

M. GESSEN

Beware: We Are Entering a New Phase of the Trump Era

May 28, 2025

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Opinion Columnist

In a show that recently opened at the LaMaMa Experimental Theater Club in the East Village, a group of actors led by a young, ambitious, charmingly naïve director are almost finished rehearsing Chekhov's "The Seagull" at the famed Moscow Art Theater when Russia invades Ukraine. Thanks to social media, they can hear the sirens and see the bombs falling on Kharkiv and Kyiv.

We witness the shock and disbelief, the feeling of utter impossibility of staying in one's country, one's city, one's skin that so many people in Moscow experienced in the days after the full-scale invasion. They cry. They shout at one another. One of them frantically packs a suitcase.

And then the show goes on.

This isn't a theater review, and I'm not here to tell you why you should go see the play, "Seagull: True Story." I have too many social connections to Alexander Molochnikov, the exiled Russian director, and anyway, the current run is sold out. I'm interested in something else: that moment when the shock fades and the (figurative) show goes on.

I think we are entering that moment in the United States.

Living in and reporting on Russia when Vladimir Putin took and consolidated power, I was shocked many times. I couldn't sleep in September 2004, after tanks shelled a school in which terrorists were holding hundreds of children hostage, and I was shocked when Putin used this terrorist attack as a pretext to eliminate elected governorships.

I was shaken when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. My world changed when three

very young women were sentenced to jail time for a protest performance in a church in 2012, the first time Russian citizens were imprisoned for peaceful action. I couldn't breathe when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. And when the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny was poisoned in 2020, arrested in 2021 and almost certainly killed in prison in 2024. And when Russia again invaded Ukraine in 2022.

Along the way there were many smaller, yet also catastrophic, milestones: the state takeovers of universities and media outlets, the series of legislative steps that outlawed L.G.B.T.Q. people, the branding of many journalists and activists as "foreign agents." The state of shock would last a day or a week or a month, but time went on and the shocking event became a fact of our lives.

The United States in the last four months has felt like an unrelenting series of shocks: executive orders gutting civil rights and constitutional protections; a man with a chain saw trying to gut the federal government; deliberately brutal deportations; people snatched off the streets and disappeared in unmarked cars; legal attacks on universities and law firms.

Unlike the Russian autocratic breakthrough (or, for that matter, the Hungarian one, which has apparently provided some of Donald Trump's playbook), the transformation of American government and society hasn't been spread out over decades or even years. It's been everything everywhere all at once.

And now that has become familiar. I've reported on many wars, and I've seen how they come to feel routine — to the people living through them, the people reporting on them and the people reading about them. Wars have a limited repertoire: bombings, shellings, offensives, counteroffensives, body counts. After the initial shock, few people keep track of the shifting front line.

Even Israel's massacre in Gaza, which makes Russia's warfare in Ukraine look restrained, can't produce new headlines after more than 19 months of indiscriminate bombing and warfare by starvation. It is news when two Israeli Embassy employees are murdered in Washington, D.C. But when entire Palestinian families are killed, or when Palestinian children die of malnutrition, it's just another day in Gaza. Nor is it news that the U.S. government is indifferent to war crimes committed by its allies.

In this country, too, fewer and fewer things can surprise us. Once you've absorbed the shock of deportations to El Salvador, plans to deport people to South Sudan aren't that remarkable. Once you've wrapped your mind around the Trump administration's revoking the legal status of individual international students, a blanket ban on international enrollment at Harvard isn't entirely unexpected.

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Once you’ve realized that the administration is intent on driving thousands of trans people out of the U.S. military, a ban on Medicaid coverage for gender-affirming care, which could have devastating effects for hundreds of thousands, just becomes more of the same. As in a country at war, reports of human tragedy and extreme cruelty have become routine — not news.

At the end of Molochnikov’s play, the main character, Kon, loosely based on the director himself, speaks on the phone to his mother, a famous actress, who stayed in Moscow when Kon left. In the three years since the full-scale invasion, she has adjusted and, most important, she is working.

Almost matter-of-factly, she informs her son that his friend, a poet who spoke out against the war, has died in prison. Kon is inconsolable. “Mama, they killed him,” he says. The mother tells him not to worry about missing the funeral and to go to his own birthday party: “They have such good parties in America. Isn’t a birthday party better than a funeral, anyway?”

She is not heartless, just realistic. Reasonable people know the rules and live within the confines they dictate.

We humans are stability-seeking creatures. Getting accustomed to what used to seem unthinkable can feel like an accomplishment. And when the unthinkable recedes at least a bit — when someone gets released from detention (as the Columbia University student Mohsen Mahdawi was a few weeks ago) or some particularly egregious proposal is withdrawn or blocked by the courts (as the ban on international students at Harvard has been, at least temporarily) — it’s easy to mistake it for proof that the dark times are ending.

But these comparatively small victories don’t alter the direction of our transformation — they don’t even slow it down measurably — even while they appeal to our deep need to normalize. They create the sense that there is more air to breathe and more room to act than there was yesterday.

And so just when we most need to act — while there is indeed room for action and some momentum to the resistance — we tend to be lulled into complacency by the sense of relief on the one hand and boredom on the other.

Think of the trajectory of the so-called travel ban during Trump’s first term. Its first iteration drew thousands into the streets. The courts blocked it. The second iteration didn’t attract nearly as much attention, and most people didn’t notice when the third

iteration of the travel ban, which had hardly changed, went into effect. Now Trump's administration is drafting a new travel ban that targets more than five times as many countries.

It took Alexander Molochnikov two and a half years to put on "Seagull: True Story." The process was arduous and often frustrating, he told me, but the long journey was ultimately good for the play. It allowed him to observe the normalization of the war in Russia and include these observations in the text. It also enabled him to get to know the United States.

The second act takes place in New York. One character, a sleazy producer, observes: "Just think. When he first came to this country, he was afraid even to say he is Russian. And now we are all friends and making peace everywhere in the world. Such a good peace."

At one point, another character makes a comment about censorship and adds: "Something like that could never happen in America. Right?" On the night I saw the play, the audience laughed a kind of laugh I'd heard before, but not in this country: It was bitter, and it was resigned.

From the comments

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Yankelneovich

Las Vegas

In my gut I think America won't end up like Russia or Hungary or any of the other countries that have slipped into fascism/authoritarianism in recent history. We are Americans, with 250 years of democracy. Freedom against tyranny is our birthright and we will never bow to a dictator.

On the other hand, the intensity of the assault on our Constitution, our public and private institutions and the rights of the most vulnerable among us dismays and even frightens me. All we can do right now is to resist. We need to resist everywhere and refuse to give up.

**M. Gessen**

Opinion Columnist

@Yankelneovich I think you are expressing exactly the tension I'm trying to get at: to make sure that that gut feeling is born out, we need to act. But the gut tells us that it will all be okay.

And it's true that U.S. history is very different than the history of other countries that have slid into autocracy in the last couple of decades. Indeed, U.S. history is profoundly different from that of any other country. But that also means it has less predictive value.

The question is, Can we truly reach for the ideas - the ideals - that make this

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Most Dangerous Phase of the Trump Era Is Now