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Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*

In conversation with Andrew Kelly, Festival of Ideas

Andrew Kelly - Good evening, everyone, and welcome to Festival of Ideas Online. I'm Andrew Kelly from Bristol Festival of Ideas. It is a great honour to have Masha Gessen with us tonight. Masha last spoke in Bristol in 2017 about their book *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*. Masha is a staff writer at the New Yorker and the recipient of numerous awards including Guggenheim and Carnegie Fellowships. They teach at Bard College and live in New York City. Masha is here tonight to discuss their new book *Surviving Autocracy*. This is part of a series of Festival of Ideas events we're running on the future of democracy, and they'll run all through the summer and into the autumn. Please do say hello in the chat and let us know where you are from, and do put questions: there's a box at the bottom of the screen and we'll get to as many as we can. The *New York Times* said in a review of *Surviving Autocracy*, "When Gessen speaks about autocracy you listen". Welcome to Festival of Ideas, Masha.

Masha Gessen - Thank you. It's great to be here again in this different guise.

AK - It's a different world to the last time we had you live in Bristol, you're online virtually in Bristol now and we're online in America and New York, and around the world. I wanted to start by just asking you to talk a little bit about autocracy and the different levels of where the autocratic interventions are, and then where we are currently with Donald Trump.

MG - So I had to think about... I mean, we all have to think about the terminology we use. And one of my intellectual heroes, somebody whose thinking has just been very, very important to me, is a Hungarian sociologist named Bálint Magyar, who has been working on this exact problem of language for, I'd say, the last decade. And where he starts is very interesting. He said, you know, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed in 1989, we started using the language of liberal democracy to describe what was happening there because... well, for two reasons. One because we just assumed that's what was going to happen, because what else would happen, right, it was the end of history. And the other is that the language of liberal democracy is the language of political science. All right, so we talk in the terms of, are there free and fair elections? Is there freedom of the media? Are there individual liberties? And sometimes when those are not the primary characteristics of a regime, we fail to see the whole for those particulars. Or, as Magyar says, you can say that they often can't swim, you can say that they often can't fly, but you're not describing the elephant. And yes, I know that elephants can swim but still, you can say that it can't swim and you're not describing the elephant. He has worked out a language of autocracy, a language to describe what has been happening in post-communist countries in the last 20 years, some of them much more recently. And I thought, I can borrow some of that language and see if it helps shed a light on what is happening in the United States today. There is some poetic justice to it, to borrow the language from that part of the world. But it's also how we work with models, right. There is this really beautifully honed model for what's happening there, and a lot of it is peculiarly applicable. And the way in which it's applicable to the United States today is very illuminating. So, he, when he talks about autocracy, he talks about three stages. The autocratic attempt, autocratic breakthrough and autocratic consolidation. Autocratic attempt, the earliest stage, is the stage

when the attempt is still at least theoretically reversible by electoral means. So at least on paper, we're in that stage until November 3rd, or possibly a bit later, of this year.

AK - So with... and then the second two phases, just worth mentioning, are autocratic breakthrough and then autocratic consolidation. But we're currently in that first phase, which is the autocratic attempt. Now those of us who follow the news regularly and have been following it for the last three years, know really very... probably too much about Donald Trump and what he's been saying and what he believes in, and so on. But I wanted to... so we don't need to rehearse some of those things, I think, because you talk about them in the book, but you talk about them in the sense about what do we do about them. I wanted to come on to what do we do about this, and to talk about some of the things that you can do. And I wanted to start by talking about... actually about citizens and about those citizens who are engaged with these things. You talk about citizens in the United States being in a constant state of cognitive tension on this. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

MG - So we have a president who lies. A president who lies about things that are empirically provable often in the moment when he is lying. And I know, Andrew, you told me that prepping for this interview you watched Chris Wallace's interview on Fox News on Sunday with Donald Trump. And you can see that performance of lying in that interview. He kind of performs his entire repertoire. He talks about acing the cognitive abilities test, he talks about... and Chris Wallace says, you know, 'That's not such a complicated test' – literally it's a test where you're asked to tell the difference between the drawing of an elephant, again, and a rhinoceros and Trump says 'Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, but it gets more complicated towards the end', which is not true. And we know this is not true. He says we have the best mortality numbers in the world, which sadly the United States is a coronavirus disaster zone. And he sort of gestures grandly to the right and asks for evidence that's never going to be produced. And Fox News has actually said that it was never produced. And yet to particular audiences, that is good enough. And the reason that that is good enough, it's sort of an invitation to live in a reality that is entirely controlled by Donald Trump. There are some disadvantages to living in that reality, which is that you can't know what's going on unless Trump tells you, because it has no relationship to observable reality that we can know through experience, right? But at the same time it frees you of the anxieties of having to know for yourself. Or, still, like the majority of this country, you can exist in the tension between what you experience and what you know to be true and what Trump says. And that is an experience of constant cognitive strain, right? There are these two flows... I mean it's hard to call what he says information, but it is information of a sort, right, and there are these two flows at all times and, no matter what we think about our unbreakable connection to fact-based reality, that stream of lies places us in a space of anxiety and a space of tension at all times. Which makes the Trumpian reality more seductive.

AK - I do urge people to watch that interview. You might only be able to watch the... take the summary that's online, and it is quite painful. But we've put a link to the interview in the chat box there. You learnt a lot... a lot of your work, obviously, has been about Russia, and your background there, and what you've learnt there, and one of the things that struck me very much about reading this book was about when in totalitarian societies people, you know, either they accept the reality or they disengage and go back to the safety of their own public sphere. How do we overcome this in terms of, particularly for individuals, in, because there's a critical election coming up and people need to get out and vote but also to engage much more widely as well.

MG - I'm sorry, I just lost you for, like, half a second.

AK – It was really about how people engage and avoid going back into their own public spheres, as you've found in what happened in previous totalitarian societies.

MG - Right. So let's talk a little bit about terminology because we often use the word authoritarian to describe Donald Trump, which I think is wrong. And frankly, I just don't like mushy language. I don't like words that we use to mean everything and nothing, and authoritarian has become that kind of word because we kind of just mean anything that's not... that's not democratic is authoritarian. In fact, authoritarianism was a term that was proposed as a kind of, to describe a regime that was different from totalitarianism, right? And an important difference – and I'll explain in a second why I think this is important – an important difference is that under authoritarianism the person or the small group of people who are running a country want you to stop paying attention. They just want you to go home, tend to your private life and let them do what they do. So the politics disappears in an authoritarian society. The public sphere disappears. Only the private exists. And basically the state itself is privatised. Totalitarianism, in a way, is the exact opposite. Totalitarianism... under totalitarianism the leader wants you out in the public sphere demonstrating your support. Under totalitarianism private space disappears and everything becomes political. So Donald Trump is not an authoritarian leader. If he could, he would want to be a totalitarian leader. He wants to be... to have his reality all the time. He wants people to be expressing their support all the time. He does, in fact, want everything to become political, and he wants everything out in public and a constant performance of power. So that's, kind of, just an important thing to keep in mind. Now what's happened with the coronavirus, on the one hand, is absolutely terrifying because all politics, to a large extent, disappeared until the uprising began. It was as close to creating a textbook authoritarian society as one has ever existed. Because everyone literally had to go home and tend to their private space and public space disappeared. Public space also disappeared in terms of politics as we experience it on a daily basis. We experience politics in the workings of our public schools, public transport, all the things that exist on the small scale in public, right, to which we contribute our taxes and which we have a stake – all of those things froze, sort of, in time and space. So politics really did disappear in a significant sense, except for the television performance of Donald Trump, which is actually a charming moment that he's trying to recapture now with restarting his coronavirus briefings. And then the Black Lives Matter protest began and turned into what we're now calling an uprising, which is an extraordinary political moment and really something that gives me more hope than I've had in a long, long time. Part of the reason that it's been so dramatic and so sustainable, I think, is that they're coming after this period of lockdown. It's practically the only way of engaging politically at this point, right? I mean, you can engage politically by going to Trump's rallies or you can engage politically by going to the Black Lives Matter protests. I'm worried as hell about how sustainable they will be until November – we're still a long way from the election – but again they do give me a lot of hope.

AK - One of the things you talked about in the *Observer* interview you did was about... if there's one thing you can do, one of the most important things to do is to protest. I wondered if you had any thoughts on what's been particularly happening in Portland and the way that Trump is intervening there, but also the reaction of the city and the people of the city.

MG - Well, what's happening in Portland is terrifying, as people probably know. Federal agents, that we're not even entirely sure which particular agency they belong to... I mean, they belong to the Department of Homeland Security, but which troops they are... are terrorising protestors in the city. The city has come out... the people of the city have come out by joining the protests in greater numbers. People who were not participating in the protests like the Portland moms have come out to try to protect the younger people and primarily people of colour – a lot of the moms appear to be white. And this is something we've seen around the country. We've seen white, middle-aged women inserting their privileged bodies between the police and the protestors. So of course the city and the state have protested the presence of federal troops, the American Civil Liberties Union has sued. All the right things are happening but it's a terrifying precedent and it's far from clear that we're going to be able to stave off this militarisation of the response to protest, and the use of what amounts to paramilitary power.

AK - One of the things... I read today that Donald Trump is now threatening to send similar... take similar action in Chicago and other cities. Do you think cities are, and increasingly, the key battleground for some of these protests? And how will that play out in terms of this much talked about split in the United States between red and blue states, and so on?

MG – Well, by and large, with a couple of significant exceptions, Donald Trump... American cities tend to vote Democratic. Even in the states that Trump carried in 2016, large cities voted for Hillary Clinton. So he sees cities as his enemy. And, you know, Donald Trump has a very simplistic view of the universe, it's basically either useful people or enemies. And cities, especially cities with Democratic leadership, are his enemies. I think that he sees protests as evidence of a lack of rule of law. I think in this sense he is sincere. It's messy, it's not... he has absolutely no understanding of American political tradition, and of the right to protest, and of the importance of protest in American history. Americans, and this is an extraordinary thing, right, I think what people in other countries probably don't tend to think about this very much, but there's probably no other country where protests are such an integral part of the national narrative. This is a country born in revolution. We trace our history back to an American uprising. And children in school learn a lot of American history through the history of protest, up to the Civil Rights Movement. And so to have a president who sees protest as an affront to him and his power is in itself an extraordinary change in American political conversation. And then to respond to this protest by deploying military force is really terrifying.

AK - And because, obviously, they're mostly Democratic, Democrat controlled, you have Democrat mayors, and so on – what is the role of a city leader like that in this current period of both resisting and getting through autocracy and to November, and so on?

MG - Well that's an excellent question, what is the role of the city leader, right? I mean, there's also the question of what is the role of the city leader in protecting people's lives? Protecting people's lives from Trump's economic re-opening while the country is still in the grips of a pandemic that hasn't been mitigated. What is the city's role in protecting people's lives from a president who is now sending troops into cities? This is not a question that mayors have really grappled with. The stand-off between Trump and mayors goes back to the very beginning of his presidency when he launched his rhetorical and then quite real war on sanctuary cities. Sanctuary cities are cities in general... I mean there are different meaning that different cities place in the term 'sanctuary cities', but basically to some extent or another, these are cities that do not allow their police to cooperate with the immigration enforcement police. And so they will not, for example, hold people in custody for deportation. That sort of thing. It's been a source of great conflict between Trump and the cities and it has a direct relationship to what is happening now, because Trump has threatened to send in troops to round up immigrants, he has threatened to deprive cities of federal funding if they refuse to... if they maintain their sanctuary status, and this has also been a conversation about protecting people from a federal government running amok. And different mayors of different cities have taken stronger and weaker stances, but we haven't really seen it articulated strongly that is the job of city leadership to protect people from a crazy federal leader. And that is part of what has allowed the conflict now to come to a point where it's actually a military conflict in Portland and likely to become a military conflict in a number of other cities.

AK - That's quite frightening. And moving on, you talk about sanctuary cities, and I wanted to talk about immigration, because one of the things you look at in the book is about the role of civil society, and I remember in the very early days of the Trump presidency when he had the Muslim ban and you had lawyers going out to the airports helping people come in and so on. But again, coming through that, is how you can only do so much and then the agenda moves on and people move on to other things. How, particularly given the importance of civil society to all our lives, how can that be sustained and moved forward?

MG - Well that's... we don't know, right? So far, I would say Trump has triumphed over civil society. And I use the example of the travel ban in the book precisely for that reason, because when the travel ban first came out, a week after the inauguration, we saw an extraordinary outpouring of protests. And it was civil society in all of its permutations, from the people in the streets to the lawyers at the airports and in the courts. And it was that extraordinary mobilisation – spontaneous mobilisation – of civil society that allowed the courts to do their job definitively and rapidly. The courts, contrary to what Americans often think, do not work in a vacuum. They do react to what society wants them to do. But Donald Trump is not a normal American president in the sense that he doesn't step back when he's told by the courts that he has overstepped his authority – he tries to find a way around that particular hurdle. He's very much... in his relationship to the legal system, he's very much the real estate developer dealing with city hall. So he is told that he can't build a tower this tall. Can he get this thing re-zoned? Can he have a recount of the storeys so that it comes out to fewer than it actually physically is? That's basically what the strategy that his administration pursued with the travel ban, by issuing new travel bans – Travel Ban 2.0, Travel Ban 3.0 – to get around what the court was telling him, to get this thing pushed through. And they succeeded.

AK - Two other areas before I just bring in some of the audience questions. The first is about... I mean, you're a writer, you're a journalist... about the role of journalism in this. And I think some journalists have struggled with this, haven't they, in terms of dealing with Trump.

MG - I think we have all struggled, right? I mean, Donald Trump, as a lying president, he's an existential threat to journalism. Not just because he keeps threatening journalists, not just because he has portrayed us as the enemy of the people, but because the actual problem of covering a president who lies all the time is insurmountable for journalism. You can't cover him, as Rachel Maddow once promised to do, like a silent movie. Because his statements, even the absurd statements, even the apparently nonsensical statements, have real live consequences. And yet you can't cover him straight, as though this were policy, which is very much the way the *New York Times* does it, because it's insanity and not policy. But it has some of the effects of policy, it has some of the effects of executive action. So there is no good solution. I'll give you some examples just to explain what I'm talking about, right? So Trump says, 'inject yourself with disinfectant to get rid of the virus'. And the next day, he says, 'I was kidding'. But by that time, poison centres around the country have been overwhelmed with calls from people who have either tried the disinfectant or are thinking of trying the disinfectant. These are the real-life consequences of a statement because it is made by the executive. It has the features of executive speech but not the content of executive speech. And so there is no good solution. I think there are better ways. I think that the *New York Times* way of covering Trump in a tone of extreme restraint and a forced neutrality is really detrimental to being able to cover him well. I think that we have seen some great examples of Trump coverage from, like, my favourite podcast *TrumpInc*, which bills itself as an open investigation of Trump businesses. But the secret to that is that it aims to describe Trump as a system all the time, to sort of describe the elephant, and it makes the project of describing the elephant explicit. Instead of, as the *New York Times* does, taking him at face value and writing headlines like, 'Trump says testing no longer a problem, governors disagree', which creates this possibility that facts are up for grabs.

AK - I'm going to ask a couple of audience questions and then come back to the final point about where we go next. But one of the things that Trump discussed, if you can call it a discussion, in his interview on Sunday was about whether he would a) whether he could accept the election result that comes up, and there's been an allied question to that is whether the actual elections will go ahead in November. Now I think it's very hard to cancel the American elections, given checks and balances, and so on, but in extremis I guess that could be the case. But a) is that possible, and b) what would happen if Trump refused to accept the election result? I'll just add one thing to that, there was an article by Jonathan

Freedland in the *Observer* on Sunday where he said it would have to be absolutely a landslide to convince Trump to leave.

MG - So there are two ways to answer that question. The sort of... the long way and the short way. The short way is that we have to understand that we're now living in a country where it is likely – it is more likely than not – that the president will refuse to leave office when he loses the election. We know this because he has told us so. He has told us that he doesn't trust the electoral process, that he believes the election to be rigged, that he is not going to recognise, specifically the way that a lot of Democrats are likely to vote, which is by mail, in the conditions of a pandemic. But in general that he is likely to not recognise the results of the election. And so the question that... if the United States is that kind of country, then the question we ask is, what... is somebody going to escort him out of office? And the answer to that question when we game it out like that lies in whether there is overwhelming legitimacy – whether the perception of legitimacy is so clear that someone will escort him out of his office or his legitimacy but the legitimacy of his opponents. And that would mean yes, an absolute landslide not only in the popular vote, which is not really even in question, but in the electoral college. It can't be one or two votes in the electoral college, it certainly can't be by virtue of electors in swing states breaking ranks, because if that happens we're going to be stuck with two presidents, or two people claiming to be president. So that's the short way of answering the question. He has to lose by an absolute landslide in the popular vote and the electoral college. The long way is really terrifying, and I've just finished writing a column about this wonderful new little book by Lawrence Douglas, who is a legal scholar, on exactly this question of what happens. And the constitution does not tell us what happens if a president refuses to leave office, or if the results of a presidential contest are inconclusive, which is likely under the current circumstances. The constitution takes it for granted that everyone is going to act in good faith and that there's going to be a peaceful transfer of power. And laws that have been passed since the constitution are basically not helpful. The only thing that we know is that if the presidential contest really isn't conclusive, and no result is certified, then the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, becomes Acting President. So that's a third possibility that you may not have considered. But it is entirely likely that in January of 2021 we're going to see two or three people – Donald Trump, Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi – claiming the responsibilities of the presidency.

AK - Do you think there won't be a situation where Trump will win the electoral college but lose the popular voting again? Do you think that the polls are bad enough for him now and will just get worse?

MG - Oh no, it's entirely possible, no, no, no, no. I mean, well, polls are unreliable under the best of circumstances. Polls are... I mean, look at our current election. Joe Biden did not look like a likely nominee until overnight he became one – according to the polls, according to the primary results, according to everything. So, I mean I'm really glad to see the polls now but I'm also a little bit upset to see the polls because I'm afraid that it will make people complicit, and if it makes even one person complicit that may be a loss that we can't afford. It is likely that Donald Trump will lose the popular vote and win the electoral college.

AK - OK. One other – this may be an unfair question so please say if this is the case because it's only just come out today, and you're behind us in terms of time – but the report of possible Russian interference...

MG - I haven't read it.

AK - You haven't read that, so that's something to catch up on later on. It's only just come out a couple of hours ago here, so we're still getting to grips with it ourselves, and I have to confess I've only seen some headlines so I wouldn't want to talk about it now. Just on a final question, and really this is at the nub of this, about the renewal that you talk about, and the renewal that's needed, because what you're talking about is not, if I've got this

right, you're not talking about just going back to what it was before, there has to be a much wider renewal. And tell us a little bit about that and also where the hope is. I mean, you seem to have strong hope in the newer elected congresspeople, ones that Trump himself has attacked in quite racist terms, in fact, about the ideas that they have.

MG - I feel very strongly, and I write about this in the book, that the goal can't be to go back to pre-Trump normal. Because I don't see Trump as entirely an anomaly in the American political context. I mean, Trump is unlike any president we've ever had. But Trump is not an alien. He did not come from outer space and he was not installed by the Russians. Trump was elected by Americans. For reasons that we can understand. He was made possible by the evolution of American society and by the evolution of the American presidents. Where more and more power was concentrated in the executive branch after 9/11, where a domestic surveillance state was created after 9/11, where we saw America redefine itself, redefine its identity as a nation under siege, a nation constantly under threat from hostile forces. All of these are things that Donald Trump weaponised and used for his own ascent. He also taps into deep economic and social anxieties. And this is not the misguided white working-class narrative of the Trump presidency, this is an observation that most of this country lives in a state of low-level economic dread under normal circumstances. And it has been significantly, of course, exacerbated by the coronavirus-related economic crisis. And unless we have a politics that addresses that anxiety, and a politics that also addresses the really negative transformations in American society post-9/11, we're not going to be able to defeat Trump or recover from Trump. And that means that the basic sort of position of the Democratic party in the 2016 election, which is that things are fine and should continue the way they are, is unacceptable. We need a reinvention of our politics, of our democracy.

AK - One final question. You talk in the book about the attack that Donald Trump made on John Lewis. Of course, John Lewis, very distinguished politician, civil rights campaigner, died, and I think you saw great inspiration and spirit there in his life but also in what the newer members of Congress, the younger members of Congress, particularly the non-white members of Congress are putting forward.

MG - Well, Donald Trump feels particularly, I think, threatened by the voice of moral authority. And this is something that scares despots and tyrants and aspiring autocrats all over the world, but it is exactly the antidote to Trump. It is... Donald Trump's appeal is the appeal of the imaginary past. And people like John Lewis and, I think, people who are his successors in the current politics, which is the Black leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other members of the so-called 'Squad' – they are future-orientated politicians for offering a vision of a glorious future, who are really saying exactly what I was just talking about earlier which is that addressing those anxieties and saying, 'It is possible that you will wake up in this country, five years from now, ten years from now, 15 years from now, and feel good about the place where you're living and feel like the future is something that doesn't scare you, the future is something that you can look forward to and with your dignity and your kids' safety intact'.

AK - Well, I'm glad you ended on that point because that was going to be my final question, so thank you very much. We are out of time, I'm afraid. As I mentioned at the start, this is part of a series we're running on the future of democracy and our next events on this include Question Time and interviews with the Bristol MPs next Monday, and then Anne Applebaum is going to be talking about her new book *The Twilight of Democracy* on 30 July. So please do join us for them. I'd like to thank particularly Granta Books for all their support for our work, and Pru Rowlandson in particular from Granta who's been a great friend to us over the years and has helped us with this event. If you'd like a copy of Masha's magnificent book *Surviving Autocracy*, they're available from our partners at Waterstones online and in store. I'm sorry we couldn't get to all the questions but we will address those in other ways. Thank you very much for joining us, and thank you most of all to Masha Gessen, thank you so much.

Surviving Autocracy by Masha Gessen is published by Granta Books. It's available to buy from our friends at [Waterstones](#).

www.waterstones.com

This interview has been lightly edited.