross published by the Swiss newspaper *NZZ am Sonntag*.

<sup>14</sup> «This year I received the most important award. I received a message from a prison saying that people had read *The Former Son* and had passed it on from one to another. This was the first time in my life that I thought that I had done something important».

and published in Russia (a far more established and “understandable” market than Belarusian), that became a more “practical” representative of the culture than the more obscure and “self-centred” Belarusian writers.

### **The best country to come out of a coma**

The main narrative perspective of *The Former Son* is shown through the way of thinking of a young Belarusian who was reaching adolescence at the turn of the millennium and who witnessed the “petrification” of the authoritarian political system as well as the collapse of many attempts to achieve social change; he had survived tragedies that could appear “small” on a global scale, but which were extremely painful for the inhabitants of the country. Remarkably, most of these events are communicated to the protagonist lying in a coma, which defines the specificity of narration and the imagery of the novel. As Lidia Mikheeva notices:

Метафорическая параллель между спящим в коме молодым человеком и Беларусью под властью Лукашенко хороша. Пересказать все происходящее в стране в режиме «отстранения», пока герой спит – ход интересный. Внутренний двигатель у романа есть – это социальные травмы, которые пережили все беларусы (Mikheeva 2015).<sup>15</sup>

The depicted historical events form the background and provide the stimulus for the evolving emotional leitmotif of the novel, which is the sense of alienation from one’s homeland and the feeling of losing one’s

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<sup>15</sup> «The metaphorical parallel between a young man sleeping in a coma and Belarus under the rule of Lukashenko is a good one. To retell everything that happens in the country in a ‘disengaged’ mode, while the protagonist is sleeping, is an interesting move. The novel has an internal engine based on the social traumas that all Belarusians have gone through».

“home”, which subsequently leads the protagonist to emigrate. The protagonist himself is a Minsk teenager named Frantsisk, shortened by the author to Tsisk. He studies cello at an art school (unlike Filipenko, who learned to play the double bass). In 1999, Tsisk finds himself in the epicentre of one of the most traumatic events in post-Soviet Belarus – a stampede in an underpass at the Nemiga (Nyamiha in Belarusian) metro station with a death toll of more than fifty people. Tsisk is seriously injured and falls into a coma for ten years. All this time, despite the resistance of doctors and even his mother, his grandmother is next to him, and his friend Stas is sporadically there as well. Their monologues narrate all the key events of this period to Tsisk. After the death of his grandmother, Tsisk suddenly comes out of a coma and realizes that little has changed in Belarus and that the portrait of the same president is still on the wall. In 2010, Tsisk and people with similar views hope for a change after the next presidential election, but Tsisk decides to leave Belarus after a post-election protest is dispersed. However, the ending of the novel, which is compositionally framed by two underground traumas (the second being the terrorist attack in the Minsk metro in 2011), remains open:

Взрыв в метро, рифмующийся с первой начальной катастрофой. То ли спасся герой, то ли погиб. И эта неопределенность его личной смерти соответствует новой полусмерти Беларуси, как и неизвестности, неопределенности ее будущего. Все возвращается на круги свои, недолгое оживление вновь сменяется апатией. То ли жива страна, то ли нет (Dark 2014).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> «A subway explosion rhyming with the first initial disaster. The protagonist has either escaped or died. And this uncertainty of his personal death corresponds to the new half-death of Belarus as well as the uncertainty – the uncertainty of its future. Everything returns to where it was; a brief revival is once more replaced by apathy. Is the country alive or not?».

From the very beginning, it is clear to the reader that Tsisk is a character who is in constant conflict with what could be called the “system” and with the mechanisms of Belarusian power. A similar feeling could be found in the voice of the subjective narrator, who, by means of irony and open criticism, takes a clearly “opposing” ideological stance. The episode that is illustrative of such a stance can be found in the virtually sarcastic depiction of the annual school meetings with the veterans of the Great Patriotic War during the Victory Day celebrations:

Рядом с ветераном садилась завуч по воспитательной работе: «*Выбачайце калі ласка – бегла праз увесь будынак!*». Ветеран [...] начинал очень тихий, *идеологически выверенный рассказ о войне*. [...] Этот партизан только и делал, что целыми днями бродил из школы в школу и пудрил детям мозги. Когда вечер подходил к концу, завуч поднимала глаза к портрету первого президента молодой республики и с удовольствием подытоживала:

– Ну что, дети? Раньше, слава богу, был отец всех народов, теперь, слава богу, будет *батька!* Так что война нам не грозит, не переживайте! (Filipenko 2014, 6).<sup>17</sup>

Here Filipenko essentially illustrates the practices of utilizing the mythologized past with its heroic narrative about the Great Patriotic War and Belarus as a “partisan republic”<sup>18</sup> in order to create modern myths about

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<sup>17</sup> «Next to the veteran sat the head teacher for educational activities: “Please excuse me, I’ve been running through the whole building!” The veteran [...] began a very quiet and ideologically verified story about the war. [...] This partisan did nothing but wander from school to school all day and brainwash the children. When the evening came to an end, the head teacher raised her eyes to the portrait of the first president of the young republic and summed up with pleasure:

– Well, children? Previously, thank God there was the father of all nations. Now thank God there will be *batska!* So the war does not threaten us. Do not worry! ».

<sup>18</sup> See Lewis 2017.

a “peaceful and prosperous” republic under the protection of its fatherly *batska*-president. One more aspect is noteworthy in this excerpt (the first italicized phrase) – namely, the exoticization of the text by code-switching and the inclusion of elements of the Belarusian language and *trasiianka* as well as aspects of the cultural and social life and customs of Belarus in the Russian text. As a writing strategy, exoticization can be perceived as one of the consequences of the hybrid nature of a writer’s identity. At the same time, one must consider an essential factor – who is the intended reader of the novel? After all, a reader from Russia and a reader from Belarus would have different reactions to such exoticization. This matter can be illustrated by the reviews of the novel written by critics from Russia and Belarus. Russian critics were generally positively inclined towards the novel, and the Belarusian experience is presented by them as the “other’s” (exotic) experience,<sup>19</sup> whereas the generally negative review written by Mikheeva, a Belarusian sociologist, criticizes both the obvious and hidden (that which are completely understandable only to inhabitants of Belarus) Belarusian “sprinklings”:

Автор пытается впихнуть в прямую речь героев максимум «скрытых» отсылок, понятных только беларусам [...] Есть в романе небрежные упоминания художника, который принес к резиденции тележку навоза, или «Валентина Васильевича», который говорил, что «если ты есть здесь и сейчас, то тебя не будет больше нигде и никогда»<sup>20</sup>. Не знаю, как извне, но изнутри они выглядят инородными кокетливыми вставками, будто автор пытается убедить белорусского читателя, что

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<sup>19</sup> See Orlova 2015; *Bomzhi na stroyke litpamiatnikov. Spetsifika momenta* 2014; Kostyrko 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Firstly, Filipenko refers to the performance by Ales Pushkin, who brought a wheelbarrow of manure to Lukashenko’s residence. Secondly, he mentions the contemporary Belarusian writer Valentin Akudovich.

он «все еще свой», и тоже рубит фишку – то есть, культурные контексты (Mikheeva 2015).<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, it is worth paying attention to the presence of these elements as well, since they perform several specific functions in the text: they serve as a means of characterization while also emphasizing the plot-forming motif of “alienation from the homeland”. One can follow the first aspect in a most revealing way if one looks closer at the speech of the nurse who looks after Tsisk in the hospital and communicates with his mother and grandmother:

Медсестра полагала, что мать Франциска, хотя и не является бабой первого сорта, но уж какого-никакого мужика себе найти сможет:  
– *Трэцый сорт яшчэ* не брак! Найдет себе *какого* кабеля, он яе обрюхатит и будет усе у ней хорошо! Слюбится-стерпится, а што было забудется!  
*А нешчасця* – так несчастья у всех бывают, *абы войны не было* (Filipenko 2014, 26).<sup>22</sup>

In this episode (and several others), Filipenko attempts to reproduce the phonetic and grammatical features of *trasiianka*, which itself lacks a

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<sup>21</sup> «The author is trying to cram into the direct speech of the characters a maximum of “hidden” references understandable only to Belarusians [...] The novel contains casual mentions of an artist who brought a cart of manure to the residence and of “Valentin Vasilyevich”, who said that “[i]f you are here and now, then you will never be anywhere else”. I don’t know how it is seen from the outside, but from the inside these elements look like foreign flirtatious insertions, as if the author is trying to convince the Belarusian reader that he is “still one of us” and knows what’s up – i.e., the cultural contexts».

<sup>22</sup> «The nurse believed that Frantsisk’s mother, although she was not a first-class woman, would be able to find a man for herself: – a third-rater is still usable! She’ll find herself some bed-hopper, he will knock her up, and everything will be OK with her! Love comes with habit. What passed will be forgotten! And misfortunes – they happen to everyone. Anyway, if only there was no war».

written form. Filipenko also makes the dim-witted nurse pronounce the main “mantra” that is believed to be essential for an average Belarusian “man in the street”, who refuses to accept even the possibility of a change within Belarusian society: *aby ne bylo vojny* – if only there was no war. In that respect, *trasiianka* can be interpreted as a social marker which Filipenko uses to model the “middle ground” of Belarusian society.

The second aspect can be illustrated by the scenes depicting the way Tsisk comes out of a coma and initially starts to mix and confuse Russian and Belarusian:

Франциск проснулся шестнадцатилетним парнем. Он полагал, что за окном девяносто девятый год [...] Портрет президента на стене лишь усиливал это убеждение. Когда кто-то впервые попытался объяснить Франциску, что он провел в коме больше десяти лет, парень, конечно, не поверил: «Невозможно проспать *столько* год. Нельзя!» – Франциск путал языки и слова (Filipenko 2014, 53).<sup>23</sup>

By means of this rather obvious technique, Filipenko creates an image of the oppressed part as a hybrid identity which seems to struggle to resurface from the subconscious. However, what is indicative and essential for understanding the Belarus that Filipenko models is that Tsisk’s “entourage”, including his mother, are waiting for him to start speaking pure Russian – without an admixture of Belarusian – and they are happy when he finally does so. The name of the main character also contains an exoticizing Belarusian code. The name *Frantsisk* is significant for Belarus, as this was the name of the humanist and book printer Skorina (Skaryna),

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<sup>23</sup> «Frantsisk woke up as a sixteen-year-old boy. He believed that it was still 1999 [...] The portrait of the president on the wall only reinforced this belief. When someone first tried to explain to Frantsisk that he had been in a coma for more than ten years, he, of course, did not believe it: “It is impossible to sleep for so many years. It cannot be!” – Frantsisk confused languages and words».

one of the historical pillars of Belarusian culture. At the same time, the nickname Tsisk – in addition to its obvious exoticism – hides a second level, which may even elude the Russian-speaking reader, since the Belarusian word *tsiské* means “pressure”. As Mikheeva notes, here you can see a reference «to the stampede in the metro, in which the young man received an almost fatal injury, as well as to the political pressure under which he has to survive in Belarus» (Mikheeva 2015). It is this pressure that becomes one of the reasons for the growing sense of alienation from home and the homeland as such, which I mentioned earlier, and which runs through the whole novel as a leitmotif.

In its most illustrative way, this alienation manifests itself in the depictions of physical spaces. These spaces are subdued and oppressed by the regime and become its “hostages”; however, the characters, depicted as ideologically opposed to the Belarusian reality, nonetheless feel like strangers and outsiders in them: «Well, and we are emigrants in our own country. It just so happened!» (Filipenko 2014, 29).

The main macrospace depicted by Filipenko is the “city” (neither the name of the city nor the name of the country are directly mentioned), which «fell into a coma a bit earlier than Tsisk» (Filipenko 2014, 35). Filipenko’s city is characterized by its undistinguishedness:

В городе посредственных архитекторов шел дождь (Filipenko 2014, 33).

Воздух города, единственной настоящей достопримечательностью которого было небо (Filipenko 2014, 35).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> «It was raining in the city of mediocre architects»; «The air of the city where the only real attraction is its sky».



At the same time, this space is personified and filled with emotional content. The changes happening within it reflect the changes in the socio-political situation:

Прямо перед тобой детский сад. Вернее, раньше там был детский садик, ты всегда играл здесь, но теперь два садика совместили, а *здесь* *сделали милицейский участок*. Вот почему в нашем дворе так много людей в форме. Смотрят за порядком. И днем и ночью! *Крась, правда, меньше не стали* [...] (Filipenko 2014, 34).<sup>25</sup>

The most radical changes in the space of the city are associated with the whims of the president of the country, who holds the city and its inhabitants captive along with the whole country, which, by the will of the authorities, starts loving hockey. Ice rinks are created in the courtyards, and the only things that are going to be built in the cities in the near future are sports facilities (Filipenko 2014, 28). The narration of these changes is sometimes filled with righteous indignation, especially in the monologue of Tsisk's grandmother, who speaks about the funeral of the "greatest son" of Belarus (Vasil Bykov):

Оказалось, что гроб главного сына страны мешает движению в городе! [...] Когда едет президент, перекрыть весь проспект – это в порядке вещей! Это нормально! Весь город должен стоять, ведь едет слуга народа! Человек, которого мы наняли. Служащий, которого мы, его работодатели, все никак не можем уволить! Когда по городу едет этот служащий, по делу или без, когда он едет покататься на лыжах или встретиться с друзьями, весь город должен стоять, но когда хоронят

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<sup>25</sup> «There's a kindergarten right in front of you. Rather, there used to be a kindergarten there. You always played here. But now the two kindergartens have been combined, and a police station has been put here. That is why there are so many uniformed people in our yard. They keep order. Day and night! People haven't stopped stealing though».

величайшего писателя страны, нужно немедленно освободить проезжую часть (Filipenko 2014, 39).<sup>26</sup>

But the main spatial metaphor laid down in the foundation of the novel is the idea that both the city and the country are frozen in time (having fallen into a coma) and that they simultaneously manage to roll back into the past. This idea is articulated by one of the young doctors, who is familiar with Tsisk's case. The young doctor jokes that they live in an ideal country for those coming out of a coma, since the surrounding space turns out to be filled with the same content and the same ideological codes as ten years earlier:

Все дело в том, что у нас время замерло. Он открывает глаза там же, где когда-то закрыл их. Мы рассказываем ему о каких-то различиях, но по большому счету здесь ничего не изменилось. Мы понимаем, что для выздоровления его мозгу нужно за что-нибудь цепляться, за крючки из прошлого, если можно так сказать. Так вот, этих крючков здесь полным-полно! [...] Если здесь и появляются новые здания, то они ничем не отличаются от тех, что строились несколько десятилетий назад. Кроме того, есть множество аспектов, которые, наоборот, только возвращают его в детство. Посмотрите на наружную рекламу, на все эти социалистические плакаты. *Наша страна движется в обратном направлении.* [...] *Вся страна превратилась в декорации его детства.* О большей помощи со стороны государства нельзя было и мечтать. Мы

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<sup>26</sup> «It turned out that the coffin of the country's greatest son interferes with the traffic in the city! [...] But it is absolutely normal when the president rides, blocking the entire avenue! That is fine! The whole city must stand because the servant of the people is coming! The person we hired. The employee who we, his employers, still cannot fire! When this clerk rides around the city, on business or otherwise, when he goes skiing or meeting friends, the whole city should stand. But when the greatest writer of the country is being buried, the roads must be immediately cleared».

могли бы просить медикаменты, но страна пошла нам навстречу и оказала гораздо большую услугу (Filipenko 2014, 56).<sup>27</sup>

The sense of alienation that accompanies Tsisk's healing process is briefly interrupted by the events of the presidential elections of 2010, when it seemed the city and the country had woken up to join the post-election protest only for that to be brutally dispersed. The country then fell asleep once again:

Франциск смотрел на соседние дома и думал о том, что за десять лет большой и мужественный город его детства не смог восстать против одного-единственного человека. *Город розенкранцев и гильденстернов, все мы здесь, похоже, персонажи второго плана, и все мы, кажется, не очень-то связаны с сюжетом* (Filipenko 2014, 71).<sup>28</sup>

The feeling of irrelevance for Tsisk and people with a similar mindset leads them to the realization of the need to make a clean break with the city and the homeland as a whole. And so we return to the idea of *pograni-*

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<sup>27</sup> «The thing is that time has stopped here. He opens his eyes in the same place where he once closed them. We tell him about some differences, but by and large nothing has changed here. We understand that in order to recover, his brain needs to cling on to something, to the hooks from the past, so to speak. So, there are a lot of these hooks here! [...] If new buildings appear here, they are no different from those that were built several decades ago. In addition, there are many aspects that, on the contrary, only return him to childhood. Look at the outdoor advertisements, all these socialist posters. Our country is moving in the opposite direction. [...] The whole country became the scenery of his childhood. One could not even dream of more help from the state. We could have asked for medicines, but the country met us halfway and provided a much greater service».

<sup>28</sup> «Frantsisk looked at the neighbouring houses and thought that in ten years the big and courageous city of his childhood could not rebel against one single person. The city of Rosencrantzs and Guildensterns; we all seem to be supporting characters here, and we all seem to have little to do with the plot».

*chye*, which is so important for Belarus. Being in an indefinite state of *pogranichye* apparently cannot last indefinitely; at some point, an inhabitant of the borderland might face the necessity to choose one of the borders to approach or cross, since the world beyond this border will be nearer to them. Despite the openness of the novel's ending, one can conclude that Filipenko's protagonist (unlike Filipenko himself) chose the western border and ended up in the "country of the Guermantes".<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusions

Coming back to the concept of "in-betweenness", it could be said that Filipenko's protagonist Tsisk was in that in-between state throughout the novel, be this in between life and death, Russian and Belarusian, or one's willingness to stay and struggle for change and one's willingness to leave. Filipenko approaches this in-betweenness primarily through linguistic means (mostly code-switching) and through modelling physical spaces (the city, its streets and courtyards, and the apartment buildings) which surround Tsisk and which he interacts with. The way the latter are modelled by Filipenko seem to mirror and amplify the protagonist's sentiments and his reflections on his native land. Therefore, the novel provides an almost confessional insight (albeit in a "self-excusing" manner at times) into the reasons of one's decision to part ways with their homeland.

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<sup>29</sup> Throughout the novel, the Germans are referred to as the Guermantes, which is a reference to Proust's novel: «Such an obsessive reference to the parts of Proust's magnum opus, *The Guermantes Way*, should probably give a highly intellectual subtext to the novel. Like little Marcel, the "former son" is "in search of lost time", suffers from the coldness of his mother, adores his grandmother, and dreams of being "with the Guermantes", i.e. among better people, in a better life, and in a better society. And he ultimately finds himself there after emigrating from Belarus» (Mikheeva 2015).

Filipenko's novel was destined to experience a “rebirth”, since the events described in it and the protagonist's feelings about his “former” homeland were very consonant with the events before and after August 2020. The writer himself compared the events using the same imagery that laid the foundation of his literary debut:

В 2010-м казалось, что *мы спим в коме*, а в 2020 году было ощущение, что все, наконец, *проснулись*, что люди жили параллельной государству жизнью, а сейчас начинают жить отдельно, что все подустали. Потом началась сумасшедшая агрессия, а люди начали реагировать. Я думаю, что сейчас государство пытается сделать все, чтобы *людей назад в эту кому вогнать* (Salimova 2021).<sup>30</sup>

A year after the presidential elections of 2020, independent Belarusian internet media started to publish stories of people who had taken part in the protests and their reflections on what had changed.<sup>31</sup> In many of these stories, there is a similar line of thinking to what is prominent in the final pages of *The Former Son*. Like Tsisk, many of these people left Belarus – some because of a more tangible fear of prison, while others did so because of a more abstract but no less oppressive feeling of being a foreigner in their own country.

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<sup>30</sup> «In 2010, it seemed that we were sleeping in a coma. And in 2020 there was a feeling that everyone had finally woke up, that people had lived a life that was parallel to the state and now they were starting to live separately – that everyone was tired. Then the crazy aggression began, and people began to react. I think that now the state is trying to do everything to drive people back into this coma».

<sup>31</sup> For instance, *Sobrali* 16 2021.

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