

The REAL Reason Peace in Ukraine is Impossible | Pavel Shchelin

The war in Ukraine is not about Ukraine. It's about meaning. Yes, it's a proxy war, and yes, power is at the core of the military confrontation. Even thinking of it as a war of civilizations is not wrong, but it misses what the civilizations actually disagree on. Only the symbolic foundations of the war reveal what Moscow on the one hand and the Globalists on the other are actually fighting about. Russian political philosopher and Orthodox thinker Pavel Shchelin joins Pascal to discuss how worldviews, symbols, and desires shape political decisions. They examine sanctions, competing ideas of peace and security, Russia-West relations, NATO, and why shared political language can hide deep disagreement over Ukraine. Links: Pavel Shchelin YouTube: English Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@NamingTheSelfEvident> Personal Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@PavelShchelin> Interview Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@schelin_official Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Pavel Shchelin on political theology 00:04:26 Worldviews, rationality, and reality 00:12:00 Sanctions and symbolic politics 00:23:00 Russia-West stories and political language 00:34:28 Peace proposals and ending wars 00:52:39 Enlightenment, globalism, and empire 00:57:36 Russia's security goals and Ukraine

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the first time, with a Russian political philosopher, Pavel Shalin. Pavel, welcome to the channel. Nice day to you, Pascal. Pavel, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you're coming from? And you're also referring to yourself not only as a political philosopher, but also a theological thinker, an Orthodox thinker. Can you tell us, what's your approach to trying to understand world affairs?

#Pavel Shchelin

Well, thank you for your question. Hard to put it into several sentences, but I will try. So I studied as a political scientist. So I graduated in international relations, political science. I have several degrees from both Russian universities and from Western universities, like University of Glasgow, Central European University. In Russia, I finished Moscow State University for International Affairs. So, kind of all of these topics we're going to talk together today, I'm technically qualified to talk to, if you're looking into diplomas. However, like several years ago, especially with the beginning of the war, it was a big crisis in terms of analytical paradigm I was working in, which was more or less kind of, you can say, standard classical theories of international relations, like realism, neoliberalism, structuralism, all these sort of things.

To me, they were insufficient to explain maybe the biggest paradox of what one can say is irrational behavior, or one would say, from other parties, basically choosing strategies which clearly would hurt them, like from an outsider perspective, but still pursuing them with incredibly diligent commitment. And around, like, 2022, I started to explore less popular traditions of political thinking and explanation models for both individual and collective behavior. And that's how I discovered both the tradition of what is called political theology in the West. And there are many thinkers like Voegelin, like Carl Schmitt, just to name a couple, maybe the most famous.

And at the same time, like Russian religious philosophy, like also a big tradition, but kind of which existed on the margin. Plus rediscovering the scriptures of Holy Fathers of Orthodox faith. And altogether, it resulted in an approach to seeing international affairs and political affairs as subject-centered issues. Approach, you can call it this way. So what I try to look at is what are the desires, who are the decision-makers, what are their desires like, what are the worlds they live in, and how basically these desires are either mutually exclusive or potentially capable of coexistence. And as a result, this shift in my paradigm resulted basically in what I am right now.

You can follow my work mostly in Russian. I would say 80% or 90% of it is in Russian, but it proved to be very helpful for people in Russian-speaking audiences to see the meaning, the reasons behind actions. So not just talking about facts or decisions made, but why people make certain kinds of decisions, without trying to judge, but kind of trying to just simply understand. Like, it might be madness to you, but that's what this person—that's the worldview of this person. That's what his desire is, and for him, that's the most logical choice. So something like this in a nutshell.

#Pascal

In a nutshell, but let's go a little bit further into the nutshell. Like, what is the—under that framework, because you seem to distinguish between worldview and then the desires—does the worldview directly impact the desire, or are they different? Absolutely.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, what I think is a weakness in the classical theories of international relations is that we still presume most of the time that such notions as security, prosperity, development, are universal, that they mean approximately the same things for all people, and that's what I think is simply not the case. So there is no such thing, in my opinion, as common rationality. There are different worldviews, and every rationality—you can call it logos—is contingent upon a certain worldview, upon a certain ethical worldview, upon a certain interpretation of history, upon a certain interpretation of simply what reality is. And constantly, within this framework, every one of us operates. It is tricky nowadays because intuitively we all treat our worldview as self-evident worldview.

And very rarely we truly bother to acquaint ourselves with a true alternative. It kind of terrifies us. You can argue, "Oh no, but we talk so much about diversity, and, like, come on, we all agree that we're all different." No, not really. Like, when people talk about diversity, they mostly say, "No, no, no, we believe in the same things, but differently." Or we all might look differently, but we actually believe in the same things. And that's what I find not the case. Actually, especially, you might be surprised, for Russian, let's say, policymakers and simply Russian culture, it is genuinely difficult to accept that, for example, what we hold self-evident is not self-evident for other people. And it creates huge—basically, you can say that the game of international politics is a game of broken telephone.

And in many ways, that creates one of the biggest reasons behind a certain kind of tragical and comical character of this phenomenon or this matter. So basically, the core argument is very simple. There is no such thing as a common rationality. And there is no such thing as a truly universal human worldview. There is no such thing as a basic baseline human universal worldview. There are different worldviews, which are all centered around a certain ethical system, which in its turn, ultimately, in its limit, will have some religious understanding of reality, so some theological underpinning. And every decision a subject makes, it's within this framework. And within this framework, his desires exist. His desires exist. So something like this.

#Pascal

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. And what about, what about... In your understanding, do we operate within an observer-independent reality, or is all and any form of reality always dependent upon the person looking at it?

#Pavel Shchelin

Okay, so I would say, theologically speaking, obviously there is an objective reality, but it's an objective reality which is contingent upon God. It's objective because we have God, and through His perspective, this universal objective reality does exist. However, and that's kind of my tricky line, so on the one hand, objective reality exists. The world exists. For example, if I jump from the tenth-story building, I will hurt myself badly, most probably die. However, if within my worldview, and that's the tricky part, I truly believe that I can fly—maybe I'm insane, let's say, or maybe I just truly believe that I can fly—then for me, this fact doesn't exist until when I make the decision.

And that's the tricky part. So you don't see what your worldview is not allowing you to see, something of this sort. Some people can train. It takes enormous effort for you to truly embrace, let's say, the ability to see at least the baseline of different worldviews. But that's kind of, I think, this paradox results. So objective reality exists, and we can try to strive to understand it better, but

at the same time, when we are talking about decisions made, we cannot analyze them just from the perspective of objective reality alone.

We need to analyze it as exactly an intersection between an objective reality, or at least some sort of understanding that there is objective reality, but also understanding what the worldview is on this reality. Because in terms of action, again, maybe it's a little bit radical, but 99% of the stories I know, people act upon what they believe in and not upon what they would like. And every time they believe in something, they think it's objective. So, for example, that's why usually a pragmatist argument simply doesn't work. For example, you can provide a person—let's take Europe and Russia, for example, in terms of economic trade, etc.—you can bring, let's say, hundreds of thousands of papers which basically will explain that this decision is optimal for economic purposes, but if, in my subjective view, this decision simply does not fit, like it cannot be because it cannot be, all this rational, pragmatic work will be fruitless.

#Pascal

So, something of this sort.

#Pavel Shchelin

I will make the decision simply because I believe that we—simply because I need to protect my status. Like, for example, I'm civilized, they are barbarians, and we are the garden, they are the jungle, and I need to protect my status of a garden. That's the thing. And simply pragmatic cooperation between jungle and garden is impossible because it is. So, is objectively, let's say, cooperation possible? Yes. Does it matter for the decision made?

#Pascal

I see. And within that framework, then, do you think that we could, for instance, explain things like 21 sanctions packages by the Europeans? It's like the belief: it must be good, therefore it will work. That's what motivates it?

#Pavel Shchelin

Kind of, it's even bigger and more basic. So let's say, here comes more like speaking, I brought that I believe in an objective worldview, and to me, the objective worldview of human nature is an Orthodox understanding of man, of sin, of passions, of desires, of, like, vices. And one of the biggest vices which we all struggle with, but we all struggle differently, is the vice of pride. So, what do you see in sanctions? So imagine you're a Brussels decision-maker. You pass sanctions projects. And within you, very importantly, you live—and your whole life is in this world—where the West for 400 years can break anybody, that you are the center, that you are the civilized.

And when you command something, nobody questions your command. That's kind of the world of Brussels commissars. And it's good because ultimately you're bringing everybody to this standard, let's say, liberal rules-based order, one way or the other, which means, like, it's a combination of liberal values and the combination of the— basically, you are a benevolent master. So that's your worldview. And again, at this point, you don't have to say it's right or wrong. You just need to accept that that's the worldview of a decision-maker. And then you pass the decision. So Russia breaks this order from your perspective.

It rebels against this order. It rebels against your right to be you. That's very important. It's not just about pragmatism. And this act of defiance, from your perspective, your whole symbolic picture of reality became under threat. So you're trying to use your efforts, the force you have in your possession, to break this rebellion. It doesn't work. Well, first iteration doesn't work. And here you have three options. Option one: to actually examine the context, like why the decision didn't work. Maybe, just maybe, your worldview was not complete. Your worldview was not correct.

Maybe your understanding of your reality you've spent your whole time—was simply wrong, and you need to adjust it to make better decisions. Well, that's incredibly tough. An absolute minority of people are capable of doing this step. So we're going into option two, which is double down. Like, if it doesn't work, my worldview can't be wrong. It's not possible, because it's not possible. So I guess I just didn't do it well enough. So let's try harder. Basically, I'm protecting my symbolic core. I'm protecting my worldview core. And basically, if effect does not fit into my worldview, well, it's worse for the effect. Kind of works like this.

And the problem of option number three, like, that's the third option, and that's the most difficult. And that kind of explains why we are kind of in this spiral of negative decision-making. The more mistakes I pass along the line, the bigger the final choice. So my final choice is to say the decisions that were made were wrong, the worldview, and I'm responsible for them. So to take responsibility and to effectively experience a symbolic death or political death, or let's say, and by this I mean literally, like symbolic death is like if my worldview dies. If I'm changing one worldview, one symbolic picture of reality to another symbolic picture of reality, you can say that one picture dies and a new one emerges. So, but still, it's a death experience.

Political death is very clear. Imagine politicians saying, you know what? Twenty-one packages of sanctions, all of the costs for our economy, all of the costs for you guys—yeah, that was a mistake. We are sorry. Well, it will be really hard for you to keep on doing this career, I would imagine. So politically, you will be dead one way or the other. So you don't want to do it, obviously, because ultimately you cannot be wrong. Basically, you're not a sucker. There is, for example, this famous video of Mr. Zelensky back in, I think, 2019, talking to Ukrainian soldiers back in Donetsk Oblast. And basically he is exactly asking them, well, but I'm not a sucker. Like, я не лох. So this sort of thing. And this, for example, simple desire of not being a sucker or accepting that you're being a sucker.

And for example, if suddenly you live in the world where you actually—when Russia is not just a gas station, or its economy is not in shambles, or its military is not second-rate, or simply its concerns—or simply it can limit your desires. It can limit your opportunities. So, like, you have to take that into account. Like, it has the right to tell you that you cannot do ABC. But notice, for example, the context of NATO expansion. We can talk about it more later, but notice that the European and Western position was very specific. It was not as much about Ukraine joining NATO, though obviously it was the case. But from these governmental officials, and you can find later quotes, it was very important that, no, we have a right to accept anybody we want.

Nobody has a right to tell us you can't accept somebody into NATO. You see? So it's about status. It's about rights. It's about your understanding of reality. And for many European politicians, it's better to suffer the consequences of, I don't know, especially since it's not them suffering, really. Yeah, sorry, my computer. You need to edit. Okay, okay. So it's better for them to basically let the situation develop to the worse than to challenge this symbolic core of their world, you understand? Basically, it's like they live in the world of 1991, and they would rather die symbolically, or in case of Ukraine, for example, literally, and who knows what comes in the future, than accept that this worldview is not coherent, for example.

#Pascal

Is this then a psychological phenomenon, how you understand it, or does it also have... Well, it's kind of, I would call it the masses that you create, right? Because you believe as a group, and you foster a group that then goes with you and supports you and claps and whatever. So is it actually a political phenomenon more than a psychological phenomenon?

#Pavel Shchelin

I would say the best word for it is symbolic. So what symbolism means? Symbolism means that there are immaterial ideas, if you want to put it this way, that there are logos, and then they embody themselves in people. And symbol is the unity of immaterial meaning and material form of this meaning. And that's kind of—you can see this approach. So we are looking at what meanings basically different people embody. And we understand that the range of possible decisions for a decision-maker is limited by this kind of immaterial meanings he embodies in himself. And obviously it reinforces itself again. Is it possible for a decision-maker to change? Yes. And every deep tradition has a word or a way for this form of change.

For example, sometimes it's like initiation, or some people go... You can go deep anthropologically and ethnographically speaking, like what a change of worldview entails. But they are all pretty consistent. It's an experience which is not death, but it's death-like. So in terms of what a person experiences, it's a lot. And we simply don't—like, people don't want to do it, especially within the liberal paradigm. So they would rather let the situation go to what one would say is worse, like what you can call a drive to mortality, or the logic behind suicidal behavior, something like this. And that's

what we can see, and that's what's happening. And I would argue that the problem of international relations theory, for example, is that it really undervalues these phenomena. Like, it just, for example, takes that security is objective and neutral and for granted, and we can all agree on the meaning of security. And it's simply not the case.

#Pascal

Especially realism has that huge problem that it basically portrays certain concepts as absolute, as if though everybody shared them, even concepts like anarchy or, well, security and security maximization, as if though every state and every state leader understood the same under security maximization. So on your side, no, we need to take into consideration that security maximization to a Vladimir Putin might be completely different from security maximization to a Donald Trump or a Graham or some of the neocons that will understand completely different things, and then they will strive toward those, even if security maximization is their absolute North Star.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, so firstly, I would say, first, it's not the case that security maximization is a self-evident highest value. It's not necessarily self-evidently the case. However, the problem runs even bigger. So even if we agree that we all can agree that for a statesman, security is pretty important, however, as you said, the meaning of this security is not similar to all of them. It's embedded into the symbolic order each one of them lives in. That's kind of the security.

#Pascal

You know, one of the things that strikes me or still puzzles me very much, especially about the Western approach, is that they constantly seem to map their own behavior, or how they would behave, on others. So they interpret, for instance, Russia, Vladimir Putin, as, "Oh, he wants to take over Europe and he wants to control us all," when in fact, yeah, I think that's what you would like to do. You would love to split up Russia and control the Russians. So you're kind of mapping your desires on the other one and then suppose they must act out of those desires. Is that also something that you think is actually inherent to how people act?

#Pavel Shchelin

I would say it's inherent, and you can say that, for example, Vladimir Putin's desire for the first, let's say, 20 years of his terms, and Russian desire of the '90s of this pragmatic cooperation with Europe, was exactly the same process. Like, it's basically what he wanted it to be, and he assumed that his party—that the opponent wanted the same. That's why, for example, you can find otherwise just weird and, sorry, kind of weak whinings about, "We were betrayed." Like, "We were betrayed. They lied to us. How could they?"

Whereas, for example, generally, historically speaking, yes, politicians do lie. And yes, they pursue different goals. So why does it hurt you so much? Because, from his initial understanding, some form of genuine pan-European security architecture, which leads to this global peace, pan-European prosperity, was self-evident. Here, you just need to remember that he comes from the background of the KGB school of the early '80s, and most people say it's dark and grim, but it's actually where all this kind of pro-West, pro-European drive emerged within the Soviet Union.

This whole idea of convergence, like, it was not just liberal dissidents; it kind of emerged within the, let's say, body of the Soviet state apparatus. And his dream of convergence, like respectful partnership, that's the coined phrase, for example, which kind of seems self-evident for him. And, like, he says, "I'm ready to treat you as a respectful partner, and I assume you treat me as such." Whereas, for example, in the Western approach to reality, there is simply no such thing as a respectful partnership. It's based on the slave-master dialectic. Like, sorry, if you lost, you lost. And you lost in 1991. Here are the terms of your surrender. Why should your opinion be of any concern? And for him it was, "No, no, no, we didn't lose in 1991. It's kind of, we voluntarily agreed to bury the acts of war in order to bring this convergence and prosperity across the continent."

And you can see how exactly, even in this story, these stories, they don't correlate. But people make the decisions based on the story they live in. That's exactly an example of why understanding the symbolic architecture of the worldview of a politician matters. You have, in this scenario, one story of Vladimir Putin where respectful partnership is the desired common goal, which in its turn is underpinned by the story of World War II, understood by Russians, which is like, we, despite all of our differences, all people of goodwill, united and destroyed the absolute evil, and that's why we should fight against each other. Let's just use this positive example and bring prosperity together, something along this line, but in form of respect.

So let's treat each other with respect. And the Western story of master and slave, of winner and loser, of surrender in 1991, it's a completely different story, which simply has no word for a respectful partnership. If you notice, the West simply doesn't—there is no word for it. There is a word like ally, which is very specific. And it's, I would even argue that the word ally, for example, there is a big misunderstanding between Russians again and the West. That's what Russians understand as friendship. Like, basically Russia equates friendship with allies, but it's simply not the case, because friendship is kind of ethical and metaphysical, whereas allies are situational, built upon certain interests.

And like, if the game changes, well, we are not allies anymore, okay? The situation changed, we are not allies anymore. And that's why, okay, we were allies against Nazism, but in ten years we became like, you are still the barbaric animal which hurts me, et cetera, et cetera. The key is like, and that's what I think is important for your audience, is the point of understanding these stories is not to judge them at first, but to accept that they matter. That something that can sound as madness to

you, like even, for example, let's say Putin's desire for partnership sounds as madness for a regular European, it might still be the system of values or the symbolic order from which he makes his decision.

And if you actually want to understand tomorrow what he might do in the future, you need to understand his range. It's equally important for Russians. Even if you want partnership, you need to understand that the West doesn't want partnership. It's simply not on the menu, what you want from the West. So you need to understand what... And even if, again, you can consider it's madness that this partnership is not on the menu, if your goal is to understand and to analyze international reality, you need to exactly see it for what it is, not for what you want it to be.

#Pascal

Yeah, but that's very hard to do, again, because you would—I absolutely agree with how you describe that—because what seems self-evident to you must be self-evident to others as well. But it's especially hard, though, when actually from the other side you have similar jargon, right? And, you know, it's very good that you point that out, that in the 1980s, like, these formative years of Vladimir Putin, you basically have the jargon of cooperation coming from the West, while Gorbachev was speaking of the common European home.

George Bush Sr. was speaking of, you know, from Portugal. They also had a concept, and you have people like Jack Matlock and so on, you know, brilliant U.S. diplomats who actually talked in those terms and who maybe had the same understanding. But you had the other group, the other crowd, who won out and then basically for 10 years had the sellout of Russia. And for Vladimir Putin, this must have looked like bad decisions at home. So all we need to do is to rectify that and then to explain the Russian position. We need to explain it better.

#Pavel Shchelin

We need to explain it better.

#Pascal

You need to explain it better. And he tried for 20 years to explain it, until it became clear that's not how it works.

#Pavel Shchelin

Even now, like, you can argue that there is still a Russian position. This desire to explain still plays a huge role, like, in terms of Russian tradition of diplomacy.

#Pascal

That's why he always goes to history, like one-hour lectures. It's part of the explaining in order to begin again from common understanding. So is this Russia, or is this the current Russian leadership misunderstanding how understanding on the other side works?

#Pavel Shchelin

Well, less. Like, I mean, I would say it's a very internal conflict, like, within the Russian elite. And by conflict, I don't mean, like, political fight, but more exactly the symbolic transformation. The younger generation of Russian elite, like those who are, like, say now 40 to 50, they are much more radical. Like, they don't have any enchantment with the West, as, for example, people whose formative years were the '80s and '90s were, and they have no sentimental feeling for Europe, for example, like common European home? No, not really. Let me put it this way. They are much more welcoming to many of the Karaganov rhetoric, that type of rhetoric. But I just want to point out one important theme.

You brought it up exactly about the language issue, which makes it even harder nowadays. Because, for example, even when I was studying, we kind of all took this kind of liberal, universalist, globalist language. And even if we think it's not, like, for example, the language of the United Nations is still liberal and globalist in its simple dictionary. Like, if you trace its philosophical origin, it's kind of still coming from there. The problem is, like, every actor on a global arena now speaks more or less, especially on an official level, the same language, but the meaning behind each word is still contingent upon the symbolic order inside.

And that's what makes it so hard to understand. Because, for example, you have this modern situation in Ukraine. You notice, everyone talks about peace. Every—literally everybody talks about peace. But what Russia means by peace, what Ukraine means, what Ukrainian officials mean by peace, what the U.S. means by peace, what Europe means by peace, they are all different concepts of peace. The word is the same, but the meaning behind the word is different, and it's not just different, it's opposite. Like, you cannot—like, so even within the same word, there is no ground for unity.

But that, from a media perspective and from a propaganda perspective, because let's be clear, the quality of media understanding has dropped significantly. Like, we live in the media age of, let's put it this way, very little value of reputation and, like, this desire of hyping. And that's why, for example, as often happens, people take the word out of context, and then they say, for example, "Clear, Putin talks about—Putin says, uh, we are open for peace," and, like, all media, like, "Putin said, Putin said he's ready to end the war," et cetera, et cetera, which is not the case. Because what Russia means, "we are ready for peace," is, "We are ready to have a peace conference which will enshrine our requirements, like, in an official juridical format," for example. But if you don't know the context, it's easy to interpret it the way you want to interpret, even if you're good-willing. And if you're ill-willing, you can see how it creates gigantic possibility for cognitive warfare, for deliberate manipulation, for special psyops manipulation directed at different actors.

#Pascal

Absolutely, absolutely true. But that leaves us then with this question: whether the misunderstanding or the non-understanding or the refusal to understand, is that part and parcel of the game of the people who play this? Do they actually...? And it's just difficult for me to believe that you and I, as observers of this tragedy, we can have this conversation and we can try actually to figure out what are the motivating factors of these actors, but that's not what the actual actors then do among each other. So, you know... That's why I often say the Europeans are extremely hypocritical. They must understand that after 21 sanctions packages, there is no chance that the next round will break the neck of the beast, right? Again, as you said, you cannot just suddenly accept political death and say it was wrong, but that the rhetoric that they throw out is not the belief system behind the decision.

#Pavel Shchelin

No, okay. It depends. To an extent, it still is, because it's still based, like, even in their, let's say, peace proposals, it's still at least connected to this value system of us determining the rules. Like, basically, let's interpret how, basically, Europeans would say their current quote-unquote peace proposal is: okay, fine. Graciously, we benevolently agree to freeze the conflict, and we will integrate the leftover of Ukraine into our military structures. But we tell the Russians, fine, you take what you take, but we will never accept it, so it will be a gray zone, and you will still return it one way or the other, and ultimately you will still achieve nothing, and ultimately we won. That's kind of the thing.

#Pascal

We graciously accept your surrender. That's the peace idea of Europe at the moment.

#Pavel Shchelin

And you can say that's how this... And that's why, for example, in my opinion, that explains this phenomenon. I think one of your guests, Alexander Mercouris, noticed this many, many times, that Europe negotiates among itself. But it's also very important because your quote-unquote peace proposal, or even without quotes, it must fit within your exact symbolic picture. And if you say, "We graciously accept your surrender," well, this doesn't hurt the fundamentals of this Brussels faith, you can call it this way. So it's not ideal, but it's still within the limits of possibility. What it can't accept, it can't accept the reality of defeat. We are the good guys. Good guys always win. We cannot be defeated by bad guys. If we are defeated by bad guys, it means we are the bad guys, because only bad guys lose. So you see how this circular reasoning starts to function, and that challenges the story, so...

#Pascal

Yeah. And the negotiating amongst themselves of the Europeans is kind of the collective figuring out of how far does our acceptance go? How far is our corridor of the possible? And then that's the outcome, just neglecting that that corridor is still far away from anything that's somehow reasonable to the Russians. Yeah.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, but your ultimate goal is to protect your symbolic picture, not the Russian symbolic picture. And God forbid, like, your purpose. So you need to constantly stay within the symbolic picture. That's why I bring the question of desire. So what is the purpose of a politician? And from this perspective, like, obviously, like, none of this, like, that's kind of—it is hypocritical in a way, but that's kind of a way deeper and longer story, how we ended up in, like, Kantian reality where you can't talk about the reality of war from a, like, historical perspective even, for example, and you always need to combine it with liberal mantra. But let's say so. Obviously, nobody of the parties have peace as the highest value. And there is a very easy check. I would say even Russians are kind of hypocritical when they talk about peace.

Because I think you will agree that in international relations, peace cannot be the highest value, because what is the quickest path for peace? Let's imagine that there is a symbolic picture where peace, like absence of conflict, is truly the highest value, like truly the highest value. Then everything else becomes subordinate to this value, because that's the nature of hierarchy of meaning. If something is at the highest of meaning, everything else becomes subordinate. Well, if at the highest point of your hierarchy of meaning is truly peace, then the quickest path to peace is capitulation. So if this absence of conflict is truly the highest value, just surrender. But nobody wants to do it, obviously. So we want peace on our terms. And that means basically there are values higher than peace that determine our action. So that's just some example of the type of analysis I try to do, like explaining the decisions we make.

#Pascal

That's a very good observation, and a very true one. This is what you just described is actually the core of absolute pacifism. They will say that. An absolute pacifist will be, "Yeah, if I'm attacked, I surrender because peace is the highest value." But that's why most people are not pacifists.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, no, and I would say it would be weird to explain, but here comes the problem of hypocrisy: that we live in a media ethical climate when you need to talk about peace as if you believe it's the highest value, but obviously nobody believes that it is the highest value. Like, Europe believes that peace is, like, liberal peace, like, let's just say, pan-European EU peace, or somebody would call it, like, European Empire, et cetera, project, like liberal universalist value, rule-based order. This is the highest value: peace within the rule-based order. Like, Russian understanding of peace is peace

within the, let's say, historical... It kind of still has many contradictions, but more or less it would be now some combination of historical approach and the sovereign approach.

So there are sovereign states, but they are not coming out of nowhere. They have deep historical, let's say, traditions behind them, and these traditions must be respected for us to achieve maximum prosperity, or something along this line. Very different from European-American, is very different from both of these, let's say, approaches. And then it gets complicated. And an important part of this theory, like, is that it puts huge emphasis not only on positive sovereignty but on negative sovereignty as well. So what do I mean? Positive sovereignty is your capacity to do something, and negative sovereignty is your capacity to not let somebody do something, to break something, basically.

#Pascal

Yeah, to prevent somebody from joining a club of others. Yeah.

#Pavel Shchelin

No, just to break any decision. I mean, it's very simple. So let's say this Anchorage story. So let's imagine, let's say, in the story of Anchorage, it's a question of Ukrainian sovereignty. Does Ukraine have any positive sovereignty at the moment? No, not really. It cannot create anything. It's a doomed state. Its power, like, basically, it's a suicidal spiral, and, like, you can find it by military losses, territorial losses, economic losses, demographic losses. They lost, like, half of their population post-1991 by now. Like, it's a clear death spiral. But now they still have negative sovereignty. What do I mean?

For example, if the Ukrainian government, within their worldview, doesn't agree to the quote-unquote peace deal arranged by Trump, Europe, Russia, everybody can agree. But if they don't agree, the deal is a no-go. And that's the true power of negative sovereignty. That's why, when you have, for example, a conflict where you have, let's say, six parties all with different worldviews fighting, it's sufficient to have one party disagree with this, quote-unquote, or this decision be impossible for this party for the decision not to happen. That's, in my opinion, the logic behind what you would call the current spiral of escalation. So even if... Okay, sorry, go on.

#Pascal

No, no, sorry, I didn't want to interrupt you. I would like to ask this question because we do sometimes see in international relations moments when genuine negotiations between warring parties do take place and when an actual negotiated compromise does become an end to a war. Like, let's say, the way that the Vietnam War between the French and the Vietnamese was negotiated, and also the way that it, in the end, also with the Americans, you know, then spiraled down. When does that happen? Because we cannot assume that the two worldviews converge, but

we can assume that—we would have to assume that something leads to the inevitability of these two to converge.

#Pavel Shchelin

I mean, I would say here reality comes into play. So one way or the other, you can say the different worldviews: one of them is closer to reality, and another is further. And eventually, the one which is the furthest will pay the ultimate price. So in the story of Vietnam, this story had huge losers. Again, several American administrations effectively lost huge political capital, and they accepted their defeat. Ultimately, America accepted its defeat. That's what happened in Vietnam. And the ultimate losers were obviously South Vietnam. Vietnam is a very good parallel. The state of, like, for a Western audience, what Ukraine is from the perspective of international theory—not is, but is like, more or less—is like South Vietnam, basically.

And basically, for the Vietnam War to be finished, South Vietnam had to disappear. So South Vietnam had to die. And that's kind of what happened. So I just want to say that negotiations between two parties, like, for example, can Russia and the United States, or Russia and Europe, in theory, agree or come to a certain understanding? Well, yes, but not with Ukraine being in the picture. And that's kind of the tragic part of it. You notice when I said that, like, in a complex story with, let's say, six parties, it's enough for one party to break any possible deal. One way of solving this problem is to limit the number of parties. Simply limit it.

#Pascal

Hmm. Especially if one of them is a completely dependent proxy, I see. But what about—what do you make of the example of Japan, which kind of did something very, very, very unlikely, if I take our conversation, and that is to admit defeat—to, in the words of the Japanese emperor in 1945, suffer the insufferable and accept that it is over.

#Pavel Shchelin

Well, you do remember... Sorry, bad habit of interrupting. All I wanted to say is, like, there was a very specific context of this decision, like two nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. Before them, they were ready to fight until the final, until the end. So unfortunately, and that's in my opinion, basically you're currently proving the potential truth or sense behind Karaganov's logic of escalation. So you're basically putting somebody in a position to suffer the insufferable. You need to create an even worse alternative. Even worse.

#Pascal

The thing is, the Japanese had the option to continue, and there were two factions. The war faction said, "No, 100 million martyrs. We want to sacrifice everybody. We'd rather have that than give up."

Those were the ones, the ideologues, that I think were closest to what you described at the very beginning, whereas the other group said, "No, if we want to preserve the nation, then we must surrender now in order to save as much as we can." They won out in the end, but that's a difficult political process.

#Pavel Shchelin

I mean, I think it's not even a political process. It's kind of bordering on heroism, sainthood, or something like this. It's like you cannot make this—this rational choice cannot be made upon rational reason. You need some kind of heroic, supranational, let's say, group which would take the ultimate responsibility. And in the case of Japan, it was the emperor. Like, the emperor ultimately took the highest responsibility. And you can just find it sad that, for example, in the last hundred years, we had absolute depletion of political character, like none of the modern politicians.

Here I'm a huge pessimist. I think none of the modern politicians would be willing to accept such a responsibility. And they would rather see their family house burning than take this ultimate form of political suicide mission. So I think that's a little bit... So again, is it theoretically possible? Yes. Should it be theoretically possible? Yes. What it takes, it takes true heroism and it takes true sacrifice, like absolute, true symbolic sacrifice.

#Pascal

And do you mean mainly... I would agree with your statement if we apply it to the political West, the Europeans and the Americans. But I do think that the 20th century showed us, I mean, at least to me, that also within—especially within—the Soviet Union, there were people who were willing to do that. And Gorbachev is one of these elements who said, like, "We did stuff wrong. We must change things."

#Pavel Shchelin

Well, that's actually a bad example, if you want to consider it. Basically, the Gorbachev example is that we tried to change something, but as a result, we only suffered war. Like, basically, the consequences of these actions was basically what Vladimir Putin said: we suffered the biggest geopolitical tragedy; Russians became the biggest separated people. And you can say that the war which is currently happening is the direct consequence of Mr. Gorbachev's decision. Like, for example, because the only way, quote-unquote, independent Ukraine would have existed was in the form of socialist Ukraine, so being effectively in the same state as Russia. The moment these two entities became separate, the war became kind of inevitable in the long run. So that's not really, like, a good case.

You can say that Russian leadership is more capable of sacrifice, but again, only when they believe it is right. And that was, I think, that's what the West doesn't understand truly. Like, that's the biggest

asset they lost within the Russian government mindset, is exactly this kind of ethical power, ethical sovereignty. Because in the '80s and '90s and 2000s, there was this huge desire to be right in the eyes of the West. There was this huge desire to unite. However, now Russia doesn't really care about the opinion of the West, and it doesn't care what the opinion of these neighboring, sorry, like basically geo-drones or proxies are. And you cannot use this as a manipulation because the easiest way to—you need to understand that in Orthodox ethics there is this, like, objective—it's not weakness, it's biggest strength, but tactically it can look as if we are prone to self-reflection.

We are prone to go to confess our sins. That's why if you can persuade me that I'm morally wrong, you can really push me into self-destructive, suicidal behavior, like it happened with the Soviet Union, like it happened with Gorbachev. Well, the West can't do it anymore. There is no moral leverage of the West in Russia anymore, which I think, for example, the Western authorities don't truly understand. That's why they honestly believe that if they promise Russia again, "We will tell you that you are good, just surrender," it will work. And that's why we just need to wait long enough.

We just need to wait until the fortieth sanctions package. You're asking what they're trying to win? They're winning time, from their perspective. They're winning time that, one way or the other, Russia will still be in need of our moral approval, and the price of this moral approval will be Russians' capitulation and Russians' surrender. That's the logic behind an action. And why is it possible? Because we are the ones, quote-unquote, the West, who determine who is good and who is bad. That's our main sovereignty. That's our main political capital.

#Pascal

Mm-hmm. Where do you—and I know this is going way too far—but where do you think it's coming from? Because I agree with you. I just wonder where we went so—where this superiority complex—

#Pavel Shchelin

Enlightenment. Enlightenment. It's clearly European Enlightenment. It's a combination of the rapid technological development from the 16th to, like, 18th and 19th centuries, when objectively Europe was the most powerful. This, sorry, kind of tiny continent, which was kind of backwards and not really most important for most of global history, because historically speaking, for millennia civilization was more like a Mediterranean continent. It was like in what you would call today Greece and what you would call Syria, Palestine, Egypt, which were also, like, you know, not Arab. Like, that's the center of this Hellenistic world. But it's not where the West is. You need to understand that the West is a very small area.

It's basically the Charlemagne Empire. That's how the borders of the West—everything else has never truly been Western. And this area experienced the philosophy of Enlightenment and the philosophy of rationalism, which meant there are no ethical constraints for my desires to gain power over matter. Like, that's what the nature of scientific rationalism is in terms of its political philosophy.

And yeah, for 400 years, it was absolutely the biggest, the most dominant. Suddenly, it looked like a miracle. And if you've been winning for 400 years, if for 400 years—sorry—you defeat China with like 20 boats, like, for example, the British did in the 19th century, you colonize continents, and Russia, in that sense, is kind of a thorn.

Why Russia became such a thorn in this story, despite the fact that they look like us, they can speak our language, that they're white, that they're on the same continent—they kind of hampered or destroyed our globalist order. They destroyed Napoleon, they destroyed Hitler, they destroyed many things, and they never truly became... We cannot trust them. And that's why it has always been this big thorn in this kind of Enlightenment, globalist, secularized version, you can even say, of basically Charlemagne's Empire combined with some rationalism, progressivism ideas.

#Pascal

Thank you. Maybe one last thing, because I had a couple of Marxist thinkers on my channel. And the Marxists, they reject the term globalism because to them it is a weaker form of what they would call imperialism, which they trace back not to the desire of creating empire, but to the capitalist logic, the way that the economy is built, rent-seeking and so on, that necessarily needs expansion. And they trace it back to this one. Is that in any way, shape, or form important also for your analysis, or is your terminology of globalism going back to a more moralistic kind of point?

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, good question. I definitely don't use these words in the Marxist connotation, just to be clear. When I mean globalists, it's more referring to a very particular power group. You can rather consider them, in my worldview, to be like the builders of a Babylonian tower, one way or the other. And the fundament can be different. It can be progress. It can be freedom, quote-unquote. It can be rights. But the idea is like, it's kind of agnostic. So I would rather use the word agnostic. So you have, like, this agnostic understanding that we can make this world a paradise on Earth through a special knowledge, and we are the ones who are the keepers of this knowledge.

And that's kind of a very Enlightenment, core Enlightenment idea, which, in my opinion, is underpinning any form of globalism. Like, in my opinion, actually Marxism can be viewed as one form of globalism. We have a true knowledge called the dialectic of history, which explains to us how everything works, how the classes work. We know what is the final state of history, the union of all proletarians. And this is the vision encompassing the whole world. So you can say, in technical terms, it's also globalist. So imperial—like, yeah, the concept of empire deserves, as a whole, another long conversation because it's deeply misunderstood, in my opinion.

#Pascal

It's fascinating. Thank you very much. I mean, we didn't even get close to any kind of complete object, but it's really fascinating to me to pick your brain and see how you conceptualize the core issue. Do you think that we covered the big picture? Is there something that we left out that you would still like to share and say, like, look, this is also really, really essential?

#Pavel Shchelin

I just want to bring one example for your audience in terms of, like, because you ask your guests often this question, like, how it will end, how it will go, and, like, what is happening. And I just wanted to explain to them, in my opinion, the story which is happening within the Russian decision-making.

#Pascal

So it might be helpful, and we might see it. Like, who knows, maybe next time we speak, we can look whether it worked or not.

#Pavel Shchelin

In my opinion, the purpose of the Russian decision-makers actually didn't change from the beginning of 2022. They wanted what they would call security on their western borders. They wanted that from the territory of Ukraine, there would never come danger to the territory of Russia, of Russian people. And they still want it. What is changing is that if in 2022 they naively thought that this was possible through an agreement with Ukraine or an agreement with the West, then now more and more of them begrudgingly, and maybe with a certain kind of resentment, accept that the only way to achieve this initial goal is to solve the Ukrainian problem.

Unfortunately, the only way for Russia to make sure that there will be no danger from this territory is to have control over it one way or the other. But that's how you can see why it's important to understand the symbolism, basically, where it's coming from. So for you, it might look like, oh, they always wanted to take it. And you can even say, like, for example, one of you gets, you know, I told you 20 years ago that, you see, they took it. That's what they always wanted. And the same decision or the same outcome can actually be the result of a very different symbolic picture. And that, I think, is a true tragedy of international affairs for those people who would want it to be more peaceful.

So, self-fulfilling prophecy, exactly what is happening. It's the story of self-fulfilling prophecy. And to understand why this scenario is still the most likely, just today you can look into the list of supposed alternatives to Zelensky, which are popular in Ukraine: guys like Fedorov, Budanov, Drapatyi, Syrskyi, Zaluzhnyi. And none of them, none of them, is ready. Like, even within the imaginary picture, for none of them there is a place for Ukraine from which there is no threat to Russia. No, for none of them it simply doesn't exist, and that's why they will never agree to it. And if they never

agree to it, then in order to achieve this initial, both very simultaneously could be very limited but also potentially huge, goal of establishing your own security the way, let's say, you understand it, you will move further and further and further until you will reach a certain limit. And that's what I think is happening. That's why I think all of the quote-unquote attempts to freeze or to achieve peace will fail, because they simply don't address the core Russian concern.

And the problem is, it's impossible to address the core Russian concern without this control over territory one way or the other. And if you look at what Europe says, what Ukraine says, you see it very clearly. It's just very clear. And it's impossible to have this very initial desire of the Russian Federation fulfilled. That's all.

#Pascal

To me, it's really relatively simple. As long as the West thinks security in terms of deterrence, you will not achieve that because you constantly have to threaten Russia. And the one thing that Russia doesn't want is to be threatened.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, but the key problem is not even the West. Honestly, even the West can say absolutely no. That's the more tragic part. Let's say the Russians could potentially agree to freeze with the West. That's actually the true tragedy. It cannot achieve a freeze with Ukraine. That's the key part. Like, it's ultimately what I mean. So no Ukrainian politician would be ready to stop persecuting, to accept the neutrality of the Ukrainian state, to demilitarize, to restore the rights of the Russian church, to restore the rights of Russian people, to restore the rights of Russian speakers. And Ukrainian nationalists are very open about it. And you need to understand it from their perspective too, from their story. And this story is very simple: if we do all of this, then how are we different from Russians? Then there are no Ukrainians. If Ukraine is not hostile to Russia, it will become effectively part of Russia.

And they are correct. Because historically speaking, it is the same people. Belgorod and Kharkov were built under the same Tsar, under the same process. All this territory was built within the same historical unity. So unless you constantly, from a Ukrainian nationalist perspective, are fighting against Russia, that's the only way to preserve Ukraine, to preserve the spirit of Ukraine. That's a very important part of the story which very few people talk about. And it took Russian leadership huge— and still there is a huge process, I think it's still in the transition— to understand that there cannot be such a thing as peaceful, neutral Ukraine friendly to Russia. It's just simply not possible because the inherent logic of the state, of this ideology, is anti-Russian. For Ukrainian nationalism to stop being anti-Russian means to die, means to stop being Ukrainian nationalism. That's kind of...

#Pascal

Okay, and we must stop it because we've reached an hour, but we have to talk about this again because there are these examples. Georgia, for instance. Georgia stepped away from that one.

#Pavel Shchelin

Very good. It's a big difference. Georgia has its own church, and it's very clear. You have no trouble distinguishing Georgian from Russian. With Ukrainians, the only thing that differentiates them is ideology. Like, there is no—like, it's the same language. Sorry, historically speaking, it's the same historical fate for most parts of the territory. Again, all of southern and eastern Ukraine, there until the 18th century, until Russian people, we could say, colonized it, nobody lived there. It was a wild field, like steppes and Tatars, and there was no such thing as Ukrainian statehood. There was no such thing as Ukrainian identity. And you can go deep into history to see it's a problem. That's the difference with Georgians. They have their own essence, if you want to put it this way, which they can fall back on. And for them, yes, it's a choice to be hostile or not to be hostile.

But for them, it's not killing Georgian to say that you are not Russian. Yes, he's clearly Georgian, and there is no problem. For Ukrainians, this option simply doesn't exist. Because the moment... Because... You know what is the title of the first Ukrainian president Kuchma's book? "Ukraine Is Not Russia." The problem is its identity. Exactly. It's not Russia. There is no positive in this identity. But that's kind of the Russian idea. And the Russian demand to Ukraine is effectively, "We demand from you to stop being anti-Russia." And that's...

#Pascal

We demand you to stop your claim to existence. Effectively, that's how it sounds to Ukrainians.

#Pavel Shchelin

Yeah, because my only claim to existence is to not be you. Well, you can see how this is doomed, effectively, historically speaking.

#Pascal

Thank you, Pavel. I mean, I'm always glad when we end up in the inevitability of tragedy. I always grasp for straws and grasp for something positive. But sometimes it's more important to be a realist than a hopeless optimist. Pavel, people who want to find your work, where should they go? Especially in English, people who listen to us in English.

#Pavel Shchelin

Well, in English, we recently started a channel in English, so you can find it in the links below. It's less on geopolitics. It's more on symbolism. So if you're interested in the questions of symbolism,

symbolic reality, please go and join. More is to come. I'm recording several series of interviews right now.

#Pavel Shchelin

And if you are following Russia, you can just Google my name in Russian, and you will find a Telegram channel, YouTube channels. That's not really hard. That's where I mostly am.

#Pascal

And you will send me the links that I should put into the description. I will post them below, and then you can find them and click them. And with that out of the way, Pavel Shalin, thank you so much for your time today.

#Pavel Shchelin

Thank you so much.