



OPINION
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There's a Reason Even 'Smart' People Surrender to Trump

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By **Patrick Healy** and **M. Gessen**
Produced by **Vishakha Darbha**

The deputy editor of Opinion, Patrick Healy, speaks with the columnist M. Gessen about why so many people and institutions, including Democrats, have bent the knee to Trump, despite strongly disagreeing with him.

There's a Reason Even 'Smart' People Surrender to Trump

M. Gessen and Patrick Healy try to reckon with the president's whiplash authoritarianism.

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Patrick Healy: I'm Patrick Healy, deputy editor of New York Times Opinion, and this is The First 100 Days, a weekly series examining President Trump's use of power and his drive to change America.

This week I've been thinking a lot about why people choose to give in to Donald Trump, from the Republicans in the Senate and House, who've given up any semblance of independence for Congress, even confirming Trump cabinet nominees who they privately oppose, to the government institutions and business leaders and even Democratic Party officials who aren't putting up much fight where it counts.

And so I wanted to talk with my colleague, Masha Gessen. They've spent two decades writing about the rise of authoritarianism in their homeland of Russia and in Eastern Europe.

Masha left Russia in 2013 after Putin's anti-L.G.B.T.Q. policies made life too dangerous for them and their family.

Thanks for joining me, Masha.

Gessen: It's good to be here, Patrick.

Healy: So Masha, [your columns last year](#) pretty much predicted what a Trump presidency would be like. Just the lack of restraints, the trampling of a system of government, the demonizing of immigrants and other groups. And so I want to ask, is there anything so far that has surprised you about Trump or his administration or about other leaders in the country?

Gessen: I don't want to take credit for predicting what the Trump presidency would be like, because really it was all out there. He was spelling it out over and over again at rallies —

Healy: Very up front, yes.

Gessen: There's Project 2025.

I think I've been unpleasantly surprised, by the fact that even in his inaugural speech, he started going after trans people. I knew he was going to go after trans people, but in the inaugural speech? That was unexpected, even for me.

Healy: Was it because that's the kind of speech where you think in terms of big themes? Or just that's the kind of speech where you don't hear hate speech?

Gessen: Well, if you recall, eight years ago it was American Carnage. So we knew not to expect a soaring vision of the future, and we know that Trump can rarely restrain himself from engaging in bad blood and resentment.

I think just the definitive, there are only two sexes, male and female, and the signal that it was going to be legislated immediately.

I think the prominence was unexpected. I was quite aware of the prominence of his anti-trans rhetoric in the campaign, and it wouldn't have been illogical to expect it to be prominent in the presidency. But to be so front and center as to be part of the inaugural speech, that was even more central than I expected it to be.

Healy: Masha, I was so surprised after that speech, given how blunt he was, that more people weren't standing up and calling him out for what he was doing. That he was essentially erasing trans people and trying to define America based on two genders. And then he quickly followed that up with attacks, not just on trans people, but on teachers who support transgender students, on issuing guidelines that hospitals have chosen to interpret a certain way.

Why weren't and aren't institutions, hospitals, leaders, individuals, speaking out more against this attack on a group of people who are one of the smallest, most vulnerable populations in the country?

Gessen: So I think there are two reasons: To stand up to an attack, you have to have language and ideas to counter the attack. And that language and those ideas on any kind of scale would have come from the Democratic presidential campaign, which they didn't.

The Democrats had chosen consciously not to engage with Trump's anti-trans baiting. Somehow willing it away, or thinking that if they don't say anything too pro-trans it will go unnoticed that he is trans-baiting them. It's a strategy that has never worked but the Democrats keep stepping into over and over again.

So I think that for people to be able to stand up, they needed the words. The way that people reacted so quickly during his last presidency to the travel ban, it was because we have the language to stand up for immigrants and we have the ideas to stand up for immigrants. I think with trans issues it's much trickier. Most people don't have the language on hand at all.

And the other reason that hospitals, schools, other helping professions aren't standing up for trans people is because they are negotiating this idea of obeying in advance. It's not a new term. Anticipatory obedience is something that Germans were talking about back in Nazi Germany, and then Sovietologists talked about when they wrote about the Soviet Union.

But in this country, Tim Snyder, the Yale historian, popularized it in his 2017 book, "On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth

Century,” in which he wrote, lesson No. 1: Do not obey in advance.

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But what I think he didn't mention is that people obey in advance for very good reasons. And often they obey in advance in accordance with their values. For example, I spoke to a health care provider, who works with a lot of both trans and immigrant patients and a lot of undocumented trans patients.

This provider said to me: I'm not going to talk to you on the record because I don't want to draw any attention to myself. I want to be able to provide care for as long as possible.

That's a perfectly clear example of somebody making a humane and rational decision that is perfectly consistent with their decades of medical practice and decades of service, that on the whole, politically detracts from our possibilities.

Healy: I think these early weeks of the Trump administration, Masha, are so crucial, you know. In political coverage, we talk about the first hundred days, the first hundred days. But this first hundred days feels like nothing we've seen before.

Trump is setting the stage for what you just talked about: for years, if not decades, of a redefined America in which the consensus, not everyone, but the majority consensus shifts toward one direction. Where things that were seen as anywhere from bad taste to being a violation of norms and values and standards somehow become either acceptable, or at least, let's talk more about this. That normalization is happening right now in front of us.

Have you experienced anything like this before in, in your coverage of Russia or Eastern Europe where it feels like we are literally in this moment and every day that goes by where that language does not exist, that people don't have an ability to call this out or talk about it or, or make these rationalized choices. Time runs out. It's too late eventually.

Gessen: Well, I definitely feel like I've experienced it, but I haven't experienced it at this whiplash speed.

I don't know if it's happened elsewhere in the world. It certainly has not happened in any part of the world that I have covered. Even when Putin came to power in Russia in 1999, 2000, first he

was prime minister, then he was president. And then when he was finally inaugurated as president it felt pretty fast. He immediately unleashed an attack on the media and on businesses, trying to get the oligarchs to line up.

I felt like I was living on a chessboard and somebody was picking off pieces and I couldn't predict which piece was going to get picked off next. It felt like I would turn around to say something to somebody, and they'd say: Oh, but I support him now. Or: Oh, but we can't run that article because of all the good reasons.

But in this country, it's faster. And it's worse. We saw the big money line up and genuflect before the inauguration.

Healy: They were all going down to Mar-a-Lago, million dollar check, the auto companies giving fleets of vehicles.

Gessen: Just falling all over themselves to be first in line to obey.

And I think that those things are also done for very good reasons. I think you can probably see some of the values that people are relying on: They have a responsibility to their shareholders, they have a responsibility to their employees. Trump has said the kind of pressure that he was going to exert on business, so they should get in his good graces ahead of time for the sake of, again, other people.

The problem is, I watched a lot of very, very wealthy people try to play that game in Russia. And the regime is insatiable.

Healy: Yes.

Gessen: You have to keep giving it more money. You have to keep ceding more power. And most people I know who fell in line are no longer living in Russia, *despite* all of their compromises. And those who are living in Russia, I think, maybe wish that they weren't, but they have no choice.

Healy: That's the thing. The autocrat always knows when he has people just where he wants them. Every time someone rolls over or bends the knee, you can just imagine Donald Trump looking at them and saying, "Got him, got her, got him."

He would pick and choose people based on this kind of Trumpian genius for understanding human behavior and the way that people roll. And I think especially understanding the way that so many human beings obey and respond to and rationalize against power. Most human beings don't have the kind of power that a Donald Trump or an autocrat has, and he has some sense of that.

[You wrote about](#) two ways of thinking about this that I thought were so important in thinking about this moment. And it's kind of the pragmatic argument for obeying and the zeitgeist argument for obeying.

What it comes down to is when we are living in Trump's America, so many people will take the pragmatic approach and the zeitgeist approach that this is what society is like today.

And I keep coming back to the idea of: Why do people, including very smart people, shrug and go along to get along when they must know that doing so puts them, if not in Trump's pocket, at least makes him know that he has the upper hand?

Gessen: That's such a great question. When you were talking about how Trump uses his particular genius to get people where he wants them, I felt a desire to object. I don't want to think of him as a psychological genius. He is a one-trick pony when it comes to people. He thrives on humiliation and he rewards loyalty. His assumption is that everybody is basically exactly like him.

You see it backfire sometimes, for example, when he says to Russian President Vladimir Putin, "Come on, stop the stupid war, you're losing more than you stand to gain," without realizing that Putin actually is not like him. The logic is not going to work because Trump doesn't understand what Putin is after.

But a lot of people, as it turns out, are a lot like Donald Trump. They think they're much smarter than they are. So they think that even though they're giving in to Trump, they are somehow going to engineer this whole situation in a way that will allow them to avoid the fate of all the idiots who are genuflecting to Donald Trump.

And I think that's where he really thrives — dealing with people who are reasoning *exactly* the way that he reasons. And he objectively has a lot more power than they do, and they're going to lose.

Healy: So many people in politics and government think of themselves as playing the long game. And so when we think about the pragmatic argument for obeying in advance, I just want to drill down on one example: PBS recently announced that they were closing their D.E.I. office so as not to lose federal funding.

I wonder — and now maybe I'm playing into the obey in advance — if the closing of the D.E.I. office is just an effort to survive at all, isn't the greater good of keeping PBS around, worth it?

Maybe the country is better with public broadcasting in some form. So the D.E.I. office can go now, could reopen in five or 10 years. What's the counter to that?

Gessen: Well, tell me honestly, do you think PBS is going to exist in three years?

Healy: I do.

Gessen: You do?

Healy: I do. But I'm not sure about the PBS News Hour.

Gessen: Right. I think that if we get a little bit of distance from this and try to sort of reason through it — as you said, PBS is in the cross hairs of this administration. Do we really think that abolishing D.E.I. is going to get them out of the cross hairs?

Like what are they actually going to have to give in order to stay afloat? I think they're going to have to have Ron DeSantis run PBS or something like that. That's the only thing that could possibly keep them alive.

And so, if we know that, then that small indignity — which is what it probably feels like to them — of abolishing the D.E.I. office and probably reassuring the employees, which is what everybody is doing, and saying: "We're not going to be worse for it. We're just giving them a little." But they're going to have to give a lot more. Especially those organizations that, like PBS, are already targeted.

I think we're all in a prisoner's dilemma. Unless we start acting collectively — and by "we," I mean the most expansive we possible — of us who don't want to live in Trump's autocracy, then we're just going to have to be making life worse for one another with every concession.

And who, if not organizations like PBS, which actually have a megaphone, would lead the charge for not obeying.

Healy: You really make a case for collective action, because it feels like, "You over there, you give an inch, Trump will take a mile." And over and over and over again.

The question is, for most Americans, the way that they have thought about success and survival in this society, so much of it has been about, "Pick your battles, live to fight another day." It's really the individual who I can count on, as opposed to a collective society. And that is a struggle. And Trump realizes we don't have the time to change our mind-set as Americans.

Gessen: I think you're absolutely right. I think this is a pretty convenient country to pick for building an autocracy. We don't have a culture of collective action. We no longer have local media. We're not equipped to stand up to this. Some extraordinary leadership and some extraordinary organizing efforts really, really soon would be needed to stave this off.

Healy: Let's dig down more into that point about opposition and resistance. It's been less than a month since Trump's inauguration, and some Democrats are still scrambling and trying to figure out and talking about finding ways to deal with Trump, including working with Trump.

In those first couple of weeks, especially, we heard a lot about finding common ground with Trump. They just want to get things done. I'm thinking of everyone from Senator Elizabeth Warren to Representative Hakeem Jeffries.

Audio clip of Hakeem Jeffries: *"We look forward to working with the incoming administration whenever and wherever possible on any issue if it will make life better for New Yorkers and of course for the American people."*

Does this set a dangerous precedent or as elected officials, do they have some obligations, some role to try to figure out how to work within the system that they're elected to help lead?

Gessen: I think this is where we admit we're in totally uncharted territory. This country, as far as I know, hasn't been here before. Certainly not at this scale and at this rate.

I think there are a couple of ways to think about it. One, those early statements about finding common ground really feel like ancient history, but I'm glad you're returning to them because it makes me ask whether they were already abdicating their responsibility to their voters.

Trump made no secret of who he was. Or what he was planning to do. And so, for Democratic Congress members to say at the beginning of his administration, let's find common ground, is to abdicate their responsibility to listen and look and protect the constitutional order that they were actually elected to protect.

Then there's another question: Can it work as a strategy? I think we've already seen that, no, it can't. And not only can it not work as a strategy, but it functions as a diversion. When we hear Democrats talking about, "Let's pick our battles and let's sacrifice U.S.A.I.D. for the sake of something more popular," what they're doing is they're entirely allowing Trump to set the agenda.

And we have this idea that I think is still conventional wisdom, that Trump has no ideas and no ideology. That is insane. Trump has an ideology and Trump has a lot of ideas. And Trump's people have even more ideas. They're just very bad ideas.

And when you respond to an administration that fills the ether with bad ideas, in the tactical way of picking our battles, what you're doing is allowing these bad ideas to completely dominate the politics and the society in which we live.

Healy: All of this makes me think of Senator Mitch McConnell, who had such a clear strategy for the Republicans against President Barack Obama. It was to say no to everything, to obstruct, to make Obama essentially a one-term president. He was quite clear about that.

And I listen to you and I find myself thinking about the Democrats and whether they have the courage and the clarity of mind to be the "party of no" when it's called for.

Are the Democrats just not good at being the party of no? Are they so the party of government that they may feel the need to find accommodation to wait the guy out, as opposed to obstructing him, or is it something else?

Gessen: I think that's exactly the right diagnosis that they're the party of government. And that's probably not what the moment calls for. But I think there's also the eternal problem of fighting the last war.

And here I want to acknowledge Democrats' dilemma. Going into the certification of the vote and inauguration, they had to hold Jan. 6 in their rearview mirror and model a behavior that doesn't delegitimize the vote and peaceful transfer of power.

The problem is that I don't think it's that intellectually difficult to separate respect for the process from addressing the actual statements and behavior of this particular president. You don't have to be Mitch McConnell and act as though Barack Obama is fundamentally illegitimate. You can actually say, this is a legitimately elected president who is engaging in illegitimate and illegal action. And it is broadly illegitimate. We're not going to pick our battles by hoping that the judicial branch takes care of things that are actually illegal. We're going to look at the broader legitimacy of an effort to break government and we're going to lay our bodies down on the tracks for all of that.

And that's where I think they're failing. They're failing to take that pretty obvious but intellectually courageous step.

Healy: Meanwhile, Trump and Elon Musk and Stephen Miller are just moving at this very fast clip to destabilize the government and remake America in the image of MAGA and not the Constitution.

You ended your column on what I found to be a pretty hopeful note, and I hung on to it, that people can maintain a sense of facts and values, and not just obey in advance.

Have you seen examples so far of people or institutions pushing back, not giving in, whether they're large or small?

Gessen: I think it's actually really important to remember that even though it feels catastrophic and it is catastrophic, what's happening, we haven't lost the war yet. We haven't even lost the battle.

This particular battle that's happening, where Trump is trying to break the Constitution over his knee — we haven't lost that battle yet. It is still possible to stop him.

I can't believe I'm about to say this, but the example would be the F.B.I. From what I understand, the F.B.I. is really resisting the broad effort to fire agents. It's a huge attack on this agency.

Healy: Based on loyalty and being tagged as part of these investigations.

Gessen: And it seems, for now, that it is possible to mount such an effort.

Healy: For me in terms of speaking out there was a rally recently where trans children and trans teenagers spoke out about what's happening with Trump and hospitals and the government and I just found myself watching it and thinking, if the youngest and least powerful among us can say these things, can find a way to have a megaphone, why can't the rest of us?

Gessen: That's a great point. And I'm afraid I have an answer. And the answer is the humanistic reasons, whatever reasons, to obey in advance, those are not available to the people who are being directly targeted.

Trans people at this moment in this country, trans people and immigrants, the effort is really to make them completely invisible in the society, in any kind of public space.

In a sense, it's even more noticeable with trans people, because with immigrants, the effect has been to make people stay home and not open the door, literally. But for now, unlike a lot of immigrants,

trans people can stay in public space for a minute and say something. And that's what we're seeing.

Audio clip of child [at rally](#): *"I moved here from Florida because it's unsafe there. Now I am unsafe here because Trump is president. I just want to live my life and be me. Thank you for supporting me and please keep fighting for me."* (cheers)

Healy: Masha, thanks so much for joining me.

Gessen: Thank you, Patrick.

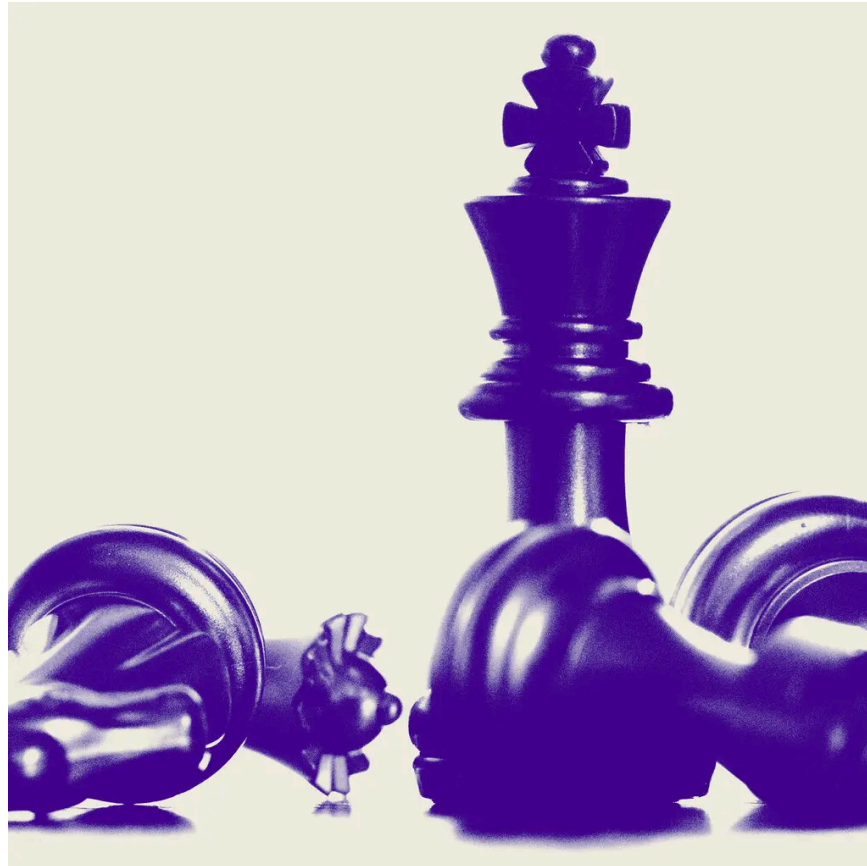


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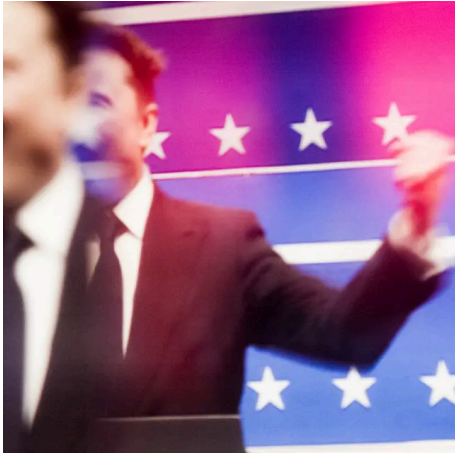
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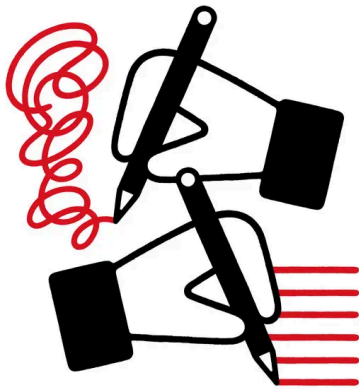
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