

Autocracy: Rules for Survival

Masha Gessen

“Thank you, my friends. Thank you. Thank you. We have lost. We have lost, and this is the last day of my political career, so I will say what must be said. We are standing at the edge of the abyss. Our political system, our society, our country itself are in greater danger than at any time in the last century and a half. The president-elect has made his intentions clear, and it would be immoral to pretend otherwise. We must band together right now to defend the laws, the institutions, and the ideals on which our country is based.”

That, or something like that, is what Hillary Clinton should have said on Wednesday. Instead, she said, resignedly,

We must accept this result and then look to the future. Donald Trump is going to be our president. We owe him an open mind and the chance to lead. Our constitutional democracy enshrines the peaceful transfer of power. We don't just respect that. We cherish it. It also enshrines the rule of law; the principle [that] we are all equal in rights and dignity; freedom of worship and expression. We respect and cherish these values, too, and we must defend them.

Hours later, President Barack Obama was even more conciliatory:

We are now all rooting for his success in uniting and leading the country. The peaceful transition of power is one of the hallmarks of our democracy. And over the next few months, we are going to show that to the world.... We have to remember that we're actually all on one team.

The president added, “The point, though, is that we all go forward with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens, because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy.” As if Donald Trump had not conned his way into hours of free press coverage, as though he had released (and paid) his taxes, or not brazenly denigrated our system of government, from the courts and Congress, to the election process itself—as if, in other words, he had not won the election precisely *by* acting in bad faith.

Similar refrains were heard from various members of the liberal commentariat, with Tom Friedman vowing, “I am not going to try to make my president fail,” to Nick Kristof calling on “the approximately 52 percent majority of voters who supported someone other than Donald Trump” to “give president Trump a chance.” Even the politicians who have in the past appealed to the less-establishment part of the Democratic electorate sounded the conciliatory note. Senator Elizabeth Warren promised to “put aside our differences.” Senator Bernie Sanders was only slightly more cautious, vowing to try to find the good in Trump: “To the degree that Mr. Trump is serious about pursuing policies that improve the lives of working families in this country, I and other progressives are prepared to work with him.”

However well-intentioned, this talk assumes that Trump is prepared to find common ground with his many opponents, respect the institutions of government, and repudiate almost everything he has stood for during the campaign. In short, it is treating him as a “normal” politician. There has until now been little evidence that he can be one.

More dangerously, Clinton's and Obama's very civil passages, which ended in applause lines, seemed to close off alternative responses to his minority victory. (It was hard not to be reminded of Neville Chamberlain's statement, that “We should seek by all means in our power to avoid war, by analyzing possible causes, by trying to remove them, by discussion in a spirit of collaboration and good will.”) Both Clinton's and Obama's phrases about the peaceful transfer of power concealed the omission of a call to action. The protesters who took to the streets of New York, Los Angeles, and other American cities on Wednesday night did so not because of Clinton's speech but in spite of it. One of the falsehoods in the Clinton speech was the implied equivalency between civil resistance and insurgency. This is an autocrat's favorite con, the explanation for the violent suppression of peaceful protests the world over.

The second falsehood is the pretense that America is starting from scratch and its president-elect is a tabula rasa. Or we are: “we owe him an open mind.” It was as though Donald Trump had not, in the course of his campaign, promised to deport US citizens, promised to create a system of surveillance targeted specifically at Muslim Americans, promised to

build a wall on the border with Mexico, advocated war crimes, endorsed torture, and repeatedly threatened to jail Hillary Clinton herself. It was as though those statements and many more could be written off as so much campaign hyperbole and now that the campaign was over, Trump would be eager to become a regular, rule-abiding politician of the pre-Trump era.

But Trump is anything but a regular politician and this has been anything but a regular election. Trump will be only the fourth candidate in history and the second in more than a century to win the presidency after losing the popular vote. He is also probably the first candidate in history to win the presidency despite having been shown repeatedly by the national media to be a chronic liar, sexual predator, serial tax-avoider, and race-baiter who has attracted the likes of the Ku Klux Klan. Most important, Trump is the first candidate in memory who ran not for president but for autocrat—and won.

I have lived in autocracies most of my life, and have spent much of my career writing about Vladimir Putin's Russia. I have learned a few rules for surviving in an autocracy and salvaging your sanity and self-respect. It might be worth considering them now:

Rule #1: *Believe the autocrat.* He means what he says. Whenever you find yourself thinking, or hear others claiming, that he is exaggerating, that is our innate tendency to reach for a rationalization. This will happen often: humans seem to have evolved to practice denial when confronted publicly with the unacceptable. Back in the 1930s, *The New York Times* assured its readers that Hitler's anti-Semitism was all posture. More recently, the same newspaper made a telling choice between two statements made by Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov following a police crackdown on protesters in Moscow: "The police acted mildly—I would have liked them to act more harshly" rather than those protesters' "liver should have been spread all over the pavement." Perhaps the journalists could not believe their ears. But they should—both in the Russian case, and in the American one. For all the admiration Trump has expressed for Putin, the two men are very different; if anything, there is even more reason to listen to everything Trump has said. He has no political establishment into which to fold himself following the campaign, and therefore no reason to shed his campaign rhetoric. On the contrary: it is now the establishment that is rushing to accommodate him—from the president, who met with him at the White House on Thursday, to the leaders of the Republican Party, who are discarding their long-held scruples to embrace his radical positions.

He has received the support he needed to win, and the adulation he craves, precisely because of his outrageous threats. Trump rally crowds have chanted "Lock her up!" They, and he, meant every word. If Trump does not go after Hillary Clinton on his first day in office, if he instead focuses, as his acceptance speech indicated he might, on the unifying project of investing in infrastructure (which, not coincidentally, would provide an instant opportunity to reward his cronies and himself), it will be foolish to breathe a sigh of relief. Trump has made his plans clear, and he has made a compact with his voters to carry them out. These plans include not only dismantling legislation such as Obamacare but also doing away with judicial restraint—and, yes, punishing opponents.

To begin jailing his political opponents, or just one opponent, Trump will begin by trying to capture members of the judicial system. Observers and even activists functioning in the normal-election mode are fixated on the Supreme Court as the site of the highest-risk impending Trump appointment. There is little doubt that Trump will appoint someone who will cause the Court to veer to the right; there is also the risk that it might be someone who will wreak havoc with the very culture of the high court. And since Trump plans to use the judicial system to carry out his political vendettas, his pick for attorney general will be no less important. Imagine former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani or New Jersey Governor Chris Christie going after Hillary Clinton on orders from President Trump; quite aside from their approach to issues such as the Geneva Conventions, the use of police powers, criminal justice reforms, and other urgent concerns.

Rule #2: *Do not be taken in by small signs of normality.* Consider the financial markets this week, which, having tanked overnight, rebounded following the Clinton and Obama speeches. Confronted with political volatility, the markets become suckers for calming rhetoric from authority figures. So do people. Panic can be neutralized by falsely reassuring words about how the world as we know it has not ended. It is a fact that the world did not end on November 8 nor at any previous time in history. Yet history has seen many catastrophes, and most of them unfolded over time. That time included periods of relative calm. One of my favorite thinkers, the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, breathed a sigh of relief in early October 1939: he had moved from Berlin to Latvia, and he wrote to his friends that he was certain that the tiny country wedged between two tyrannies would retain its sovereignty and Dubnow himself would be safe. Shortly after that, Latvia

was occupied by the Soviets, then by the Germans, then by the Soviets again—but by that time Dubnow had been killed. Dubnow was well aware that he was living through a catastrophic period in history—it’s just that he thought he had managed to find a pocket of normality within it.

Rule #3: *Institutions will not save you.* It took Putin a year to take over the Russian media and four years to dismantle its electoral system; the judiciary collapsed unnoticed. The capture of institutions in Turkey has been carried out even faster, by a man once celebrated as the democrat to lead Turkey into the EU. Poland has in less than a year undone half of a quarter century’s accomplishments in building a constitutional democracy.

Of course, the United States has much stronger institutions than Germany did in the 1930s, or Russia does today. Both Clinton and Obama in their speeches stressed the importance and strength of these institutions. The problem, however, is that many of these institutions are enshrined in political culture rather than in law, and all of them—including the ones enshrined in law—depend on the good faith of all actors to fulfill their purpose and uphold the Constitution.

The national press is likely to be among the first institutional victims of Trumpism. There is no law that requires the presidential administration to hold daily briefings, none that guarantees media access to the White House. Many journalists may soon face a dilemma long familiar to those of us who have worked under autocracies: fall in line or forfeit access. There is no good solution (even if there is a right answer), for journalism is difficult and sometimes impossible without access to information.

The power of the investigative press—whose adherence to fact has already been severely challenged by the conspiracy-minded, lie-spinning Trump campaign—will grow weaker. The world will grow murkier. Even in the unlikely event that some mainstream media outlets decide to declare themselves in opposition to the current government, or even simply to report its abuses and failings, the president will get to frame many issues. Coverage, and thinking, will drift in a Trumpian direction, just as it did during the campaign—when, for example, the candidates argued, in essence, whether Muslim Americans bear collective responsibility for acts of terrorism or can redeem themselves by becoming the “eyes and ears” of law enforcement. Thus was xenophobia further normalized, paving the way for Trump to make good on his promises to track American Muslims and ban Muslims from entering the United States.

Rule #4: *Be outraged.* If you follow Rule #1 and believe what the autocrat-elect is saying, you will not be surprised. But in the face of the impulse to normalize, it is essential to maintain one’s capacity for shock. This will lead people to call you unreasonable and hysterical, and to accuse you of overreacting. It is no fun to be the only hysterical person in the room. Prepare yourself.

Despite losing the popular vote, Trump has secured as much power as any American leader in recent history. The Republican Party controls both houses of Congress. There is a vacancy on the Supreme Court. The country is at war abroad and has been in a state of mobilization for fifteen years. This means not only that Trump will be able to move fast but also that he will become accustomed to an unusually high level of political support. He will want to maintain and increase it—his ideal is the totalitarian-level popularity numbers of Vladimir Putin—and the way to achieve that is through mobilization. There will be more wars, abroad and at home.

Rule #5: *Don’t make compromises.* Like Ted Cruz, who made the journey from calling Trump “utterly amoral” and a “pathological liar” to endorsing him in late September to praising his win as an “amazing victory for the American worker,” Republican politicians have fallen into line. Conservative pundits who broke ranks during the campaign will return to the fold. Democrats in Congress will begin to make the case for cooperation, for the sake of getting anything done—or at least, they will say, minimizing the damage. Nongovernmental organizations, many of which are reeling at the moment, faced with a transition period in which there is no opening for their input, will grasp at chances to work with the new administration. This will be fruitless—damage cannot be minimized, much less reversed, when mobilization is the goal—but worse, it will be soul-destroying. In an autocracy, politics as the art of the possible is in fact utterly amoral. Those who argue for cooperation will make the case, much as President Obama did in his speech, that cooperation is essential for the future. They will be willfully ignoring the corrupting touch of autocracy, from which the future must be protected.

Rule #6: *Remember the future.* Nothing lasts forever. Donald Trump certainly will not, and Trumpism, to the extent that it is centered on Trump's persona, will not either. Failure to imagine the future may have lost the Democrats this election. They offered no vision of the future to counterbalance Trump's all-too-familiar white-populist vision of an imaginary past. They had also long ignored the strange and outdated institutions of American democracy that call out for reform—like the electoral college, which has now cost the Democratic Party two elections in which Republicans won with the minority of the popular vote. That should not be normal. But resistance—stubborn, uncompromising, outraged—should be.

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