

Belarus vs. World: Raman Svechnikau's Journey around the World

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TODAY'S Belarus holds a sophisticated position in Europe. Although one believes it is geographically located in the middle of the European continent, its political and social development in past decades has prevented it from becoming an organic part of the region. This reflects on Belarusian citizens' travel practices, citizens who face double-sided limitations from both Belarusian state and authorities in the countries of destination, including those in Europe. Thus, the very act of travelling contains more personal, bureaucratic and logistic challenges for an "average Belarusian" than for an "average Westerner".

This may be one of the reasons why travellers draw a lot of attention from the Belarusian media as even a journey around a borderless Europe may present a significant and extraordinary personal achievement, let alone a journey around the world. In this article I will focus on *Roma yedze* [Roma Travels, 2014-2015], a book that follows the journey of Raman Svechnikau¹, a young man from Minsk. His journey was initially a multimedia project as it was conceived in the form of internet blogs and YouTube videos uploaded to *34mag.net*, an independent Belarusian youth-oriented web magazine. Later, Raman's writings and photos were transformed into two volumes of the aforementioned book published in Belarusian in cooperation with the editors from *34mag.net*. In 2016, Corpus Publishing House released the revised Russian version of the book².

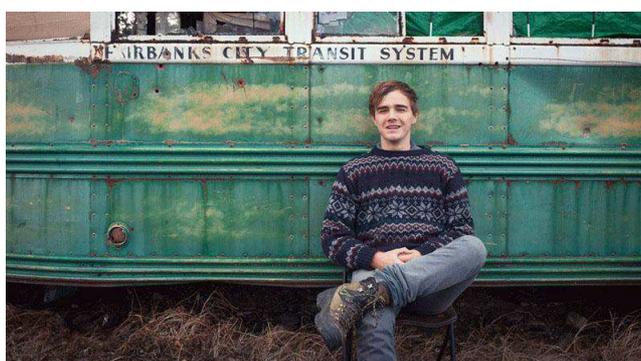


Fig. 1. Raman Svechnikau,
<http://img.tyt.by/n/05/i/roma_edze_066.jpg>.

At the start of his journey in 2012, Raman Svechnikau was 20 years old and had just dropped out of university³. During his 2.5-year long journey, marketed by the media as a *krugosvetnoye puteshestviye* [a journey around the world], Raman visited 3 continents and 25 countries, documenting his experiences in writing or through audio-visual means and sending them back to Belarus using modern internet technologies. Halfway through his journey, Volha Palevikova, a columnist from *34mag.net*, joined him and accompanied him in Southern Asia and both Americas.

In its essence, Svechnikau's book perfectly fits the definition of a travel narrative given by David Chirico as "a non-fictional first-person prose narrative describing a person's travel(s) and the spaces passed through or visited, which is ordered in accordance with, and whose plot is determined by, the order of the narrator's act of travelling"⁴. Being a

¹ Here and further in the text I use transliteration from Belarusian versions of names.

² See R. Svechnikov, *Roma yedet, Vokrug sveta bez grosha v karmane*, Moskva 2016.

³ R. Svechnikau, "Roma yedze", link <http://gedroyc.by/svechnika_u.html>.

⁴ D. Chirico, "The Travel Narrative as a (Literary) Genre", *Under Eastern Eyes. A comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe*, edited by W. Bracewell, A. Drace-Francis, Budapest, New York 2008, pp. 27-59.

first-person narrative, the book puts the depiction of countries, cultures and peoples into a subjective perspective. Several distinguishing traits define Raman's cultural and personal background as a traveller and writer⁵.

Regarding Raman's background, we can define several important presuppositions of his travelling that to a certain extent influence his perception of other cultures. First of all, Raman cannot be perceived as a bearer of imperialistic standpoints or cultural background that may offer ground for ideas of domination or superiority. This may be explained by the nature of Belarusian cultural space in the post-Soviet decades and the very nature of the state of Belarus, which gained its independence in its present-day borders only after the demise of the Soviet Union. Throughout most of its history this land was always a part of larger multinational states and was always under the influence of its "greater" neighbours (Poland and Russia being the most powerful of them). In its post-Soviet era, after a short period of national "renaissance" in the early nineties, Belarus experienced a shift towards "neo-Sovietization" and Russification of its cultural space characterized by attempts to build a miniature friendship of the people's state. Analysing the post-Soviet development of Belarus, Belarusian writer and philosopher Ihar Babkou has interpreted the Belarusian experience within a post-colonial paradigm and expressed the idea of today's Belarus as a country with a "repressed identity"⁶. "Belarussian identity" itself cannot be easily explained because of the country's "transculturality" and its existence being defined by real and imaginary borders surrounding it. Babkou says, "Today's Belarusian cultural space is a non-homogenous space of national culture, where dynamics (and dialectics) of evolution function as a complex game between the centre and the periphery, as an alternation of romantic, modern and post-modern myths"⁷. This non-homogeneity manifests

⁵ Here and later in the paper I will not strictly follow the chronology of Raman's journey, but rather use excerpts to illustrate my points.

⁶ I. Bobkov, "Postkolonialnyye issledovaniya", *Noveyshiyy filosofskiy slovar*, edited by A. Gritsanov, Minsk 2003, pp. 776-777.

⁷ Idem, "Etika pogranychya: transkulturnost kak belorusskiy opyt",

itself in various forms: a split linguistic identity and a blurred ethnic identity, radically different views on country's history and contemporaneity. Another peculiar trait of today's Belarusian mentality is introduced by the book's cover photo, which contains a peculiar moment that is important in order to understand the cultural preconditions of Raman's journey. We see Roma⁸ dressed in a t-shirt with a print reading "404. Belarus not found. Error. Perhaps the land has either been moved or deleted".

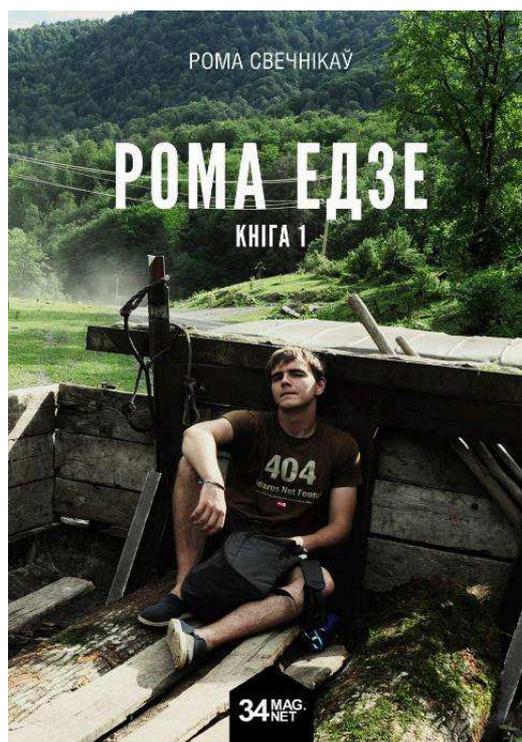


Fig. 2. The cover of the first book, <<http://delaemvmeste.by/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Roma-edze-493x700.jpg>>.

This image can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it is a common place for Belarusians to think that few people in the world have a clear idea of Belarus or its more or less exact location. It is almost an organic part of contemporary Belarusian national narrative⁹. Secondly, it can be understood

Perekryostki, 2005, 3-4, pp. 127-136.

⁸ Roma is short for Raman.

⁹ Recently, it has been reflected in a humorous way by M. Cheriakova, M. Chernova, the authors of the book *Heta Belarus Dzi-etka!* [Minsk 2015]. See also: S. Kviatkouski, *Yak stats belarusam. Sto historyy*, Minsk, 2014; V. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus*, Minsk 2010.

as a critique of the de-Belarusization of the land, which leads to the existence of a country with the aforementioned vague identity.

Roma's descriptions of the causes and goals of his journey are filled with gloomy imagery of a restrictive native time-space, since Roma seems to fall into the category of Belarusian citizens who have critical views towards Belarusian political and social reality. This can be illustrated by the way Svechnikau describes the Minsk underground:

Тут мяне кожны раз сустракаюць, як тэрарыста, правяраюць мой заплечнік. А яшчэ гэты заўсёды жыццярэдасны голас розуму з дынамікаў: “Паважаныя пасажыры, будзьце пільнымі...” Амаль як у старэчы Орўэла¹⁰.

Consequently, Roma sees his journey as an “escape”¹¹, which he describes metaphorically, comparing himself to a dog on the leash:

Гэтыя паўгода я планамерна рваў ланцуг, якім быў прыкаваны да будкі. Апошні рывок — і мой ашыўнік сарваны. Я прагна глытаю паветра і кладу ўсе назапашаныя сілы на тое, каб быць далей ад будкі, міскі і гаспадара. Я адпраўляюся ў кругасветнае падарожжа¹².

On the early stages of his journey, even a thought of returning home frightens him:

Мне сніцца адзін і той жа сон, быццам я вяртаюся дадому ў Менск [...] Ад такіх карцінак я пачынаю панікаваць. Мая дарога — гэта ўсё, што ў мяне ёсць. [...] Адчуваць, як гэты шар круціцца пад табой. Адчуваць, як ты яго круціш¹³.

Thus, one of the principal aims of the journey for Roma is to gain freedom, and the journey itself transforms into a form of building up his self-worth; it is meant to make him more important, first of all in his own eyes. Hence the usage of the self-enlarging metaphors of “spinning the Earth”.

In another chapter of the book, when Raman is in Georgia, we meet with another usage of self-enlarging strategies:

Хутка збягаю з гары. Па дарозе сустракаю пару дрэваў з грушамі. Вось ён я — Юра Гагарын перад адкрытым космасам! Унізе, ля падножжа гары, бяжыць дарога. Я стаю на пагорку і грызу дзікі плод дрэва. Пакуль што я магу толькі пазайдросціць гэтай жылістай дзікасцю¹⁴.

Commonly, in traditional imperialistic travel writings the scenes (M.L. Pratt called them “the monarch-of-all-I-survey” scenes)¹⁵ presenting the protagonist observing a land “from the hill” reflect “fantasies of empowerment and social advancement”¹⁶, but I believe that, in this case, Raman stresses not the superiority, but his astonishment combined with naivety and unspoiled view; hence the comparison with the space pioneer Gagarin whose image has positive symbolic connotations in post-Soviet discourse. We can also see that Raman's ideals lie in being wild, untamed, which is often expressed by animal and vegetative metaphors as he perceives and presents wild plants and animals as truly free. We can illustrate this point by quoting from the chapters about Mexico and Argentina:

Хай лепш на тратуары валяюцца паўразумныя брудныя людзі і кожны квадратны метр гарадскіх фасадаў будзе ўшчэнт спісаны графіці. Хай лепш мяне абрабуюць ноччу ў падваротні і дадучь бутэлькай па галаве. Гэта сапраўды лепш, чым жыць у стэрыльным акварыуме з кормам для рыбак¹⁷;

or

Праз паўгода жыцця ў дзікіх умовах мы вяртаемся ў цывілізацыю. Звер унутры мяне сумуе, чалавек нарэшце ўдыхае на поўныя грудзі. Апошнія шэсць месяцаў былі добрай школай знаёмства з інстынктамі. [...] Сабака ўнутры мяне расплюш-

¹⁰ “Here [in the underground] they always consider me as if I were a terrorist, they check my backpack. And also this ever-joyful voice of reason coming from the loudspeakers: ‘Dear passengers, be vigilant...’ Almost like in old man Orwell’s”, R. Svechnikau, *Roma yedze. Kniga 1*, Minsk 2014, p. 10.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 11.

¹² “For the past six months I’ve been deliberately tearing the leash that chained me to the kennel. The last tug and my leash is off. I greedily swallow the air and with all my accumulated strength I am trying to be far from the kennel, the bowl and the master. I am going to travel around the world”, Ibidem, p. 13.

¹³ “I have the same dream as if I was getting back to Minsk for a couple of days and then continued my trip. I start panicking when I see these images. My road is all I have. [...] To feel the Earth spinning under you. To feel that you are spinning it”, Ibidem, p. 136.

¹⁴ “I quickly run down the mountain. I stumble upon a pair of pear trees along the way. Here I am — Yuri Gagarin standing in front of the open space! Underneath, at the mountain foot, runs the road. I am standing on the hill gnawing the wild fruit. For now, I can only envy this stringy wildness”, Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁵ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, New York 2008, pp. 197–204. See C. Thompson, *Travel Writing*, London, New York 2011, p. 120.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ “May all the pavements be covered with half-mad dirty people and every square metre of city facades be covered with graffiti. May I be robbed in a gateway at night and get a bottle over my head. It is indeed better than living in a sterile fishbowl with fish feed”, R. Svechnikau, *Roma yedze. Kniga 2*, Minsk 2015, p. 124.

чыў вочы, яму больш не патрэбныя законы, запісаныя словам. Ён чуе кліч прыроды — уласны час¹⁸.

The wildness and freedom he found in his journey makes it difficult for him to deal with the reality of an imagined and later real comeback:

Я стаміўся ад дарогі. [...] Мне вельмі хочацца дадому, да сябе, у Менск на станцыю метро “Аўтазаводская”. Мне хочацца выгуляць свайго сабаку і абняць бацькоў. Я так хацеў бы напіцца са сваімі сябрамі. Але ёсць адна рэч, якая мяне паляхае і спыняе. Я ведаю, што ў мяне не атрымаецца жыць на першай паніжанай. Я не змагу мірыцца з тыраніяй кіраўнікоў, законаў і традыцый. Я шалёна хачу пазбавіцца ўласнага імя і любога пашпарта. Я хачу быць простым чалавекам безадносна любога дзяржаўнага ладу і статусу¹⁹.

Generally, it can be seen in the narrative that Belarus, as a place, is hardly a missed land; Roma's rare feelings of nostalgia and thoughts of returning are mostly directed towards “home” and familiar places rather than the country itself.

Moving to less self-oriented sides of Raman's narrative, the author depicts his journey through post-Soviet territories, mainly located in the Caucasus region. He acknowledges the traces of post-Soviet traumatic experiences and finds evidence of several frozen conflicts in the region. A powerful moment in this narrative is Roma's arrival in Beslan, where his background knowledge is actualized and the previously seen TV reports are contextualized within a real space:

а тым часам у мяне адпадае сківіца — мы ўязджаем у Беслан. Я ведаў, што ён у Паўночнай Асеціі, але не ведаў, што буду праязджаць праз яго. Я не магу знайсці словаў. Мы выходзім з машыны — перада мной пахавання некалькі сотняў дзяцей. Для мяне Беслан — рэпартаж па тэлевізары. Я не ведаю, як гэта прыняць або ўсвядоміць²⁰.

Roma also visits Azerbaijan and Armenia, where he is struck by the level of hatred still present in relationships between two nations, as seen in the dialogue between Roma and an Azerbaijani security guard:

- Магамед, а як ты да армян ставішся?
- Я іх ненавіджу! Я б іх усіх выебаў! У нас тут іх наогул усе ненавідзяць! А ты ў Арменіі быў, ці што?
- Так, быў. [...]
- Калі б ты сюды галаву армяніна прывёз, то моцна б разбагацеў! [...]
- Слухай, ну не могуць жа ўсе армяне дрэннымі быць! Сам падумай, усюды ж ёсць добрыя людзі.
- Ну-у-у, бабы армянскія мне падабаюцца. Цела ў іх добрае, твар толькі — лайно.
- Магамед, а ты ў Бога верыш?
- Вядома, у нас у Азербайджане ўсё паводле Карану!
- А ты яго ўвесь прачытаў?
- Я ўсё і так ведаю. Чытаць не абавязкова²¹.

Roma also decides to go the conflicted area of Nagorno-Karabakh, where the confrontation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis culminated in the late Soviet era and in the nineties. Roma's view of this place is once again presented in an eye-opening way and makes him to draw a comparison with Belarus:

З трэцяй спробы я нарэшце трапляю ў Карабах. Сцепанакерт — як Менск, чысты, з кветнікамі і людзьмі за стабільнасць. Толькі іх імкненню да стабільнасці хочацца верыць. Тут яшчэ пахне вайной, прайшло толькі дваццаць гадоў — вайна ў вачах кожнага. [...] Мяне расцягваюць па кавалачках поглядамі, але я зусім не супраць — я адчуваю павагу да гэтых людзей, я гатовы размаўляць з кожным і пра што заўгодна. [...] Тут яшчэ шмат слядоў вайны — разбураныя бамбёжкай вёскі, зарослыя варонкі ад снарадаў, сляды ад кулямётных чэргаў на сценах, людзі без ног, вачэй, рук. Я ўпершыню ўрубаюся ва ўсё гэта. Некалькі дзён я блукаю па ўскраінах горада, каб адчуць пасляваенны правінцыйны дух²².

¹⁸ “After six months of living in the wild, we are getting back to civilization. My inner animal is sad, but the man finally takes a deep breath. The last six months were a good training to get acquainted with my instincts. [...] My inner dog has opened up his eyes, he doesn't need laws written in words anymore. He feels the nature call — his own time”, Ibidem, p. 178.

¹⁹ “I am tired of the road. [...] I really want to go home, to my place, to Minsk and the Avtozavodskaya underground station. I want to take a walk with my dog and to hug my parents. I want to get drunk with my friends so much. But there is one thing that frightens and stops me. I know that I won't be able to live a low gear life. I won't be able to put up with the tyranny of the rulers, laws and traditions. I desperately want to get rid of my own name and any passport. I want to be a common man irrelative of any political system and status”, Ibidem, pp. 59-60.

²⁰ “my jaw drops as we enter Beslan. I knew that it was in North Ossetia, but I didn't realize we'd travel through it. I can't find words.

We get out of the car — in front of me I see a several hundreds of buried children. For me Beslan is a TV report. I don't know how to accept it and acknowledge it”, R. Svechnikau, *Roma yedze. Kniga 1*, op. cit., p. 17.

²¹ “— Magomed, what do you think about Armenians? — I hate them. I'd fuck them all! We all hate them! You've been to Armenia or what? — Yes, I've been there. [...] / — If you had brought a head of an Armenian here, you would have been very rich! [...] / — Listen, but the Armenians can't be all that bad! Just think about it, good people are everywhere. / — Weeell, I like Armenian chicks. They have a nice body, but the face is shit. / — Magomed, do you believe in God? / — Sure, in Azerbaijan, it is all according to Quran! / — Have you read it? / — I know everything. It's not necessary to read it”, Ibidem, pp. 106-108.

²² “The third attempt is successful and I finally get to Karabakh. Stepanakert is like Minsk, clean, with flower-pots and people rooting for stability. However, one wants to believe in their striving for

Besides the traces of the conflicts that escalated in a dramatic way, Roma also depicts the everyday conflicts between the peoples of Caucasus, and the conflicts between them and Moscovites (generally, “white” people from other regions of Russia). In these situations, Roma saves himself by stressing his Belarusian origins and by distancing himself from the Russians: “Адзін альфа-самец нават вылазіць з машыны, каб разабрацца з намі, памылкова прыняўшы нас за масквічоў. Мы ўціхамірваем яго пявучай беларускай мовай”²³. All in all, he depicts his journey through Caucasus and southern regions of Russia by stressing the remains of the Soviet legacy as a part of a broader shared experience: an oppressive experience that can function as a part of a familiarising technique. In some way, they are meant to present places as less exotic, as in his depictions of Armenia: firstly, in Yerevan: “Цэнтр Ерэвана ўзяты ў палон савецкімі манументальнымі будынкамі”²⁴, then during his visit in an old woman’s house: “Перада мной кватэра, у якой час спыніўся ў сямідзясятых. У шафах — рускія кнігі, вялізныя стосы кружэлак, у бары — хрустальны сервіз”²⁵, and later at a train station near Azerbaijani border: “У вялікім памяшканні будынка стаяць толькі стол, крэсла і сейф, пад якім я знаходжу некалькі савецкіх манет”²⁶. This “sovietness” and general affinity evoke disturbing images of the homeland:

Вакол бедныя вёскі і статкі авечак — ніякіх крамаў і ганд-

stability. It still smells like war here, only 20 years have passed, so the war is in everyone’s eyes. [...] I’m getting torn by people’s stares, piece by piece, but I have nothing against it, I feel respect for these people, I’m ready to talk to everyone about everything. [...] There are still a lot of traces of war. The villages destroyed by bombings, shell-holes covered with grass, traces of machine gun bullets on the walls, people without legs, without eyes, without hands. For the first time I’m starting to understand these things. For a couple of days, I wander around city’s outskirts in order to feel the post-war provincial spirit”, Ibidem, pp. 58-60.

²³ “An Alfa-male gets out of the car to get through with us, having mistaken us for Moscovites. We calm him down by our melodic Belarusian”, Ibidem, p. 123.

²⁴ “Yerevan’s city centre is held captive by the monumental Soviet buildings”, Ibidem, p. 40.

²⁵ “I stand in the apartment where time stopped in 1970’s. There are Russian books and a pile of old records in the cabinet, and a crystal set in the bar”, Ibidem, p. 44.

²⁶ “In this large premises I only find a table, an armchair and a safe with some Soviet coins under it”, Ibidem, p. 49.

ляроў сувенірамі. У мяне закладвае вушы. Вакол усё такое роднае, што хочацца выбегчы з машыны і ўцячы ў горы”²⁷.

Generally, during the course of his post-Soviet journey, Roma still moves around familiar geographies with at least some background (though often stereotypical) knowledge of what to expect from, for instance, people of the Caucasus region. He is convinced of their hospitality and emotional expressivity. An interesting pattern gradually builds up in the following chapters: the “Slav-out-of-nowhere,” which designates all the sudden encounters with Slavic people from Eastern and Southern Europe. Roma frequently stresses the Slavic origin of a group or an individual; he shares his experiences with them as if to show a contrast with the locals. Sometimes it even looks like a subconscious search for a culturally closer companion, for example when he travels in Armenia (“Калі я дабіраюся да яго хаты, высвятляецца, што акрамя мяне ён гатовы прыняць яшчэ восем чалавек: чатырох чэхаў, польку, харватку, славачку і турка. Ну і мяне — беларуса. *Амаль славянская сям’я атрымліваецца*”)²⁸, in Alaska (“Маральна мы ўжо рыхтуемся заночыць у стылай глухмені, але раптам з цемры ляснога масіву на нязграбным шумным цягачы выпаўзае *ўкраінец Сямён*. Адзіны на ўсю аляскінскую тайгу, ён вязе нам вялікі разводны ключ”)²⁹ and in Laos:

Цямнее. Я манеўрую паміж крамамі з гароднінай і кафэ-хамі, у якіх разліваюць суп з локшынай. Раптам з цемры з’яўляецца *белы чалавек*:

— *Hey! Where are you from?! — цікаўлюся я.*

— *Russia.*

— *О, прывітанне! А я беларус, з Менска.*

— *З Менска?! А я з Брэста!*³⁰

²⁷ “Poor villages and flocks of sheep are all around, no shops or souvenir sellers. My ears get blocked. Everything around me is so like home that I want to jump out of the car and escape to the mountains”, Ibidem, p. 20.

²⁸ “When I get to his house, it turns out that besides me he’s willing to accommodate another eight people: four Czechs, a Belarusian girl, a Croatian girl, a Slovak girl and a Turk. And me — a Belarusian. It almost looks like a Slavic family”, Ibidem, p. 40.

²⁹ “We are mentally getting ready to spend the night in this freezing no-man’s land, but suddenly Semyon, a Ukrainian, crawls out of the dark forest in his awkward and noisy truck. The only one in the whole Alaskan taiga, he brings us a big screw wrench”, R. Svecnikau, *Roma yedze. Kniga 2*, op. cit., p. 32.

³⁰ “It’s getting dark. I am dodging among greengroceries and cafes where they serve their noodle soup. Suddenly, a white man appears

The last part is remarkable not only for the use of the “white man” formula, but also for the small but revealing detail about Belarusians’ self-identification abroad. The stranger whom Roma meets demonstrates a rather widespread among Belarusians way of self-presentation: present yourself as a Russian or say that you are from Russia, so that nobody gets confused about where you are from. Roma presents himself as a Belarusian but his common tongue with “compatriots” is almost always Russian. Despite that, throughout his narrative, Roma expresses his growing urge to avoid communicating or dealing with Russians, especially Russian businessmen living abroad and post-Soviet Russian-speaking tourists. He uses negatively connoted language, including generalizations and stereotypes while depicting the way Russians behave abroad, which points to an obvious antagonism:

Тлустыя пераспелыя самкі, мабыць, з кіёскаў на рынку “Хмяльніцкі”, выгульваюць сінтэтычныя сукенкі азіяцкіх куцюр’е ў чырвона-чорную палосачку з надпісам Rich са стразаў, што абсыпаюцца, нібы зоркі з неба. Іх кавалеры, у таніраваных да абсалютнай імглы акуларах, шортах маркі Adidas, аранжавых майках-сетках без рукавоў і, вядома, з нязменнымі в’етнамкамі на нагах, пацягваюць халодны півав. Я ўжо бачу, як мне давядзецца падносіць экзатычныя напоі гэтым айчынным турыстам. Унутры ўсё перакручваецца³¹.

While in the US, Roma even starts stealing from supermarkets in order to avoid working for Russians: “Чарговы раз праглядаючы бруклінскую дошку абвестак, я канчаткова вырашаю, што больш не буду працаваць на рускіх імігрантаў. Мяне не палохае праца, я проста баюся мець справу з рускімі людзьмі”³².

from the darkness. / – Hey! Where are you from?! / – I ask him in English. / – Russia. / – Oh, hi! – I say in Russian. – And I’m a Belarusian, from Minsk. / – From Minsk? And I am from Brest!”, Idem, *Roma yedze. Kniga 1*, op. cit., pp. 216-217.

³¹ “Fat overmature females from somewhere like a kiosk at a market place who take their red and black striped synthetic skirts from Asian couturieres with the word Rich made of rhinestones which fall off like stars from the sky. Their fancy men in absolutely black sunglasses, Adidas briefs, orange fishnet sleeveless t-shirts and, naturally, flip-flops on their feet are sipping on their cold beer. I am already imagining how I will serve them with exotic drinks. Everything inside me twists”, Ibidem, p. 251.

³² “Browsing Brooklyn bulletin board for yet another time I definitely decide not to work for Russian immigrants anymore. I am not afraid by the work itself, I am just afraid to deal with Russian people”, R. Svechnikau, *Roma yedze. Kniga 2*, op. cit., p. 51.

As Roma moves farther from the borders of more or less familiar countries, his perception also changes; he becomes cautiously observant and frequently amazed. One of the roughest experiences in the first months of his journey is his stay in Iran, the first Muslim country he visits. Roma’s depiction of his Iranian experiences is rather peculiar because of the constant comparisons he draws between Iran and Belarus. He perceives Iran as an oppressive state where he has to act like an “invisible man”³³ in order to communicate with his new acquaintances, who criticize the regime. He sees common oppressive mechanisms in both countries comparing prisons:

Яго завуць Сірыўс, і яму дваццаць чатыры. На яго шыі вытатуяваны крыж, а на спіне сляды ад удараў бізуном – вельмі папулярнае ў Іране пакаранне. Кажуць, што пасля такой працэдуры ты не можаш ляжаць на спіне некалькі месяцаў. У нас у “Амерыканцы” амаль тыя ж метады³⁴;

and police actions:

Падчас пратэстаў было забіта шмат маладых людзей, яшчэ больш трапілі ў турмы. Іранскі ўрад не саромеецца адкрываць агонь па пратэстантах. Нашым мянтам яшчэ ёсць куды падаць і чаму вучыцца³⁵.

Roma then compares Iranian law-enforcers Basij with Belarusian KGB officers³⁶ and concentrates his impressions of Iran in the following quotation, where he puts his newly gained experience through the prism of the experience of his native country:

У нас вельмі шмат агульнага з іранскай моладдзю. Ім гэтак жа балюча за сваю радзіму. Ім не зразумела, чаму іх лічаць тэрарыстамі, як нам не зразумела, чаму нас лічаць нязручнай скацінаю. Яны гэтак жа пакутуюць з пашпартамі. Кожны з іх можа распавесці гісторыю пра тое, як адгроб па спіне дубінкай, яны гэтак жа хаваюцца па ўніверсітэтах ад арміі ды ім усім таксама не вядома, што далей³⁷.

³³ Idem, *Roma yedze. Kniga 1*, op. cit., p. 71.

³⁴ “There is a tattoo of a cross on Sirius’s neck, and his back bears whip traces. It is a very popular punishment in Iran. They say that after the procedure you cannot lie on your back for several months. In our ‘Amerikanka’ prison they use almost the same methods”, Ibidem, p. 74.

³⁵ “During the protests many young people were killed, even more ended in prison. The Iranian government isn’t ashamed to shoot at the protesters. Our cops have where to lapse and have a lot to learn”, Ibidem, p. 85.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 87.

³⁷ “We have a lot in common with the young people of Iran. It is also painful for them to see the situation in their country. They don’t understand why others think they are terrorists, just like we don’t understand why we are taken as valueless cattle. They suffer with

The narrator also found “the double” in Iran. During one of his desperate moments, Roma meets Abtin, who reminds him of his own reflection in the mirror:

У яго пакоі тое самае хлам’ё, што і ў маім: друкарская машынка, піянерскі горн, калекцыя фотакамер, таблічкі з забароннымі знакамі і надпісамі ды іншыя вельмі патрэбныя рэчы. Але машынка — з персідскай клавіятурай, горн — трохі карацейшы за наш, айчынны. [...] Мы разглядаем яго працы, і я губляю дар мовы. Я знаходжу партрэт свайго бацькі і брата — ды што там, я знаходжу сябе. Я магу распавесці пра кожную дробную дэталю на яго малюнках. Нягледзячы на тое, што ён вельмі дрэнна гаворыць па-англійску, мы размаўляем паўночы аб усіх самых важных для нас рэчах³⁸.

Thus, the depiction of this “Double” follows the same line of parallels we described earlier. Meeting his “Double” changes Roma’s view of the country, which he perceived as hostile and completely different. For the first time at this point of his narration he uses the word *inshaplanetsiane* [aliens/extra-terrestrials] to describe “the other”. This will be his word of choice for depicting exotic and unknown cultures:

Да апошняга моманту я жыў сярод іншапланецян, якія не разумеюць мяне, і я не надта спяшаўся разумець іх, але цяпер я сустрэў родную душу, і гэта самае важнае, што я магу сказаць пра Іран³⁹.

As a whole, in his depictions of previously unknown and unseen cultures and people with whom he shares no common social or cultural experience, Roma is not too cautious when naming things directly or unconventionally. He is rarely compassionate towards the unpicturesque. In the second book, which covers Raman’s journey in Americas, the aforementioned “alien/extra-terrestrial” is

their passports as we do. Every one of them could tell a story about getting a stroke on the back by a rubber hose. Just like us they hide in the universities in order to avoid compulsory army service. And none of them knows what’s coming next”, *Ibidem*, p. 90.

³⁸ “In his room there is the same rubbish as in mine: typewriter, pioneer bugle, collection of cameras, signs with forbidden actions and with writings and other very useful things. Only that the typewriter has Persian keyboard, and the bugle is a bit shorter than ours. [...] We look through his artworks and I lose the gift of speech. I’ve found my father’s and my brother’s portraits, even my own. I can talk about every detail on his pictures. Even though his English is bad, we spend half a night talking about the most important things in our lives”, *Ibidem*, p. 97.

³⁹ “Until now I lived among extra-terrestrials who don’t understand me and I didn’t try that hard to understand them, but now I’ve met a common soul and it is the most important thing I can say about Iran”, *Ibidem*, p. 96.

used predominantly in connection with Mexicans. Mexico itself is called *inshy svet* [another world]⁴⁰: “Метрапалітэн горада нагадвае савецкія фільмы пра піянераў космасы. Цягнікі — касмічныя караблі, мексіканцы — іншапланецяне”⁴¹. His depiction of Mexicans contains several clichés; he deliberately uses culture-bound linguistic elements to exoticize the depicted:

Рэальнасць перапаўняецца тлусценькімі жанчынамі з велізарнымі сіскамі і вусатымі, цвёрдымі, як леташняя булка, мужыкамі ў шыракаполых капелюшах і зіхоткіх ботах. На рагу вуліцы адзін *сеньёр* націрае да бляску боты іншаму *сеньёру* з газетай у руках. Побач размясцілася *сеньярыта*, каб пабарыжыць нарэзаным ананасам. [...] Нарэшце мы трапляем у *мексіканскі серыял*!⁴²

In other chapters of the book, Roma repeatedly uses mass-culture stereotypes or images frequently used in media discourse, which serve as referential images in his representation of unknown countries and people. For example, he once again turns to space exploration imagery to describe the Mongolian landscape: “Марсаход Curiosity можна было з тым жа поспехам адправіць сюды — фатаграфіі гэтай часткі Манголіі было б цяжка адрозніць ад марсіянскіх. Хіба што, калі б у кадр трапіў які-небудзь узік”⁴³.

The most controversial depictions are in the chapters devoted to Roma’s journey through Central America, which is presented as an endless succession of ups and downs. The wildness and authenticity that were previously valued are frequently interpreted from a negative perspective. More and more often, Roma stresses the differences between *us* and *them*; the experiences depicted in a positive way are commonly connected with Europeans

⁴⁰ *Idem*, *Roma yedze. Kniga 2*, op. cit., p. 69.

⁴¹ “City’s underground reminds Soviet films about space exploration pioneers. The trains are spaceships, Mexicans are extra-terrestrials”, *Ibidem*, pp. 79–81.

⁴² “The reality is overfilled with podgy women with huge tits and moustachioed and hard as last year’s bread men in wide-brimmed hats and shiny boots. At the corner of the street one señor is belarusian boots of a señor with a newspaper in hands. Not far away a señorita sits peddling some cut pineapple. [...] We are finally inside a Mexican telenovela!”, *Ibidem*, pp. 74–75.

⁴³ “Curiosity, the Mars rover, could have been easily sent here, because photos of this part of Mongolia would have been difficult to distinguish from those from Mars. Only if a Soviet truck gets in the photo”, *Idem*, *Roma yedze. Kniga 1*, op. cit., p. 163.

or North Americans living in the region. The feeling of difference becomes stronger depending on the country and varies from stating said difference (“Мне складана апісаць сваё стаўленне да балівійцаў, але я востра адчуваю розніцу ў нашай сутнасці. Яны людзі пустыні, людзі гор, і ў іхнай лёгкай хадзе па бязмежных узгорках адгадваецца векавая натуральнасць”)⁴⁴ to absolute lack of acceptance. But most commonly, the feeling of estrangement is rooted in the feeling of danger that dominates Roma’s travelling around the region: “Дарэчы, кожны лацінаамерыканскі горад з надыходам змроку пераўтвараецца ў небяспечную клааку, якая кішыць усялякай нечысцю. Сонца хаваецца за гару, і вуліцы адразу напаўняюцца оркамі і ваўкалакамі”⁴⁵.

Further on, this feeling of estrangement or alienation within an unknown culture transforms into what can be called the “otherness of self”. Through depictions of “the other”, the narrator shifts attention to his own otherness within the surroundings, which causes his frustration. Even before South America, we can find the first manifestations of this phenomenon. Interestingly, in some cases, the feeling of otherness comes from acknowledging race and skin colour; for example, in China: “Наперадзе дзікая і чужая Азія. На доўгія месяцы, а можа і гады, я ператваруся ў ‘белага містара’, а значыць – *у іншага*”⁴⁶, and later in Latin America: “Па вуліцах [Нуэва-Лярэда] снуюць пікапы, пад завязку забітыя ваеннымі аўтаматчыкамі, якія праводзяць нас здзіўленымі позіркамі. Падобна на тое, што мы адзіныя белыя ў гэтым горадзе”⁴⁷. In the strongest and least politically correct way,

this sort of experience is expressed in the chapters devoted to Central America. In the passages quoted below, the narrator reintroduces his animal metaphors, but this time to underline his stressful experiences: “Два апошнія месяцы я пачуваюся *лугавым трусам*. Жыццё *травяеднага* пастаянна звязанае з сур’ёзнымі стрэсамі. Кожны сустрэчны наровіць зняць з цябе твой *беленькі пушысты кажушок* сваім востранькім сцізорыкам”⁴⁸. The strongest imagery, that derives from the feeling of alienation, is used in depictions of the Peruvian highland villages and the locals’ attitude towards the travellers:

[...] я нават адчуваю віну перад мясцовымі жыхарамі, што гэтак жа не магу падаць ім капейчыну на тое-сёе. Кожны сустрэчны малец тыкае ў нас пальцам і з ваяўнічай грывасай крычыць на ўсю вуліцу: ‘Гры-ы-ынгас!’ Мясцовыя вытрэшчваюцца на нас, як ведзьмы на інквізітараў. [...] наша паўтаратыднёвае падарожжа па горных вёсачках поўніцца сярэдневяковаю халоднаю злосцю⁴⁹.

As one can see, Raman once again accents the skin colour factor as the basis of his feeling of alienation:

Усё навокал нібы пад уздзеяннем нейкай асаблівай сацыяльнай радыяцыі. Мы бачым толькі доўгую горную грунтоўку і непрыветлівых брудных людзей, якія рэдкімі зубамі жуюць жылістае мяса. Яны хрумсцяць храсткамі і глядзяць на мяне з пагардаю. Яны лічаць мяне вінаватым у тым, што іхныя адзенне, твар і будучыня брудныя. Ім здаецца, што горад іхны засраны таму, што ў мяне *белы твар*⁵⁰.

Raman’s journey and writings present an interesting and unique phenomenon in its original cultural context, since for historical, political and economic reasons travel writing is neither common, nor popular genre in Belarusian literary tradition. In this respect, he may even be considered one of

⁴⁴ “For me it’s difficult to describe my attitude towards Bolivians, but I strongly feel that our essence is different. They are the highlanders, the people of the deserts and their light pace around borderless hills reminds of us their long-established genuineness”, Ibidem, p. 174.

⁴⁵ “By the way, after dark every Latino-American city transforms into a dangerous foul place swarming with all the evil spirits. The sun hides behind the mountain and the streets are immediately covered with Orcs and Werewolves”, Ibidem, p. 133.

⁴⁶ “Wild and unfamiliar Asia lies ahead. For months or even years, I am going to be a ‘white mister’, hence – the other”, Ibidem, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁷ “Trucks full with gunned men circle around [Nuevo Loredo] the city Gunmen follow us with surprised looks. It looks like we are the only white people in town”, Idem, *Roma yedze. Kniga 2*, op. cit., p. 70.

⁴⁸ “For two months I feel like a jackrabbit. The life of an herbivore is very stressful. Everyone wants to get your white fluffy skin with their sharp knives”, Ibidem, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁹ “[...] I even feel guilty towards local people for not being able to give them some coins. Every kiddo we meet points finger at us and shouts with a militant mug: ‘Gringoos!’ The locals stare at us like witches at inquisitors. [...] our week and a half long journey through highland villages is full of cold medieval anger”, Ibidem, p. 143.

⁵⁰ “Everything around us seems to be under the influence of some special social radiation. All we see is a long unpaved road and unfriendly dirty people chewing stringy meat with their few teeth. [...] They look at me scornfully. They blame for their dirty clothes, faces and future. They think that their town is dirty as shit because my face is white”, Ibidem, p. 144.

the pioneers of the genre in Belarus. But even beyond Belarusian reality, this book may also present a valuable insight into the mind of a young, modern Belarusian man for an outsider. Despite his demonstrative cosmopolitanism and openness to the world, Raman's sense of belonging to Belarus, even as an imagined land, is strong and his experiences gained in "outer world" are inadvertently put into a "native" perspective. As was said earlier, for Raman, the "native" is not necessarily found in strict geographical coordinates, it can be characterised as a feeling of belonging (willing or unwilling) to a certain cultural reality, which in Belarus is characterised by the aforementioned blurriness of collective identity caused by social development in the post-Soviet era. His perception of the "native" is strongly marked by the feeling of being oppressed by it. Thus, in a broader perspective, all of his journeys may be interpreted as his search for freedom (in ways of self-expression, in closeness to the wild

nature, in human communication etc.) in other lands and cultures.

Roma's journey did not cover Europe since his itinerary was initially directed eastward. After South America, he and Volha Palevikova returned to Belarus through Kiev. Although the reasons he could not go to the EU first are completely legitimate and described thusly: "Шчыра кажучы, нам вядома, што тут зрабіць [Шэнген] практычна немагчыма — згодна з законамі Еўразвяза, мы маем права падаваць на візу толькі ў краіне нашага жыхарства. Цэлы дзень мы душымся ў прыёмных усіх магчымых еўрапейскіх амбасадаў, але цуд так і не адбываецца"⁵¹, the situation transcended its bureaucratic character and became almost symbolic: as if once again, after all the troubles and encounters with the new and the unknown, a Belarusian is reminded of his own otherness even within Europe.

⁵¹ "Frankly speaking, we know that it is almost impossible to obtain [Schengen visa] here, since according to the EU laws we have a right to apply for the visa only in the country of our residence. We are stuck at the suffocating receptions of every possible European embassy, but the miracle doesn't happen", *Ibidem*, p. 189.