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Vladimir Nabokov's Critique of Realism and Geopolitics

1. Vladimir Nabokov: The Vulgarity of Geopolitics

Vladimir Nabokov spent the 1930s in Germany. His 1936 story *Tyrants Destroyed* distils the essence of the Nazi regime by revealing the link between the obsession with willpower, as well as with the land. He describes the fictional ruler who gnaws his way into power thanks to 'that deaf, focused, gloomy, and deeply self-conscious will, which in the end moulds a triumphant monster out of a mediocre man'[1]. The ruler has a myopic belief that willpower alone is enough to break and refashion the fabric of social and material reality as one sees fit, at one point he suffers from toothache and he promises to 'overcome his teeth' by the sheer exercise of will. But what's interesting is this: this ruler is obsessed with farming. At one point he awards an old lady with the highest state honour for victory in the contest of growing the largest pumpkin. He even introduces an 'agricultural hymn' as the national anthem. Why does Nabokov connect the worship of willpower with – of all things – farming? The reason is simple. There is a tight correlation between the agricultural success and hardwork that goes into the cultivation of land which indulges our illusion that "we reap what we sow", that teaches us to think that our success is of our own making, that we are self-made and self-sufficient, while teaching us to forget the ecology of loves, cultures, and material environment, that precedes and creates us. Before farming emerged, hunter-gatherers humbly relied on gifts from wild nature. Farming taught us to see nature as a passive instrument of our will. Farming taught us to think that possession of land is merited by all the hardwork they've put into it. We turned the wilderness into pasture or arable land and wild animals into livestock or workers to graze or plough the land. We colonised patches of wild nature – wild plants and wild animals – were enslaved as property of the humans. Once our environment was privatised by various individuals, everyone became afraid that he'll be left without resources that began to seem very scarce, and started trying to secure some of the resources for himself. People began to protect their

[1] Vladimir Nabokov. (1936). *Tyrants Destroyed*. [Rus. *Istreblenie tiranov*]. Chapter V.

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property from rival claimants by any means necessary. The war for scarce resources, the geopolitical struggle for *Lebensraum* (Ger. 'Living space'), began to escalate out of anyone's control – to the extent of people beginning to enslave other people and create unnatural societies based on slavery as the model of relationships. These unnatural societies are the product of the feedback between the tyrant and the popular will. Because, in the absence of politics, popular will cannot be articulated past 'the general mess of imprecision of feeling, undisciplined squads of emotion', natural desires and appetites mutate into passions, and since the passions arise from competition, the ruler has no choice but to appease them by imprisoning himself within the geopolitical logic of a zero-sum-struggle for scarce land against threatening foreign rivals. This is why Nabokov's fictional ruler uses a fortified prison as his palace – 'this tyrant calls himself a prisoner of people's will'.[2] Why does geopolitics resemble a prison?

In his 1937 novel *Gift*, Nabokov describes geopolitical thinking as a 'clichéd' and 'trivial'[3]: 'the world Shchyogolev created came out as some kind of collection of limited, humourless, faceless and abstract bullies, and the more brains, cunning and circumspection he found in their mutual activities the more stupid, vulgar and simple his world became'… 'France was *afraid* of something or other and therefore would never *allow* it. England was *aiming* at something…'[4]. Nabokov was able to see how the geopolitical presumption of a zero-sum struggle for scarce *Lebensraum* as the ultimate context of all human affairs turns us into 'bullies' by locking our imagination into a scarcity mindset, a mindset that provides us with a seemingly 'realist' excuse for violence against all sorts of threatening others: 'There is no avoiding war: it can only be postponed to the advantage of others'.[5]

But what if there is a way to avoid war? In his memoir *Speak, Memory!*, Nabokov discards the idea that the world is a creation of the struggle for scarce resources because it teaches humans to live an inhumane form of life: 'Struggle for life" indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast's crazy obsession with the search for food'.[6] Nabokov countered it with a different outlook, the 'excess mindset', that restores the primordial understanding that life ultimately is an undeserved gift by insisting that we are *spoken* into existence. It is the inability to see life as the gift of language is what makes the geopolitical lens vulgar and clichéd, makes it astoundingly unimaginative and uncreative. Geopolitics narrows our attention on securing our domination, our free will to do what we choose with the passive stuff like land before our rivals take it from us, but distracts our attention from our freedom to create the laws under which we can intensify our cooperative responsiveness to the

[2] Vladimir Nabokov. (1936). *Tyrants Destroyed*. [Rus. *Istreblenie tiranov*]. Chapter IX.

[3] Russian word *poshlost* stands for a mix of English 'platidious', 'vulgar' and 'clichéd'. Nabokov translated it as 'artistic triviality, banality, lack of spirituality and sexual indecency'.

[4] Nabokov, Vladimir. (1963). *The Gift*. [Written in Russian as *Dar* during 1935–1937] G. P. Putnam's Sons. Pages 171–172.

[5] Niccolo Machiavelli. (1513). *The Prince*. Chapter III.

[6] Vladimir Nabokov. (1964). *Speak, Memory!* Page 617.

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gifts that land has to offer. The geopolitical outlook is uncreative because it locks people out of legislative conversations in which new social worlds are created – it distracts our attention from imagining new vistas of creativity that tap into new vistas of excess. And since we can avoid war only if we have faith in the excess in which we all can partake, the geopolitical lens gives us a hard time imagining a possibility of lasting peace. It leads to a life where people fight for their share in what is already there, to a life that is essentially just a living out of a *cliché*, life that partakes in only one kind of excess – the spiral of violent revenge.

2. Russia's Descent Into Geopolitical Framework

"Tolstoy said that patriotism is the last refuge of villains. Today, in my view, we should replace 'patriotism' with 'geopolitics'"[7]. So says Dmitry Muratov, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who sold his medal for $104 million and donated the money to the Ukrainian children refugees. Geopolitics is the only meta-narrative that tyrants allow to propagate because it diverts national attention from domestic problems to foreign affairs. Leaders adjust propaganda's lenses to geopolitics when there is no democratic support for what they're doing. I want to be precise in what I mean when I say 'no democratic support'. It is not the approval ratings or plebiscitary acclamation. During his whole reign, Putin relied on genuine popular support, of which the polls and election results are proof, but never allowed people to develop their opinions. People could check boxes on multiple choice questionnaires, but with such an inarticulate expression of will, passions remain easily manipulated with the propaganda toolkit. This I believe is the warning of where not to tread that recent Russian history ought to teach us: Democracy is more than listening to the people's opinion, it depends on educating people into those whom Shalamov described as *politiki*, into citizens who can verbalise their will to the extent of genuinely shaping decisions that legislate the context of their lives, articulating themselves to the degree where policy undertaken in their names genuinely reflects their will – not just choosing between options, but shaping which options are available. Democracy, in essence, is communal self-examination – thinking in public, persistently asking "What do we truly want?", "Is this how we would really love to live?' and persistently making authorities answer to it. Statecraft is to be examined and judged in light of the forms of life that are desired by the people. The unexamined society is not worth living in because the absence of communal self-examination leads to dictatorship.

Geopolitics is precisely what allows communities to avoid self-examination. Geopolitics permits us to *not* pay attention to the actual forms of life. It allows people to stay within the 'echo chamber' of certainty and never be disarmed by confrontations with the apparent facts on the surface of the world. Notice how today's Russian official war apologists distract people's attention from both the 'facts on the ground' and 'gut feelings' by using a geopolitical lens that narrows attention to issues of territory, one

[7] Dmitry Muratov is an editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper specialising in the defence of human rights. Interview with Dmitry Muratov. Link: https://youtu.be/VK_aPMxG3h0.

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resource of zero-sum nature: 'Russia's main interest in this war is neither cities nor people, but the land', pushing Russian borders farther from Moscow, so as to secure total invulnerability of Putin's regime. Putin does not want Kharkiv, my home city, but he repeatedly stressed that he would not tolerate the risk of having foreign nuclear warheads within a 7-minute reach of Moscow. 'Russia doesn't need Mariupol. Russia needs another supply corridor to Crimea. Russia doesn't need Odessa. Russia needs another sea outlet'[8]. War apologists implore us to "take the geopolitical situation into account and see that Russia was left with no choice but to react to the encroachment of foreign powers on its sacrosanct sphere of influence!". By making it seem that Russia was totally bereft of all negotiatory faculties, totally reactive, talk of geopolitical necessity permits decision-makers to shed all responsibility.

3. The Realist School of International Relations

In this regard, John Mearsheimer and other acolytes of the 'realist' school of foreign policy are in fact idealists. It is just that their ideal is grim: humanity stuck at the impasse of an imperial power struggle. They think that the emphasis on the self-legislative rights of all nations is just moral posturing, a distant echo of what the ideal world should be. But one may just as well argue that it is the 'realists' who are out of touch with the reality of progress towards international relations that are less defined by power struggle and more by creative cooperation. For example, they are out of touch with the anti-colonial resolve of Ukrainians, with the fact that people who defend their freedom will always shatter the neat predictions of military analysts upon which the 'maps' of the balance between great powers are drawn. And since "when we make peace with the idea that 'might makes right' we only help the mighty"[9], the 'realists' only help imperialists like Putin. From their perspective, it doesn't matter what Ukrainians self-legislate. The floor has to be given to the interests of great powers. It does not bother them that these security interests are often dictated by dictators. In one of his prison letters, Navalny says that, in the long run, any nation's security interest, including Russia's, is to be a democracy. For a very simple reason – democracies actually don't go to war with each other, democracies don't pose a threat to each other's security because it is in no people's natural desire to go to war. Sadly, from the 'realist' perspective, Navalny's voice does not count because he is just a political prisoner – he's not in power.

We shouldn't let Putin define Russia's security interests because the only interest of his regime is to stop democracy. "What threatened Putin was not NATO expansion, but the democracy expansion"[10]. We have to understand that long before the talk of 'national interests' and 'spheres of influence' we've already walked the walk of appeas-

[8] Anatoli Ulyanov. (2022). *Why do Russian occupiers wipe cities off the face of the earth and arrange 'Buchas'?* Link: https://www.facebook.com/100000275173858/posts/5536815189670932/?d=n

[9] Timothy Snyder in the interview with Sean Illing on Vox Conversations. Episode: *The fight for Ukraine – and democracy*. Link: https://www.vox.com/vox-conversations-podcast

[10] Michael McFaul. Closing Statement in the Munk Debate on Ukraine. Link: Munk Debate on Ukraine – Michael McFaul Closing Statement

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ing the people who can't let go of their power and use the talk of 'national interest' as a guarantee of their personal security – which for them means forever staying in power. *Putinverstehers* perpetuate the idea of Russian innocence because it was left without a choice – but to accept this is to let every tyrant justify violence with the mythology of national interest: 'the Russian foreign ministry claiming Russia will be "forced to take retaliatory steps" if Finland joins NATO'. No, it will not be "forced", in the same way that Russia was not "forced" to attack Ukraine. This decision appears "forced" only if one accepts the whole set of ideological and geopolitical assumptions that sustain Russian politics'[11].

But for the 'realist' there is no difference between democracy and autocracy. The 'realist' equivocates all 'great powers' and then asks us to listen to every last one of them. At the end of the day, it is a recipe for the appeasement and subservience to the bullies, for an international order based on the balance of power between the strongest empires. Putin wants to build an international order like this – where strong states do things at will but disguise it by the sacred 'security interests' which they define according to their caprice. He had established a new axis of autocracy[12] that includes India's Modi, Brazil's Bolsonaro, China's Xi, and infiltrates even into NATO – Orban's Hungary and Erdogan's Turkey. This is why 'realism' plays into the hands of imperial ambitions. Putin points to the double standards of the Western policy when it falls short of its espoused ideals, but Putin wants an order where there will be no ideals to fall short of, a world without hypocrisy. Yet today we must learn to think of hypocrisy as a good thing because the world where hypocrisy is impossible is a very dark place. "Yes, the liberal West is hypocritical, applying its high standards very selectively. But hypocrisy means you violate the standards you proclaim, and in this way, you open yourself up to inherent criticism – when we criticise the liberal West, we use its own standards. What Russia is offering is a world without hypocrisy – because it is without global ethical standards, practising just pragmatic "respect" for differences. We have seen clearly what this means when, after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, they instantly made a deal with China. China accepts the new Afghanistan while the Taliban will ignore what China is doing to Uyghurs – this is, *in nuce*, the new globalisation advocated by Russia.

[11] Slavoj Zizek. (2022). *We must stop letting Russia define the terms of the Ukraine crisis.* The Guardian. Link: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/23/we-must-stop-letting-russia-define-the-terms-of-the-ukraine-crisis .

[12] William A. Galston. (2022). *The New Axis of Autocracy*. Germany and France are weak links as the West faces an alliance of China and Russia. February 6, 2022. Wall Street Journal. Link: https://www.wsj.com/articles/axis-autocracy-russia-putin-ukraine-china-france-germany-commit-defense-invasion-scholz-biden-macron-11644336548
Caroline Mimbs Nyce. *(2021). The New Axis of Autocracy*. November 16, 2021. *The Atlantic* Daily Newsletter. Link: https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2021/11/modern-autocrats/620719/

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And the only way to defend what is worth saving in our liberal tradition is to ruthlessly insist on its universality".[13]

4. Democratisation as Abstraction of Violence.

The problem is not power itself, but its arbitrary exercise. The West's 'sphere of influence' is postcolonial (rather than simply 'colonial') because it is not imposed at will – in contrast to the fundamental disregard to human rights and life by the autocratic regimes, the West presents a form of life that people aspire to emulate, providing the individual with a space, time and silence for growth: be it Swedish spacious public spaces, German observance of recreation on Sunday, or Swiss laws of silence, be it the flamboyance of 'American dream' or the normcore of 'Nordic minimalism'. This is why many nations voluntarily choose to be integrated into the West. This self-determination principle, inscribed into international law, is what is being threatened by Russia's recent transgressions. If the international law does not function properly, empires (nations that have problems with recognising their borders) will simply impose their will on the weaker nations because empires don't recognise them as subjects of politics. But if all nations are given a voice, there is a chance of creating legislative communication on the planetary level and then abstracting violence to that level.

Can we break the sovereignty of strong states just like in the past we broke the sovereignty of strong individuals? In the past, we managed to abstract violence to the level of the state – to the legislative communication between citizens – and from that level to enforce it onto the lawbreakers. We abstracted violence to polity, allowed the police to apportion violence onto the brutes, bandits and bullies – and called it justice. We said to them – "You cannot act with impunity, you have to attune your conduct to the laws that are conducive to the common good". And now wherever, say, domestic abuse takes place, police can intervene and punish the abuser. The household is not a sovereign order unto itself with the man as a sole dictator of moral judgements, the local arbiter of good and evil. The human rights legislation does not recognise the right of the strong to impede on the liberty of the weak.

However, having abstracted sovereignty to the level of the state, we must not stop there. Today, when bandits and bullies come to power in the state, they use the image of foreign threat to usurp power forever – to take on the colonial expansion and incite the police against their political enemies whom they target as foreign agents – and to market all of this as defence of sovereignty. Today we are gradually degrading into the state of international relations where the sovereignty of stronger states allows them to impede on the freedom of weaker ones and justify it by the talk of 'national interests'. If powerful enough, nation-states are allowed to act arbitrarily. We have confined thieves

[13] Slavoj Zizek. (2022). *We must stop letting Russia define the terms of the Ukraine crisis.* The Guardian. Link: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/23/we-must-stop-letting-russia-define-the-terms-of-the-ukraine-crisis .

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and thugs to the prisons, but fail to deal with the thieves and thugs who come to power and weaponise the state to bully and steal.

Today, to abstract sovereignty above the level of nation-states, we have to stand up for the sovereignty of all countries, their right to self-legislate. First, consider Ukraine – the only nation that agreed to give up the world's third largest arsenal of nuclear warheads and that, because of it, is now painfully aware of its reliance on the family of interdependent nations. Second, consider Russia – the nation whose unrivalled nuclear capacities allow it to be the vanguard of the contemporary neo-colonialism.

Putin sees dominance as the only legitimate model of personal and international relations: "In order to claim some kind of leadership – I am not even talking about global leadership, I mean leadership in any area – any country, any people, any ethnic group should ensure their sovereignty… There is no in-between, no intermediate state: either a country is sovereign, or it is a colony, no matter what the colonies are called".[14] In Putin's view, there are two categories of state: The sovereign and the conquered, and Ukraine should fall into the latter category. 'Russia's strategic plan is to profit from global warming: control the world's main transport route, plus develop Siberia and control Ukraine. In this way, Russia will dominate so much food production that it will be able to blackmail the whole world. This is the ultimate economic reality beneath Putin's imperial dream'.[15]

The reason Putin's imperial ambition 'should be unconditionally rejected is that in today's global world in which we are all haunted by the same catastrophes, we are all in-between, in an intermediate state, neither a sovereign country nor a conquered one: to insist on full sovereignty in the face of global warming is sheer madness since our very survival hinges on tight global cooperation'[16]. Putin's neo-colonial obsession with strength and weakness is out of place in the twenty-first century where the strong and the weak are equally interdependent in the face of global challenges.

5. Conclusions

Perhaps there was a way to prevent Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine – a bilateral 'divide-and-rule' meeting between the US and Russia. This is what Putin wanted all along since he took the office in 2000. It would have saved Ukraine from the insufferable toll of pain and death, but it would have reshaped international architecture in a manner that would have made planetary cooperation all but impossible. As things stand now, the resolve of the Ukrainians to self-sacrifice for the sake of anticolonialism – the right

[14] Vladimir Putin. (2022). *Meeting with young entrepreneurs, engineers and scientists*. On 9th of June, 2022. Link: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606

[15] Slavoj Zizek. (2022). *Pacifism is the wrong response to the war in Ukraine*. Link: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/21/pacificsm-is-the-wrong-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine?fbclid=IwAR0O-bKj48dzU_I6LiRVLAzVlgC4JO7baa8puYhvG-SYRCWP1-vffE3TytA

[16] Slavoj Zizek. (2022). *Pacifism is the wrong answer to the war in Ukraine*. Guardian. Link: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jun/21/pacificsm-is-the-wrong-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine?fbclid=IwAR0O-bKj48dzU_I6LiRVLAzVlgC4JO7baa8puYhvG-SYRCWP1-vffE3TytA

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of a nation to self-legislate – has reanimated the ideal of the international community in which every country is endowed with the dignity of an inter-independent (independent and interdependent) self-legislator.

Not to see the difference between democracy and autocracy is to fail to see social development over the axis of time. This is why 'realism' is a clichéd worldview – it attends only to the present status quo; it is interested in making great powers avoid war, but does not attend to the growth into such international relations in which every nation can pursue the policy under conditions of freedom and sovereignty. 'Realist' concern for preserving status quo so as to avoid escalation by not provoking the unnecessary violent reaction from the powerful is important, but it has to be incorporated within the wider history of growth into relations where brute force does not have the last word. Since democracy presumes the exchange of critical perspectives, the painful process of acknowledging errors, it poses a unique threat to the dictators – people whose authority is based on the myth that they don't make mistakes. The acknowledgement of errors is exactly what the tyrants cannot stomach because to do so is to show weakness, and, in the strongman's 'system of coordinates', weakness is precisely what shouldn't be shown. "The weak", as Putin is keen on reminding us, "are beaten".

Abstract: The *aim* of this article is to follow Vladimir Nabokov's critique of geopolitics as found in his works *The Gift* (1963), *Tyrants Destroyed* (1936), and *Speak, Memory* (1964). Vladimir Nabokov critiques geopolitics as something that locks people's imagination within the zero-sum-struggle for scarce resources and mobilises their passions for the worship of the ruler. I *hypothesise* that Nabokov also shows us how the image of creation as a gift goes past zero-sum "realism" and unlocks parts of the environment as having increasingly more to "say" within increasingly intricate conversations. With this framework in mind, we can read the Realist school of international relations as reifying the destructive force as the centrepiece of politics by way of honouring the balance between "great nuclear powers". I argue that Nabokov's view can instead set us on the path of democratisation as the salient focus of international relationships much like the Christians in ancient times were able to ignore the intricate geopolitical network of different deities that represented the destructive powers of the Roman provinces under the cult of the Emperor who represented the destructive force of the Roman legions. This democratisation is the work of *abstracting* violence so as make it restricted and monopolised by the Wilsonian ideal of the "Concert of Nations" from the level of which the violence is used to police the "rogue states".
Keywords: geopolitics, realism, Nabokov, Mearsheimer, zero-sum-game, dictatorship, Russia, Putin, Ukraine, war

Krytyka realizmu i geopolityki w utworach Władimira Nabokowa

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest prześledzenie krytyki geopolityki Władimira Nabokowa zawartej w jego dziełach *Dar* (1963), *Zniszczeni tyrani* (1936) i *Pamięci, przemów* (1964). Vladimir Nabokov krytykuje geopolitykę jako coś, co zamyka ludzką wyobraźnię w walce o sumie zerowej o ograniczone

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zasoby i mobilizuje ich pasję do kultu władcy. Stawiam hipotezę, że Nabokov pokazuje nam także, jak obraz stworzenia jako dar przekracza „realizm" o sumie zerowej i odblokowuje części otoczenia, które mają coraz więcej do „powiedzenia" w coraz bardziej zawiłych rozmowach. Mając to na uwadze, możemy czytać realistyczną szkołę stosunków międzynarodowych jako reifikującą niszczycielską siłę, centralny element polityki przez honorowanie równowagi pomiędzy „wielkimi mocarstwami nuklearnymi". Twierdzę, że pogląd Nabokowa może zamiast tego skierować nas na ścieżkę demokratyzacji, jako że główny ośrodek stosunków międzynarodowych, podobnie jak chrześcijanie w starożytności, byli w stanie zignorować skomplikowaną geopolityczną sieć różnych bóstw, które reprezentowały niszczycielską władzę rzymskich prowincji pod panowaniem kult cesarza, który reprezentował niszczycielską siłę legionów rzymskich. Demokratyzacja ta jest dziełem abstrahowania przemocy, aby ją ograniczyć i zmonopolizować przez wilsonowski ideał „Koncertu Narodów", z poziomu którego przemoc jest wykorzystywana do nadzorowania „państw zbójniczych".

Słowa kluczowe: geopolityka, realizm, Nabokov, Mearsheimer, gra o sumie zerowej, dyktatura, Rosja, Putin, Ukraina, wojna

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