

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Masha Gessen

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Masha Gessen, staff writer for *The New Yorker* and author of the new book "Surviving Autocracy," where I ask them, *Is Donald Trump An Autocratic Basic B?* Welcome to "Getting Curious." Welcome back, Masha Gessen. I am very, and I say air quotes, "Happy to see you." This is a new time in podcasting. I am in my closet. You're at your house. I'm assuming. Last time we got to talk, we were face to face in Manhattan. And obviously times have changed. So if you hear my cats in the closet or a video game in the background, that's all that is everyone. And that is not a big deal because what is a big deal is what we are here to talk about. So, Masha, your 11th book just came out. I mean, first of all, congratulations. You are.

MASHA GESSEN [00:01:01] Thank you.

JVN [00:01:02] Yes. You're a prolific writer. And first of all, welcome back. After all that talking.

MASHA GESSEN [00:01:08] Thank you. It's so good to be here. I mean, here, sort of, be.

JVN [00:01:12] Yes. All operative words, which is actually some of the things that you talk about in "Surviving Autocracy." And so, first of all, first question, pulling out a bit, is: what is autocracy?

MASHA GESSEN [00:01:25] So autocracy is simply the rule of one person. Right? It's, it's, it's top down. It's vertical. And it's free of checks and balances. And, you know, I use that word because people have used different words to try to describe Trump. And I think some accurately, some a little bit less accurately, a lot of the time we throw around the word authoritarian, which in political science has specific definitions. But, you know, we just throw it around to sort of say, you know, not democratic, or we use the word fascist, which I think is sometimes justified. In other words, I've been using the word autocrat's to describe what Trump was trying to do since the time he got elected. And part of the reason I've been using it, it was just to attract attention to the thing itself. Right? When we use a word that we're really used to like authoritarian, we kind of gloss over it. But I wanted people to ask, you know, what is it autocracy? What is he trying to do? And what he is trying to do is he's trying to create the rule of one man without checks and balances.

JVN [00:02:27] So what's the difference between an authoritarian and an autocrat?

MASHA GESSEN [00:02:33] Well, authoritarian actually is a more specific term. I mean, in sort of its strict definition, which is often lost in the conversation, but it's in, its strict definition, it's a one person or a group of people who run a country while everyone else loses the ability to participate in politics. So in an authoritarian country, what they want you to do is they want you to go home and tend to your private life a little bit like during a pandemic. The pandemic, the quarantine is, is kind of like authoritarianism on steroids because there's no public space, there's no politics. There's only a group of people, or one person, who accumulate money and power and everyone else is not paying attention, is excluded from the political process. Right? It's very different from totalitarianism, which is also one person or group of people. But everyone is involved in politics.

Everyone is supposed to be out in the public square. Everyone is supposed to be marching in support of the leader and, or the regime. Right? So, like everything becomes political and under authoritarianism, nothing becomes political. And I think Trump, in what he wants, is actually his more of a totalitarian leader. He wants people to be out in the square. He wants his rallies. He wants, you know, that whole thing. So authoritarian is actually not a terribly accurate word.

JVN [00:03:54] Yeah, I mean, he-.

MASHA GESSEN [00:03:55] But again, my, my beef is not so much what the word, it's just, like, I think autocracy describes the really huge change that's happened in this country.

JVN [00:04:04] Well, I also think that, you know, I can speak for myself on this. I think that so much of what I'm learning, you know, recently in these last few weeks is that we have to be so much more, you know, exacting with our words because they do mean something. And not that I didn't know that they did. But I just, you know, as we talk about defunding police, as we talk about abolishing the police, and it's, like, it's my privilege that allowed me to, like, throw around words and not understand, you know, why they are so important. So I think that I really respect that about you, that you're, you know, and I think we all need to hear that because, you know, what is the difference between a totalitarian or a totalitarian and an autocrat and a fascist and all of these things, because I think for most of us in America at least, we never thought in our wildest dreams that we would be living in the day where we would be led by one. And, you know, certain people. I think you are, one would say that these things have, had been ringing the alarm for some time and I think that so much of us recently are like, holy, holy moly, you know, it's, it is, you know, it is here. I mean, we just saw that, whatever, I want to focus. So I understand what, what autocracy is.

MASHA GESSEN [00:05:21] But can I. Can I just-.

JVN [00:05:22] Yes, please.

MASHA GESSEN [00:05:22] Can I pick up on your point about language? Because I think it's super important and I think you said it beautifully. And, you know, I think that, yeah, we don't pay so much attention to language when we feel like we all live in a shared reality, like you are going to understand me. I'm going to understand you. The person in the next state over is also going to understand us. What Trumpism has done is really undermined our sense of shared reality. And so I think in response to it, we have to be super careful with language. We have to be really intentional in the way we talk to each other and the way we talk about politics.

JVN [00:05:58] Which is something that you talk about, you know, in a, in the book, in "Surviving Autocracy," but is about, like, his speech patterns, which I thought was fascinating. And they're ones that I am really myself bamboozled by and don't, I mean, I obviously, I want to say this with, you know, with, you know, some candor and then also, you know, carefulness. But, like, there are times when I will listen to his speeches and, you know, for a minute or not a minute, that's way too long. For a sentence or two, you'll be like, yeah. And then you're like [gasp]. What? I didn't, like, I did not just agree with him on, and it's never like any of the soundbites of the things that you hear that are like the worst stuff. It's just like little tiny bits of, like, "normalcy," in air quotes. And you also talk about, well, it happens later on, but like, you know, don't fall for these, like, moments of, of him pretending to be a human.

MASHA GESSEN [00:06:58] Or president.

JVN [00:06:58] Yes.

MASHA GESSEN [00:07:00] Jonathan, I mean, I'm not saying this just to make you feel better, but it's happened to me. I mean, I like I, I've made a living off of being a Trump critic and Trump skeptic and a Trump observer for the last three and a half years. And the last time it happened to me was when he did his coronavirus speech on March 11th. And, you know, like, I set it down, set the laptop down on the dinner table as we're having dinner, we're listening to him. And like for a second I thought, wow, you know, he, like, he was serious. He was grave. He acknowledged the gravity of the situation. I was like, what? What did I just think? Because. Because what he had done is he had read from a teleprompter. He, he, his, his tone was fitting to the occasion. But it was as though, for one thing, like the previous, what was it, six weeks of just gaslighting the country and being a complete coronavirus denialist and costing, as we now know, tens of thousands of lives. Because of the, because of not responding to the threat of the pandemic, but also the things he said were completely insane. Like, "I am immediately shutting down all, you know, travel from Europe" as though that were, I mean, first of all, he couldn't do it. Second of all, it's not an anti-pandemic measure, but for a second, because usually he's just, you know, out in the stratosphere saying things that are completely insane when he acts semi-sane for a second. You feel kind of your reality come onto, you know, if not into focus, but at least into some sort of agreement, you're not as schizophrenic as you are the rest of the time under Trumpism. And you're like, yeah.

JVN [00:08:52] That's what I mean. And so, yeah, it's, it's like not. It's, that's, you exactly described what I meant to say in a much better way, which I'm not surprised by. What are some of the ways that your experience leading up to this makes you specially positioned to talk about this autocracy?

MASHA GESSEN [00:09:10] You know, I want to be careful about this, because I don't want to say that Trump is like the Soviet government. He is not. But, and the, you know, the political and cultural history and context in Russia is vastly different than it is in the United States. But I did spend like a quarter century studying totalitarianism.

JVN [00:09:35] Yes.

MASHA GESSEN [00:09:35] And studying sort of the tensions between democracy and non-democracy and why people make certain choices and what is emotionally appealing about an autocrat. And that sort of thing. And so there are a lot of things that I've been thinking about and a lot of models that I'm familiar with that I can sort of apply to, to Trump. So that's, that's what I think makes me special in the position. I don't want to make it sound like my knowledge of, of Soviet history transposes to the United States. It doesn't. Right? But it's just these ideas have been in my head and the readings I've been doing and the interviews I've done over like 25 years.

JVN [00:10:13] Right.

MASHA GESSEN [00:10:14] Have relevance.

JVN [00:10:15] One hundred percent. Fundamentally, like what, what are some of the things that, that Trump has done like, I mean, for instance, "fake news," "alternative facts," "witch hunt," like, what are some of those, um, the key features and the things that he's done to create this landscape of autocracy that seems like it didn't used to be there so much.

MASHA GESSEN [00:10:39] So, you know, the book is divided into three sections, one is in institutions, one is on language and media, and one is on his redefinition of who we are as Americans. And so the middle part of the book is about language and, and the media. And I think that he has done several things. He is. And this is a way in which he's actually, I think, super talented. He is talented as a performer. And, and he's talented in his use of language in a weird way. Even though often he sounds demented. But there is-

JVN [00:11:14] 'Cause it's bamboozling. It's so-

MASHA GESSEN [00:11:16] Right.

JVN [00:11:17] That's, that's the thing about it. It's so, it's, you can tell it's evil. You can tell there's something wrong. But it is so confusing, but it takes a special type of talent to do that. So, yes, lay it on me. Yes.

MASHA GESSEN [00:11:30] So, you know, there, we know that totalitarian regimes use language, use words to mean their opposite. So, like, if you read "1984" in high school, you know, you know, "war is peace." "Ignorance is power." I can't remember. And so totalitarianism does that, and Trump does that, too. He will use words to mean their opposite, especially words that have to do with relationships of power, like, for example, when he says that he is the victim of a witch hunt. I mean, the most, the most powerful man in the universe can't be the victim of a witch hunt. The victim of a witch hunt doesn't have power. It's the other people who have power. That's how witch hunts work. Right? But he does that. He you know, the way he used the word "safe space," the way that he uses, you know, the way that he talks about conspiracies. Right? It's very much he portrays himself as kind of powerless in the face of something huge and threatening. And that really uses language to mean its opposite.

Something else that autocrats do that totalitarian regimes don't really do but contemporary autocrats like Putin do is they just use words to mean nothing. So, like the Russian public sphere is full of expressions that are completely incomprehensible, like, like "managed democracy." What the hell is "managed democracy"? But they're like, they refer, they use it as though it were a special thing. That, that we inhabit it. And Trump does that a lot. I mean, a lot of the time what comes out of his mouth is just incomprehensible. And so it is left up to journalists or to Trump's enablers in the White House to try to make sense of it. Right? And that's, and that's a way of just plunging us into this universe of meaninglessness. And then, of course, sometimes he also uses words to say things that are literally meaningless. Right? Meaning that he takes the meaning out of them. Right? So, for example, when he says, "Inject yourself with disinfectant," and then the next day he said, "I was kidding." I mean, that's just an incredible trick to perform, to say something that is insane. And then to say, "Oh, but I didn't mean it," which establishes that things that the president says, you know, from the White House might actually have absolutely no meaning. But at the same time, while they have no meaning, they have consequences. I mean,

people started injecting, ingesting Clorox and poison centers were over overwhelmed with calls. I mean, this has real life consequences because he is the president.

JVN [00:14:19] So we're going to take a quick break. We'll be right back with more Masha Gessen. Then he also does this thing to the press where he makes you not believe the press. It's like, "I didn't say that." Like, "I didn't mean it." Like, "These are the evil." Is that othering? Where he's, like, saying, like, "You know, the press is always full of fake news and like twisting my words" and like, is that a version of othering or no?

MASHA GESSEN [00:14:44] Yes. And, you know, he establishes that he is, he is the victim of the press and he also establishes that you can't trust the press. And, you know, he has been incredibly effective. And I think we have seen that during the Black Lives Matter process where the police have been targeting journalists all over the country. And this is normally something that, you know, I've done a lot of reporting from conflict zones or countries where that are by no stretch of the imagination democratic. And that's something that you watch out for. When state power targets the media with violence. That's a whole other level of non-democratic. That's really, you're in complete crackdown territory. And Trump has succeeded in creating that, because I don't believe that that's something that we have seen in the United States in the past. You know, back in ACT UP days, you slapped a press pass on yourself and you knew you were safe. Even though the police were not generally nice to ACT UP protesters, being the media, being clearly marked as the media made you safe because there was a kind of recognition that the police and journalists exist in the same kind of political space.

JVN [00:16:03] And that's, just I mean, we saw people being arrested on camera, like on national television. Reporters were being arrested and, and other reporters and local and local media places were being, like, physically assaulted. I mean, it was, you know, as a widespread thing.

MASHA GESSEN [00:16:20] Can I actually add one more thing to-.

JVN [00:16:23] Yes please.

MASHA GESSEN [00:16:23] To the way that Trump does language because I think this is, this is another really important tool that he uses. It's the way that he lies. Right? Because, I mean, obviously, we, we all think that politicians lie. And politicians do lie. But usually they lie, you know, and everybody lies. But we all, lie, usually in a way that's intended to, to get you to believe what we're saying. Right? Like, the dog ate my homework, and I want you to think that the dog ate my homework, but it was actually done.

JVN [00:16:51] Yeah.

MASHA GESSEN [00:16:51] Trump lies about the weather. I mean, literally, he lies about the weather. He lies about things that are empirically just provable and disprovable. And that's a whole other kind of thing. It's a power lie. It's the bully lie. It's, it's him saying I can say whatever I want whenever I want to. And you are going to be forced to engage with it, because I am the president. I have the biggest microphone.

JVN [00:17:20] That's another confusing thing about him is, like, when did he, I know he does that, but I can't think of like a specific like, like when, or like when he says that like they did a

great job preparing for the pandemic. That's like a provable lie. I mean, he said that it was going to, you know, vanish like magic. And then that kind of goes back into the whole gaslighting thing.

MASHA GESSEN [00:17:38] Or when he said that early, you know, it was like late March or even mid-March. He said the testing was no longer a problem. Testing is widely available, and *The New York Times* published this article with the headline, "Trump Says Testing No Longer an Issue. Governors Disagree." Like, you can disagree about facts. You can't. They're not a matter for debate. You just say, Trump lies about testing.

JVN [00:18:08] So that's almost, like, a thing of like, I make this comparison a lot and I need to not to. But it, it actually I do think it makes sense. So in this movie "Dante's Peak" with Pierce Brosnan in the mid 90s, like, this town is like going to, like, get, like, a volcano is going to blow up. And he makes that analogy of if you're a, you know, a frog being boiled like, you know, that whole thing. But if you put a frog in boiling water, like, they jump right out. But I do. It does. I mean, what we saw happen in Georgia in the primaries that as a result of, you know, years of mismanagement and Brian Kemp's, you know, suppressing the vote and, you know, like successful voter suppression tactics. But it's like, we have to understand what he's doing, how he's doing it, and how we can defeat him. And I think part of the issue is, is kind of what you're saying is it's like the whole concept of, you know, of, of understanding facts and communication has always been based on like this, you know, widely agreeable, like what the truth is. And he's not, you know, doing that. So, you know, that's a shame that *The New York Times* is almost like acquiescing to saying, like Donald Trump says, it's not an issue. Governors disagree. But that's based on the fact that, like, it is an issue and like there's no way that Trump, that testing isn't an issue. So to make that as a headline is like misleading and we're almost like turning the boiling on ourselves. So I guess my question is, is like, how is the groundwork kind of laid for him to do this in 2016? Like, you know, how did we get to here? With him in this full fledged autocrat state?

MASHA GESSEN [00:19:42] Well, I think there are a couple of answers, and that's, you know, that's a great question because I think there you know, sometimes we talk about Trump as though he were just a complete anomaly. Right? Like we were just going along. Everything was great. And then suddenly for no reason, except maybe the Russians, Trump happens to us. And I think that's just dead wrong. I think the groundwork was laid for Trump to become a viable presidential candidate. And finally, president. Right? And, and that doesn't mean that he was predetermined. It doesn't mean that he was bound to happen. But it means that he was possible. And then it was a matter of somebody like Trump actually happening. So I think what happened to make him possible is. Probably most important, the marriage of money and power, or money and politics in the United States. You know, we don't question it. We don't question that the Democratic Party apportions seats at the debate table according to how much money you have raised from private donors. That is not normal. That is not you know, that is not how other demo-, democracies in the world function. And you know the elections as, we also think that elections are democracy, which they're not. Democracy is what happens between elections and elections are very imperfect tool for creating representation that allows democracy to happen. But if we screw with our elections to the extent that we have, making them basically possible to buy. Then we have no democracy between elections.

JVN [00:21:27] So one other thing that you talk about, which I think is, you know, it just as far as like the ground work of Trump is that like, you know, this and this doesn't even just go to 2016. It really it's, like, and I can't rec-, because I read so much. I can't remember if it was in an article or

in the book. But you talk about how it's, it was really the prioritization of the feeling of safety by means of, like, an Islamophobia, like, attack on the country, like, after September 11. And kind of like we gave up our, we gave up oversight and transparency in-, can you talk about that a little tiny bit?

MASHA GESSEN [00:22:03] Yes, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I think that-, there are many ways to tell sort of the story of what created the conditions for Trump, but to me, the most important one starts on September 11th, right? That's 9/11. September 11th, 2001, which is when we went into this mentality of a nation under siege. And sacrificed a lot of civil liberties and a lot of American principles. From principles of individual freedom to principles of openness, to immigrants and religious lines, to the altar of imaginary safety. Americans are not original in this. Nations do this. Nations sacrifice freedoms when they feel in danger. But this state of emergency lasted, it has now lasted, its legal state of emergency that has now lasted for 19 years. And it's a mental state emergency. That continues to persist. And Trump has really been able to use that I mean, he's been able to use it because it concentrated power in the executive branch, because it created all sorts of systems of secrecy, because it created, it turned the FBI from a domestic police agency into basically a domestic spy agency, surveillance agency. Right? So he's been able to use all of that, but he's also been able to use the way that we have become this, this country under siege against the world. Right? And he's really been redefining our sense of ourselves as Americans, as being embattled and closed to the rest of the world, which is why I think his anti-immigrant campaign and his, which is legislative and real, has been so incredibly successful. Not just in terms of legislation and policy, but in terms of rhetoric.

JVN [00:24:03] And in the book, you say, "No powerful political actor had set out to destroy the American political system itself. Until that is, Trump won the Republican nomination and he was probably the first major party nominee who ran not for president, but for autocrat. And he won." Chills. So. That's so serious and, and you say, you know, that democracy isn't the vote. It's what happens between the times. And so we saw in 2018, the midterms. I mean, we sent a Democratic majority to the House of Representatives. You know, the Senate. You know, we didn't. Trump has remained the president. We, you know, use the constitutional tool of impeachment, which, you know, he was impeached. He wasn't removed from office, which I think has really only emboldened him since. You talk [in the *NYR Daily* in 2016] about "Believe the autocrat," like, "When he says something, like, believe him," and these rules and they're se-, there's one, two, three. Yeah, there's 6.

MASHA GESSEN [00:25:04] 6, yes.

JVN [00:25:05] Can you lay those out for people kind of listening, like just so that they can be familiar and like becoming their own Masha in in detecting and in, in, you know, building up their own bullshit-o-meter so that they can understand what is going on.

MASHA GESSEN [00:25:21] Yes. Let me see if I can recall them, I don't actually have them in front of me.

JVN [00:25:27] Well, one is believe, believe the autocrat. Which is like he means what he says. That's the first one which I love to talk about.

MASHA GESSEN [00:25:34] Yeah. Right. So, you know, this, this was an essay that I wrote right after the election. And that *The New York Times* actually refused to publish and I sent it to *The New York Review of Books*. But. Believe the autocrat is, it's kind of like Maya Angelou, you know, when someone tells you who they are, believe them the first time. Right? He was saying so many things during the campaign. That seemed so outrageous that people were dismissing them as hot air, as just rhetoric. And my point was that no, he means them. He actually means exactly what he says. And one of the things that he kept saying was, you know, "Drain the swamp," "Run this like a business," and drain the swamp was one of history's campaign slogans. And when he said "drain the swamp," you know, he didn't mean eliminate corruption in Washington. What he meant was destroy the government as it's currently constituted. Because if you listen to him after he said "drain the swamp," you know, he railed against government in general like he thinks the whole, the whole thing-.

JVN [00:26:46] The deep state-.

MASHA GESSEN [00:26:46] Shouldn't exist.

JVN [00:26:47] Yeah, the deep state out. Yeah.

MASHA GESSEN [00:26:49] Exactly. And so when he started making appointments, his cabinet appointments, he would choose people who are not only incompetent. But also actually explicitly opposed to the mission of the agency. So, like, he chooses Betsy Devos to be education secretary. She's actually opposed to public education. She has been an activist against public education. And he chooses Rick Perry to run energy, Rick Perry had no idea what the Energy Department was.

JVN [00:27:20] He was, like, on "Dancing with the Stars." Yeah.

MASHA GESSEN [00:27:24] Exactly. But he still said that it should be eliminated. He chose Ben Carson to run Housing and Urban Development. Ben Carson had no government, policy or management experience. The only thing that made it, I guess, look plausible in Trump's mind is that, you know, Ben, Ben Carson was Black and had lived in the house. But there's something Ben Carson is actually a really interesting example. I mean, I think this is true of all of them. Right? But it's just it's such an obvious example. So two years after he was appointed secretary of housing. He was in a congressional hearing or more than two years even. And Katie Porter asked him about something, she asked him about REOs, which is, which is a very common acronym used, used in housing. And he thought she was talking about cookies. So not only was he incompetent and unqualified when he entered office, but there was no reason for him to think that he should become familiar with this agency like there was no stepping up, because in their mind, stepping up is like stepping down because they, they have absolute disdain for government.

JVN [00:28:30] So then the second part in the point is, don't, do not be taken in by sma-, small signs of normality. And it's like to me that kind of is instituted and also is what makes it so confusing as it like sometimes, he'll appoint people who aren't so, like, aren't so completely incapable, like you think about like a General Mattis or like a Nikki Haley. And obviously General Mattis just came out and said what he said, which was like a blistering rebuke. And I think that some people are slowly waking up. But it's, like, I think sometimes when he can be serious, like

on a March 11th or there are you know, I think another example is the the crime reform package that he signed. What Black people have gone through in this country and the mass incarceration crisis that faces our country like that's what we're literally protesting. So for him to not sign that when it was like, had bipartisan support, like it would have been such upheaval, like he, like, like don't be mistaken. Like he had to do that. It was so blisteringly bad, the position that Black people face, mass incarceration has put us in that. Like if he didn't sign that bipartisan support thing from the Senate Republicans, which kept him in office, he, it wouldn't have, like. So it's like, don't be mistaken that he did like one semi-normal thing, which is what a president's supposed to do, which is, like, sign legislation that both houses pass to him. You know, that is going to help so many Black Americans.

OK, so we're going take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more Masha Gessen after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. How much do you think that that sort of money in politics corruption runs all the way down to like our local elections? Which as we're learning is so important because like, you know, how your mayor cooperates or doesn't cooperate with the police chief. How your district attorney gets elected and decides to, you know, enforce or not enforce, you know, like crimes of poverty or like, you know, marijuana stuff, like we're learning more and more. At least, you know, people that didn't know as much as we should have known. Like what district attorneys do and what mayors do and how important, you know, these local elected officials are, and like even your state, your state Congress and your state Senate. How much do you think those money corruption things like trickle down to those? Which are so important.

MASHA GESSEN [00:30:47] That's a great question. And I have a two part answer to it. So one is it obviously permeates the entire system. Because the entire system of elections is built on fundraising. And, you know, politicians rise through the ranks of legislatures and they rise through the ranks of the party. And the party evaluates them on their fundraising potential. If somebody can't raise money, they can't be a candidate for higher office. So you're running within these two systems at the same time. You're running, you know, the legislative system, representative system, and you're running within the party system. And if the party doesn't see you as a good fundraiser, you're not going to get very far. Right? So it completely permeates the system.

The other part of the answer is we don't know. And that's the huge, huge change that has occurred in the last, say, 12 years. Right? Maybe up to 20. But particularly the last dozen years, which is the disappearance of local media. You know, we used to have journalists in every town reporting on the school board, reporting on the city council. Reporting on the, on the, on the, on the town selectman. Right? We used to have familiarity with how decisions were made. We used to have concerned citizens be able to question, you know, why is the zoning variance granted? What happened there? Why is this developer building a 38 story hotel in our little town? Right? The this was mediated literally, right? Mediated by local newspapers. And that's what we've lost over the last dozen years, is local journalism. We had just about lost it before the pandemic. And what was left of it was, has basically been destroyed by the economic crash caused by the coronavirus. And you know that there's another effect of that, which is that everybody used to know a journalist. Right? You knew your local reporter, you knew who worked for your town's paper and now journalists have become other, which is another reason why it's been so easy for Trump to just villainize the media and to, to, to other journalists, because nobody actually knows a journalist personally anymore.

JVN [00:33:15] That's, I mean, obviously, I come from a family of, like, local media. It's just I mean, we've talked about like how, you know, the destruction of newspaper and print. And it's just, it's just such a disheartening. One thing that I was writing down and just thinking about as we were talking is like, you know, what are, is we talk about the importance of words and the, and the importance of understanding how to use words, understand words so that we can really, like, get this very dangerous person out of office. But it's like this isn't just Trump and it's not just Trumpism. It's a whole collective situation that we're seeing. You know, what to you are the stakes of this election?

MASHA GESSEN [00:33:57] Oh, it's everything. You know, the, so the terminology that I use in the book, I actually borrowed from this Hungarian political scientist, Bálint Magyar. And he lays out a system of how autocracies come into being. So he talks about the first stage being the autocratic attempt. And then the next stage is autocratic breakthrough and then autocratic consolidation.

JVN [00:34:23] Autocratic attempt.

MASHA GESSEN [00:34:24] Autocratic break through, autocratic consolidate.

JVN [00:34:28] Taking notes.

MASHA GESSEN [00:34:29] And, and autocratic attempt is the period when you have somebody who's trying to govern as an autocrat. But you can still reverse it by electoral means. And that's the big question that faces us in November. Trump has already laid the groundwork for not recognizing the results of the election. He has already talked about, you know, millions of immigrants voting illegally. He was even talking about that in 2016, a complete, you know, complete evil fantasy, total lie that he kept just reiterating. Now he is talking about voter fraud. He is talking about how voting by mail will lead to voter fraud. Again, total evil fantasy. There's absolutely no evidence. I mean. Somehow there, you know, there are lots of problems with U.S. elections. Voter fraud is not one of them. We just haven't seen voter fraud on any scale that could affect the outcome of elections. And so, and so he creates this boogeyman and he creates it for a reason. Which is that he's afraid of losing the election and he wants to lay the groundwork for not recognizing the results of the election. And so we have, we have a double danger in two ways of looking at just how incredibly high the stakes are in November. One is that we just have the risk of him being voted back into office. And the other is that we have the risk of him being voted out of office and refusing to recognize that.

JVN [00:36:00] Do you think that it would have to be such an overwhelming loss for him in order for him to be taken out by, you know force or-?

MASHA GESSEN [00:36:09] Exactly. You know, when we talk about, it's so hard, I mean, even for me, even having written this book, it's really hard for me to talk about this country the way I would, like, write about other countries. But when we talk about other countries, when we talk about countries where it is actually conceivable that the president or the prime minister, whoever is the elected leader, would refuse to recognize the results of the elections. We always talk about who, whose side the military will be on. And we talk about, sort of, this concept of legitimacy, which is very difficult to put your finger on. But at election time, legitimacy is determined by the margin. Is he going to lose by tens of thousands of votes like he won in 2016? That's not going to

give his opponents a lot of legitimacy. That's not going to give his opponent a lot of leverage in getting Trump out of office. Or is he going to lose by millions, in which case that sense of legitimacy will be overwhelming. And in which case, you know, Trump will be forced to leave office by the uniformed services.

JVN [00:37:20] So, you know, when you when you talk about at the beginning about like, you know, when a, when an autocrat says something like, believe him, or them, you know, could be any gender of an autocrat. But like.

MASHA GESSEN [00:37:31] Usually it's a he though.

JVN [00:37:34] Usually, classically has been. Although some day there could be a fierce non-binary autocrat or woman autocrat, but I don't want to joke about that. But someday. But anyway, so he has said, you know, voter fraud. He has created this boogeyman of voter fraud. He's also created this, you know, the deep state myth, which I think could really delegitimize like any institution, whether it's a voting one or, you know, whatever. And so, you know, one thing that you say in the book is that, like, you know, Russians didn't elect Donald Trump. Like, yes, they meddled. But like, they didn't elect him like the American, we elected him. Obviously, people need to read "Surviving Autocracy," first of all, but-. I guess, parting words, what are the things that that people need to really understand? I mean, the, the, what's the name of the guy or the person who you like took the, borrowed the science from on like when people?

MASHA GESSEN [00:38:32] Bálint Magyar.

JVN [00:38:34] So and so right now, in that timeline, in that chronological time, like we're in, we're still in the autocratic attempt.

MASHA GESSEN [00:38:40] Right. So we still have a chance. And we'd better use that chance because after the breakthrough, it's going to be really hard. And if possible, it's going to just come at great cost. Like great cost to human life. We're already paying with human lives. Right? But the costs will go up. So, you know, he has appointed not just two Supreme Court justices, but more federal judges than any president. He has stacked the judiciary, which is a very, very important part of an autocratic attempt. Now, he hasn't just appointed people who are extremely conservative in their views. Right? In fact, Kavanaugh, Brett Kavanaugh, you know, he's not that tremendously conservative as far as I can tell. He tends to vote with the majority. But he has appointed people who are opposed to the very culture and principles of the courts. Right? Who kind of view the courts the way Trump views the courts, which is, you know, he views the law as an obstacle. He has appointed people who are inexperienced. He's appointed people who were bloggers when the people who are unqualified. He has the same kind of disdain for the courts. As he does for the, for the federal government in general. And so you're absolutely right. You know, even if we vote him out of office, we're going to be stuck with this extremely problematic judicial system. He has also really destroyed, I mean he's destroyed federal agencies, he's decimated the State Department, he has decimated the CDC, he's decimated the Department of Education and on and on and on and on.

And he has also really severely damaged the system of checks and balances. You know, he's been on this rampage of firing the inspectors general. The inspectors general, for people who don't know and most people don't know. It's, they've been in existence for 50 years, this institution,

and basically Congress created these offices of people who oversee federal agencies, the way that they function and the way that they spend congressionally allocated money. So it's a system of consistent oversight, congressional oversight over federal agencies, which was made necessary by just how complex were, they were and how much money was going into them? So the inspector general, you know, they regularly write reports. They regularly conduct audits. But when Congress created these offices, they didn't create, create a defense against the president firing inspectors general because I guess it didn't occur to Congress that a president could be such a bad actor. That he would, he would start fire, destroying the system of checks and balances. So at this point, Trump, you know, he's been, he's been firing them one after another at the moment that they become inconvenient. And that means that if we vote him out of office, we're not just going to magically be transported to some perfectly great pre-Trumpian time, which never existed in the first place. We're going to be facing an imperfect federal government that has been severely damaged. And so we're going to have to reinvent it.

JVN [00:42:11] So last question. I swear. So in, in being someone who experienced the rise of an autocrat and has, you know, has written about it. I'm talking about Putin in this case. You know, the first part of your career, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, was really writing about Russia and writing about, like European things. And then now since like '16, it's like it's really been very American focused. And we talk about or we talked about, like what are the stakes? And, you know, why do we have to understand, exactly how to understand what's going on now so that we can defeat him, but should we not? I think this is, you know, not to end on such a like downer moment, but it's like, what is it if Trump doesn't last forever but if he experiences an autocrat breakthrough and he wins by some huge majority and Republicans continue to allow him to erode these civil liberties and he continues to destroy institutions, do you think there's a possibility where there could be a President Trump for, like, 16 years? Is there like a world where he appoints an Eric Trump? Like is this, do you think this could be the beginning of just a complete reversal of American history as we know it? If he experiences an autocratic breakthrough? If he gets to that phase?

MASHA GESSEN [00:43:24] Absolutely. Yes. Yes. It's not, you know, we have this deep faith in our institutions. And I think that's, you know, part of that faith is just a failure of the imagination. You know, no system is perfect. No system lasts forever. Our system is not that great at defending itself against a bad faith actor. And that's what we've been observing. Right? And, you know, we talked a little bit about sort of the small signs of normality and, there's a nor-, natural human tendency to look at that and, you know, to look for a reassurance, to sort of say, OK, the sun came up in the morning. Thank God. You know, we're still, we're still around. Not a terrible thing, but a lot of the time we'll look at our institutions and say, oh, well, they're still withstanding his attack. That's not what we should be looking at. We should be looking at how much damage he's been able to do in three and a half years. It's an enormous amount, frankly. It's more than I expected he would be able to do. I thought it would be more like of an autocratic creep, but it's been like an autocratic sprint. And, and so nothing is off the table. Nothing is unimaginable. We really, really have to mobilize because we could be looking at decades of Trumpism and that's, you know, and that's even if he doesn't try to delay the election, which is also something that I'm really, really worried about.

JVN [00:44:45] That took my breath away when you said that. I mean, because I was going to ask you before and, and then it slipped my mind but I was going to, I obviously knew it wasn't better than you thought, but I was gonna ask has this presidency been, like, as bad as you thought or

worse? And you answered that for me. So is there anything else that, like, I could talk to you literally like 17 hours. Like, I just think you are so brilliant. And I mean you, I literally have chills from the belly button down, like I just am. I just. Yeah. But is it, it's like that Yogi recess part of the podcast where like, is there anything you feel we missed? Is there any place where you're particularly active, you know, on Twitter or is it read the book, like, how can people keep up with you?

MASHA GESSEN [00:45:24] Oh, definitely read the book and read my columns in *The New Yorker*. But you know what I want to say? I actually have hope. Because I think that we're in a revolutionary moment right now. I mean, the protests have been amazing and they haven't just been amazing because there's so many people out in the streets all over the country, you know, in a sustained way in large cities and small towns, you know, young people of, of all races and languages and creeds and colors and just, you know, just beautiful. But they've also been amazing and I think unprecedented in the way that we have seen how they make institutions act. Right? And this is a really important point, because I think Americans really tend to, to, to forget about this. Right? We think that institutions kind of exist in a vacuum. You create them and then they do their job.

JVN [00:46:13] Yeah. We take them for granted.

MASHA GESSEN [00:46:13] We really see-. Yeah. We really see how we all create the circumstances for institutions to function. You know, the, the way that city councils have, have started stepping up and cutting police budgets, the way that the New York state legislature repealed 50-a, which was the provision that allowed for police secrecy. You know, that, that, and opened up police records in a matter of days. You know, that's, that's an example for us about people power. And, you know, just the incredible effects of people acting collectively. And the third thing that is really unprecedented about these protests is just the way that ideas that were so marginal, you know, just a few weeks ago, like defund the police. Are now not only being discussed, but actually are starting to see, to be realized legislatively. And that's what I think really marks a revolutionary moment, is when things that seemed completely farfetched become so very, very quickly assimilated. So we have this incredible momentum. And, you know, it's up to all of us to keep it going. We could not only win, but we could actually, like, create a much better country than we had before Trump.

JVN [00:47:33] I can't think of a better way to end the podcast than on that, on that vision. Which that's where our imagination needs to be is we really do have a chance to create a much better country than we had before Trump. Masha Gessen, thank you so much for your time.

MASHA GESSEN [00:47:52] I think this was great. This was so enjoyable. Thank you.

JVN [00:47:52] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was the journalist and author of "Surviving Autocracy" Masha Gessen. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson.