

Starr Forum: Russia's Putin: From Silent Coup to Legal Dictatorship

CAROL SAIVETZ: Today's talk is "Russia's Putin-- From Silent Coup to Legal Dictatorship," and our guest is the award-winning journalist, Yevgenia Albats, who is very old and dear friend of mine, and I'm delighted that she's here despite all the complications. She is a Russian investigative journalist, political scientist, author, and radio host.

Since 2007, she has been the political editor and then editor-in-chief and CEO of New Times, [SPEAKING RUSSIAN], a Moscow-based Russian language independent political weekly. It went digital only in 2017 when its distribution and sales were severed by the Russian authorities. Since 2004, Yevgenia has hosted Absolute Albats, a talk show on Ekho Moskvyy, the only remaining liberal radio station in Russia.

She graduated from Moscow State University and received her PhD in government from Harvard in 2004. She was a professor at a Moscow-based university until 2011, when her courses were canceled at the request of the Kremlin. She was named the inaugural International Institute Distinguished Faculty Fellow for 2019-2020, in partnership with the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian studies, all at the University of Michigan. Yevgenia, you're on, and thank you so much for coming.

[APPLAUSE]

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Thank you. Yeah. Carol, thank you very much for your such nice words. Thank you very much for inviting me to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It's a famous institution, very well-known in my part of the world. I am grateful to all of you, to Professor Elizabeth Wood, that you are having me with such an explosive thing.

Also, I think it's perfect time, because today Russian so to say Parliament, Russian Duma, a body of yes men, passed amendment to the Russian constitution that basically allows Vladimir Putin to stay in power forever. This amendment will pronounce void and null all previous-- his presidential terms. And for those of you who are not aware, he got in president in 2000, served for two terms, then sort of, you know, allowed for intermediate president to step in.

Dmitry Medvedev served for four years as his substitute, and then he returned back for another two terms. He was supposed to have stepped down in 2024, but now they say that, no. All previous 20 years as if they don't exist, but trust me, they do exist for us, and in a sort of way that I wouldn't want you to experience this. In these 20 years, we lost what we had from the democratic institutions in Russia, and we're going into the direction of what is called quite often in political science as legal dictatorship.

In fact, you know, I wrote this slide back a couple of weeks ago before the Russian Duma announced about this amendment. It was done on March 10, 2020, as well as at the meeting of January this year, Putin first announced about crucial amendments to the Russian constitution, which 22 he wrote personally. And no one knew about this except for two people-- his closest

pal, Yury Kovalchuk, of course with the KGB background, and the banker who became a billionaire during this 20 years of Putin's in power, and his chief of staff, Mr. Vayno, also of course from the KGB family.

So no one knew about that. Putin was doing his yearly state of the nation address and all of a sudden, he started talking about amendments to the Constitution, and no one could understand what was he doing, what were the ends of these amendments. So I'm going to show you that it was unavoidable, that in fact it was due to happen, that all the steps that were taken by Vladimir Putin over the last 20 years led to exactly this kind of outcome.

Unfortunately, Vladimir Putin was a sort of darling of the West when he replaced Boris Yeltsin, the first President of Russia, who was a drunkard and who was old and went through severe surgery. But apparently, Boris Yeltsin allowed for democratic institutions to emerge and to thrive and to survive. And together with Mikhail Gorbachev, who led this crucial dissolution of the Soviet evil empire to the end, these two people gave us what no one tsar or general secretary gave us ever.

Gorbachev gave us freedom. Yeltsin allowed that freedom to evolve into institutions. Putin crashed it all, and it was doomed to happen, because he was a graduate of the most repressive and most dangerous institution of the Soviet state, the KGB. In 20 years, he created a corporate state, which basically put into trash everything that was done before him.

So this is the kind of slide, you know, when I'm teaching at the University of Michigan, why people choose autocrats. They're in backsliding post-communist countries. And so that was the end and the last slide of my lecture on the development of autocracy in Russia. And so I was, as you can see, and I will show you step-by-step that the current outcome was avoidable, as I said.

And so, you know, when Putin announced on January 15th, 2020, these amendments to the Russian constitution, it became obvious that we are watching what is called in political science the constitutional self coup-- something that time and again happened in different Latin American countries, but not just in Latin Americans. Wherever autocrats would like to become dictators they always rewrite those constitutions.

That's what was done in Uruguay in 1964, a decade after a military junta, took over, and they immediately started to write in constitution, pass the amendments in 1974. That was done by Fujimori in Peru in 1992 when he dissolved the parliament and took on himself the responsibility of the judiciary branch. That's what happened in 2010 in Hungary, even though there are certain constraints on Orban that doesn't allow him to go into a legal dictatorship.

But still, this year Hungary was outlined by the Freedom Forum in his regular, yearly survey as a partially free country, whereas it was free country before. So what is a legal dictatorship? I think it's important to know the origin of this term, and we have to go back to mid-1930s, to Europe, to Germany. On March 23, just seven days after Adolf Hitler's National Socialist party failed to get absolute majority in the then-German parliament, Reichstag, Adolf Hitler, who was appointed by the President Hindenburg as the Chancellor of Germany in January of 1933, he proposed what became known in history as an enabling act.

It was basically the amendment to the then Constitution of the Weimar Republic. This amendment allowed for government to enact acts without OK from Reichstag, from the parliament, to go into alliances, agreements, and et cetera, et cetera. Since then, there was no need of legislature in Germany, in 1934 Reichstag was pronounced null and void, and March 1933 elections were the last more or less free elections in Germany.

That's what happens when they rewrite constitutions. Of course, you know, when you bring in an example of Nazi Germany, it's sort of, you know, we'll immediately say, oh, it's a fluke of history. It's an extreme situation. No, no, no. It cannot happen.

But if you for a minute, even though it's difficult, forget about Holocaust and what followed after the 1939, when Hitler started the war in Europe, then you think that that's a very good example of how the foundation of dictatorship was laid down. So, exactly-- no. I don't want to say exactly, because any comparison with Knights of Germany is a tricky thing, and it's good to know the background of the term legal dictatorship, but any comparisons are still to speculative, I would say.

It will lead us to different connotations and probably different conclusions. However, the amendments to the Russian constitution that, as I said, Putin wrote himself-- himself-- without knowledge of his legal department. No one from the legal department of the administration of the President knew about that. So he wrote himself, and which were introduced to the stunned nation, these amendments-- first of all, they destroy the system of checks and balances between different branches of government.

We have to say here because we are in the university setting that Russia is not presidential republic the way it exists in the United States or in much of Latin America. Russia mimics Yeltsin's constitution after the French Fifth Republic. It's a semi-presidential setup of this presidential republic, where a president is head of state and commander in chief, and also by tradition-- it's not written anywhere. It's only in the law on presidents outlined since Putin became the President-- but by tradition, also President, administrator of foreign affairs, and all so-called punitive organs, all punitive agencies of Russian society-- Minister of internal, Minister of [INAUDIBLE] being successor to the KGB.

Intelligence [INAUDIBLE] grew, and certainly they report to the President. Russian President is not chief executive. He is not head of the cabinet like it is in the United States and in other clear-cut presidential republics. So Putin decided to deal with that. He decided to get rid of these because it's totally ridiculous, because, you know, after all, he's the only guy who's capable to do any good to the great Russia.

So system of checks and balances-- now, in accordance with the amendments, independence of the judiciary. Judiciary branch doesn't exist, you know, will no longer exist as an independent branch of government because President, in accordance with these amendments, is going to appoint members of the Constitutional Court, the highest court in my land, in Russia. It's like a Supreme Court in this country.

And there, he also suggested to reduce the amount of judges from 15 to 9, and he gets the right to appoint them and to dismiss. And only to get a key from the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, which is not senate by any means, because they are not elected. They are appointed officials. They are appointed officials from different regions of the Russian Federation.

The absolute majority of them are millionaires or billionaires. It means they are totally controllable, and very easy to deal with. But in this case, they also just have to OK. From now on, he's not just going to-- as it was before, he was going to suggest the Prime Minister who is the chief executive in accordance with the Russian Constitution-- I have it in my backpack, the Russian Constitution, but OK. It is chapter six of the Russian Constitution.

So before, the President had the right to present candidates of the Prime Minister to the Parliament, and Parliament could OK or not OK. If it didn't, then President had the right to dissolve the Parliament. So now, he is going to appoint the Prime Minister and low chamber of the Russian Parliament. Thus, what they do is just going to say, OK.

He doesn't have no longer-- unlike it was before-- Prime Minister no longer has the right to appoint his Ministers. No. He's just a technical guy, you know, to do what Putin is going-- you know, so he will serve as, like, Deputy to Putin or his Chief of Staff in the government, but Prime Minister won't have the right to appoint his own Ministers. It's the President who is going to have.

And on top of that, now they're going to write to amend the Russian Constitution and write, the President is-- they're conducting a general control of the government. What does it mean? Today, he wants to do this. Tomorrow, he wants to go to Sochi and, you know, get some rest. He's not going to do this. You know, no one knows.

There are extremely important two amendments. There's one that, in accordance with one amendment, Russian people are going to be deprived from their constitutional right for self governance-- no longer. So amendment doesn't makes municipal self governments which were elected by people and which were answerable to the people, these will become part of so-called public power.

I am trying very hard to stay and, you know, not to use the kind of Russian that I use in private settings. [LAUGHS] And the second amendment is that, before January 2020, there was the primacy over the international law over the sovereign law. It was very important, because its basically refers us to the famous Helsinki Act. You know, I'm not going to go into these. I understand that people who don't remember Soviet Union probably have no idea what I am talking about, but just trust me.

It's very important, because these acts pronounced that violation of human rights cannot be a sovereign affair of a state. So now, we are going to miss this, as well. What's also very important about those amendments is that the rights of governance as well as primacy of the international law are private, so international law is written in the first two chapters of the Russian Constitution. First two chapters of the Russian Constitution-- that outlines the constitutional regime, the constitutional order that exists in Russia since 1993.

In accordance with chapter nine of the Russian Constitution, any changes to any articles of the first two chapters can be made only by the people who are a source of all power in Russia. That's what they're reading. Then, as always what dictators do, they manipulate the wording and they change articles in other chapters that are going now to contradict the main chapters of the Russian Constitution, and say, that's why we don't need any referendum to approve those amendments.

So the purging procedure is the following. But of course, you know, the most important thing-- when I was really all this it was clear that Putin is doing something that should allow him to stay in power after 2024, when in accordance with the Russian Constitution chapter on presidency he's supposed to step down, because Russian Constitution's allowed only for two consecutive terms.

And that's all of a sudden, a week ago, on March 10th, Valentina Tereshkova, 84-year-old woman who was the first woman in space back decades ago. I even don't remember when it happened, but, you know, that's basically all she did in her life, you know, she was three days in space-- not exactly, but that's another story. So anyway, this old lady came out to the podium of the Russian State Duma and said, the situation is very difficult in the world.

There is coronavirus, and of course, you know, there are United States, and there is-- we are surrounded by enemies. Of course, Russia is all surrounded by enemies, as all of you are well aware, and that's why Putin should stay. Where is the logic? No. There is no logic. It just, you know--

And you know what happened? The Speaker of the Parliament announced a break for hour in half, and then in an hour and a half, of a sudden, President Putin shows up on the State Duma-- surprise, surprise-- with a prepared speech, as if his speech writers were able to write this 30 minutes or 20 minutes long speech, you know? And then this speech, of course, he says that Russia needs strong President, that of course we need strong presidential power.

Yes. In general, it's a nice idea to have different Presidents. But look, you know, United States-- they passed the amendment to their constitution only 94 to 7. You know what happened back then with the Roosevelt and et cetera, who died in the middle of his fourth term, right? So even the United States had for a couple of decades no limits for the terms.

Now, of course, we're surrounded by enemies, and of course life is so difficult, and coronavirus. And basically, Russians, I'm your lucky guy and you're going to have me forever. Leonid Brezhnev, the longest-serving after Stalin, as General Secretary served for 18 years. So Putin already served longer than that.

Stalin served for 33 years. Ivan the Terrible served for 47 years. So Putin is going to be the next after-- if he is going to-- after Ivan the Terrible to serve as the leader of the country. And of course, Putin said that, yes, he's going to agree with what Valentina Tereshkova, this 84-year-old lady, suggested.

He couldn't resist, but he would like the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation to approve this amendment. And of course, as you heard me before, I said the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, members of the Constitutional Court are going to be appointed and dismissed by the President. To be sure, so you understand, it's a very lucrative job.

They receive tons of money, but what's more important, they have a very, very good retirement compensations, about \$7,000 monthly. By Russian standards, our usual retirement compensation is about-- good retirement compensation is \$300 a month. So it's a very, very nice job. And you should be needed, right, to vote on your principles?

I don't expect them to be idiots, no one, and Putin himself does. But then, so already today, State Duma voted all amendments in the second reading and [INAUDIBLE] into-- oy. I did something wrong. OK. No. Just one sec. This is too early.

So Duma is going to vote in the third reading, then the upper chamber is going to OK it, and then Putin is supposed to sign it. They don't need anything else. But Putin said, no, no, no. Russian people should give their OK. Of course, you know, you understands that's totally illegitimate, what he is doing, that hopefully-- I hope that the United States and Europe is not going to recognize his terms after 2024.

If you do, then please, you know, it's up to you. You will face the consequences. I will talk about these consequences at the end of my talk. And of course, we know what happened in all each and every legal dictatorship that did exist or exists in the current world. It's not any good for their countries, for their nations, and it's very bad for the world order.

But that's later on. You know, these are the tasty that I will serve you later. Now, as you noticed, my talk I called "From the Silent Coup to the Legal Dictatorship." And in fact, what I meant by silent coup when I was writing those slides and writing this presentation, I had in mind something different that happened, in fact, much earlier.

In fact, it happened by 2008, but pretty much by 2012, the situation was already concluded. It was the creation of the corporate state in the Russian Federation. What happened is that, as you're well aware, Yeltsin chose as his successor-- it wasn't Yeltsin himself. By that time, he was pretty much senile-- but it was three people who wear operative in this choice.

It was Valentin Yumashev, his son-in-law, his daughter Tatiana Yumashev-- they had married after Yeltsin stepped down-- and Sergei Kiriyenko who is now Deputy Chief of Staff. And they decided they had different options. The idea to choose Putin was based on-- there were certain preconditions.

It should be ethnically Russian. Russians are comprised 70% of the Russian Federation, so it should be ethnically Russian. He should have been in the uniform, and there are a hell of a lot of people in uniform in Russia, whether it's railroads or there are 2.5 different kind of bodyguards, and there are internal police and fire people. They also have the uniform.

And they wanted him to be young, much younger than Yeltsin, pretty tall, nice looking. So that will be a problem. No, no, no. They were not talking about, of course, principals. Forget about this. What are we talking about?

God, my poor country Russia is a great country. It has great human capital, but unfortunately we have awful elite, and that's the major problem. But anyway, so as you can see, so these were the preconditions. And Yeltsin himself, when he was asked, he didn't want Putin.

He didn't like him very much. You know, he didn't know him very much. Putin was shortly a head of the FSB. He was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. Sobchak, who was the first elected mayor of St. Petersburg. Then in 1996, Sobchak ran for re-election. Putin was head of his campaign. They lost.

Putin never, himself, ran to the office before 2000 and didn't like all these electoral affairs at all, because as a result of this electoral bullshit he had to-- sorry for the term, but we're on the internet so it's allowed-- he had to leave St. Peter. He got a job in the presidential administration at Russia's White House.

First, he was responsible for soiled real estate outside Russia, and there was a lot of real estate that Soviet Union left, so they had to do all this kind of stuff, and there was a lot of KGB real estate left. Anyway, so he dealt with them, then he became Deputy Chief of Administration, then he was-- and by the way, when he was already he was-- I of course interviewed each and every one who was in any way involved, including you know those people that I named.

But also, I interviewed people who worked for him in the presidential administration they said that when he became Deputy Chief of Staff all of them got to know that they were taped. They realized that all their private conversations in their offices became known to the boss. Of course, boss had grew up, came to being a man inside the KGB.

So then, he briefly was appointed as the head of the FSB. Back then, it was just counterintelligence. By now, FSB accumulated all previous departments of the KGB intelligence. But you know, this intelligence is just a mimic of what-- you know, there are all kinds of other agencies that do the job. Anyway, and so Yeltsin didn't want him.

Putin did a dirty job for Yeltsin. Yeltsin had to take down the Attorney General of Russian Federation who initiated the case against his daughters. So Putin had to do a dirty job to videotape this attorney general in bed with prostitutes. It wasn't a good picture.

After all, the guy didn't have good muscles. Everything else is relative, here. Anyway, the basic idea was, of course, to have somebody who was going to ensure security and immunity of the first family. And that was the main, of course. And on top of this, after I interviewed all of them, I can tell you, the major reason-- even not that-- ignorance, amazing ignorance and greed.

These were two major reasons that those people whom I named chose a former KGB operative-- who never was a spy, by the way-- a former KGB operative is the next President of Russia. He

became the legacy of Boris Yeltsin, and now forever Boris Yeltsin will be remembered as the one who chose a guy who put Russian democracy in grave.

Don't worry. I never say outside Russia what I don't say in Russia. And of course, all that I told to Tatyana Yumasheva and Valentin Yumashev in person. So it didn't happen overnight. These things don't happen overnight. It took Putin some time to screw up Russian democratic institutions.

So of course, first of all, he had to cancel elections in the Russian regions, gubernatorial elections. Then, there was wholesale change of elites for distribution of property. Of course, then the richest man in Russia was put in jail and his oil company was privatized-- oh, I'm sorry, nationalized by Putin's closest pal, Igor Sechin, now probably the second the number two, number three in the Russian unofficial hierarchy.

Also, he took time to put Russian media under control, because there were a lot of different private companies that existed. Then, there was institutional redesign, of course. And finally, we came to the self coup.

By the way, probably I should say here to those who are students and watching us on the internet that's self coup is what we call when leaders of the countries who were elected on a constitutional basis, who were elected legally, after serving as presidents for one or two terms, then by the end of their last term make changes to the constitution that will allow them to stay. Whether it's junta, military junta, or whether it's the president-- Erdogan did it in Turkey, of course.

Turkey was a parliamentary republic. Erdogan changed this to presidential elections. Armenians tried to do this, but people went out on the streets. But anyway, so that's what they do.

So the most important steps in screwing up democratic institutions Russia were taking control over the media. The main reason is that there will be no message distributed to the population, 244 million strong country, which runs over 11 time zones, so it's such a tricky thing. 11 time zones from Kaliningrad in the west to Vladivostok in the east, so from Europe to the border with Japan, right? No, almost the border with Japan.

So to make sure that all these people will be getting the same message, no alternative to Putin. That was the main idea. And of course, that's what's often done. Even though Hugo Chavez in Venezuela tolerated an opposition channel for quite a while, and of course now then in Turkey, despite the autocracy that exists there, and 150 people-- journalists are sitting in jail, and a lot of lawyers had to emigrate, however an opposition managed to elect the mayor of Istanbul and mayors of some other important cities. So this is a little bit different stories.

But also, what was very important which few people noticed, that in 2004, 2008, there was the massive infliction of the KGB graduates in all administrative offices. First, they started from the regions. They were not very successful. Then, those KGB graduates who were working in different private enterprises and companies they moved to state-owned enterprises and slowly but surely took control in the major industries of the Russian Federation.

And you have to understand, Russian economy is very monopolized. If in this country, 60 million people work in small and medium-sized businesses and they produce more than half of US GDP, in Russia, small businesses are almost nonexistent. So by the end of 2010, Putin took control over the Russian media.

All this media that you see here used to be private. No longer. And there was one of the best TV in the world, NTV, which was basically taken away from its creator and owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, and so it became part of the Gazprom Media. One of NMG group is run by Yuri Kovalchuk, but the chairman of the board is Alina Kabaeva, who allegedly is substitute for Putin's wife.

Is that OK if I put it this way? They say they have two children, but you know, you cannot write about this in Russia because immediately the newspaper which writes this, it immediately gets closed. We have a case already. And of course, it's all secretive. We don't know neither the state of health of Putin's, nor who he lives with and who is sharing his bed, and et cetera. That's all unknown.

Of course, there was institutional redesign, as I said, the changes of laws on elections. There were, from 2012 to 2017, 59 articles out of 87 articles of the law on presidential elections were amended, and plus, all four appendices to the law were changed, as well. 126 laws amended, previous election laws in Russia. They made it impossible for any alternative to run-- totally impossible.

A Russian opposition doesn't stand a chance. Last summer, it became clear that it's impossible to run even for the Moscow City Council, which doesn't have a say about anything, but it became totally impossible. So they changed. Once again, just notice that it was done through changing the institutions. That's the most important.

They pretended that all is done in a legal way. So it became impossible to register an opposition party. It became impossible to register opposition candidates. It became impossible to run for the presidency.

No contestation whatsoever. It's all simulacrum at the place of contestants. It's all the same. You know, each year the same Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, [? Yuganov, ?] and [? Mironov, ?] yes, pretend they are opposition. Zhirinovskiy was chosen by the KGB in 1989 to become an opposition, and he created Liberal Democratic Party.

It's not liberal, not democratic, not party. Everything else is right. And that is what I call Putin's silent coup. Look. That's what I'm telling about the creation of the corporate state.

When people predominately from the KGB, some from GRU, entered all top offices in the country, both in the center and in the regions. Sorry, you know, anyway. So you can see that in Gorbachev's time, there was 4.8% of KGB guys and KGB was the second most important institution in the country. The first was, of course, the Communist Party, which wasn't the party.

It was the form of government. And these were two vertical structures that were running the Soviet Union-- two-- and they were competing with each other. Right? It's also very important to our client that now KGB or its successor FSB doesn't have any control and any contestation from the side of the Communist Party as it was before the Soviet Union fell apart.

So by 2015, you can see, KGB graduates had control all of the major offices in the country. And I'm not talking-- you know, traditionally in the Soviet Union, KGB guys were deputy ministers. That was the tradition, because they were in charge to control in an outflow. So the same now?

Absolutely. You know, in many ways, sometimes it's very easy to predict what Putin does, because all you have to know, you have to know very well how KGB operated. And then, you understand how they operate outside the country, how they operate inside the country, what they are going to do next, and et cetera. In this way, they're pretty much predictable.

And on top of that, you know, they're not very smart and not very educated. So it also helps. It doesn't help you to survive, but it helps you to understand. There are so-called state-owned corporations, 10 of them are led major, 10 of them led by the former KGB graduates, and that's the industries. Of course, Russia is an oil-dependent country.

Oil prices went down and Russian ruble devalued about-- what?-- 15%, 18%? So Russia is absolutely dependable upon oil and gas, but there are some other industries, and as you can see, they're all under control of [INAUDIBLE]. OK. And that's what happened.

That's what happened, that for the first time in the Russian history, the political police is not an instrument of power, as was the case during the Tsarist era when we had Okhrana, and [INAUDIBLE], thought department, or in the USSR. For the first time, the political police have become power in itself, its essence, and its being. In Russia in 2020, there isn't a single institution capable in any way, shape, or form of controlling KGB, FSB.

Now, when they say this, usually in this country immediately I get the message, but what about FBI under Hoover? Or what about George W. Bush Sr. was head of the CIA before he became the President? Right. You know, the FBI under Hoover, from what I know, was no good and it was a very dangerous to the American Society.

And of course, you know, everything that happened during the McCarthy years was a disgrace to the American democracy. But we're talking about very different institutions. You know, there is a huge difference between-- where did I have it?

Yes. There is a huge difference between the Secret Service and the Political Police. The major goal of the Political Police is to protect the sovereign. That's the goal. There is no public good. There is no even idea of the Political Police being independent from the sovereign.

There is no way that national intelligence can issue a report claiming that the President of some country-- a President of a country-- what might be helped by some in other country. Just, you cannot even imagine this to happen.

And of course, you know, there are no real laws, and there is what wasn't important. There is no accountability and no checks-- just none. Intelligence Committee on paper does exist in Russia, but all clauses and articles on the real budget of the Russian punitive organs are classified. You can find money for FSB in the article on kindergartens-- on state budget expenses on kindergartens just the way it was pretty much during the Soviet time.

But also, what is very dangerous about this, that political police by virtue of being so-called law enforcement-- because on paper it's law enforcement, right, or it's secret police, or law enforcement-- they have right for the legal violence. That's very important. They have right to come to your house, drag you out, search your house, take all your computers, all your phones, and do whatever they will with your private information, or beat you on the street just because they think that you shouldn't be on the street, or control your phones, tape you.

And all these rights that that state-- and if we're using Weberian notion of the state-- has, because of course, later on when we're talking about relative monopoly over violence in the state, but you know, obviously, in countries like Russia these punitive organs have full monopoly over violence. Just last summer, we had demonstrations, protest rallies, in Russia, and a guy threw plastic bottle.

I was there. I saw it with my own eyes. A plastic bottle into a riot police officer. He got three and a half years in jail. That's what monopoly on violence. When people ask me, why Russian people don't want to protest? Well, you know, please come. We can try together.

You will be in jail, and of course, I will be there, too. No, maybe not, because I am a journalist. I will claim that I covered the events. But anyway.

Yes. I am coming. So the outcomes is [INAUDIBLE]. It's creation of the corporate state. Pretty much, you know what? I always advise that if you want to understand what is a corporate state, read on Benito Mussolini, Italy. It's very much related to the current Russian corporate state. All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.

Of course, you know, the developments of the latest years. Elite repressions, about you can put in jail anyone, any bureaucrat, any businessman. A lot of them are clear-cut thieves, but of course, as it happens in these kinds of regimes it goes under the banner of the war against corruption. But the real reason why some end up in jail and some not is some happened to be disloyal or refused to give up their business in favor of Putin's pals or KGB reps or FSB reps in the regions, and they end up in labor camps and chains.

You know, the latest very well-known case is Michael Calvey, the American from Oklahoma who married to a Russian woman set up a company, Baring Vostok, which invested in the major Russian and the most successful IT enterprises like search engine and Yandex, which is like Russian Google. And you know, he's under home arrest now, but he was put in jail just because his counterpart happened to be a friend of the son of the head of the Security Council. Of course, you know the KGB guy, Nikolai Patrushev.

And I have never heard Calvey even once to say anything critical about Putin. And when he was asked, he will say, yeah, you know, it's not exactly easy, here, but still you can make money. Come and invest. Trust me, yeah, he will return back to the United States, only he will have to give up all his business.

They will leave maybe something to him so you don't have to pay him retirement compensation, but you know, whatever millions that he made in Russia he will leave in Russia. So that's what-- you know, from autocracy to the legal-- however, there is some good news, because I cannot leave you with bad news. So there is some good news.

The absolute majority-- you know, as I told you, by 2010, Putin got full control over the Russian media and TV became the biggest source of media. And of course, the annexation of Crimea and the war in the eastern Ukraine in 2014 annexation of Crimea happened on March 18th. Is it today? Yes. No, tomorrow.

Ah. In a week. Right, I'm sorry. Oh, yes. I have a midterm on March 18th. So-- what? OK. That's OK.

So TV was state-owned, and there are no such a thing as non-state-owned TV. All Russian TV networks are either owned by the state or controlled by the state-affiliated companies. What is it? What happened? Why I cannot-- OK.

But look what's happening in the last years. That's what the source of my optimism, because as you can understand, of course, I am an optimist living in Russia. Look at this. Look at this. You can see that young people age 18-24, 25-34, these people, these kids, they don't remember the Soviet Union. They don't remember what it's like to live in fear from day one to the last day of your life.

They don't remember any of that. They were born after. And so for them, social networks are becoming the major source of information. It's important to say that studies that were done for instance by [? Jarovsky ?] and [? Atole ?] and others suggest that social networks like Facebook, they do promote populous messages in the Western democracies where there is a constant station.

However, in our part of the world, it is a source of information. For us, Facebook is the source of information. It's a source of communications. It's very, very important for us. That's why Putin is getting into digital repressions and creating a so-called sovereign internet.

And look what's happening with Putin's ratings. It's going down. Exactly. I'm coming to an end. Exactly. You know, it's going down, and look. After annexation of Crimea, he has an approval rating of 82%, from 82 to 86% of Russians. This is VTsIOM. I'm sorry if I forgot to put the source. That's very important. It's a state-owned pollster, VTsIOM.

29%-- that's why-- that's why he needs to do what he did with his amendment, because he understands that legally he won't be able to stay in power. Yes, that we will have some means. And so that's my last message to you.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Thank you, [INAUDIBLE]

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Thank you.

ELIZABETH WOOD: We'll give her a big hand, here, and I hope viewers at home--

AUDIENCE: This is about the coronavirus?

[LAUGHTER]

ELIZABETH WOOD: So I'm Elizabeth Wood, and Carol Saivetz and I are going to maybe ask a few questions.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Yes. May I have another bottle of water, please?

ELIZABETH WOOD: Of course.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Thank you so much. Where should I sit? I would prefer here, because--

ELIZABETH WOOD: Then you can see everybody.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: And it will be easier for me with my braces. OK?

ELIZABETH WOOD: OK. Do you want to open with a question before we check--

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: I actually have a bunch of questions, but you know, for the last couple of years it's been speculated that Putin was going to do something-- that there were some kind of succession plan that was going to-- at one point, it was that he was going to appoint a Medvedev-like character to serve the six years, and then he would come back in.

At another point, it was that he was going to pursue all the pressure on Belarus, and they were going to have the Belarus-Russian union, and then he could become President of this new entity and not violate the Constitution. The other one was that he'd amend the Constitution.

AUDIENCE: It would also violate the Constitution in any case.

CAROL SAIVETZ: OK. But so why did he pick this and why now?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: I'm sorry?

CAROL SAIVETZ: Why did he pick this method with a sudden, you know, constitutional changes--

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: A poll rating 29%.

CAROL SAIVETZ: OK.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: You see, I'm referring you to the information theory by [? Grief ?] and [? Trisman. ?] What's the difference between Putin and all other KGB guys in power, and other generals around him? The only one-- it is that he used to have popular support, that he could tell them that, guys, you are nothing without me because I protect you from all these dirty Russians who want to have your companies and your money, and et cetera.

I am the one who is capable to negotiate between you and people, and there's 20 million Russians who live below the poverty line, right? So that's his source of legitimacy, his approval rating, and his high approval was his source of legitimacy and was his protection from the other generals around him. It's gone now. It's 29%, and it's a trend.

I can return the back to the slide. You will see it is a trend. This trend was before 2014, then he annexed Crimea and started the war in eastern Ukraine, and it ran like that for three or four years, and then steadily but surely it's going down. So that's very important. That's why now.

Secondary, when everyone knows that he was supposed to do something by 2024, he became a lame duck, because people were starting to think, oh, you know, maybe Medvedev, or maybe we should make a deal with Lukashenko in Belarus, or maybe we have to think about Sechin, or maybe somebody else. It is very dangerous, because we do know that these kinds of regimes fail because of the elite coup.

That's what happens, split of the elites. That's what's the most important in this kind of regimes. So once again, I can refer you to the latest study done by Sergei Guriev from the Paris Sciences Po, a big study on authoritarian regimes. So it became dangerous for him.

He is not an idiot. He is pretty smart, I should say. I never voted for him, to be sure. I never accepted him as a President, but you know, he is smart and he has guts, and his gut told him the situation is getting pretty difficult. That's why now.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So we have some questions. First, a question here in the audience, and then I'll take one from here. Dmitiri?

AUDIENCE: Thanks Yevgenia, so when this was announced in his address and then in the next few weeks--

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Surprise, surprise.

AUDIENCE: Yeah. So there was a lot of sort of confusion about the text of the amendments, right? Like, first he seemed to propose one thing when he spoke, then what was actually proposed in written form was maybe a little different, then it was changed some more, and also at the same time the procedures for how they were going to be adopted seemed to be changing initially on a kind of almost daily basis.

Was this a plan to sow confusion, or was it that they weren't quite sure how to do it and we're kind of improvising as they went along, and if so why? Like, either way, why?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: I think that it was an active measure operation, just exactly as I said, that in order to understand what they're doing now, go back and read good studies on the KGB. It was a cover up. It was an active measure operation.

They're putting a lot of right nows, because it was clear that he was going to come up with something real important, the one that was the real reason for those amendments, and that's exactly what happened in March. That's exactly what happened. It was active measure operation. We're dealing with a KGB operative who became to a being the man, and became a proud man when he started in Andropov's School 101.

Now it's, Andropov's Intelligence Academy. Back then, it was School 101. So that's how he got to know how to operate, and the majority of the operations that were conducted during these 20 years, it was done in the fashion of active measure operations.

AUDIENCE: So in other words, it was kind of, the idea was to get people used to changes and amendments and so forth, and then just slip one in at the end.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: And to create a cloud. No one listened. You know, the great academics here in this country, I listen to their podcasts. They keep saying that Putin is this sad, that Putin was turning Russia into a parliamentary republic. I just collapsed, you know?

And the kinds of things that I read, including the best newspapers here, New York Times, Washington Post, they had no clue. And of course, it was very difficult, because it was an active measure operation and he was bringing a lot of cloud for the main thing to happen.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Actually, let's take one more from the audience, and then I'm going to turn to--

CAROL SAIVETZ: We've got two more here.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Well, all right. Go ahead. Let's take [INAUDIBLE].

AUDIENCE: I'm listening to you when you're talking about a coup, and it sounds to me from listening-- and I know nothing about the subject-- but it sounds to me from listening that it's one of two other things and not a coup. It sounds to me like it's either a successful counterrevolution to the revolution of Yeltsin and Gorbachev, and if it is that, I would ask you why is it successful and what would be the conditions to make it not successful?

So that's one possibility. The other possibility I hear is that it's much less extreme. It's simply a course correction to the historical course of Russia.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Well, once again, you know I hate this. Once again, yes, there is this negative political culture that doesn't allow Russia to become a democracy. That's a part. Listen,

I love Steve Kotkin. I'm listening to his three-volume book on Stalin right now, but this is totally wrong.

By this account, Germany was not supposed to become a democracy, and Poland. Just tell me which part of democratic culture Poland inherited, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire it was part of, or from the Russian Empire it was part of, or from the Prussian Empire it was part of? Listen, it's totally ridiculous. Time and again-- you know, Japan was not supposed to become a democracy, and many, many other countries.

We see that even in Latin America, as hard as it was for those countries to get through. Argentina had six schools during the 20th century, and finally very difficult road, but it will get there. Brazil has setbacks and still Peru, and et cetera. People want to be happy. That's the only reason people choose democracy, because they want to survive, to raise kids, and as Amartya Sen said, two things never happen on the democracy, massive hunger and massive murder.

That's it. it's pursuit of happiness as it's written in the American Constitution. That's what everyone wants-- you, me, Carol, and [INAUDIBLE] and his kids, and et cetera. And democracy is the older regime that allows for that. We went through the very painful 20th century. Soviet Union lost 56 million-- 56 million.

My grandpa was killed just because he started in the United States, and he was killed on November 1st, 1937. So Soviet Union went through awful atrocities, but at the beginning there were promises of course of heaven. So this is number one, about the silent coup.

You know, in democracies, we tend to think that whatever happens, happens more or less in a transparent way. Even if a president of a particular country or of some country is doing something wrong, it becomes known. If some president in some country doesn't trust health authorities and doesn't allow for a test to be produced, it becomes known. Sooner or later, The New York Times is going to write about this.

However, opposite to that in the countries in the corporate states, everything is done in a closed fashion. Just imagine that we're talking about Coca-Cola, not Russia, Coca-Cola. Do you know what kind of talks existed at the top level of the corporation? Or Goldman Sachs, what kind of decisions they're taking? No. We know nothing.

But when it happens with the corporate state, they're not Coca-Cola. They live out of our taxes. We're supposed to know this, right? So all this was made in silence. It happened very silently.

You know, there were idiots like me who was putting, each time I see a new official, I checked him. You do it all manually. You cannot a research student to do it for you. You have to do it manually, and that's what I did, all this. I was just checking.

Wow. So nice. What department? OK. So this is first main director. Ah yeah, this guy served in third director, then this guy. And that's what. If you go on the web and try to check their biographies, you wouldn't see it. No one writes that Yuri Kovalchuk served in the third main directorate, and that Igor Sechin served in the same, that their job was to stay in Leningrad if it

gets occupied. That's the job. You know, they were supposed to run guerrilla operations-- no one. Try to find it on the internet. You won't. You have to ask me about that.

ELIZABETH WOOD: She wrote a book about the KGB.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Yeah. But you know, so it was all done in silence, non-transparent. That's why I call it the silent coup. Counter-revolution? You know, I'm not sure. I think that it's a little bit misleading. Now, correction, what do you mean, correction?

After all this institutional redesign, it's not correction. It's not correction. Legislation no longer exists. Judiciary no longer exists. Presidency as an institution doesn't exist, because there is no way to get another President. That's why [INAUDIBLE].

Do we need institutions, formal or informal? Precisely, because these should be some impersonal ways to deal with the government authorities, right? So that a presidency doesn't exist. So it is fully de-institutionalization of the Russian state.

In a way, we could argue-- and I know some people who would argue-- that he's leading to total destruction of the Russian state, because there are no institutions. Just like under Stalin, there was no real institution. You know, he abolished politburo. He was the only one who was taking all the decisions.

For 70 years or something like that, he didn't have any meetings of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. So anyway, it's de-institutionalization. 21st century? Please. You cannot run a modern state without institutions, unless I should forget everything that I was taught by Peter Hall in the university next to yours.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Yes. All right. Let's take a different tack from our audience. We have a couple of questions, but we'll take one at a time. What is the real COVID-19, the coronavirus situation in Russia. Who is in charge, who is telling the world, and what do you think is happening?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: I was in Russia two weeks ago. And by the way, so you will know that I said all that on Ekho Moskovy, so it's all known to my fellow colleagues and to my fellow citizens, and I'm a citizen of the Russian Federation. So there are 20 or 22 cases now.

Three were cured, and others are under control. Now, Russia closed all flights from Italy, Germany, China, but from China it was way ago, and from some other countries where there is outbreak of the virus. As in the United States, today it was trying to buy in CVS sanitizers.

Oh, this is great about this country. I don't understand why people don't want to make money and produce sanitizers. But anyway, the same in Russia. You cannot buy masks. You cannot buy mask N95. You cannot buy sanitizers. You cannot buy wipes, and et cetera, but that's it, you know? And they're closing the country.

ELIZABETH WOOD: All right. Let me take one more from here. A question about Mikhail Khodorkovsky. What do you think about the role of Mikhail Khodorkovsky as the leader of the opposition? Is his past relevant? Parenthesis, as an oligarch but not as a prisoner.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: First of all, he was a prisoner. He served 10 years in jail in the labor camps. He was my columnist, by the way, during his second term, so he didn't have access to the internet but we managed to--

ELIZABETH WOOD: His second term in prison?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: In jail. Yes.

ELIZABETH WOOD: He was writing articles for you? Yeah.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Right, and columns, yes. So I think that it's a lot of years in Russian labor camps, and I think that he learned certain lessons. He was not allowed, when Putin pardoned him on the basis that his mother had a terminal stage of lung cancer. He was taken from his labor camp in the Russian north directly to Berlin, Germany, which didn't allow him to stop in Russia even though his mom and dad were in Moscow.

So now he's living in London. I wouldn't call him a leader of the Russian opposition, because it's very difficult to be a leader of the Russian opposition, but he's definitely one of those who invests money in opposition. The real leader of the Russian opposition is Alexei Navalny, of course, a young 42-year-old politician, very capable, the creator-founder of the fund to fight corruption.

So he's the real leader, and he wasn't-- by the way, he tried to run for the presidency. They instituted a totally fake case about him. European Court of Justice in St. Petersburg overturned this case saying that it was a politically-motivated case. However, he was still not allowed to run for president against Putin in 2008, and Putin is dead afraid of him.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Mm-hmm. So do we have another question here? I'm going to take David [INAUDIBLE].

AUDIENCE: You mentioned something interesting, that Putin at some point ignored legal counsel and legal advice, and proceeded to what he needed to proceed. That's very, I think, indicative of what he could afford that many Western leaders would never be able to afford even if they wanted to ignore legal structures. So that reflects, I think, the failure of Russian institutions because Putin's, because it's not all about Putin.

In some ways, he sort of suggested that Yeltsin was an enabler of that. He's kind of the Hindenburg for Hitler. So could you reflect more about the failures of Russian institutions before Putin came to power? Because I think--

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Of course. Of course. First of all, he didn't consult the legal department for the administration of the president because it was active measure operation. He

was a friend of Oleg's and he wanted to surprise each and every one. That was the whole idea of active measure operation.

In this murky world of the secret services and political police, they tend to be secretive. So this is number one. Number two, you're absolutely right. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin dissolved the Parliament. It was the constitutional self coup. It was a very wrong way to proceed.

And in 1993, they adopted the new constitution. There were all kinds of reasons why it shouldn't have been done. I think it was a very big mistake. In 1996, on July 3, 1996, I was the only reporter in Russia who reported that Russia was voting in the runoff for the half-dead man.

Yeltsin had a stroke. Yeltsin had a heart attack. He was unable to talk. It was July 3, 1996. I was a producer at CNN. Eileen O'Connor went on air live. There was a huge scandal. She got a call from the American Embassy saying, what are you doing? Anyway, so American [INAUDIBLE] was very upset. I'm not talking about Russians.

So anyway, it's true, and it's true that Russia, according to the Freedom Forum, Russia was the freest in 1989 under Gorbachev, that since then, it was gradually sliding down and was partially free by the end of Yeltsin's two terms. But trust me, partially free is much better than North Korea, and we are not a free country now, and we're steadily going in the direction of Turkmenistan, North Korea, and those most repressive countries in the world.

ELIZABETH WOOD: I have another question. We're getting close to the end so we won't be able to take all of the questions from the audience, but let's have another one. What is your opinion on the extent, the goals, and the sources of Russian quasi-government and government efforts to interfere in the US elections? I'm sure this will be interesting.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: You know, I should feel proud, because basically, for the last-- whatever-- already four years on the road, I read that my country is capable to run American politics.

[LAUGHTER]

So I should be very proud. To be honest with you, I do think that there were-- we know this for a fact, that Russians broke-- you know, there is an agency. They're basically known for its assassinations-- grew. It's military intelligence, but they're also known for their cyberwar affairs-- that it broke into the email of the Democratic Party and campaign and knew what Democrats were doing the crucial states, including, as far as I understand, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, which became crucial for Donald Trump's electoral success in 2016.

And Russians interfered in the electoral machines of 45 states in this country. This we know for a fact. We know that Donald Trump was pronounced winner, Putin's closest associates and emails as saying Putin won. But you can read all that in the Mueller report. I believe it's chapter one, and there is outlined whether it was Russian attempts had impact on the outcomes, yet we still don't know. We do understand that probably they may, but we don't have hard data that supports that claim.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So another question here. We're short on time.

AUDIENCE: Yeah. Part of these other amendments that, as I understand it, are being voted on is an amendment to ban same sex marriage. Why do you think that's included?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Well, of course.

AUDIENCE: Yeah. I mean, is that a bid to increase his popularity, or?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Yes. There are several amendments that appeal to different strata of the Russian society. Putin is running on a ticket that he is the leader who is carrying on conservative values, that entire Europe, not talking about United States, you're basically [SPEAKING RUSSIAN]. What's the English for that?

ELIZABETH WOOD: Dirty sinners.

AUDIENCE: Mired in sin.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Yes. So you are sinners, but he's the one who is trying to protect these important values. That's why marriage can be only between man and woman now, and that's why a lot of gays had to emigrate from Russia. Second, there are certain appeals to the Russian orthodoxy, because in a way it's filling the gap that was left after the dissolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, its propaganda department.

So it's sort of an agency which is responsible for Russians proper understanding of morals and everything else. And of course, you know that you cannot resist powers, because [INAUDIBLE] right? You know, a letter to Romans.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Oh, four powers, yes, from God. So yes, there are sort of the amendments, but once again, these are all clouds. These are all white noise. The most important thing became clear on March 10th, when he allowed that it was announced that his previous presidential terms were pronounced null and void. They did try to convince the President of Belarus to create some sort of a new state in this case that will allow-- it totally failed, because Lukashenko is a very smart dictator and he does understand.

ELIZABETH WOOD: He doesn't want to lose his job.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Of course, and he does want to be a number one rather than number two. But trust me, you don't ask me about what's going to happen. I am going to tell you.

In this situation, that's what we know from these kinds of regimes. They're going to look for internal and external animus. Internal animus means, we're getting into repression stage. External animus, Putin will try to regain back some of the republics of the former Soviet Union. That's

what's going to happen. Belarussia and Ukraine, two of the first to experience this new, strong presidency.

ELIZABETH WOOD: We have only two minutes left, so I'd like to take a question from the audience. Do Russian people tell jokes about Putin? Could you tell us one or two if they do?

CAROL SAIVETZ: We'll end on a light note.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Try to end on a--

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Ah, there was all kinds of jokes about, you know, these presidential terms became null and void. Some of them, like, you know, that's the way to get your virginity back, just pronounce all your husbands null.

[LAUGHTER]

So that's one of the jokes.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Oh, that's a good one. And do you have any last words for us about how we should react in the West to what's going on? Is there anything we can do?

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Yes. It's very important that academic community won't be blind about what's going on, that the United States government and governments in Europe do understand that this is a legal dictatorship, that even though it's done sort of via amendments to the law-- to the Constitution-- but it's totally illegal and illegitimate, and they shouldn't recognize Putin a President after 2024.

If you don't, you will get a wholesale war in Europe, and problems to the world order. You have to open your eyes finally and understand that Putin is not going to provide you stable Russia, since that's the main idea, that you need stable Russia. No. A legitimate President is unable to provide stability.

Look at what's going on in Venezuela. Look at what's going on in Turkey, and et cetera. There will be a lot of instability inside Russia, but what's most important, there will be war in Europe. If you want this, then be my guest. Just don't tell me that I didn't tell it to you ahead of time.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Thank you.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Well thank, Yevgenia Albats. We are very grateful for your talk.

YEVGENIA M. ALBATS: Thank you so much. This was lovely.

[APPLAUSE]