

Democracy in Danger

S2E16: Moscow Duel

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:12] Well, I'm going to date myself a bit here, but I remember vividly when the Berlin Wall came down and then a few years later, the Soviet Union broke apart. It was a momentous time. The Cold War was ending and Eastern Europe was reopening to the world.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:30] Yes, even as a student in those years, I recall the early 90s were filled with this hope, the promise of a new democratic order in the former communist bloc. And, of course, some of those expectations were met. I mean, we look at countries like the Czech Republic, Poland and elsewhere, even in some former Soviet republics like Ukraine. As Serhii Plokhii told us on a recent episode, there's been extraordinary Democratic growth, but things have not turned out so well in the biggest state of them all, Russia.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:59] No, they have not. Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, has dominated politics there for more than two decades. He has done this by throwing dissidents in jail, by torturing and killing those who cross him, and by manipulating elections. And along the way, he and his cronies have amassed perhaps billions of dollars. And yet we have seen democratic movements in Russia rise above and rise again. Even recently, there have been massive protests in response to the arrest of pro-democracy activist Alexei Navalny. Navalny had been poisoned by a Russian made nerve agent, and after recovering from that poisoning while in Germany, Navalny returned to Russia, where he was immediately detained. Until a few weeks ago, Navalny had been on a hunger strike and near death to protest his treatment in detention.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:53] Yeah, and let's not forget Siva, this story of Putin's power and his corruption, it goes way beyond just Russia. Russian intelligence officials have orchestrated efforts to destabilize democratic institutions in other countries with cyber attacks, disinformation and in some cases, outright military action.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:02:11] Well, perhaps no one has written more incisively about post-Cold War Russia than our guest today. Masha Gessen is a staff writer at The New Yorker. Masha has covered the rise of Putin and the staying power of autocracy in Russia. We've invited Masha to walk us through these convulsions in Russian politics and the country's prospects for moving forward. Masha. Welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Masha Gessen [00:02:37] Hello. It's great to be here.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:02:38] Well, Masha, you were born in Moscow. You grew up in Russia, in the United States. You've worked as a journalist in both countries. You have been an activist and an outspoken critic of Putin. You've defended LGBTQ rights in Russia and you've paid a price for all that. Well, could you start by sharing something of your

personal story, your relationship to your native country, and tell us where you are now?

Masha Gessen [00:03:00] So, yeah, my family came to the United States when I was 14, in 1981, and then I went back in 1991 and stayed for more than 20 years. I left Russia at the end of 2013 with my family because the government was threatening to take my adopted son out of the family and by implication also threatening the biological kids because they were being raised by a lesbian couple. I want to put this in context briefly, which is that at the time, the Kremlin was really making an effort to force everybody who had been involved with the protests of 2011, 2012 had been in the leadership of the presence of 2011, 2012 out of the country. So, you know, Garry Kasparov was threatened with criminal charges, as were a number of other people. And I was threatened with having my kids taken away. And like many, many other people, I made the choice to leave the country. I don't feel it was a voluntary choice. I still think of myself as living in exile. It's nice where I live. I like New York City and I have a nice career here, but I'm not home and I don't get to do the work that I really wanted to do.

Will Hitchcock [00:04:14] Let me ask you to take us back to an earlier work on Putin that you wrote, *The Man Without a Face*. And you sort of work through the problem of how this, you know, bland, mediocre figure, an old school KGB agent rose to preeminence in Russia after the Cold War. It's a long story, but you thought so much about it, spoken so much about it. What explains his success in acquiring power, holding on to power, but also how has he managed in the face of persistent, maybe not overwhelming, but persistent, social protest movements that do keep doggedly emerging in Russia?

Masha Gessen [00:04:48] Putin has been terrified of mass protest ever since he came to power and really protest in general. And has been quite open about it. He's offered up his recollections of the protests in East Germany when he was stationed there as a KGB agent and just has conveyed incredible fear at even those memories. And he has reacted to protests, up until recently, in a way that was almost disproportionate to protest, even though Russians have now for more than a decade lacked any levers that would have allowed protests to turn into actual change. We haven't had a parliament that's capable of independent action. We haven't had a judiciary that is independent to any extent at all. So Putin's fear of protest has actually been kind of irrational. And I think something very significant has happened and very tragic has happened in the last 9, 10 months, which is that Putin has observed the crackdown in Belarus, where we have seen truly mass protests on a scale that Russia has never even approached - where every little village, every small town, every planned apartment block in the city of Minsk - people have been protesting consistently for months and months and months on end. And the regime has responded by cracking down, by jailing people, by torturing people, by killing several people. But most of all, it has responded by refusing to budge. And I think Putin has looked at that and thought, oh, that was an option all along. I can just refuse to budge and I can just crack down brutally. And I think that's why we've seen a real escalation in Russia where they've been very blatantly just destroying Navalny's organization, which poses the greatest risk that Putin's regime has ever seen because Navalny has figured out ways to undermine all the pillars of the Putin regime. But Putin is still in power and Putin can pull a Lukashenko and just refuse to budge. And that's what he's doing.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:54] So Belarus is one lesson that he's reading. And the other might be, you know, the failure of East Germany in 1989 to invoke the so-called Chinese solution. I mean, are these things that you think are active as he's weighing his options?

Masha Gessen [00:07:07] I think you're absolutely right. I think he's never concealed his bitterness over the Soviet Union's - what he saw, I think, as the Soviet Union's weakness and also betrayal, right? He, as a KGB agent stationed in Dresden, felt betrayed by Moscow, which wouldn't send troops when he was feeling that he was legitimately there felt attacked.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:07:29] Well, we've seen similar brutality and similar stubbornness in Myanmar. And so perhaps the dictators around the world are taking notes from each other and exchanging strategies. Now, you've expressed some skepticism about relying on a Reichstag fire kind of analysis, right. To go back to Germany in German history, the sense that a single key moment emerges when a strongman can consolidate power during a crisis. But Putin himself has had quite a few, at least many Reichstag fires. Right. I mean, he's had the strategy of manufacturing crises to strengthen his power at different points or at least ramp it up. So I'm thinking about the wars in Chechnya and Georgia and Ukraine. How have you seen these conflicts shaping or complicating his opposition - democratic movements or human rights efforts in Russia? What has been the effect of these of these conflicts during his twenty-two years?

Masha Gessen [00:08:28] So, you know, the reason I've pushed back against the Reichstag fire analysis is there are actually two reasons. One is that, you know, we collapse the Holocaust a single moment. We collapse Hitler's consolidation of power to a single moment. But in fact, six years passed between the Reichstag fire and the start of World War II, five years passed between the Reichstag fire and the Anschluss. So what happened during those years? What happened in the years between the start of World War II and the end of the catastrophe for the Jewish people, which is 1944, like people who were living and making choices about action. And so that's what's always interested me in. A lot of my books have been about that. But the other reason that I really resist the Reichstag fire imagery is that I think it creates the very definitely false impression that the people in the country, people on the ground can recognize a moment and say, oh, now we have crossed the line. You know, Russians are telling this joke right now about crayfish being boiled in a pot. And one says to another, you know, 10 degrees ago, it was really quite nice. And that kind of sums up the experience of actually living in an autocracy is that, you know, I left Russia seven years ago, but compared to what it is now, seven years, it goes really quite nice.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:57] Can I come back to to Navalny, who you mentioned before, Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader, and he's said to be the man Putin fears the most, but you, I think, have some mixed feelings about Navalny and perhaps you could talk a little bit about that. And do you think he is the man that Putin fears? Do Democratic activists have alternatives that they might turn to other than Navalny?

Masha Gessen [00:10:20] So I think with Navalny being pretty consistently now at death's door for the last eight months, it's not a good time to talk about any mixed feelings. And really, my feelings about him are no longer mixed, like they were maybe mixed years ago when there was a kind of field of Democratic activists in Russia. That's no longer the case. He is it and he is it, in part because he has been so stalwart and so brave and because he's refused to go into exile. But I think he's also been - in addition to being stalwart, he's also been incredibly inventive and strategic in the face of overwhelming power. And I would say that he has attacked Putin in exactly the three areas that maintain Putinism. And those three areas are fear now bordering on terror. Domination over the information sphere. And a kind of manufactured legitimacy. Right. So the manufactured legitimacy is

the trickiest part of it. As you might have heard, Russia has elections. It has events that are called elections. They have predictable outcomes. There's no free and open access to them. There's no free and open access to the media that would allow people to campaign. There's no access to the ballot. I mean, there's no way to actually call the elections in any traditional sense. But still, Russia continues to have them. That's to maintain the idea that Putin's regime is the most legitimate and the only option and that's necessary for Putin to maintain power because in the end, a dictator relies on the uniformed services and the uniformed services are only loyal to a leader that they perceive as legitimate. And because there's no real free media, there's really no other mechanism of feedback. So there's no way to question how real this legitimacy is.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:18] So how has Navalny managed to challenge that manufactured legitimacy?

Masha Gessen [00:12:24] So, you know, so there are these three pillars of the regime. And what Navalny has done is he has managed to circumvent Putin's control over the information sphere by creating this YouTube channel where they put out these movies, these really funny, incredibly vivid movies about their investigations into corruption. And they have these his biggest investigation, the one into Putin's palace on the Black Sea, which he released after he was arrested in January. It has been seen by every Russian adult. So we have like a very clear quantitative indicator of how he has destroyed Putin's monopoly on the information sphere. And they've also devised a system for circumventing his control over these fake elections. The way that these elections are structured is that they're these sort of fake competitors to the candidate of United Russia, which is the party of power. And there's always sort of a left party, a pocket party that's more to the left of United Russia and one that's to the right of the United Russia. And so they they get a little bit of the protest vote and then most people sit it out and then Putin emerges or the candidate of the party in power emerges with more than 50 percent of the vote in what looks on paper like a federal election. And Navalny's organization has called on people to exercise what they called a smart vote, where they choose a candidate of those who have been allowed to get on the ballot and ask people to not sit it out and to vote for the just one candidate who is running against the party of power. And they've actually been successful in a couple of local elections around the country. And that's absolutely terrifying to Putin because that undermines this whole system of manufactured legitimacy. It's a bit of a cynical approach because they're not actually voting for a candidate, but it is a way of mobilizing the protest potential. But it also proves just how powerful and credible Navalny's organization is because they get people to vote for just anybody. And that's really like sent the Kremlin into hysterical fear. And then the last the third pillar is fear, which Navalny is showing by his own example, how to not act out of fear. And that is those three things are what make Navalny the most formidable and the first formidable opponent to Putin. And that, unfortunately, is what's causing the current really, really brutal crackdown.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:14:54] So Putin like almost every dictator we've seen, relies on violence, threats of violence, fear and loyalty. But he also seems to be a specialist in knowledge politics. In your book, *The Future Is History* you write that the Soviet Union throughout its time waged a war on knowledge and in particular, a war on the social sciences, on history, on philosophy. And of course, we in the academy find this deeply chilling. Many of us found it chilling during the Cold War. And we see similar things happening now. Now, this, of course, but as you've explained in your book, that two generations or more of Russians lost the depth that they needed to understand their own place in time, their ability to evaluate their political circumstances. I'm wondering if you see anything similar happening during the last two decades in Russia in the Putin era? Do

Russians today have the freedom, the curiosity, the skill, the perspective to critically evaluate their own politics now?

Masha Gessen [00:15:55] That's a great question. And unfortunately, I think the answer is no. And, you know, I feel that really strongly when I travel around the former Soviet bloc. I mean, it's been more than a generation, right? There have been lots and lots of young people who are not so young people who've been educated in the post-Soviet moment. And you can really tell just how much Russia is lagging behind. Right. And I want to be clear on what I mean by that. I don't know, there's a Russian sociologist who got her Ph.D. in the States and went back to teach in Russia quite a while ago, probably almost 20 years ago now. And she wrote down some of her first impressions after returning, including an academic discussion that she witnessed. And she said it was a debate between two very intelligent, very educated people, one of whom had been educated in the 20th century and the other in the 19th century. And that's kind of what I mean. Right. I mean, Russia has, to a significant extent, missed out on the benefits of contemporary theory in every area of social sciences. And we often forget just to what extent that theory drives our current conversation anywhere in the world that we think of as democratic, whatever that might mean - in Russia it's not there, right. So we would have to - and that's not necessarily a terrible thing - that Russia would have to invent democracy all over again if there were a change in power. But I think that a loss of sort of intellectual language, the loss of intellectual skill is something that will set us back even more after Putinism than it did after the Soviet Union.

Will Hitchcock [00:17:42] I wonder if I could ask you to comment on one perhaps common thread between the US and Russia that is very tragic. The ugly discourse around sort of sexual panic and homophobia seems to have been mainstreamed even through legislation in Russia and here in the US we're passing through what I feel like as a particularly cruel moment of hostility. And I just wonder if I'm right and there is this commonality, is it related to this passage through a time in which democracy itself seems to be eroding? What is the connection between a drift to illiberalism and this extraordinary sort of outburst of hatred and intolerance towards women, towards LGBTQ communities? What's the link if there is one?

Masha Gessen [00:18:31] You know, I think of all contemporary autocracies that I'm aware of as being past oriented. There's a kind of past oriented politics of the future of anti-politics. And I get these ideas from Erich Fromm. You know, Fromm has argued back in 1940 that the drive to autocracy is animated by anxiety about the future. When enough people are so terrified of the need to imagine their own future, to invent themselves in an incomprehensible world, that they want to hand over their agency to somebody who will promise them stability and the return to an imaginary past. And I think that that's what we saw in Russia after the 1990s. I think that's what we saw in the United States when Americans elected Trump. I think that that's what we see in Poland now. We really know, between 2012 and 2015, we really saw a struggle between past oriented and future oriented politics and past oriented politics won. And it relies on performing a kind of reversal, right, a reversal of social change. The promise that Putin, that Trump, that Kaczynski make to their people is I'll take you back to a time when you felt comfortable, when you felt safe and when the things that you know, that irritate you, that make you feel like you don't know the world that you're living in, then those things are taken away. And so they have to start by reversing the most recent social change. And the most recent social change basically, all over the Western world has to do with gender and sexuality, whether it's the recognition of same sex marriage or the recognition of the unreliable narratives of gender, or just the recognition of the existence of lesbian and gay people, all

of those things can be sort of pointed to and then demonstratively reversed. And I think that that is absolutely what connects Wooten's law against so-called propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations and Poland's LGBT free zones and the anti trans bills that are being pushed by the Republican Party all over the United States right now.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:20:42] Right. So what about in Russia? Are there figures, writers, thinkers who are striking a moral message that can help forge a vision for a better Russia?

Masha Gessen [00:20:53] You know, actually, I've been incredibly impressed with Alexei Navalny in that his ideas keep evolving. And he's actually been talking about the beautiful Russia of the future for quite a while now. My one of my criticisms of him for many years was that he talked about the Putin regime as a regime of thieves and crooks. And I thought that was kind of not it wasn't looking at the heart of things, because at the heart of things, they are - they're killers and tyrants. And along the way they also steal and lie. Right. And he and I have talked about this and he has countered by saying, no, they exercised tyranny and they kill people in order to amass more wealth. But what he talked about most recently as he was being sentenced to jail was he gave this beautiful statement in which he said, look, we shouldn't just be talking about - I'm paraphrasing - we shouldn't just be talking about a Russia that's well governed and that's fair. We should be talking about a happier Russia. And the slogan that his movement had used was 'Russia will be free' and now they've changed it to 'Russia will be happy'. And I actually think that that's a beautiful way to project a more humanistic message and to sort of refocus the fight from let's stop these people from stealing to let's make life better for each other. Together. Which should be the purpose of all politics.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:22:29] Well, Masha Gessen, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger and lending us your own moral vision. It's always enlightening and refreshing to read your work and now to hear your voice. So thank you very much.

Masha Gessen [00:22:44] Thank you very much for having me.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:22:52] That was Masha Gessen, a staff writer for The New Yorker and a distinguished writer in residence at Bard College in upstate New York. Gessen is the author of numerous books, most recently *Surviving Autocracy*. Gessen also wrote the book *The Future Is History*, which won the National Book Award in 2017.

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Will Hitchcock [00:24:05] So, Siva, we are recording this in late May, in just a few days after the dictator in Belarus forced down an airplane in order to capture a single person on board that plane, a dissident who had been particularly effective in using social media to

encourage and inform the protesters who are protesting in Belarus right now. This is a capsule of the ways in which the strongmen persist. They have power. They have a surveillance state at their beck and call. And yet the struggle continues. The dissidents continue. They're still in the streets in Belarus, but they're also in the streets in Russia. And I think we don't know if the glass is half empty or half full. Masha Gessen suggests that there is both durability in the protest movement and in the ideology of protest and in the courage that is motivating them. But Putin is a figure who commands enormous resources, not just money, but the power of the state. I mean, this is a figure who has cast a terribly dark shadow over not just Europe, but really world affairs since the beginning of the twenty first century.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:25:18] I mean, we opened this episode, this conversation with our own nostalgic reflections on those years between 1989 and 1992 and our youthful selves being just so optimistic about the unfolding and the opening of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. You know, I haven't lost that hope. And listening to Masha Gessen, I can't help but be reinvigorated with this notion that throughout the former Soviet Union, throughout those republics, including in Belarus, we see time and time again people rise up and demand dignity, demand autonomy, demand democracy. I don't know if Navalny is the hero of this story. I don't think Masha Gessen knows if Navalny is the hero of this story. But the very fact that a Navalny can exist and that we can know about him says to me that there is some hope.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:16] One of the things that we are seeing in Russia, in Belarus and in many other countries that we have talked about on this show, from India to Brazil to Turkey, is that there is still a doggedness, a persistence, a crying out for democracy, for individual rights. And that suggests that the war on knowledge has failed. It has taken a toll, of course, but people want change. They want rights. They want freedom. And against all odds, they're still fighting.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:26:50] That's all we have this week on Democracy in Danger. Next time, we'll turn to my family's ancestral homeland, India. It's the world's most populous democracy. Or is it?

Vidya Krishnan [00:27:01] India is not a democracy at this point. The young people do not want religion and they don't want temples. They want hospitals and they want schools. And that's where our answers are to be found.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:15] In the meantime, do your part to help save democracy. Subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast player. Share us on social media and tweet to us @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast or visit DinDanger.org to read up on this and all our past episodes.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:27:34] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Eli Bashkow.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:43] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:27:59] And I'm Siva Vaidyanathan. Until next time.