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## Pavel Shchelin on Political Theology

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*Edited Interview Transcript*

### Introduction and Method

**Pascal Lottaz:** Welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the first time, I am joined by the Russian political philosopher Pavel Shchelin. Pavel, welcome to the channel. Could you tell us a little about yourself? You describe yourself not only as a political philosopher but also as a theological and Orthodox thinker. How does that shape your approach to world affairs?

**Pavel Shchelin:** Thank you. I trained as a political scientist and studied international relations and political science at Russian and Western universities, including the University of Glasgow, Central European University, and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Formally, therefore, I am qualified to discuss the subjects we will address today.

Several years ago, especially after the war began, I experienced a crisis in the analytical paradigm in which I had been working. Standard theories of international relations - realism, neorealism, structuralism, and related approaches - seemed insufficient to explain a central paradox: actors often pursue strategies that clearly harm them, at least from an outside perspective, yet do so with remarkable persistence.

Around 2022 I began exploring less familiar traditions of political thought and alternative explanations of individual and collective behaviour. I encountered the Western tradition of political theology, including thinkers such as Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt, as well as Russian religious philosophy and the writings of the Orthodox Church Fathers. Together, these led me toward what might be called a subject-centred approach to politics and international affairs.

I ask who the decision-makers are, what they desire, what world they believe they inhabit, and whether their desires are mutually exclusive or capable of coexistence. Most of my work is in Russian, and this approach has helped Russian-speaking audiences look beyond facts and decisions to the meanings behind them. The point is not initially to judge. It is to understand that conduct which looks irrational from outside may be entirely logical within the actor's worldview and hierarchy of desires.

### Worldviews Rationality and Reality

**Pascal Lottaz:** Let us go further. You distinguish between worldview and desire. Does worldview directly shape desire?

**Pavel Shchelin:** Yes. A weakness of classical international-relations theory is its assumption that concepts such as security, prosperity, and development have approximately the same meaning for everyone. I do not think they do.

There is no common rationality in the abstract. Every rationality - every logos, if you prefer - depends on a worldview: an ethical framework, an interpretation of history, and an understanding of reality. Each of us operates within such a framework. The difficulty is that we intuitively treat our own worldview as self-evident and rarely make the effort to inhabit a genuine alternative. That can be frightening.

People speak constantly about diversity, but usually mean that we look different while believing fundamentally the same things. That is often untrue. Russian culture and Russian policymakers, for example, can find it genuinely difficult to accept that what appears self-evident to them is not self-evident to others. International politics then becomes a game of broken telephone, producing both tragic and absurd outcomes.

My central argument is simple: there is no universal human baseline worldview. Different worldviews are organised around different ethical systems, and at their limit those systems rest on a religious or theological understanding of reality. Political desires and decisions arise within those symbolic frameworks.

**Pascal Lottaz:** What, then, is reality? Do we operate within an observer-independent reality, or is every reality dependent on the observer?

**Pavel Shchelin:** Theologically speaking, objective reality exists because it is grounded in God. The world exists independently of us. If I jump from a tenth-floor window, I will be badly injured or die. But if my worldview tells me that I can fly, that physical fact may not enter my decision until I jump. We do not see what our worldview prevents us from seeing.

With great effort, people can learn to recognise at least the outlines of other worldviews. The paradox is that objective reality exists and we can strive to understand it, but decisions cannot be analysed from objective conditions alone. We must study the intersection between those conditions and the actor's interpretation of them. People generally act upon what they believe, and while acting they usually experience that belief as objective truth.

This is why purely pragmatic arguments so often fail. One may produce hundreds of studies showing that a certain course is economically optimal, but if that course is incompatible with an actor's symbolic identity, the analysis will have little effect. If I understand myself as civilised and the other as barbarian - the garden opposed to the jungle - cooperation may be materially possible yet symbolically unacceptable. Status and identity can outweigh pragmatic benefit.

## Sanctions and Symbolic Politics

**Pascal Lottaz:** Could that framework explain the European Union's repeated sanctions packages? Is the underlying belief that sanctions must be good and therefore must eventually work?

**Pavel Shchelin:** The explanation goes deeper. My own theological anthropology is Orthodox: it understands human beings through sin, passion, desire, and vice. One of the most important vices is pride.

Imagine yourself as a decision-maker in Brussels. You inhabit a world in which, for roughly four centuries, the West has been able to compel others. You see the West as the centre of civilisation, and its liberal rules-based order as benevolent. When Russia rejects that order, it does more than frustrate a policy. It challenges your right to define who you are and how the world is organised. Your whole symbolic picture comes under threat.

You use the instruments at your disposal to suppress the rebellion, but the first measures fail. You then have three possibilities. First, you can re-examine the context and admit that your worldview may have been incomplete or mistaken. Very few people can bear that. Second, you can double down: the worldview cannot

be wrong, so the policy must simply have been insufficiently forceful. If the fact does not fit the worldview, so much the worse for the fact.

The third possibility becomes harder with every failed decision: accept responsibility for the accumulated errors and undergo a symbolic and perhaps political death. A worldview dies when one symbolic picture of reality gives way to another. A politician who admits that twenty-one sanctions packages and the costs imposed on the public were mistaken may also end his career. The incentives therefore favour escalation rather than self-correction.

A related motive is the refusal to appear a fool. Accepting that Russia is not merely a gas station, that its economy and armed forces have not collapsed, and that it can limit Western choices would require a painful revision of status. This is visible in the debate over NATO expansion. The Western claim was not merely that Ukraine should be admitted; it was that the West had an unrestricted right to admit whomever it chose and that Russia had no right to object. The issue was therefore status and authority as much as security.

For many politicians, continuing a damaging course is easier than challenging the symbolic core of their world. They remain psychologically in 1991 and may accept severe consequences, borne largely by others, rather than acknowledge that this worldview is no longer coherent.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Is that primarily a psychological phenomenon, or is it political because a group creates and reinforces the belief?

**Pavel Shchelin:** I would call it symbolic. An immaterial meaning or logos becomes embodied in people and institutions; a symbol is the unity of that meaning and its material form. The range of decisions available to an actor is limited by the meanings embodied within him.

Change is possible, and deep traditions have names for it - conversion, initiation, transformation - but it resembles death because one identity must give way to another. People naturally resist that experience. Within a liberal paradigm, they may allow circumstances to deteriorate rather than accept symbolic death. This can produce what looks like a drive toward self-destruction. International-relations theory undervalues such phenomena because it treats security as a neutral and universally understood objective.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Realism has precisely that problem. It treats ideas such as anarchy and security maximisation as if all states and leaders understood them in the same way. Security maximisation for Vladimir Putin might mean something entirely different from what it means to Donald Trump or an American neoconservative.

**Pavel Shchelin:** I would go further. Security maximisation is not necessarily the self-evident highest value. Even if we agree that security matters greatly to a statesman, its meaning differs because it is embedded in each actor's symbolic order.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Western political language often seems to project Western intentions onto Russia. Putin is described as wanting to conquer and control Europe, although dividing Russia and controlling it may be closer to what some Western actors themselves desire. Do people naturally attribute their own desires to others?

**Pavel Shchelin:** Yes, and Russia made the same mistake. For roughly the first twenty years of Putin's rule, Russia sought pragmatic cooperation with Europe and assumed that Europe wanted the same. This explains the recurring Russian language of betrayal: "They lied to us. How could they?" Politicians often lie and pursue divergent goals, but the deception was experienced as shocking because Putin assumed that a respectful pan-European security architecture and common prosperity were self-evidently desirable to both sides.

Putin's outlook was formed partly in the KGB milieu of the 1980s, where a pro-European idea of convergence had developed inside the Soviet state apparatus, not only among liberal dissidents. He offered what he understood as respectful partnership and assumed it would be reciprocated. In the Western story, however, 1991 was a victory: Russia had lost and should accept the terms of defeat. In the Russian story, Moscow had voluntarily helped end the Cold War in order to make convergence possible.

These narratives do not correspond, yet each side acts from its own. In Putin's story, respectful partnership is the common goal, supported by a Russian memory of the Second World War in which people of goodwill overcame their differences to defeat an absolute evil. The Western story is more readily organised around winner and loser, master and subordinate. It contains "allies", a situational relationship based on interests, but not necessarily the Russian ethical and metaphysical idea of friendship.

Understanding these stories does not require approving them. It requires recognising that they shape the range of possible decisions. To anticipate Putin's actions, one must understand the symbolic order from which he acts. Russians likewise need to recognise that partnership of the kind they seek may simply not be available from the West. Analysis must see actors as they are, not as we wish them to be.

**Pascal Lottaz:** That is difficult when both sides use similar language. In the late 1980s Gorbachev spoke of a common European home, while Western leaders and strategists also used the vocabulary of cooperation. Putin may have interpreted the 1990s as a bad policy choice that could be corrected if Russia explained itself more clearly.

**Pavel Shchelin:** That impulse to explain remains strong in Russian diplomacy. Putin's long historical lectures are attempts to reconstruct a common foundation from which dialogue can begin.

Within the Russian elite, however, a symbolic transition is under way. The younger generation - those now in their forties and fifties - is more radical and has little of the older generation's sentimental attachment to Europe or the idea of a common European home.

The shared vocabulary makes mutual understanding harder. Official international language remains liberal and universalist in origin. Actors use the same words but give them meanings derived from different symbolic orders. Everyone speaks of "peace", but Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Europe mean different and sometimes opposing things by it.

When Russia says it is ready for peace, for example, it may mean a conference that legally enshrines its requirements. A headline can detach the word from that context and imply that Russia is prepared simply to stop the war. Even well-intentioned readers may misunderstand; ill-intentioned actors can exploit the ambiguity for cognitive warfare and deliberate manipulation.

## Peace Proposals and Ending Wars

**Pascal Lottaz:** Is this misunderstanding - or refusal to understand - part of the political game? It is difficult to believe that outside observers can discuss the actors' motives while the actors themselves do not. European leaders must know that a twenty-second sanctions package is unlikely to succeed where the previous twenty-one failed. Their public rhetoric may therefore differ from the real beliefs driving their decisions.

**Pavel Shchelin:** To some extent, but their proposals remain connected to a symbolic order in which Europe determines the rules. The current European idea of peace can be paraphrased as follows: "We benevolently agree to freeze the conflict and will integrate the remainder of Ukraine into our military structures. Russia may retain what it has taken for now, but we will never recognise that outcome and will seek to reverse it."

Ultimately, Russia has achieved nothing and we have won." It is an offer that can be presented symbolically as Russia's surrender.

This helps explain the observation, often made by Alexander Mercouris, that Europe negotiates with itself. Its proposals must remain compatible with the Brussels worldview. What that worldview cannot accept is defeat: we are the good side, the good side always wins, and if the bad side defeats us, our moral identity is threatened. The reasoning becomes circular.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Negotiating among themselves allows Europeans to determine how far their own corridor of acceptable outcomes extends, even though that corridor remains far from anything Russia might accept.

**Pavel Shchelin:** Exactly. Their principal purpose is to protect their symbolic picture, not Russia's. This is why desire matters: what does a politician actually seek?

None of the parties treats the mere absence of conflict as its highest value. There is a simple test. If peace in that narrow sense were truly supreme, the quickest path would be capitulation. No party accepts that, so each wants peace on its own terms. Other values therefore stand above peace and determine action.

**Pascal Lottaz:** That is the core of absolute pacifism: an absolute pacifist would surrender when attacked because peace is the highest value. Most people are not absolute pacifists.

**Pavel Shchelin:** Yet our media and ethical climate requires everyone to speak as though peace were supreme. Europe means a liberal peace within a European or rules-based order. Russia increasingly imagines peace through a combination of historical continuity and sovereignty: sovereign states do not emerge from nowhere; they embody traditions that must be respected if prosperity and stability are to be possible. The American conception differs from both.

This framework also distinguishes positive and negative sovereignty. Positive sovereignty is the capacity to do something; negative sovereignty is the capacity to prevent others from doing something.

Consider the negotiations associated with Anchorage. Ukraine has little positive sovereignty: it cannot create a viable future by itself and has suffered military, territorial, economic, and demographic decline. But it retains negative sovereignty. Even if Russia, the United States, Europe, and other parties agreed on a settlement, the Ukrainian government's refusal could prevent it. In a conflict involving six parties with different worldviews, one party's veto may be enough to block any agreement. This is one mechanism behind the present spiral of escalation.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Yet history includes genuine negotiations between belligerents and compromises that ended wars, such as the French and later American wars in Vietnam. The worldviews did not converge, so what made settlement possible?

**Pavel Shchelin:** Objective reality eventually imposes a price. Some worldviews correspond more closely to reality than others, and the one furthest from it ultimately pays. In Vietnam, several American administrations lost enormous political capital, and the United States eventually accepted defeat. The decisive loser was South Vietnam, which had to disappear for the war to end.

For a Western audience, Ukraine's structural position resembles that of South Vietnam. Russia and the United States, or Russia and Europe, could theoretically reach an understanding, but not necessarily while Ukraine retains the power to veto it. One way of resolving a six-party impasse is to reduce the number of effective parties, particularly when one is a wholly dependent proxy.

**Pascal Lottaz:** What about Japan in 1945? The emperor accepted defeat and asked the Japanese people to "endure the unendurable".

**Pavel Shchelin:** That decision had a specific context: two atomic bombs had been dropped, and Japan had been prepared to fight to the last man. To make someone endure the unendurable, an even worse alternative must become credible.

**Pascal Lottaz:** There were competing factions. One preferred one hundred million martyrs to surrender; the other believed surrender was necessary to preserve the nation.

**Pavel Shchelin:** That borders on heroism or sainthood. It is not a routine rational choice. It requires a person or group willing to accept ultimate responsibility. In Japan, the emperor assumed it. Modern politics has suffered a profound depletion of character; I doubt many contemporary leaders would accept such responsibility. They might watch the house burn rather than undertake a politically suicidal act of sacrifice. Theoretically it remains possible, but it requires genuine heroism and symbolic self-sacrifice.

**Pascal Lottaz:** The twentieth century also produced leaders in the Soviet Union who were willing to make radical changes. Gorbachev, for example, acknowledged that things had gone wrong and had to change.

**Pavel Shchelin:** From the Russian perspective, Gorbachev is a poor example of successful sacrifice because his reforms produced consequences seen as catastrophic: the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the separation of Russians across new borders, and ultimately the present war. One can argue that an independent Ukraine could remain stable only within the common framework of the Soviet state; once Russia and Ukraine became separate, long-term conflict became increasingly likely.

Russian leaders may be capable of sacrifice when they believe it is morally right. What the West has lost is moral leverage over Russia. During the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, many Russians strongly desired Western approval and union with Europe. Orthodox ethics encourages self-examination and confession. That can be a strength, but tactically it creates vulnerability: persuade me that I am morally wrong and you may push me toward self-destructive conduct.

The West can no longer do this. Russia no longer needs Western moral approval, yet Western authorities often behave as though the promise "Surrender and we will again call you good" will eventually work. From their perspective, additional sanctions buy time until Russia once more seeks their approval and accepts capitulation as its price. This follows from the Western claim to decide who is good and bad - a major form of symbolic sovereignty and political capital.

## **Enlightenment Globalism and Empire**

**Pascal Lottaz:** Where does that superiority complex come from?

**Pavel Shchelin:** From the European Enlightenment combined with rapid technological development from roughly the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. A relatively small and previously peripheral part of the world became extraordinarily powerful. For millennia, major centres of civilisation had lain around the Mediterranean - in territories we now call Greece, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The historical West in a narrower sense was closer to the territory of Charlemagne's empire.

Under Enlightenment rationalism, that region developed an outlook in which ethical constraints no longer limited the drive to gain power over matter. For about four hundred years it dominated much of the world. If you repeatedly defeat large civilisations with small forces and colonise continents, dominance begins to appear miraculous and natural.

Russia became a particular thorn in this story because it looked European, spoke European languages, and occupied the same continent, yet repeatedly obstructed projects of universal order. It defeated Napoleon and Hitler and never became fully assimilated. Hence the persistent distrust of Russia within a secularised, progressive, globalist version of the Carolingian imperial idea.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Marxist thinkers on this channel reject the term "globalism". They regard it as a weaker label for imperialism, which they attribute less to the desire for empire than to the expansionary logic of capitalism and rent-seeking. Does that matter to your analysis, or do you use "globalism" in a more moral sense?

**Pavel Shchelin:** I do not use the word in the Marxist sense. By "globalists" I mean a particular type of power group - builders of a new Tower of Babel. The stated foundation may be progress, freedom, or rights, but the underlying idea is gnostic: through special knowledge, we can make paradise on earth, and we are the guardians of that knowledge.

That is a central Enlightenment idea and, in my view, underpins every form of globalism. Marxism itself can be understood as one such form. It claims true knowledge of history's dialectic, explains the operation of classes, predicts the final stage of history, and offers a vision for the whole world. Empire is a separate and deeply misunderstood concept that would require another conversation.

## Russias Security Goals and Ukraine

**Pascal Lottaz:** We have not exhausted the subject, but have we covered the essential framework? Is there anything else you would like to leave with the audience?

**Pavel Shchelin:** I would like to apply the framework to the question you often ask guests: how might the war end?

In my opinion, the Russian leadership's basic purpose has not changed since early 2022. It seeks security on Russia's western border: Ukrainian territory must never again be a source of danger to Russia or its people. What has changed is the expected means. In 2022, Russian leaders may have believed this could be secured through an agreement with Ukraine or the West. Increasingly, and with resentment, they have concluded that the only reliable way to achieve the original goal is to resolve what they see as the Ukrainian problem by exercising control over the territory in one form or another.

This illustrates why symbolic analysis matters. An observer may conclude that Russia always intended to seize the territory. Yet the same territorial outcome can emerge from a different initial worldview through a self-fulfilling prophecy. Policies intended to deter an assumed Russian expansion can help produce the expansion they predicted.

Look at the Ukrainian figures discussed as possible alternatives to Zelensky. Within none of their political visions is there a Ukraine that poses no threat to Russia. If no Ukrainian leadership will agree to such a state, Russia will continue pursuing its security as it understands it, moving further until it reaches some effective limit. Attempts merely to freeze the war are therefore likely to fail because they do not address the core Russian concern.

**Pascal Lottaz:** As long as the West understands security primarily as deterrence, it must continually threaten Russia, while the central Russian demand is not to be threatened.

**Pavel Shchelin:** The deeper tragedy is that Russia might conceivably reach a freeze with the West, but not with Ukraine. No Ukrainian politician is prepared to accept permanent neutrality and demilitarisation or to

restore the rights of the Russian Orthodox Church, ethnic Russians, and Russian speakers. Ukrainian nationalists state their objection openly.

From their perspective, if Ukraine does these things, what distinguishes it from Russia? They fear that a Ukraine no longer hostile to Russia would be absorbed into the same historical and cultural space. Russia and much of present-day Ukraine developed within a shared historical unity. Ukrainian nationalism therefore understands continued opposition to Russia as essential to preserving a distinct Ukrainian spirit.

The Russian leadership has been slow to accept the implication: in this nationalist framework, a peaceful, neutral, Russia-friendly Ukraine is impossible because anti-Russian opposition is constitutive of the ideology. To cease being anti-Russian would mean, symbolically, the death of Ukrainian nationalism.

**Pascal Lottaz:** We must end soon, although we should return to this. Georgia, for example, stepped away from permanent hostility to Russia.

**Pavel Shchelin:** Georgia is different. It has its own church and an identity clearly distinguishable from Russia's. Georgians can choose whether to be hostile to Russia without ceasing to be Georgian.

Ukrainian identity, as modern nationalism formulates it, has a more difficult relationship to Russia. The title of former president Leonid Kuchma's book, *Ukraine Is Not Russia*, captures the problem: the identity is defined negatively. Russia's demand that Ukraine cease being anti-Russian can therefore sound to Ukrainian nationalists like a demand that they surrender their claim to existence. If their only claim to separate existence is "we are not you", the conflict becomes structurally tragic.

**Pascal Lottaz:** We have reached the inevitability of tragedy. I am always looking for something positive, but sometimes realism is more important than groundless optimism. Where can people, especially English-speaking viewers, find your work?

**Pavel Shchelin:** We recently started an English-language channel. It focuses less on geopolitics than on symbolism and symbolic reality, and more material is forthcoming. Those who follow Russian can search my name to find my Telegram and YouTube channels.

**Pascal Lottaz:** Send me the links and I will place them in the description. Pavel Shchelin, thank you very much for your time.

**Pavel Shchelin:** Thank you.

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