Testimony of Masha Gessen

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My name is Masha Gessen. I am a journalist, a professor, and the author of several books of nonfiction, including a biography of Vladimir Putin, *The Man Without a Face* (2012) and *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 2017. I have spent most of my life researching, thinking about, and trying to describe political and social transformations in Russia. In 2011-2012, I was also an activist in the protests against Putin's regime.

I came to this country as a refugee from the Soviet Union in 1981. I returned to the USSR in 1991 and had to leave again in 2013, when, like many opposition journalists and organizers, I was threatened by the government. In my case, the threat was that my adopted son would be removed from the family because he was being raised by a same-sex couple.

For every era in Russian history, there is a joke that sums it up perfectly. I heard the one for the current moment from an academic who has survived an assassination attempt because his wife was investigating one of Putin's cronies.[1] Here is the joke: Some crayfish are being cooked in a pot. One says to another, "You know, ten degrees ago it was really quite lovely."

[1] The interview was Sergei Mokhov, an anthropologist. He is married to Lyubov Sobol, a lawyer and politician who works with Alexey Navalny

That is contemporary Russia in a nutshell. On the one hand, the nature of the regime has been clear for a long time. And yet the scale of the tragedy is greater than it has ever been before. By this I mean the extent of corruption; the brutality and breadth of the current political crackdown; the disregard for human life; and the number of people pushed into poverty and despair. In my testimony I will focus on the crackdown.

Vladimir Putin has been in power for almost 22 years and appears to plan to stay in power forever. His power, and his longevity, rest on three pillars: fear; domination over the information sphere; and perceived legitimacy.

1. **Fear**

   In my biography of Putin, I documented a series of suspicious deaths, likely caused by poisoning, that date back to Putin's first weeks as acting president. In 2021, it is impossible to compile a full list of deaths and assassination attempts in which the Kremlin is implicated. The August 2020 attempt to kill opposition politician with the nerve agent Novichok, which the investigative-journalism foundation Bellingcat has been able to trace to a group of secret-police officers, is the best-known and best-documented example of what is in fact a widespread practice. Other victims include: Pussy Riot activist and media executive Pyotr Verzilov, who survived a poisoning in 2019; opposition activist Vladimir Kara Murza, who has survived two poisonings; opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, who was shot dead in 2015; and many others, including local political activists and local bloggers. The violent or sudden death of a high-profile activist sends a message to anyone who is either already active or is considering speaking up: You are risking your life. And the reminders keep coming. For members of Navalny's organization - including junior, behind-the-scenes staff in their 20s - police visits in the middle of the night, violent apartment searches, and arbitrary detentions for one, 10, or 15 days at a

time have become routine. And you never know when one of these detentions will turn into a criminal case that will send you to a prison colony for several years. According to the human rights organization Memorial, Russia currently has 80 political prisoners[2] and more than 400 people who are facing politically motivated charges but are not currently in prison. This is more political prisoners than Russia held at the height of the Cold War - and this tally is likely far from complete[3].

Tyrants, bullies, thugs know that fear works best when violence is unpredictable. To create an atmosphere of fear that borders on terror, the Kremlin goes not only after prominent national and local activists but after ordinary protesters. In the winter and spring of 2021, following protests against Alexey Navalny's arrest, Moscow police made a point of detaining at least three different well-known and much-loved retired school teachers - all women in their sixties and seventies; in each case, police officers came to the woman's home, told her that she had been identified by facial-recognition software, and taken her to the precinct, where each woman was interrogated and held for as long as 24 hours.[4] The message - to these women, their families, and a combined thousands of former students - was that no one is safe from gratuitous punishment for exercising the right to protest, which the Russian Constitution still ostensibly guarantees. Altogether, this year police have made more than 10,000 arrests people as a result of protests against Navalny's arrest; about a hundred people are facing criminal charges and likely prison sentences.

[2] Not including people who are serving time for religious activity; they number 307
[3] In fact, Memorial itself estimates that another 70 people are likely political prisoners who haven't been tallies as such
[4] The women are Irina Bogantseva, Tamara Eidelman, and Anna Press

Some of these people stand accused of violating pandemic regulations, putting other people's lives at risk by calling for a mass protest while the coronavirus is circulating. This is another telling sign of the times. Everywhere you go in Moscow and other Russian cities, you see reminders of pandemic-era restrictions: every other seat on public transport is marked - you are expected to leave it vacant - as is every other table in cafes and restaurants; stores post reminders for customers to wear masks and gloves. Everyone ignores these signs: the subway is crowded, as are cafes and some stores. Every so often, police fine people for failing to wear masks or gloves - or charge someone with violating pandemic restrictions by going to a protest. In a matter of months, anti-pandemic measures have become nothing but the tools of a punitive bureaucracy. Russia is the first country to have started distributing a vaccine - yet vaccination rates are negligibly low and death rates are strikingly high. Such is the level of disregard for human life. The regime kills its enemies and lets ordinary people die. Not only acting politically but simply living in Russia is scary.

2. **Domination over the information sphere**

In my work, I rely on frameworks developed by Balint Magyar, an extraordinary Hungarian sociologist who studies post-Communist regimes. He talks about "domination of the information sphere" as a strategy distinct from the total control through both ownership and censorship that totalitarian regimes exercised. Putin's kind of autocracy doesn't need to control every single media outlet. What it has to do is dominate, by controlling the narrative, flooding the zone with disinformation and white noise, and marginalizing or shutting out alternative voices. Domination is a process, not a stable state. It began as soon as Putin took office, with the state takeover of federal broadcast television channels. It has continued, for more than twenty years, with the gradual disappearance of independent local television, followed by local radio, followed by

independent print newspapers, followed by magazines, and, finally, by online media and social media. This year law enforcement has specifically targeted - for arrests, detentions, and apartment raids - journalists who have covered protests for opposition media such as TVRain and Media Zone. Sergei Smirnov, the editor in chief of Media Zone, was arrested in February while he was walking in a park with his small child. He spent 15 days under administrative arrest.

Last month, the leading Russian-language independent media outlet, Meduza, was declared a “foreign agent.” The designation requires the outlet to preface every article and every social-media post it publishes with a large-type disclaimer informing the reader that the post or piece was created by a foreign agent. It also places a number of paralyzing financial-reporting requirements on the outlet. But more than anything else, this scarlet letter serves to scare advertisers away from an outlet. Anyone who wants to continue to do business in Putin’s Russia has to sever ties. Some advertisers even asked Meduza to stop running their ads without asking for a refund on the remaining term of their contracts. Meduza effectively lost its entire advertising base overnight. In the last few weeks, they have had to forfeit their office space, cut salaries, and ask their readers for help. The Kremlin has not only succeeded at marginalizing a critical voice - it is also staging a demonstration of power: any media outlet can be effectively silenced with the stroke of a bureaucrat’s pen.

3. **Perceived legitimacy**

You often hear that Putin is very popular. This is conventional wisdom informed by opinion polls and election outcomes. It’s easy to be popular in the absence of an alternative, though. Putin’s domination over the information sphere ensures that no one is allowed to appear to challenge him: no one has a platform, no one gets the kind of

respectful coverage that Putin does. Indeed, for years neither Putin nor his press secretary nor his television would ever even pronounce the name Navalny. The Kremlin finally broke this apparent ban on August 27th of last year, a week after Navalny was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok - when the entire world was talking about him.

Another source of Putin's perceived legitimacy are so-called elections. We often talk about "rigged elections" when we talk about Russia, but even that is an understatement: it suggests the existence of a contest. Russian elections are fixed at a number of points. First, arcane regulations and total Kremlin control over the administration of elections ensure that no one gets on the ballot without the Kremlin's permission. Most often candidates are, in fact, appointed by the Kremlin or its vassals to create the illusion of a contest. The next stage at which the contest is fixed is the vote itself. Fantom polling places, stuffed ballot boxes, election observers who are kicked out of precincts - all of these are regular features of the so-called elections. Then the vote is fixed again at the tallying stage: direct observation and statistical analysis have both shown, time and time again, that local election authorities make up vote tallies out of thin air. Finally, the central election committee does its own doctoring of vote tallies.

I have discussed the three pillars of the Putin regime: fear, domination over the information sphere, and perceived legitimacy. Alexey Navalny and the organization he has built over the last decade have been consistently attacking Putin in precisely these three areas. They refuse to let fear stop them - they show that it is possible for Russians not to act out of fear. They have challenged Putin's monopoly on the media by turning their work into videos that millions of Russians watch. Indeed, every Russian adult appears to have watched Navalny's movie about Putin's palace on the Black Sea. They have also campaigned to get their own candidates on the

ballot (they have failed, but rejections have sparked mass protests, most notably in Moscow in the summer of 2019) and, most recently, to consolidate the protest vote to back one of the Kremlin-approved but nominally alternative candidates. The Kremlin has responded by first attempting to murder and then jailing Navalny; by bringing charges against all of his closest allies, forcing many of them into exile; and, most recently, by starting the process of cclassifying all Navalny-affiliated groups as “extremist.” This disqualifies members of these organizations from trying to get on the ballot, and it also threatens all of them with prison terms up to six years, ten years for the leaders.

Often descriptions such as the one I have provided end with the conclusion that Putin’s regime is weak. I don’t want you to come away with that impression. Yes, the Kremlin is acting afraid. Navalny personally, his supporters, mass protests, and independent media all scare Putin, and always have. But this fear doesn’t mean that the regime is vulnerable. It’s that crackdown is the regime’s animating force, its lifeblood.

Thank you.