“I like kitties and puppies and little animals,” Vladimir Putin told Masha Gessen in 2012.

This was a strange way for the Russian president to start a conversation with a journalist whose scathing biography of him was receiving rave reviews around the world.

When the two met, Gessen had just been fired as the editor of Vokrug Sveta, a popular science magazine, for refusing to cover one of Putin’s media stunts. (Putin had piloted a motorized hang glider while ostensibly escorting six endangered Siberian cranes to their winter homes.) Putin had reached out to offer Gessen her job back—apparently uninformed of her unflattering assessments of the former KGB officer. Gessen declined. She would never work “as a Kremlin appointee,” she explained later.

(“Don’t make compromises” would become one of her six rules for surviving an autocracy.)

Gessen was born in the Soviet Union, and moved to Boston with her family when she was 14. In 1991, she went back to Russia as a young reporter, and soon made her name as an LGBT rights activist and a Putin critic. In 2013, with the Kremlin threatening to take away the children of gay parents, she fled to the U.S. with her wife and kids.

Since then, Gessen has written or co-edited four books, including The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy on the Tsarnaev brothers who carried out the Boston Marathon bombings.

Having spent over two decades watching Russia slide into dictatorship, Gessen is now terrified of the damage President Donald Trump could do to American democracy.

World Policy Journal spoke with Gessen about Putin, the U.S. media, and what citizens can do to protect a country from authoritarianism.
World Policy Journal: In The New York Review of Books, you called Russia a “mafia state.” What makes Russia a mafia state, and how does that differ from a fascist one?

Masha Gessen: The term “mafia state” was introduced by a Hungarian social scientist named Bálint Magyar. There’s nothing wrong with describing Russia as a fascist state; it’s just not very precise. A mafia state is a much more specific term, which was developed to describe a particular kind of post-communist regime. A fascist state, at this point, is such an expandable term that I don’t think it’s terribly informative. In the most general sense, a fascist state is a state that is run by a far-right, nationalist government on a basis of everything of the state and everything for the state. That’s pretty accurate when applied to Russia, although what you define as right and not right in a Russian context is a little tricky. And I wouldn’t call Russia a nationalist state—at this point, it’s an imperialist state. So “fascist” is just not informative.

WPJ: You’ve argued that Trump could introduce to the world a “post-democratic mafia state.” How is that different from Putin’s post-communist mafia state?

MG: It’s exactly what it sounds like. Magyar is very precise about the fact that what has allowed these mafia states to flourish in Hungary and in Russia is that they were built on the ruins of a totalitarian society. The instruments they can use and the way they can instrumentalize things like ideology is specific to societies that have lived through totalitarianism. In the States, we don’t have that experience at all, and we see society responding to the signals from Washington in entirely different ways—thank God—than you would expect in a post-communist country.

WPJ: What warning signs should we be looking for to determine if a country is becoming a post-democratic mafia state?

MG: “Post-democratic mafia state” is not a defined term. What I was writing in that piece is that Magyar has published two books and a number of articles on what constitutes a post-communist mafia state. But we don’t know what a post-democratic mafia state looks like. We know what mafia-like governments look like, and that is exactly what Trump is creating. It’s all centered on him. He plays more of a distributor role. The way Putin acts or the way [Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán acts is that they accumulate all the control, and then they hand out a little bit of wealth and a little bit of influence to all the people who are loyal to them. Trump is starting to create that kind of distributive system, which is very different from a tightly controlled system that delegates in very controlled ways. Trump’s basing a lot of decisions on personal loyalty. We saw that during the formation of the cabinet—bringing his family into the cabinet is literally mafia-style. And it’s very clear that his primary motivation is greed. It’s dominance, it’s power, but mostly it’s greed. That’s what we see in Russia and in Hungary, and now I think we’re starting to see it in the States.

WPJ: You’ve said that autocratic power requires the degradation of moral authority. How do autocrats accomplish this, and how can regular citizens reaffirm the right to judge good and evil?

MG: Autocratic power requires the degradation of moral authority because moral authority is the only thing you can’t buy and you can’t come by through your title. You earn it, or you don’t. And what makes it even more confusing is that you can’t set out to earn more moral authority. It’s almost an externality of consistent and very long-term moral behavior. And that’s why it’s such a threat to autocratic power. It wields power through instruments that are inaccessible to autocrats. Moral authority can’t be bought, captured, or declared.
The way autocrats degrade morality is by attacking the very idea of moral judgments—true nihilism or its mild form, cynicism. Constant lying is the most nihilistic behavior there can be. We see it in the way Trump went after Representative [John] Lewis when he said he’s all talk and no action. Talk is the instrument of morality, and Trump is degrading that by saying, if all these people are talking, it makes no difference. There is something extraordinary about the brazen way this administration exposes its corruption and its cynicism. Hannah Arendt wrote extensively about the value of hypocrisy in government and in civilization. Hypocrisy is not the same as lying. Hypocrisy is constantly paying dues to certain social compacts, trying to observe the appearance of decency, if nothing else. The fact that this administration doesn’t observe the appearance of decency implies that not only is this administration rotten to the core, but everything in the world is rotten to the core, and that’s just how it works. In that context, of course you respect Putin. That’s nihilism, and that’s how it degrades moral authority.

The way that society fights it is by maintaining a sense of outrage. Many of the catchphrases of the resistance have gotten exactly to that point, like when people keep saying, “This is not normal.” The moment we accept nihilism as normal is the moment we lose the ability to judge good and evil. Stay outraged. By protesting, by maintaining healthy public debates in the media and other public spaces, we maintain it. When Meryl Streep spoke at the Golden Globes, that’s a way of maintaining a sense of moral authority. It’s publicly speaking to the people in your profession and establishing a moral compass among them. That sort of thing is hugely important. The fact that it didn’t happen to the same degree at the Grammys is sad. Those are the kinds of forums in which it should be happening.

**WPJ:** At the level of language, how does one keep the abnormality and violence of this administration alive?

**MG:** It’s really hard. I read *The New York Times* pretty closely—it’s my hometown newspaper and also the one I write for—and it keeps zig-zagging. They find wonderful tools for pointing out the abnormalities, as you said. They finally used the word “lies” in the headlines—that’s really good. At the same time, the institutional memory of an institution as old and set in its ways as *The New York Times* is really hard to overcome. *The New York Times* recently wrote about Trump in a way that marked the opposition to Trump as abnormal and Trump as the mainstream. It portrayed a feud he was having as a feud between him and the black community. In the subtitle, it said “many blacks say” that what Trump had said was disrespectful. The problem was that the objective truth—and there is such a thing—was that what Trump had done was wrong and disrespectful. Using the crutch “many blacks say” marked this position as marginal, and that’s where the objective style is in conflict with objective truth.

**WPJ:** Are there publications or writers that you think are doing a particularly good job at this moment?

**MG:** Everyone is struggling, but there’s some really great writing going on. One way in which this country is completely different from other countries where people like Trump have come...
to power is the health of the public debate, the health of the public sphere. I really hate when people talk about the liberal bubble versus the conservative bubble, because that’s not accurate. A majority of people in this country live in a pretty damn healthy public sphere, where they consume a variety of viewpoints. Most people cross-pollinate a lot, and it’s not in any way equivalent to the bubble in which the Breitbart people live. If you look at them, they really do consume a single media outlet or one large media outlet such as Breitbart and a couple of tiny alt-right websites that are basically the same as Breitbart, only more explicit. There is no cross-pollination going on there. The people in that bubble are not exposed to people who think any differently from them. And so what we have in this country is a bubble of people, Breitbart-type people, and a much larger part of the population that actually exists in a healthy public sphere. It’s something that sets America apart and is one of the biggest reasons to hope that we’re not going to fully succumb to this.

WPJ: You’ve written about Putin and Trump’s aesthetics, that they have “a way of making one ashamed of seeing and hearing,” and that by degrading language they are destroying the healthy public sphere you’re talking about. How exactly do their words damage the public sphere?

MG: Look at a couple of examples from this past weekend. The Department of Education misspelled “W.E.B. Du Bois” and then misspelled the word “apologies” when the initial spelling error was pointed out to them. That’s a perfect example of the Trumpian drift in language, standards, and aesthetics. Trump’s inaugural speech was politically disturbing, but it was also just painful to listen to. It was badly written, it was mean, it was small. And when he is not reading from a script, he is barely literate. A lot of the people he’s brought in are barely literate—like his education secretary.

That’s familiar to me, because I come from a country where people who have been endowed with power and who make policy in areas such as culture and education are sub-literate. It is really painful to watch, and then you start to feel like you’re under siege just for trying to protect decent grammar and style from this constant assault. What do you do with these people who are on television and can’t use English, or refuse to use English, and don’t see the point of it?

George W. Bush was obviously no great orator, but he saw the point of excellence. He was not always successful, but he hired speech writers, he had coaching. He did all the things that one is supposed to do when one feels like the dumb younger brother. It was very clear in his entire approach, which was annoying, but in retrospect feels endearing. These guys today view anybody who insists on beauty and excellence as the elites, a group they have been attacking. That’s how they degrade language.

Another thing they do is they lie, and language takes a huge blow when it is used to lie all the time. We don’t know exactly what happens with somebody like Trump who lies in the context of a democratic society. We know very well what happens when lies become the basis of government in a totalitarian society. Language can’t survive that kind of violence, because you have to stop using all sorts of words that have been abused. Words like freedom and democracy become suspect. Trump can’t make abusive words into policy, but he can make it into the dominating aesthetic, and it’s up to us to resist it.

WPJ: In the face of actual state violence, why is the threat to language so important?

MG: Because there will be a time after Trump, and our ability to recover will depend on the state of the culture, and the state of the culture will be largely determined by the state of the language. If we don’t have language, we will be unable to recover from Trumpism.
WPJ: In your piece “Autocracy: Rules for Survival,” your sixth rule was “remember the future.” What does remembering the future look like?

MG: Remembering the future looks like biblical verse: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We shouldn’t be calling for things or doing things that we don’t want to be done after Trump is gone. There are certain things that I find deeply disturbing—like calls for a psychiatric evaluation of Trump to determine whether he is fit to be president. That is not the sort of thing that we want to make into an institution in this country. I’m old enough to remember when gay people were considered psychopathic personalities. The ideas of the psychiatric norm shift from generation to generation, often rapidly, and we don’t want to bring that into our politics.

I felt the same way about Lawrence Lessig’s calls for using the Electoral College to stop Trump from becoming president. That is a great idea if we are never going to have another presidential election ever again. But if we are going to have one, then we need to reform the system. We need to get rid of the Electoral College, but as long as it exists, you cannot set that precedent halfway through the process. Everything that is needed we must do without damaging the institutions of democracy—that is what remembering the future is.

WPJ: You’ve talked about the need to shift from a realist to a moralist reasoning. What do you mean by that, and why is it so important now?

MG: It goes to the question of moral authority, because part of what Trump has been able to use is the habit that we’ve developed, especially since the end of the Cold War, of talking about politics solely in terms of outcomes and never in terms of principles and values. “Is this going to work, or is this a good strategy?” Rather than, “Is this the right thing to do?” That gives Trump the ability to say, “Why shouldn’t we be friends with Putin? Wouldn’t it be better for the country if we’re friends with Putin?”

What’s the answer to that? We don’t know if it will be better for the country, but what we do know is that it is wrong. It is wrong to be friends with a dictator. It’s wrong to admire somebody who kills journalists and people in the opposition. It is wrong, not because it is a bad strategy, but because it is wrong. Realism is part of what has enabled Trump. Realism is the first step toward cynicism and nihilism.

The second reason we need to use moralist reasoning is that someone like Trump traffics in nostalgia for an imaginary past. The only way to fight that is to offer a vision of a glorious future, and the way to offer a vision of a glorious future is to talk about beautiful ideals, not pragmatic purposes. I think that’s where the Hillary campaign went terribly, terribly wrong. It did not offer a vision of the future, but instead it sort of said, “This is all going to work great, because we are good.” This suggests that everything is fine just the way it is. It leaves out everybody who feels disenfranchised, everybody who feels that things aren’t working for them as they’re constituted. You need to lead; you need to promise people that things will get better, and show them the specific ways in which they will get better. That’s how you fight somebody who is very nonspecific about getting better and chooses to go backward.

WPJ: Can fiction and poetry play a role in this?

MG: I think they play a huge role. Historically they certainly have helped by providing people with language and with vision and also with exercising the imagination. One of the most important things in politics is to have imagination. ●

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.