

Surviving Autocracy by Masha Gessen

Discussion Questions

1. Gessen discusses how autocracy can rise in a system not designed to prevent it. How do prior crackdowns on due process in U.S. history shape today's threats? Has this changed your view of American exceptionalism or democratic resilience?
 - a. Do you think we're more prepared now?
2. Gessen warns against a return to "business as usual." Did the post-2020 political response miss the moment? Has it hurt our ability to act now?
3. Gessen portrays the Trump regime as driven more by incompetence and anti-intellectualism than by a grand autocratic plan. How do you see the role of anti-intellectualism—or the disdain for expertise and excellence—playing into this? What can be done individually and collectively to push back against this trend?
4. Gessen notes that Democrats and Republicans often speak to entirely different audiences. How does this communication divide affect our politics? Can it—or should it—be bridged?
5. How has media coverage legitimized Trump or portrayed him as "normal"? How can we discuss his actions publicly without reinforcing his platform?
 - a. Do you see signs of normalization in your own political conversations or media consumption? How might we resist it?
6. Gessen introduces the concepts of *dignity of performance* (competent governance) and *dignity of participation* (respect for the citizen). How have these dignities been eroded under Trumpism? When fighting back, how important is it for political opponents to uphold these dignities—or is that a losing strategy?
7. Gessen calls for a reinvention of both institutions and political culture to truly recover from Trumpism. What might that reinvention look like? What kinds of imaginative political thinking or structural reforms would you like to see?
8. Did this book shift your thinking about how individuals or groups can resist autocracy? What responsibilities feel most urgent—or most doable?