

ZUZANA KOZÁROVÁ

## Literary images of Russia in Vladimir Sorokin's novels

### Литературные образы России в романах Владимира Сорокина

**Abstract.** Vladimir Sorokin is one of the representatives of Russian postmodernism and one of the most translated contemporary Russian authors in Europe. His work reflects an alternative to the “accepted” Russian reality, focusing on its understanding and the influence it has on the Russian people. The author uses artistic means of expression without embellishment and through his works he reflects not only the political, economic and social situation, but also his views and attitudes as a resident of Russia. In our article we present the time map of Russia according to Sorokin as reflected in three novels: *The queue* (1985), representing the Soviet system in the country, *Their four hearts* (1994), depicting the collapse of the USSR, and *Day of the oprichnik* (2006), portraying the beginning of the XXI century. The article is devoted to the significant epochs of Russian history through the eyes of the author, who is trying to capture the mentality, beliefs and opinions of Russian people in his literary works. The analysis of the main periods of Russian history and their influence on the people, as reflected in Sorokin's oeuvre, allows us to understand their attitude to the current situation in Russia.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Sorokin, Russia, conceptualism, social art, satire, criticism of society

Zuzana Kozárová, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Nitra – Slovak Republic, [zkozarova@ukf.sk](mailto:zkozarova@ukf.sk), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1693-2342>

Vladimir Sorokin is a leading representative of contemporary Russian literature, and his works have been translated into several foreign languages. Through his works, whether literary or film, he expresses his opinions and thoughts while reflecting on the current political situation in Russia. In an interview for the Slovak daily newspaper “Pravda”, journalist Vladimir Pizar asked Sorokin whether literature can describe real life. The writer argues that literature can reflect reality, but a new and different language has to be chosen because we no longer live in the nineteenth century. Currently, there are strong media such as television, film, and the Internet; Sorokin claims that literature has to compete with them, and therefore it has to be inventive, it cannot be archaic, and it cannot endlessly use the old language of realism (Pizar, electronic source).

The current article is focused on the mentality and reality of Russians reflected in three significant novels, each of which describes different historical periods and their influence on the Russian people. The first analysed novel is *The queue* (*Ochered'*, 1985), considered a literary experiment, in which the focus will be on political allusions and reflections subtly incorporated into the dialogic text, which hides the writer's criticism of the political practices and the ever-present manifestations of communism in the country. The second chosen dystopian novel, *Their four hearts* (*Serdtsa chetyrëkh*, 1991), is a work from the 1990s that allows to examine the change in style in Sorokin's writing compared to his works from the 1980s, taking account of sentence formation, descriptions and artistic expression and how the author portrays the theme of violence. In the third analysed novel, *Day of the oprichnik* (*Den' oprichnika*, 2006), the author has resourcefully combined traditional symbols from the sixteenth century, modified in a very natural way, and used them in a story which is set in 2027. Using language and stylistic devices, he has created an unusual fusion of satire, cynicism, historicism, archaisms, and newly created words and phrases, and combined them with the terrifying atmosphere that prevailed during the reign of Ivan IV; this is all projected into the year 2027 and combined with the presence of the oprichnina. The writer uses the achievements of modern times to implement the medieval arrangement of power in the country. Through analysis and interpretation of historical background, mental statements, and the atmosphere reflected in the novels, is created a clearer picture of contemporary beliefs and opinions in Russian society.

In 1979, in an article written by theoretician Boris Groys and published in the Paris magazine "A-JA", it was written that Sorokin, as well as Dmitry Prigov and Lev Rubinstein, are the representatives of a new artistic direction, which Groys termed "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism". Conceptualism is considered the most influential artistic direction in the second half of the twentieth century. The terms conceptualism and soc-art exist side by side, and their meanings overlap to a certain extent because both terms denote a modern artistic direction in art, mainly in literature, built on the deconstruction of concepts of the Soviet era. Conceptualism as an artistic direction tries to reshape these concepts, de- and re-conceptualising established stereotypes and the expectations of respondents from a given work of art, deviating from the norm (or what is considered "normal") with the help of irony and absurdity. The artistic term soc-art was used, for the first time, by the artists Vitalij Komar and Alexander Melamid in 1972. They created a new style which reflected American pop art by using Soviet symbols. Soc-art critically focusses on the official reality of a totalitarian state by using irony, socialistic relativism, and criticism of dissidents and underground art (Glanc 5–8). The style uses nostalgia and parody, but it is connected with the official canon of Soviet art. Komar and Melamid's work is not focused on soc-art only, but also on the

diversity of ideological and mythological codes typical for Russian and American “postcommunist” and “postmodern” societies. Like Ilya Kabakov, these artists supplement their visual work with programmatic discourse, suggesting that some ideas can function as self-sufficient works of art. The art idea is more substantially ideal than the idea embedded in the theoretical discourse because it does not demand to transform reality as in ideology or to explain reality as in philosophy and it presents itself purely as the idea itself. Similarly, conceptualism establishes the concept as its basic unit that refers only to itself and not to external referents (Epstein, electronic source). Conceptualism as an artistic movement is exceptional in that it does not have defined standards that each work has to contain. Considering this fact, the author, his unique language style, and his manner of expression are differently represented in each work. According to Lucy Lippard, the main feature of conceptualism is a value shift away from the created art object toward the idea behind it, while the physical object embodying the concept is unpremeditated and may indeed not even be enlivened, hence the so-called “dematerialization” of this art (Lippard, electronic source).

Sorokin works with anti-aestheticism as well. According to Igor Smirnov, in literature and other arts, anti-aestheticism is not manifested in the choice of subjects of depiction but in the relationship of the artistic text to the discourse to which it belongs, as Sorokin's anti-aestheticism is of a different quality than the avant-garde. His texts are directed against the discourse of literature and art, as well as avant-garde work. But at the same time, they do not enforce the rules by which they would deviate from some literary standards. Sorokin's opposition to literature is that his texts demonstrate the self-destruction of the discourse in which they are included (Smirnov 1997, electronic source). He defined the contradiction in Sorokin's works as: “Апория, которая лежит в основе творчества В.Г. Сорокина, состоит в том, что его тексты, с одной стороны, антилитературны (и – шире – антиэстетичны), а с другой, – остаются литературой” (Smirnov 1997, electronic source).

Sorokin uses the method of shock in his works, which Viktor Yerofeyev defines in the preface to his collection of short stories *Russian flowers of evil*:

Строя тексты на отбросах социалистического реализма, он взрывает их неожиданным словом повествования, матом, предельным сгущением текста-концентрата, состоящего из сексуальной патологии, тотального насилия, вплоть до каннибализма и некрофилии. Под коркой текста обнаруживается словесный хаос и бред (Erofeev 21).

In the case of Sorokin, it is shock treatment. The author considers the deviance of socialism and socialist realist literary creations to be a disease, which he uses for his artistic expression by transforming them into art. It could be considered a destruction of motifs in Russian short stories using satire, irony, exaggeration,

vulgarisms, interjections, onomatopoeia, and other poetic means of expression (Mamleev 169–178). The author uses all available means of expression to reflect the social situation while crossing the boundaries of acceptable artistic, literary, and social taboos. In his works he tries to look into the deep past of the nation, thematise it, and point out its parallels in the present, often absurdly and shockingly. Sorokin's works are based on a realist paradigm that changes at a particular turning point, and the depicted reality becomes distorted. For this goal, he uses controversial means and pushes the boundaries of literary-artistic conventions a little further than the average reader is used to (Mattova 85). In his works specific attention is given to the materialisation of obscene metaphors and to the violent and destructive sexual acts that are rendered in language without using emotions, drawing instead on excessive realism for an obscene, even nauseating effect (Rosen, Uffelmann 18).

In the novel *The queue*, Sorokin's dialogic text contains hidden political themes that comment on the everyday life in socialist Russia in 1985, the year when this literary work was published. The themes are not discussed in detail in the novel; they are represented as hints and allusions, not as the complex thoughts and opinions of the author. With his unusual artistic style, Sorokin creates within the novel a metatextual mixture of texts, including direct speech, murmurs, sighs, noises, screams, and nonsensical phrases and sentences. The main focus is on an everyday part of the life of ordinary Moscow people during the period of socialism, namely waiting and standing in lines. The author conceived a queue as an independent, dynamic machine or organism that operates based on its own rules. He focussed on how it works, how it manifests itself, and how it moves. He expressed its dynamism and changeability using literary language, which includes murmurs, noises, sighs, shouts, interjections, and unfinished sentences and curses. The entire work is written in the form of dialogues between the characters, without any description or commentary from the author. According to Smirnov, anti-aestheticism is manifested in the novel by the fact that it consists entirely of restoring the oral collective communication that is the *vox populi*, thus returning the written culture to its archaic folklore beginnings (Smirnov 1997, electronic source). The actor of the story is the language itself, which works on its own, while individual words and sentences only have meaning if we guess the context, but do not make sense by themselves – for example, in the part where the heroes solve a crossword puzzle or read a newspaper while waiting in line while at the same time commenting on the current political situation. Although the writer uses the language of Soviet newspapers through the characters, the sentences they say or their comments and opinions have no meaning and therefore contain no message for the reader. They are simply the words of people waiting in line and driving away boredom (Vargova 27). According to Tomaš Glanc who wrote the preface to Sorokin's novel in the

Czech edition published in 2003, the author is more interested in the queue than the characters themselves standing in the queue; and the conclusion could be an idea that the main character in this novel is a mass of people, depicted using impersonal sentences, mutterings, shouts, and various sounds, which is undoubtedly one of the signs of conceptualism in literature (Glanc 7).

Individual protagonists gradually appear in the series, such as the MGU graduate Vadim, the student Lena, a woman with a child, and a character known just as “a writer”. Characters do not represent their individuality and uniqueness, as is common in traditional novels where the heroes are different from ordinary people by their behaviour, rebelliousness, or attitudes. These characters represent or stand for a particular group of the same people in a multitudinous queue, because Sorokin does not devote himself to their external or internal description. There is no focus on the reader knowing where the heroes come from, their background, or what they have experienced in everyday life. Based on this fact, it could be assumed that the MGU graduate – Vadim – does not represent an individual personality, but rather represents every young man waiting in line for something, characterising their attempts to get closer to a younger female. Lena also symbolises any other young and naive student who, while waiting, talks to and becomes one-sidedly emotionally involved with “the writer”, even though she does not know if he can get her the goods she wants at any time. The characters in this work are not unique personalities whose stories are read; on the contrary, they are only the protagonists of the queue itself, through which is shown the working of the main character – the queue. Presumably the writer grotesquely depicted how individual and unique people who come to stand for something become just a mass of an anonymous crowd, where everyone, no matter how special, sooner or later merges and becomes just one of many. This is the very essence of socialism – to fit into the crowd and not stand out (Vargova 27–28). Elaine Blair wrote a comprehensive review called *The wait* in the periodical “The Nation”, where she admits that, even though there are no violent scenes or passages with bizarre murders in the novel, the tragedy of *The queue* arises from its hyperbolization. People are “trapped” in a queue for several days, to which they have to submit their whole lives to obtain the thing they desire. The individuality of each waiting person is denied in the name of the collective mass. Although everything is covered by the everyday lightness of what we hear on the street every day, perhaps from today's point of view, nostalgia, and the violence against man, threatening his identity and freedom, manifests in this more sophisticated way in *The queue* (Blair 28).

The idea of the loss of individuality and identity is outrageously depicted in the part of the novel where the whole row of people seems to undulate and move so that the people inside the row are able to reach the drinks stand, or the part where people gradually move from bench to bench because they need to rest dur-

ing a hot day; none of them, however, will leave the line. Everyone standing in line becomes a part of it, and thus a living organism is created from it, always moving somewhere without knowing where, and waiting and hoping to achieve something without knowing what exactly. The idea of obtaining or achieving something unknown but desirable is also mentioned in the Russian national fairy tale of Ukrainian origin *Go I know not whither and fetch I know not what*<sup>1</sup> (Afanas'ev). Characters in the novel are waiting for “something” that they do not know whether they will get or not, or even how much it is and what it looks like. Nevertheless, everyone obediently waits while at the same time facing obstacles that sometimes reach the point of absurdity – for example, looking only at the number of people waiting, or observing Vadim, who is three hundred and twenty-fifth in line but still waits and believes that he will get his moment at the cash register. Even though Vadim's number is known, it does not make him an exceptional human because there are more than a thousand other people in the same situation as Vadim, with the same hope and determination to stand in line until the end. This number assigned to him evokes the impersonal approach in the queue, the merging with the crowd.

Sorokin is a representative of conceptualism and soc-art, and for this reason it is necessary to consider the influence of American pop art in the interpretation. The idea of waiting for something could also be compared to the concept of the American dream. The essence of this is to wait for fulfilment of the dream, which one believes will surely come true one day. The assumption is supported by information in the novel, where it is written that the dream goods are of American origin. At the time the book was set, America was perceived as a land of endless possibilities for the citizens of the USSR, and they believed that goods from America were of high quality. On the contrary, the attitude towards the citizens, not only of America but of the West, is portrayed negatively. According to a review by Mary

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<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the fairy tale lies in the difficulty of fulfilling the given task (due to its uncertainty), with which the “evil king” wants to catch and destroy the hero of the fairy tale. There are a few more things to consider, for instance, the unlimited set of spatial and realistic options. It assumes an unlimited freedom to choose the direction of the search and the freedom to decide the object of the search. The task presupposes the conditional freedom of the performer – he is free while he searches. If the object is found, he gets a reward, but if not found, he loses his life. The goal of the fairy tale could be understood as the endless free quest to gain the true freedom of life and the precious reward. The impossibility of finding the unknown in the unknown pushes the hero's salvation to infinity. Different fairy tale plots deal with this problem in different ways. But among them is this: the hero goes to “another world” from where he brings something “otherworldly”. The logic is simple in the world of reality, the boundless and endless search seems impossible because in this world, every “thing” is known and named, so to speak, and is in its place and if so, then only something transcendent from the “other” world gives the hero hope of victory over the “evil king” (Ivanov, electronic source).

F. Zirin in "Publishers Weekly", Sorokin, in his novel, works with the relationship of the Soviet citizen to America as a country and the hateful relationship to Americans (Zirin, electronic source).

Another manifestation of absurdity is that people were able and willing to wait all day and all night, even when it started raining heavily. They spent the night in the park on benches so as not to be excluded from the line. The people are not sure if there are enough goods for everyone; they are not even sure what the goods are, whether they will like them, or how much they have to pay for them. Into this atmosphere full of uncertainty and expectations there is suddenly an appearance of busloads of comrades, all of whom have priority access. The moments when the comrades from the buses enter the scene could be considered a mockery of ordinary citizens, who have to patiently and obediently wait in a line of several thousand for a vision that may not correspond to their expectations at all. This mockery contrasts with the traditional Russian novels written with pity, expressions of disapproval, and sympathy for suffering, a typical feature of the anthropocentric literature of the nineteenth century. Situations of injustice are portrayed grotesquely, with a certain amount of irony and satire directed against society as an opposition to the Russian literature of the nineteenth century. Almost fifty pages of the book are devoted to listing names on an endless waiting list, signing them up, or checking them off the list. It is a realistic depiction of how long it takes to count people in a line of several thousand and how individual people in the crowd disappear and merge into one unit because everyone is on the list for the same reason, which gives the impression that everyone is the same (Vargova 29).

The novel ends happily because Vadim meets the department head of a Moscow department store, a woman called Lyudmila Konstantinovna, who promises he will be allowed to go directly to the warehouse to select goods. The motif of Lyudmila, who portrays a strong woman in a high position, and who saves Vadim from the rain and promises him the achievement of his longed-for dream, is an element of conceptualism. She, as one of the characters, contradicts the motif of the traditional women portrayed in typical Russian literature – weak, tender, obedient and self-sacrificing, passing moral judgment on the main character, and embodying the opposite of the strong, tough, and domineering man. In Sorokin's novel, Vadim is the one who needs saving, and Lyudmila is a woman who is independent, self-confident, even divorced, and herself the initiator of the love act. The description of the love act at the end of the novel is realised in dialogues, interjections, exclamations, or sighs. The silence that sometimes occurs between Vadim and Lyudmila is visually depicted by the author with the help of a few dots in quotation marks. It is an excellent game with literary language because, even in interpersonal communication, there is sometimes silence between conversation participants. In classical works, silence is described by various adjectives or sim-

ply by the author's statement: "There is/was silence". Using a punctuation experiment, Sorokin brought a new possibility of expressing silence in a literary work:

- .....ах.....мальчик мой...
- .....
- .....мальчик.....милый... (Sorokin 2018, electronic source).

The writer visually depicts silence very simply but realistically, as if he gave silence its opportunity to express itself. He gave it space in quotation marks as if silence could speak and express its opinion. The reader can easily imagine how long the silence lasts and what dynamics it has in the stream of sentences, words, shouts, and sighs. According to Smirnov, the final passage is crucial – in which catharsis occurs, as the protagonist Vadim gets intimate with Lyudmila, the mediator between the product and the waiting people. The conclusion, which takes place in Lyudmila's apartment, is interesting because it points to its mediality through interjections and blank pages. Smirnov claims that the metafictional procedure used in the final scenes forces the reader to shift attention to the problem of the mediation of the plot itself (Smirnov 1995, electronic source). The novel conclusion could be interpreted as the fulfilment of the American dream as the main character seemingly gets his "happy ending".

Another manifestation of conceptualism is that the author remains distanced from the action itself, as if he is uninvolved in what is happening in the novel. The readers have the opportunity to form their own opinions and attitudes toward the plot and characters. This postmodern literary procedure, known as 'death of the author'<sup>2</sup>, is defined by Marina Mozheyko as a paradigmatic figure whose goal is to create an independently functioning text that uses the author only as a tool for the realisation of the given text. In this way, each reader can realise their own interpretation of the text, and it is solely up to the reader to interpret the work (Gricanov, Možejko, electronic source). In the case of *The queue*, the reader has at their disposal interjections, monologues and dialogues, unfinished sentences, and the visual side of the text to facilitate forming his/her own opinion about the characters, with only the reader's imagination to depict the background of the plot and the surroundings. According to Glanc, whose works deals with Russian conceptualism and soc-art, Sorokin's literary debut contains several political topics such as: an analysis of Stalinism, the conditions in factories and shops, corruption, Brezhnev and his politics. He states that these themes are treated in the work in the form of sounds and hints; he adds that So-

<sup>2</sup> The literary theory was first introduced in 1967 by French philosopher Roland Barthes in his essay *The death of the Author*, where he claimed that the meaning of a text is not determined by the author's intention but rather by the reader's interpretation (Barthes 54).



rokin remained deeply immersed in Soviet discourse, even later in life. Sorokin himself repeated that he feels like a Soviet writer based on the Soviet experience and Soviet traumas (Glanc 9).

The novel is primarily concerned with the situation of the Soviet people because the living conditions and possibilities of ordinary citizens are reflections of the politics of each state. In *The queue*, the writer focusses on the fact that if ordinary people want to buy something of high quality, they have to stand in a line of several thousand, which is the result of the lack of goods; when the goods are finally available, everyone wants to have them. In Soviet Russia there were restrictions according to which, in some parts of the country, it was determined how many goods would be provided to individual stores or cities. In this way, according to Soviet ideology, it was supposed to ensure that each and every citizen would have the same opportunities and receive the same number of given goods so that no one had too much or too little. *The queue* points out that none of this ideology applied to ordinary reality because standing in lines for goods that were in short supply was not an isolated phenomenon. In addition to the fact that there were many people and not enough goods, and even queues for unknown goods just because some goods were available at all, there were many under-the-counter commodities, along with black markets and corruption. The novel mentions a corrupt police force that arrives to maintain the order where people are waiting in line. At first, people are satisfied because they believe that no one will jump the queue when the police are there; however, it is the police force who do not follow the rules, instead allowing citizens who are important to the regime to move to the front of the line.

ГРАЖДАНЕ! ПРОСЬБА НЕ ШУМЕТЬ!

А мы и не шумим...

Чего они лезут-то?

А кто это, пусть объяснит!

ПРОСЬБА НЕ ШУМЕТЬ! ЭТИ ТОВАРИЩИ ИМЕЮТ ПРАВО ПОЛУЧИТЬ ТОВАР ВНЕ ОЧЕРЕДИ. ТАК ЧТО, НЕ ШУМИТЕ, СТОЙТЕ СПОКОЙНО!

Как это?!

А кто они такие?

Что это за безобразие?!

А мы что же?!

Я ПОВТОРЯЮ. ПРОШУ ВАС НЕ ШУМЕТЬ И СОБЛЮДАТЬ ПОРЯДОК! ПОДЪЕХАВШИЕ НА АВТОБУСАХ ТОВАРИЩИ ИМЕЮТ ПРАВО ПОКУПАТЬ ВНЕ ОЧЕРЕДИ! (Sorokin 2018, electronic source).

According to our interpretation of this excerpt, it portrays the police as controlled by orders “from above”, which favours higher-ranking people without looking at ordinary citizens. This part of the novel shows how the police and “comrades” holding higher positions abuse their authority and power to obtain

advantages, in this case the goods from America. The police bluntly order the others to wait and keep calm and quiet while the “comrades who have the right to receive the goods in priority” move to the front of the line. Even though the people complain and object, they do nothing about this injustice and abuse of power because they know they cannot effectively do anything. Even Vadim, who waits obediently in line, receives a promise at the end of the novel that Lyudmila Konstantinovna, the department head of the Moscow department store, will take him to the warehouse after getting to know him so that he can choose and purchase the goods for which he has been waiting for so long. Describing the behaviour of the police and the comrades, along with the conclusion of the work when Vadim receives a promise from Lyudmila Konstantinovna, the novel realistically portrays that without bribes, a favourable acquaintance, or a relative from a higher-ranking family, an ordinary person can only get access to high-quality and scarce goods with difficulty.

While waiting in line, people pass the time with various activities, and at one point they solve a crossword puzzle, in which it turns out that Maxim Gorky is a Soviet writer:

Ага. Так... По горизонтали... русский советский писатель.  
 Сколько букв?  
 Щас... семь. Семь букв.  
 Шолохов.  
 Шолохов советский писатель. А тут русский и советский.  
 Маяковский.  
 Он поэт.  
 Горький.  
 Подходит... (Sorokin 2018, electronic source).

In his debut, Sorokin reflects on the attitudes of ordinary people, who often have opinions and judgments manipulated by the media and politicians. During one of the many conversations of people waiting in the crowd, there is a discussion about how someone was swearing at Stalin. Others claimed that Stalin won the war, strengthened the country, and there was order during his dictatorship:

Да. А все Сталина ругали.  
 А у нас только и могут – ругать.  
 А он войну выиграл, страну укрепил. И дешевле все было. Мясо дешевое. Водка три рубля.  
 Даже меньше.  
 И порядок был.  
 Конечно был. На двадцать минут опоздаешь – судят.  
 Кажется, на пятнадцать.  
 На двадцать. Моя жена покойная однажды весной через Урал бежала, по льдинам, чтоб на завод успеть. Автобус сломался, и она побежала. Вот! А кто теперяшний побежит?  
 Да, смешно сказать (Sorokin 2018, electronic source).

The novel emphasises the manipulation of the media and its influence on the ordinary citizens of Soviet Russia because access to information, as during Stalin's dictatorship, was limited, and only the information that suited the government got into the newspapers. Lies became the norm, and words meant the opposite of their true meaning. Although they talked about socialist democracy, brutal terror was practised. There was talk of a socialist constitution and respect for socialist law, and about an unprecedented flourishing of socialist nations, but Stalin's purges decimated not only the power apparatus but also the intelligentsia (Shvankmajer 376). Stalin's crimes against humanity, the removal of non-compliant people, and other atrocities, were only publicly revealed several years after his death. By the description of the ignorance of the citizens, the novel criticises the corruption of the press, the manipulation of information by politicians when making it available to ordinary citizens, and the influence of public opinion. In the given quote, people standing in the queue not only disapproved but even remembered with sadness how, during Stalin's rule, people were arrested because they were fifteen minutes late, which seems inhumane, but the people influenced by demagoguery did not realise that they were victims of terror and that they lived in constant fear for their life because Stalin was presented as a saviour who did great good. The novel not only emphasises the strong influence of the media and propaganda on ordinary citizens, but it chiefly brings attention to the political manipulation of information. The following quote captures a conversation among the people standing in line, talking about how life was good during Stalin's regime, that the labour standards were exceeded, and everyone worked. According to people in the novel, the situation is that they cannot fire the locksmith because there would be no one to replace him, and Brezhnev (the then-president) does not care. The novel underlines the fact that ordinary people are uninitiated about the political situation, they tend to idealise the previous regime, and even if they talk about politics among themselves, they cannot change their situation.

А при Сталине разве творилось такое?

Порядок был.

Порядок. И работали все на совесть.

Еще как. Нормы перекрывали.

А сейчас слесаря уволить не могут: права не имеют.

А главное – уволят, а на его место кого?

Некого, конечно.

А Брежневу наплевать.

А что Брежнев сделать может? Система такая (Sorokin 2018, electronic source).

The hidden political context of the writer's literary debut is a silent criticism, not only of the political regime but also of the corruption in the government, intrigues, crimes against humanity, and manipulation of the opinion of the citi-

zens of Soviet Russia at that time. The fact that the author could not directly and openly write his views but had to hide them in a dialogic text and statements that are seemingly unrelated proves that, even in the eighties of the twentieth century, criticism of the government regime was still taboo in Soviet Russia. The writer's work depicts waiting in line for goods satirically, sometimes going into the grotesque; and the entire literary work of *The queue* is a cynical criticism of the communist regime.

The year 1991 is one of the most important in the history of Russia because the USSR definitively disintegrated, which profoundly changed the situation in the country. The collapse of the Soviet system and the disintegration of the USSR raised several fundamental questions; for example, what direction would the successor system take? Would Russia reject not only communism but also any dictatorship and follow the legacy of 1917, i.e. an attempt at parliamentary democracy? Or would it continue the absolutist history of tsarism? How would Russia solve the catastrophic economic situation (Shvankmajer 478)? During this period of upheaval, Sorokin wrote his controversial dynamic novel *Their four hearts*, which was published in Russia only three years later. In an interview for "SME", the writer spoke about the political and social situation in Russia in the nineties. Sorokin said that the birth of democracy was in the 1990s, and it was said that Russia would become a civilised European country. He continues that the years of totalitarianism, however, were ingrained in the hearts of the people. The man Homo Sovieticus did not die out – he just mutated; the mentality remained Soviet, but he knows and covets real quality and wants to have a Mercedes and a vacation in Spain or Italy. However, there is a very healthy and critical youth who, in principle, do not watch the Brezhnev-era style television, instead preferring to get information from the Internet (Toda, electronic source). In the interview, Sorokin further commented that Russia was a country of violence when he wrote the novel *Their four hearts*. As the author claims, he only reflects the situation in society and politics in his works. He follows that he saw Russia in the nineties as a country full of perversions, violence, and sadistic murders. In the dynamic plot of the novel, one violent scene alternates with another, while the manifestations of violence and brutality gradually increase in intensity, as well as detailed descriptions of the given morbidities. The novel features four main characters who are all members of a secret organisation – Rebrov, Shtaube, Olga, and a very young boy, Seriozsa – and their attempt to connect themselves to special, strictly guarded aggregate located in a bunker in Siberia (Lorkova 2011a: 22).

In addition to the theme of violence, which is expressed very clearly in the novel, another line of this challenging work is the loss of identity and the search for values. *Their four hearts* was written in the year when the USSR collapsed and the old regime ended, and it was time to find out and establish what would follow.

The protagonists of the novel, the old man Shtaube, the young woman Olga, the young Rebrov, and the boy Seriozsa, are rebelling against the present situation in their country and trying to achieve a transformation of their hearts, which implies that they want to establish a new order by deconstructing themselves. For readers it is unclear why they are trying to change their hearts or where they got the belief that if they proceed the way they do they would succeed in changing something; this information is not revealed even at the end of the work, although it is certain that they did actually achieve the transformation of their hearts. The meaning of the numerical digits 6, 2, 5, and 5, which are presented to us in the novel is, however, not clarified. These elements of absurdity are an important part of the novel *Their four hearts*, because they create tension in the work and help to graduate the plot, and the reader naturally expects the ambiguities to be clarified at the end of the novel, highlighting the senselessness of the whole transformation of hearts. The characters enter the plot already formed, with a clearly defined plan, believing it has to be accomplished. In the novel are portrayed three generations of contemporary Russian people: the older generation represented by the old man Shtaube, the middle generation by Olga and Rebrov, and the children of the nineties by the boy Seriozsa. Even though there is a generational gap between the characters, they all behave in the same perverted, sadistic manner, while all of them, including the boy Seriozsa, engage in various sexual deviations and excesses. The uniform behaviour, where there is no distinction between who is too young or where the boundaries of "normality" are, reflects the loss of identity of the characters. They all follow the same goal and behave equally abnormally and fanatically, while they have no moral values or boundaries. In an interview for "SME" (Toda, electronic source) Sorokin expressed that people in Russia in the nineties, after the fall of the USSR, were in an environment that was not only saturated with violence but was still feeling the influence of the communist regime, which pushed people to blend in with the crowd and adopt the same behaviour. If, however, people live for a long time in a society where their identity is suppressed and many things are forbidden, the result is a loss of one's nature and a numbness to not only one's own emotions but also a lack of empathy for other people. When suddenly these prohibitions cease to be valid, the deformed "blackness" of the human soul begins to emerge. However, the characters in the novel cross the line in every way, not only in terms of sadistic murders but also in their fanatical obsession with transfiguring hearts, which makes them capable of committing crimes in a startling, sadistic way. This obsession was in the novel used to express the loss of faith in human, moral, and ethical values. It depicts the characters as individuals deformed by time, who do not know boundaries and have no conscience. The only thing they are interested in is the transformation of their hearts which, however, appears to be senseless. Smirnov sees the suicide of all characters as a tool of anti-aesthet-

icism: “в *Сердцах четырех* кончает самоубийством все главные персонажи этого авантюрного повествования, так что и в данном случае читатель имеет дело с жанровой прозопопеей, ведущей в Ничто” (Smirnov 1997, electronic source). Sorokin, by using the image of the heart in his works, is considered as a protagonist of cardiocentric culture. The human body has always been considered an object of art and has undergone various refigurations in cultural history. Special attention has been paid particularly to the heart rather than the head, or something else in understanding human beings. The heart has played the main role not only in the human body but also in human thought. Sorokin works with the image of a speaking heart in his *Ice trilogy* (2002–2005), which belongs to the tradition of “heart knowledge”, but in a special way because the *Ice trilogy* marks the end of cardiocentric culture. It would seem that Sorokin is attempting to renovate the culture of the heart by inventing a sort of cardiac language, but only to confirm the end of cardiosensocentrism. For Sorokin, cardiosensocentrism is a remedy against the “sick” culture itself, but it does not manage to cure the sickness – it disappears at the end of the text as a fatal mistake (Grigoryeva 108–109). According to Uffelmann “the heart turns out to be the organ of cognition, superior to all other forms of emotion evoked by the (meta-)literature of Sorokin” (Uffelmann 116). Ultimately all the actions of the characters seem to be senseless because it is not explained what their transformation of hearts has achieved or what has changed in society. Their quest to deconstruct their hearts is accomplished, but the meaning of this task is lost by the end of the book, as no result of their efforts is apparent. The boundaries of ordinary violence have moved further, people are becoming more sadistic, losing moral values and their identity, and believing in different sects. The series of violent scenes that lead to a senseless change of heart point out that violence, even if widespread, has no meaning.

The writer has a penchant for playing with words, sentences, and all available means of expression, as well as sudden changes in artistic style within one work, which he admitted: “Я получаю колоссальное удовольствие, играя с различными стилями. Для меня это чистая пластическая работа – слова как глина. Я физически чувствую, как леплю текст” (Genis 73). For this reason, the work *Their four hearts* belongs to those works that must be read carefully, with an open mind, and more than once so that the reader understands what the author intended to portray. The style and the vocabulary of the novel *Their four hearts* are very diverse. In the work, the author plays with different stylistic levels; for example, the work contains elements of military prose in the passage where Shtaube talks about his childhood. There are also quotations from other works, such as an excerpt from Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical work *Thus spoke Zarathustra* or a quote from the novel *Prince Serebrenni* by Aleksey Tolstoy. The novel contains elements of a thriller, a detective story, and a computer strategy game when

we consider the fact that the characters work to accomplish different missions. Sorokin included excerpts from encyclopaedias as well as lines from academic literature in human and animal biology and anthropology, including using technical terms from the given fields. The novel contains a passage where Rebrov's mother mentions her family and life in the camp, which could be categorised as a memoir. In addition to the brilliant alternation of stylistic genres, the writer also played with direct speech, monologues, and dialogues and also used various areas of vocabulary where he included terminology, jargon, slang, vulgarisms, interjections, dialectisms, phrases in the Ukrainian language, cultural and historical realities, geographical names, names and abbreviations of institutions, and other areas (Lorkova 2011b: 81). Sorokin has an exceptional talent for formulating sentences, dialogues and monologues and knows how to draw the reader directly into the plot of his work with the right words. Although some passages of his works give the impression that words and sentences do not make sense and are random, the stylisation within Sorokin's works is never random; it always has some purpose and goal. "Слова в его текстах, по меткому выражению одного из его поклонников, превращаются из слов смысловых в «видеослова»" (Mežieva, Konradova 32). Uffelmann understands the novel *Their four hearts* as an anchoring point of destructive and post-destructive tendencies in Sorokin's writings. The violence that dominates the plot could be explained as a literal materialisation of expressions of the vulgar language *mat*. The situation of "brain fuck" described in the novel is the narrative materialisation of the metaphor *ебать мозги* (to confuse). At the end of the novel the machine makes cubes of the hearts of the main characters and throws them onto the frozen "liquid mother". Behind the inhuman violence, cannibalism, and sexual acts is the striving of the main characters to deconstruct their hearts with the help of the ice substance, which could be understood as a metaphysical thirst (Uffelmann 113).

In 2006, Sorokin wrote another dystopian novel *Day of the oprichnik*. In this novel, the writer combines satire, cynicism, thought and the language of the sixteenth century with the achievements of modern times. Focusing on the theme and the analysis of symbols creates a necessity to analyse political reflections and, of course, the opinions of literary critics and the author himself. The novel takes place in 2027 in Reborn Holy Russia, surrounded by the Great Russian Wall which separates it from Eastern Europe. In this work, the writer contrasts the history of Russia with its present and technological achievements of the modern era. The culture of the sixteenth century, represented by the language of the oprichnina, clothing, the political establishment of the country, and traditional Russian food, is intermingled with today's technologically advanced society that uses mobile phones, travels in Mercedes, uses modern weapons and, of course, takes drugs. In the novel, we follow one day in the life of the oprichnina mem-

ber Andrei Danilovich Komiaga; through his eyes, we learn how the oprichnina works and the internal mechanisms of the organisation.

The word “oprichnina” comes from the sixteenth century during the period of the cruel reign of Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible, who made an army out of his loyal servants. The tsar’s oprichnina were the secret police, which prosecuted the “enemies” of the tsar and performed specific tasks. At that time, the oprichnina were called kromeshniki, meaning “those who come from the dark”, and their appearance inspired terror. They dressed all in black, rode on black horses with black harnesses, and had a dog’s head by the saddle as a sign that their task was to track down treason everywhere. Another of their symbols was the broom, which signified the sweeping away of betrayal. The members of the oprichnina had to give up all contact with relatives and friends; they belonged only to the tsar, and no one was allowed to complain about their violence because that would be taken as a complaint against the tsar. No one was even allowed to complain about the servants and family of the oprichnina because they too were above the law (Shvankmajer 55). The tsar’s secret police were established to eliminate the power of the Russian nobility.

The oprichnina was pursuing two main goals in its actions against the population in the Novgorod posad. The first was to replenish the empty oprichnina treasury by robbing the rich trading and manufacturing elite of Novgorod. The second was to terrorize the posad, particularly the impoverished sections of the population (Skrynnikov, electronic source).

With his work, Sorokin transfers the themes from the sixteenth century to the present. For example, in 2027 there is a powerful ruler who has imposed law and order on the country by force, while at his side stand his loyal servants (the oprichnina), who carry out his will and cleanse Russia of enemies and traitors, which is a clear comparison to Vladimir Putin and his use of security forces to remove oligarchs, political opponents and people openly criticising the regime in the Russian society.

The writer argues that Tsar Ivan IV infected Russia with the idea of the oprichnina, which, unfortunately, is resurrected at certain stages of history. Sorokin transfers the medieval model of Russia (the period of the reign of Ivan the Terrible) to the 21st century. However, the oprichnina in Sorokin’s novel bear traces of mutations that have occurred over the centuries, for example, features of the Stalinist model embodied within the reincarnated Ivan the Terrible and his henchmen, which could be seen at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries (Kupka 36). The writer did not forget the symbols of the oprichnina, which he transferred to the present – for example, the dog’s head that is on the front of the members’ cars and the broom that is attached to the back of the car, or the strict observance of rituals, murderous criminal expeditions, rape, bribery



and the search for conspirators. Unlike the oprichnina of the sixteenth century, the members of the oprichnina in Sorokin's novel are in constant virtual contact with their ruler, who speaks to them and gives instructions through television, spy cameras, and telephones, although no one actually sees him. In addition, the oppressors of 2027 indulge in expensive narcotics from China and homosexual orgies in their spare time. The work alternates between elements of satire and cynicism, and sometimes comic skits alternate with moments that can cause disgust in the reader. The most prominent motifs in the work naturally include violence, typical for Sorokin's novels. The author stated that the novel did not reflect the situation in Russia at the time but was trying to alert people and draw attention to a real threat. As stated by Maria Kusa, an author who was dealing with the issue of power, Sorokin wrote the novel as a warning: this can happen if Russia develops in the direction specified by the current nomenclature – a kind of magic spell of a demon poet, a fallen angel who rules the world (Kusa 110).

The novel also deals with the relationship of Russia, as a representative of Eastern Europe, with the countries of Western Europe, as well as exploring its attitude towards China. Russia's relationship with the Western countries of Europe is crystallised in the literary work by the fact that a Great Russian Wall is built between Russia and the countries of Western Europe. The author depicts not only the general negative attitude of Russia towards the West in this work but also points out the country's constant tendencies to close itself off or try to separate itself from the countries of Western Europe socially or economically. It is also possible that the work expresses the superior attitude of the absolute ruler of Russia, who, with this wall, not only prevents the penetration of any influence from Western countries but also makes it clear that Russia is an independent country that does not need to cooperate with other European countries due to the fact it has everything it needs on its vast territory.

In the 1830s and 1840s, the so-called Slavophile-Westernizer dispute arose over which model Russia should choose to follow: European modernization or old Russian traditionalism. In Westernizers' view of the world, the Qing Empire was a space of stagnation, despotism, and corruption, the reverse of the progressive model they idealized. In contrast, Slavophiles often expressed their respect for the ancient Asian civilization, preferring a multiple, divergent development of nations to a straight road of modernization (Koshino, electronic source).

Russia's relationship or attitude towards China is complicated in the novel; compared with Western European countries, which are perceived as undesirable and therefore separated from Russia by a wall, China represents the so-called lesser evil. It is necessary to cooperate and trade with China because, without this contact, Russia would be forced to limit itself to its own resources. Russia's relationship with the countries of Western Europe and with China is perceived through

the eyes of the main character, the oprichnik Komiaga. The alliance with China is necessary, but on the other hand the oprichnina is afraid of Chinese expansionism, which is exaggerated in such a way that Komiaga watches a film with this theme during a business trip. However, at the same time there is a sense of respect and interest in Chinese products; for example, Komiaga receives a glass ball as a bribe and an aquarium with fish, which are actually high-quality and expensive narcotics (Lorkova 2011c: 67–71). In the novel, Russia has obtained an influence on Europe through rich natural resources. Sorokin creates in his work an exaggerated picture of the real situation because the import of oil and gas is closely linked with Russian diplomacy and politics. Russia's prosperity and influence in the novel are guaranteed by the Chinese presence. China took the part of the West, toward which Russia has a history of ambivalent attitudes as a model of imitation and a target of antipathy. The role of French as a language of the elite of nineteenth-century Russia is displaced by the Chinese language. In Sorokin's futuristic vision of Russia in *Day of the oprichnik* all sorts of Chinese goods predominate in the market. Although the oprichnina moans at the dinner feast about how long great Russia has to bow before China, it is beyond doubt that Russia is dependent on Chinese products (Koshino, electronic source).

As part of the review published on the cover of the Czech edition of *Day of the oprichnik* (Sorokin 2009a), there is a quote from the writer warning against the dangerous direction of further political development. He draws attention to the tendency of the country to isolate itself and the tendency to barbarism and opines that all the difficult times in Russia, such as revolutions, riots, and the sea of blood spilled in the country, are the result of the oprichnina rule. The writer claims that the idea of this government permeates their entire society and resides in the thinking of officials. Sorokin presents a vision of Russia in 2027 which is isolated from other countries by the presence of a large wall, and the novel even expresses the opinion that the Western countries of Europe are perceived very negatively and represent absolute evil, rendering it necessary to wall them off so that no unwanted influence would penetrate the country. China is considered, by the characters of the work, as a necessary evil. The author portrays the influence of Russian history, which has such strong roots that through the centuries its influence has not weakened. The intense tradition is mixed with the Chinese influence on Russia, resulting in a red Mercedes with a dog's head and a Chinese-made broom, which is a reference to China's takeover of foreign companies and automobile concerns.

An interview with Sorokin, called *Тень опричника*, was published in January 2012 (Trefilova 58–59). When asked if he assumed that the situation in Russia would develop in this direction, Sorokin replied that several factors made this idea come to his mind. He stated that he created a model of the situation that many oprichnina agents dream of, including that Russia has to separate from the

West because they believe that Western European countries could harm Russia: “А Запад нас только развращает, заражает фальшивыми идеями и всячески вредит. И я попытался смоделировать, что в этом случае произойдет и в социуме, и на уровне языка” (Trefilova 59). The growing negative attitude towards the Western countries of Europe was implicitly reflected in the novel by portraying one of the possible future situations that could arise if Russia were to completely isolate itself from the Western world, not only economically and politically, but even physically – that is, by building a wall.

Another political topic that the novel discusses is autocratic government. In the novel there is no opposition to the oprichnina, who can do whatever they want; the people suffer silently, do not rebel, do not react in any way and are passive. The writer says that the oprichnina is a serious and painful topic for Russians, emphasising that anyone, even a seemingly unimportant person, can become an intruder in their own country. Another idea discussed in the novel is that there is an autocratic government, and that those who live in the country must submit. The author argues that unless this vertical of power is described, exposed, and clearly and concretely identified, it will continue to function without hindrance. “Если на Западе каждый человек может сказать: «государство – это я», то мы говорим: «государство – это они». И народ ощущает государственную власть как власть оккупантов, живущих и действующих по своим, неведомым законам” (Trefilova 59). The novel *Day of oprichnik*, not only criticises the higher-ups who abuse their power without restraint, but also urges people to act and to not be passive or close their eyes to the wrongdoings. On the one hand, it is understandable that people are afraid to stand out from the crowd, openly criticise and protest because, for several years, people with opinions that did not suit the government were eliminated. The author created a warning with his dystopian novel that if the government has absolute power, and knows that the citizens will adapt, it will have no boundaries and will do what it wishes, knowing that no one will complain publicly.

From the point of view of stylistic classification, the novel *The queue* belongs to conceptual literary works. In the work, the author brilliantly reflected one of the most typical situations of Soviet reality – the queue. The literary debut is in dialogic form, everything consists of the direct speech of the characters, and there is no description of the environment, characters, or author's commentary. The reader is uncompromisingly drawn into the plot and can create a vivid and accurate visual picture of what is happening in the queue. The author conceived this Soviet phenomenon of waiting in line as an independent, dynamic organism, or a machine that operates based on its own rules. An attentive reader will notice that the replicas of the characters on individual pages represent people lined up in a queue of several thousand from a bird's-eye view, which allows the reader to

maintain a certain distance necessary to feel the author's sarcasm over the situation in which the people find themselves.

The main themes of the work are the abuse of power by law enforcement agencies, the control and influence of the media, the daily life of the people of a country oppressed by the regime, or the manipulation of public opinion. Even though the novel was published in 1985, its themes are still relevant compared to the current situation in Russia, which after the declaration of war with Ukraine has largely restricted media that informed about the situation. The media that convey information from home and the world are strictly controlled and openly promote the narrative that Russia is defending itself against the West. As already indicated in the novel, whose intention was to reflect the people's opinions in the given period, hostile attitudes towards America and the countries of the West were already negative and suspicious 30 years ago. The media at that time were newspapers that manipulated public opinion. An example from the novel *The queue* is the discussion of the people standing in the queue regarding Stalin, who is portrayed in a positive light because he won the Second World War and established order in the country. Similar opinions can be heard even nowadays from people living in Russia in various opinion polls, where they defend the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin as a strong leader.

In the novel *Their four hearts* the dominant theme is the violence spread everywhere around us, although it may not only take a physical form. Another strong theme is the meaninglessness or uselessness of human life. The main characters, the old man Shtaube, the young woman Olga, the young Rebrov, and the boy Seriozsa, represent individual generations, while their goal is to achieve the transformation of their hearts to bring about a change in society. Although the characters realise their plan at the end of the work, the novel ends there, which raises many questions: What has changed with the transformation of their hearts? What was the point? What happened to them? Why was the conversion of their hearts important? However, the reader does not get an answer to these questions. In our opinion, the book expressed the idea that there is no point in pursuing absurd goals literally through corpses, mindlessly following or obeying someone's commands, and adapting one's whole life to it.

The novel, written in the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet regime led to the disintegration of the USSR, reflects the chaotic atmosphere that arose, emphasising the necessity for change and the need for a complete deconstruction of the previous system. It is not sufficient that the regime in the country changes. The transformation itself has to take place in society and the depths of the human interior as the result of internal motivation. The protagonists' fanatical pursuit of the transformation of their hearts, preceded by a series of violent scenes, can have multiple interpretations. One may be the message that striving for a change

for the better cannot be achieved by using the old methods. Violence in various forms existing in society will not allow change towards a future without violence. The path full of obstacles the novel's protagonists have to overcome can be understood as a message that, although the regime has officially ended, society still has a long and demanding path to mental transformation that people will identify with internally.

*Day of the oprichnik* takes place in 2027, with the author being inspired by the phenomenon from the 16th century, the feared privileged private army of Ivan the Terrible, the oprichnina. The author deals not only with the oprichnina phenomenon, which in his opinion is currently catching a second breath, but also with the political and economic relations between Russia and the countries of Western Europe and the relations between Russia and China. Interesting is the combination of traditional symbols of oprichnina from the 16th century and applying them in a mutated form to the future. For example, a red Chinese-made Mercedes with a dog's head on the hood and a broom attached to the back of the car, informs us not only that medieval persecution and abuse of power are still relevant, albeit in a changed form, but also reflects Russia's political and economic relationship with China. The image of Russia in the novel *Day of the oprichnik*, in which a country isolated from the West by a great wall operates in an autocratic regime using fear and violence to control the population, does not seem unrealistic these days. The prophetic language that contains all three analysed works leads to the question of what life will look like in Russia when it definitively separates from the Western world. In 2023, Sorokin was the guest at the international book fair Book World Prague, where he talked about how Putin's military invasion of Ukraine caught him in Berlin, where he had flown to by air only four days before its outbreak. Like Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar, author of the world bestseller *All the Kremlin's men* and founder of news channel TV Rain, the Russian novelist, screenwriter, and human rights activist Lyudmila Ulitskaya, the Russian writer and journalist Dmitry Glukhovsky, or the Russian writer, poet, film critic, and journalist Dmitry Bykov, he was forced to leave the country and live abroad. The author clarified that he underestimated Putin and assumed the war would continue to have a hybrid nature (Stastka, electronic source).

In an article for the Slovak "Dennik N", translated by Jan Štrasser, the author wrote that power in Russia is a pyramid built in the 16th century by Ivan the Terrible with the help of his army – the oprichnina, while cruelly and bloodily dividing the Russian state into power and nation, and into special and ordinary people, while the gap between them became extreme. Friendship with the Golden Horde convinced him that the only way to rule in vast Russia was to be the occupier of this vast zone, and his occupying power had to be powerful, cruel, unpredictable,

and incomprehensible to the nation. People were not supposed to have a choice, but, on the contrary, they were supposed to submit, and at the top of this dark pyramid sat a single person, possessing absolute power and the right to everything. The writer, as he also reflects in his novel *Day of oprichnik*, by using medieval symbols, archaisms, and an atmosphere of terror, argues that the principle of Russian power has not changed in the last five centuries, which he considers the essential tragedy of this country (Sorokin 2022, electronic source).

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