Living in Putin’s Land:
The Wealthy, the Ignored, and the Persecuted

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DR. GILL
Good afternoon everybody. Let's get started. Welcome to a special series on Russia, for the Teach-In series. The teach-ins are designed to give folks relevant information you can use to form opinions. They were founded back in 1965 at the University of Michigan when students were confused about the Vietnam War. They were being lied to by their government they couldn't make sense of the media so they bought in experts where they could share the list up and then they could ask direct questions of those people. And so you guys are here for a reason. Chase knows a whole lot about Russia, and I'll tell you about him in a second, but he's gonna share some things that he thinks, might-will be helpful to know from his perspective, and then you guys get to ask him whatever you guys want to know. So that when you leave here today you leave with information you can use to understanding this relationship between the United States and Russia. I'm an American historian. I'm here to learn today, okay? So Chase is pretty damn special. He graduated from Boise State as an honors student in history and political science. He did two years in the Peace Corps, in turn at the Departments of State and Defense in Russia, and he worked on human rights issues there. We're lucky to have him back as a research associate at The Frank Church Institute. This guy knows his stuff. Next week we're gonna have a follow-up. Lynn Lubamersky from the Department of History who studies Russia and she's gonna talk about Russia's interference in our elections. Okay? Break down the whole cyber-war thing. So, I hope you'll come back for that as well. Chase? Thank you.

MR. JOHNSON
Well, thank you very much, Dr. Gill, for having me. I'm really excited I love to dweeb out about this, so I'm happy that you're here to dweeb out with me. Before we get going, this is kind of the domestic component of our series on Russia, so I wanna set just a few ground rules. A few things I don't want to talk about today. One, Donald Trump. Let's take a break [laughter] for an hour. We could all use it. Two, the 2016 election. That's next week. Today we're talking about domestic Russia and they don't have too much connection with that. And three, Russian geopolitics and foreign policy. I'm happy to talk about Syria, or Afghanistan, or what have you with about Russia later. There are classes on that here at the university, but today we're going to talk about domestic Russia. I'll skip my introduction because Jill gave me a good one. I want to run
over the three main groups in Russian society real quick, and then we're going to get into a little
case. So we have the wealthy, all wearing nice suits with good houses. The ignored, Russia's
absent middle or lower classes in rural area. And the persecuted. These are the poor folk that we
hear a lot about in the news. This includes women, dissidents, LGBT, religious and ethnic
minorities. And real quick on the ignored, I view these as rural Russians, industrial workers,
Millennials, new industry, and westernizers. So let's set a little bit of context. Why am I going
to talk about the economy first? Because the economy drives so much of what everyday life is
like in Russia. It is a society that is very closely connected to what it's economic reality and
position is. Also, political economy is kind of my jam, so I'm going to fit it in whenever I can.
This here is Russia's export portfolio. Now over half of Russia's state wealth comes from it's
exports, so when we talk about services delivered to common day, every day Russians, it comes
through resources levied from their exports. Not necessarily tax revenue or anything like that,
so exports are very important. Notice a big big black hole right here. Number one export in
Russia crude petroleum. Number two, refined petroleum. After that petroleum natural gas.
Russia is a one-trick pony economy. It is heavily dependent on it's energy exports, and it's
revenue and ability to deliver services is very much predicated on what position in the energy
economy is. Now, you may ask we have some other large economies in the world. How do they
compare? Here's Germany. You notice it is much more diversified. Here are their natural gas, or
their energy exports here, but nothing quite heavily dominates their economy the same way.
Here's another example, China. See it's more of a patchwork quilt. So what does this big black
hole of exports mean for the Russian economy? And real quick, think about what the oil industry
does for a country versus other industries. It's a non-inclusive one. It's one that requires high
amounts of corporate investment. It doesn't necessarily create a lot of middle-class jobs the way
tech, or medium and light industry might. So the result is this. This is the trajectory of Russian
incomes over the last 20 years. These lines here are Moscow and oil producing regions. Down
here are none. That is quite the gap. Now considering how volatile Russia's economy is, and the
volatility of the world energy market, this means it is either stagnant or, I would argue, probably
a regressive income for Russia's rural populations and non-oil producing people. So keep that in
mind. Now there are no paragons of virtue in the world today when it comes to income
inequality. You can see here. Here are some big economies, like here's us and here's Turkey.
And this is the wealth controlled by the top 10%. 10-the top percentile of the most wealthy, and
Russia is, as everyone pretty much can see here, 85% of Russian wealth is controlled by it's top
10% and they are definitely winning that game. Here is Russia compared to the U.S. by income
graphic. People making less than 10,000-10 to 100-100 to a million, more than a million. 95 85
to 90% of Russia makes less than $10,000 a year. Now this is a G.A.'d economy we're talking
about here. A supposedly western economy. A WTO member, yet they have a massive sector of
their society is quite poor. And really when we talked about how wealthy Russia is, yet this
many people are poor, that means there is no middle class in Russia. There are people who exist
at our income levels that we're used to, but they are few and far between. So let's talk about
who's benefiting from this. Here are a cast of characters along the bottom. This is Igor Sechin.
He is the CEO of Rosneft, state energy company and energy minister. Humble public servant.
Here is Dmitry Peskov. He is the spokesperson for Vladimir Putin, humble public servant, also
a billionaire. Right here I don't see this in the news very much that is Vladimir Putin's house
outside of Moscow. I don't know how many tens of thousands of square feet. It's quite a bit. He
doesn't work in the Kremlin. He works exclusively from here. On the far right is Prime Minister
Dmitri Medvedev. We will talk about him and his houses in a bit, but this is the Russian power
structure as I see it today. It is a marriage between the oligarchs I think we can assume who those
are industry moguls, oil barons, and these people have agreed to profit share with Putin and our
second group, the Siloviki. Now to have an oligarchy you need a political power buttress, and
this is one that I don't see talked about as much. But this is the military, the bureaucratic power
centers
If you can issue a contract in Russia you have quite a bit of power when it comes to leveraging
wealth. The church is another big one and ex-KGB. So this is humble public servant billionaire
Dmitry Medvedev's house. One of his six, and I want to draw special attention right here
[speaking Russian]. That is the duck house. Keep that in mind, but his ducks are living quite
quite nicely up there. Up next, this is humble public servant Dmitri Peskov at his wedding.
Congratulations. Billionaire. He's wearing a watch that cost $37 million rubles. His government
salary is about 60-70 thousand dollars a year. So... I want to know where he's investing. ...Up
next, this here is Vladimir Putin's daughter. Her profession: she is a professional acrobatic rock
'n' roll dancer, and a billionaire...so, I didn't know what that was until recently, but I had no idea
that professional rock 'n' roll dancing was so lucrative.

[laughter]

So, I don't want to talk about this side...wealthy strata too much because they get a lot of attention
today, but here's some good books to read Won't keep this up long. I can send you -- I'll loan
them to you if you want. But Fiona Hill does a great exposé of Russian power. I've actually
assigned this book in my class. Putin's Kleptocracy looks at how wealth is gained, how do people
get into the wealthy strata, and Bill Browder recently...brainchild of the Magnitsky act
sanctions... has detailed how these oligarchs profit share with Putin. ...and he...he's done some
great work...and I- I encourage you to seek him out. He's on a lot of podcasts these days. So let's
talk about the ignored real quick...and...so I want to set up a bit of a context here as well...These
people exist in that lower income bracket like I mentioned before, less than $10,000 a year...They
lack modernization in industry and agriculture... There are massive discrepancies in wealth here, but also this is Putin's voting bloc. Putin is a populist. ...These are the people who have subscribed to what I like to call [speaking Russian] --Make Russia great again.

[uneasy laughter]

...They receive a single narrative through state media...They don't speak other languages, so they don't seek out foreign media. A lot of them don't have internet, and they don't really get out much it's hard to get outside your bubble when you make less than $10,000 a year. So this is the best piece on Russia's ignored that I have ever seen, and it has aged phenomenally. It is by Ellen Berry. Maybe you can you read that there? It's from the New York Times. Still up. It's an immersive journalistic piece called The Russia Left Behind. She travels between Moscow and St. Petersburg and stops at villages along the way. She doesn't concern herself with Moscow and St. Petersburg. And we'll see some of the people she met in a little bit. So remember this graph? Massive discrepancies in wealth between oil and non-producing places? This is what it looks like in practice. The -- Russia's villages are dilapidated They're falling apart. Many of them are disappearing altogether, and the people who live there...I mean this doesn't exactly look like a budding growth job sector. Does it? ...So anybody who looks at Russian history before the Soviet Union, back into the past will know that Russian peasantry in rural-Russia was it's bed rock for hundreds of years. Those were very important power sectors that kept the Tsar in power, that manned the revolution for the Soviet Union, and that narrative is falling apart under Putin's Russia. And it's going to create a very different Russia on the outset of Putin's Russia. So, nobody really knows what it's going to look like, but I'm kind of concerned. Here's another example, this is Norilsk, Russia. The northern-most town in the world with over a 100,000 people. Now, with this extractive industry, this extremely wealthy elite leveraging state resources, what you don't get from these places from this type of power structure is administration that benefits everyday people. So, like an EPA, or good health care, or something like that. This doesn't exactly look like a well-regulated city with a good EPA. There's no public spaces. There's no parks...I think this is the school if I can kind of go through my mind's eye of what old Russian schools look like. ...But this is extremely Spartan city planning. This is a...population meant to make money for the wealthy and that's about it. Now that doesn't just exist in rural Russia. This is the suburbs of Moscow, and Moscow is the largest city in Europe. 21 million people live there, and most of them live this way. In block after block after block of Soviet-era apartment buildings. Some people live up to 10 people per flat here. So we often see a very vibrant, very rich center of Moscow. That is the reality for a very very few number of Russian people. So, now we get to our first group from the persecuted, but they're members of the ignored, and these are political dissidents, and in Russia people are starting to push back against these realities, and I don't blame them. This is a sign from the recent protests, "I want a house like the ducks." They... Medvedev's
ducks are kind of living better than they are. This picture was taken just a few days ago. This is how...I think this is Vladivostok celebrated Putin's 65th birthday. Here's our duck again. It's kind of become a symbol of political dissidence in Russia, and that sign says, "We don't believe in your ducks anymore." So, very clever. This was the same day in Moscow. And... what I want to draw your attention to here is these guys on the right. They're also members of the ignored: Russian military, Russian law enforcement. They're not paid well. They don't get very good benefits, and to me...I mean it could be that sternly Russian demeanor...but they don't look too happy to be there. but they exist in a very very rigid power structure run by our first group. Now also what I want to draw attention to here is Russia has the capacity to get outside this reality. Their education system is phenomenal. Left over from the Soviet Union. Some of the best universities in Europe. They have some of the best scientists in the world. Most of them are working here now because they couldn't find industry in Russia. I love this headline: Russian science is amazing why hasn't it taken over the world? Well, it's because Russian scientists went to Wall Street. They went to Silicon Valley, and they went to American universities. So we're benefiting from Russia's lack of a middle class right now. ...It's not exactly a zero-sum game so...you know...previous...administrations like Medevdev's tried to get a tech industry launched in Russia, but it doesn't benefit the wealthy like oil wealth does. So they failed. Also a concern for these political dissidents, very tech savvy ones, is Russia's slow rollback of civil liberties. Social media networks must keep their servers on Russian soil to exist. There is a Facebook Russia server. Now this makes them vulnerable to states surveillance. It makes them vulnerable to kill switches from the Russian government. Russia has done everything it can to build a tech wall from the outside world. And Putin said this himself, he said, "In times of crisis maybe we need to shut the internet off." Now I think he and I would have probably a very different definition of what a crisis is, but it's important to remember that Putin is extremely fearful of political protests. So, the persecuted. We're going to talk about women, dissidents...we've talked about dissidents...LGBT, ethnic and religious minorities, so move a little quickly through this...This is kind of a controversial topic. ...I don't want to stand up here and presume a sense of morality. I certainly have my own moral convictions on it. I'm sure you can probably assume what my politics are, but I want to remain academic today. So to do that, I'm going to let the Russians speak for themselves on this issue. I'm going to let our group one speak for themselves. Putin said, "I am not a woman, so I don't have bad days. I'm not trying to insult anyone. That's just the nature of things." ...That speaks for itself. ...Russian Duma member, a woman herself, Yelena Mizulina said, "A man beating his wife is less offensive than when a woman humiliates a man." This woman introduced this legislation. ...a move to decriminalize domestic violence there. This was about a year, a year and a half ago, since then we have seen a massive uptick in domestic violence in Russia. ...Police don't respond. They get a warning and whatnot, but here
40% of women face domestic violence in Russia. ...There's a story...a woman called the emergency services there and said, "My husband is beating me." And they said, "There's nothing we can do, but don't worry we'll collect your body if you die."

[gasp from audience]

[surprise from audience member]

...So...well I'll get a little opinionated here. Maybe it's time to get work on Russia.

[laughter from audience]

This was a...all this comes from a Washington Post article from July 5th written by a very good friend of mine, Elena Volkova. She's very good on Russian human rights and women's issues. ...456 Russian jobs women cannot hold. 80% of crimes against women are committed by a spouse or family member. Most women in authority positions are handpicked for counter-factual arguments, or to make a good optic like the woman who introduced the decriminalization of domestic violence. Then we can say, "Hey, that's a woman's idea, so it must be good for women."

...But, what I want to leave you with is that this is not precedence in Russia. Russia has been extremely progressive when it comes to women in the past. In time adjusted terms. This is Alexandra Kollontai. She was the Soviet ambassador to Norway. In the early 20s and she was the first woman to represent a country as an ambassador. Can you imagine the man-splaning she had to deal with at summits?

[laughter]

So...now...it's bad for women. It's even worse for girls in Russia. This is a quote directly from the Children's Rights Ombudsman speaking about child marriage: There are some places where women are already shriveled at age 27, and by our standards they look 50. And, in general, the Russian Constitution forbids interference with citizens' personal lives. Remember Ellen Berry's New York Times article I talked about? This is a scene from it. This is a wedding between two 14-year-olds in a village outside Moscow. So let's talk about LGBT. The last topic wasn't cheery enough for you. ...This is the president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, speaking about LGBT. One caveat I want to give you on this is when the Russian elite talk about LGBT issues they only mean gay men. So, what I mean by that, trans people don't exist or are either doing it for a show. Gay women they're okay with that 'cause they're creeps honestly. And other things like intersex, a-sexual, what have you, queer...those aren't even in the vocabulary yet. They're talking about gay men. So, he said: We don't have those kinds of people here. We don't have any gays and if we did take them from us so we don't have to have them at home. To purify our blood, if they are here take, them away. ...This is the reality for gay men in Chechnya today...They are often rounded up, interrogated, tortured, held in camps, and a lot of them are killed. There was a report
that came out a few months ago. It did pretty well in American news that around 3 to 600 gay
men were killed in Chechnya. When I met with human rights activists from the north
caucuses in our embassy, they said that's usually like a quarterly instance. This has been
happening for a long time in Chechnya. It is nothing new and whenever you see a causality
figure I would just assume it's higher. It doesn't just happen in Chechnya either. Across Russia
young gay men are baited into meeting through dating apps like Tinder or Grinder. They're
done...this is done by neo-Nazi and skinhead groups and they're either beaten or killed. Some
countries have started offering refugee status and asylum to Russian gay men. Canada has and
has resettled a few dozen so far. But the reality is pretty grim. Here's Putin's take on the matter.
He said you know...it's okay to be gay. Just don't do it in front of children. Don't know what that
means, really. ...He said that around the time of the Sochi Olympics. ...so...yeah. ...speaks for
itself. Here is a video I can send the link if you want. There's a social experiment done. ...in the
center of Moscow. Right among the elite and wealthy strata that I talked about. Two young men
walked through the streets holding hands and these...subtitles speak for themselves...someone
came up and...this was right before he started swinging punches actually. So, it's a pretty...pretty
bad situation. ...for...for civil rights in Russia. So I'll wrap this up then we'll do some questions.
I'm very much more interested in questions. My My three conclusions from looking at these
three groups in Russian society. Russian civil rights are at least one generation away, probably
30-50 years, if they will come at all. This is the fastest I see it happening. So, this is...we're
talking about illegal immigration, immigration in general, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities,
religious minorities, and women. Mitigating these issues we talked about are at least a generation
away. Russian civil liberties, freedom, privacy, freedom of speech ...they're going to get worse
before they get better I think. There's a very tense... there's a palpable tension among... among
the elite when it comes to the ability for Russians to speak their mind. This sign here says, "No
to a censored internet". ...This young woman didn't...was just standing there on Red Square.
She's being issued a court summons here. ...and conclusion 3. This is Ramzan Kadyrov of
Chechnya by the way...and-and I hate to say it, but this is kind of the most depressing thing about
it. Is post-Putin's Russia concerns me much more than Putin's Russia. ...There are people who
are much more radical on the spectrum when it comes to this. When it comes to leveraging
Russian power. Leveraging a war crimes of Russian history. A very regressive media
environment. People who condone genocide and imperialism...and Putin has created this power
structure where everything revolves around him. Remember the slide back with the Sloviki and
the oligarchs and Putin at the center? ...he doesn't have a real line of succession, and so I'm
worried what potential radical elements could come in after him. He's also waged a very
successful war of attrition against political dissidence. Boris Nemtsov was killed...Ms.
Politkovsaya a journalist was killed. So most ...composition politicians are in exile now. An
acquaintance of mine is the only Russian Duma member to have voted against annexation of
Crimea. Very very brave man Ilya Ponomarev. He cast his vote and ran straight to the airport. [chuckles] Now he splits his time between San Francisco and Kiev...so, with that...not exactly the most optimistic way to end it, but thank you very much for listening and I would love to field some questions.

[applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...my question is...when did the...when did the history change Russia? You're saying that they're...that...there was a very... driven...that it was driven by villagers and everything

MR. JOHNSON
uh huh

AUDIENCE MEMBER
When did that teaching of that history become more ...just the one vein?

MR. JOHNSON
Right. That-that's a very excellent observation. The Russian Revolution that formed the Soviet Union was done on the backs of working class and peasantry ...Soviet leaders lionized that those groups for a long time. I would say after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When these industries fell apart and people moved into cities. ...or when these industries no longer got investment.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[inaudible] [Russian accent]...I'm glad. They were the main driving force for the revolution. was working class citizen and the [inaudible] present day...and I am from Russia by the way.

[laughter]

If you...if you was [inaudible] the Russian people even talk to me and I-I agree with some of it of course, but I couldn't give you the number of others. That's from living in this country for 17 years, so in a sense I did not live in what you call Putin's Russia, but I-I lived there and grew up there. and I lived there in the Soviet Union [inaudible] The Russia before Putin.

MR. JOHNSON
Great. I'd love to hear what you have to say.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
My question for you have you been in Russia?

MR. JOHNSON
Yes, I lived in Mosco for some time.
AUDIENCE MEMBER
For how long? and when?

MR. JOHNSON
...about six months in 2014. I lived in Georgia for three years. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...so you said that the...the...new communities where it's...where Putin has his base because there's a single media controlled. What does it look-like is the media look like for the elites in Moscow? Like what are they...describe what they see in the media. Like how is Russia able to control one media? ...and then how...like...how do the elites view Putin as well? 'cause...or do the elites no have support of Putin? Has...they see him as soft? or...

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah, well I-I would say their ability to exist as a member of the elite is predicated on being friendly to Putin. ...as yup?

[inaudible]
okay? Real quickly on the media too...members of the elite own the media and there are some independent outlets like Dozhd or Echo Moscow and so...it's really difficult to get a different narrative.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
I can comment on why Putin's so popular in Russia. You can't deny that he's

MR. JOHNSON
No.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
popular not only in what you would call [inaudible] in one [inaudible] population. And I'm not even there. But still have my brothers even there whom I communicate with and even my friends are there and I He's so popular in Russia because people believed [inaudible] before Putin came to power. That was a complete disaster, and some people when we-you'd [inaudible] [inaudible] ...for example. He is [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[inaudible] and he is [inaudible] of the people who are responsible for the disaster you [inaudible] there in the 90s. and I-I only mention his name as I [inaudible] being assassinated has nothing to do with Putin. Putin has zero interest in being-in him being assassinated because
that guy has...I don't know...maybe the chances of being [inaudible] ...that that was the guy responsible for that huge gap in the wealth. He's one of the guys who did that to Russia in the 90s.

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah. I-I see that lost on-

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Did you see the [inaudible] after Putin came to power? It was his vision too [inaudible] [inaudible]...another thing, but... they see that the oligarchs put up there in the 90s and they are still there now, but people see at [inaudible] improved dramatically

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

[inaudible] there in the 90s, and that's why he's popular.

MR. JOHNSON

Right.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

And another comment I want to make is that well Putin has [inaudible] is autocratic ruler [inaudible]. But when you tell it to many Russian people who you've mentioned in such a-they don't mind being autocratic ruler as long as they see. They feel that that ruler takes care of the country.

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

They're scared of that [inaudible] but as long as they see that Putin takes care of the [inaudible], takes care of more [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON

great...great.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

[inaudible] They would be fine with it.

MR. JOHNSON

Let's go over here.
AUDIENCE MEMBER
Well first off I gotta say that more and more lately, I am so grateful for my ancestors comin' over here and leaving behind [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
[chuckle] uh huh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
That said. Could you talk a little bit about Gorbachev?

MR. JOHNSON
uh hm

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Because we love him here. We value his progressive things la-la-la, and they hate him there.

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
I mean he lives there in disgrace? Right?

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah. Well...this...I-I-I love this point about how popular Putin is 'cause compared to Yeltzin and Gorbachev Looks great on independent opinion polls of him done there and Putin has verifiable upwards of 88-85% approval rating... So, I-I see a lot in kind of our cartoonized media here that follow the colla-the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union was Ronald Regan or Pope John Paul- it-it was Gorbachev 100% In my opinion...and...by reforming...by...ironically giving voice to dissidence in the Soviet Union these issues became laid bare, and it had...this stagnation or these difficulties in the late Soviet Union. They had built up for a long time and then finally people could talk about them. ...and that was extremely powerful. And then when it collapsed ...things didn't get better like people thought they would. They got much worse. ...and...so...I have a lot of friends who served in our embassy there in the 90s and...told some pretty [cough] [inaudible] stories. ...and...yeah, let's go right here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
I don't know. It seems like they're entire economy is not sustainable. It seems like Russia is going to have to expand it at some point.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] I would argue with that. You will know which path Russia has paid off completely it's national debts and even [inaudible].
MR. JOHNSON

uh huh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] It has zero national debt now. How [inaudible] do you know? [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
the economy is still [inaudible] Russia has more export of wheat than any other country in the world now, and they get more money from exporting wheat than they do from exporting weapons. Do you know that?

MR. JOHNSON
...yeah. I-I've a couple thoughts on this. I-I would say it is quite sustainable now because one new areas of energy are being opened to Russian exploration thanks to climate change in Siberia and above the Arctic Circle and they have a lot to work with there. I think they-they could be nimble if they were forced or chose to be...economically. But ...I disagree with the measure of national debt as a good measure of economic stability

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] Well, it's not variety. It's not [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Look, what I want to say about that is the United States is owed as much money as it owes, so...I mean... it's [inaudible]

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...I'm curious because from what I understand ...when the Soviet Union collapsed... ...the...economic model... shifted...towards a more...mixed model. That I call correctly from [inaudible] socialist model? and I'm wondering if...there... ...if its conditions in Russia are moving towards a... ...you have so many people live-still live in...very meager conditions today, I'm wondering if that's going to make people reject the economic model of today and try to seek a new alternative... or...I don't know.

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah, that's an interesting notion. I don't know if anybody really knows...I-I I-I think that today's Russian industry is very similar to its old one dressed in different clothing...when privatization happened few of the elites scooped it up very quickly, and...to be able to become a scooper you had to be well connected before the collapse happened, so ...in my mind...I mean...call them a private oil CEO or call them a... you know...a senior member of the Soviet oil ministries ...I don't
think it's that much different...so... yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...My question is...so why was Putin ...voted in in the first place? Like what were his platforms?

MR. JOHNSON
Hmmm...his...he was voted in. He was chosen by Boris Yeltzin on his way out. Yeltzin was in extremely poor health and...didn't have a good line of succession. There were people who certainly wanted to challenge him, but he made Putin his prime minister in 1999...and then when he resigned Putin became president. ...He won on his elections ...now...if...there's an argument about whether or not the elections were legitimate or illegitimate...I don't think that matters so much because he would have won them either way...He won on a platform of stability really...Looking at the chaotic 90s and saying we're going to...one, destroy the oligarchy that is robbing the country blind. He did...he...got rid of oligarchs who didn't agree with him. There're certainly plenty left behind... who do agree with him. You know...Bill Browder I mentioned earlier has...he posits this notion...cause he was a financier in Russia in the chaotic 90s and I'm kind of skeptical cause he has bought into this system that—that really bore Russian populism, as...and especially as a westerner, so he was as extricative as anybody there, but he said that Russian industry was brought before Putin like a...like a king in court, and said, "Give me half and I'll let you do whatever you want." ...is it half? is it 20%? ...I don't know, but... ...yeah, he—they he did a good job of making them exist at his graces.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] [inaudible] [inaudible] ...is...at least in my opinion is he's a pawn. If a person can denounce the United States [inaudible] he was...[inaudible] Magnitsky [inaudible] ...and ...[inaudible] is a fraud.

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
This is more a comment than a question that... ...you talk about the chaotic 90s

MR. JOHNSON
uh huh

AUDIENCE MEMBER
and I don't believe ...the Russian people were prepared for that transition cause it was a collapse and all hell broke loose... ...There are a lot of examples in 20th century history where people will
take stability over civil rights, freedom, whatever...it's alright if it's a dictator as long as I know what the rules are and I know how to operate under those. I think that's very much the environment Putin is in.

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

That people would rather have stability in somebody who they-they think is...vigorously represents...and I mean vigor in the broadest sense of that term, represents the Soviet Union. He's viral...You know he demonstrates that with all the shirtless pictures

MR. JOHNSON

[chuckling]

AUDIENCE MEMBER

and him doing all these great wonderful things. But they see that as "He is a strong leader and represents a strong Russia."

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah, yeah. So...I laid out the system of society here as-as depressing or...and it might be for us to look at it...it's one that has an 85% approval rating over there. So, let's go here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I was curious could you describe the education system? Oftentimes when you see that kind of [inaudible] throughout it's propagated by a difference in education. How do they have their educational system set up?

MR. JOHNSON

Oh! Our gentleman in the back, were you educated in the Soviet Union?

AUDIENCE MEMBER

[Russian accent] I [inaudible] in Soviet Union, [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON

Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

But by the way, I am one of those scientists who you mentioned fled Russia in the 90s because there was very little to do and very [inaudible] condition in science in Russia at the time.
MR. JOHNSON

Yeah. To comment on it, I once took a taxi from Telavi, Georgia to Ruispiri, Georgia and my
driver had two Ph.D.s...so education system...is...it's not taught in the western style. I taught in
the style for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer...It's very very heavy on the math and sciences
and rote memorization...foreign languages are extremely important...and...when students
matriculate to a university there, they're driven heavily into one subject and brought through a
regimental course and an extremely well-developed course of study. You don't...you're not free
flow to choose your courses and electives like you are here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Is it publicly available?

MR. JOHNSON

Uh huh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Provided by the state-

MR. JOHNSON

Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

-and set up through their governments? Available to all though?

MR. JOHNSON

Yes. So, they have universal access, totally funded K-20...so...Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

So is...Crimea an independent state that you were saying your friend...voted against the
annexation

MR. JOHNSON

Uh huh. [chuckle]

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Why-why is that? Why?

MR. JOHNSON

I think Crimea's status depends who you ask right now. ...I-I still maintain my U.S. government
stance that it's part of southern Ukraine. We can talk about if you want, but...it...Google changed
their...their border and includes it as part of Russia now...I would say it's definitely not an
independent state though...It's working with Russian administration...Yeah?
AUDIENCE MEMBER
[cough]...What do you think is the source of the... ...this Russian homophobia, so like in Chechnya it's kind of understandable because they promote a very fundamentalist...

MR. JOHNSON
uh huh.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...sort of Islamic view but...

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] [inaudible] ...same reason

MR. JOHNSON
What was that?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] If you look at Soviet Russia for example and how there [inaudible] you will find the same-the same treatment of...

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah. Orthodox Christianity I think is very prevalent ...less than 50%...actually less than 20% of Russia by some measures are practicing Orthodox Christians ...but it's a...it's... omnipresent in culture and politics and the church itself is quite anti-LGBT. So...yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
I was actually...I was curious about that because it seems like a ...like there's this attitude of like the...maybe that the male it's- that sticks out...it's dropping the hammer and it makes me wonder if there's a reason for that? Because... I was always under the impression that...the promotion of people who were different...technically... also could encourage...like...alternative thought. so maybe there's some motivation for... ...influencing... the society a certain way...and possibly... a state collusion with the church.

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah, yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] I was going to say. It is much more than Soviet Union...under the Russian society [inaudible] [inaudible] more open...generally...under [inaudible] [inaudible] ...that's about where they're now...

AUDIENCE MEMBER
It's concerning that it might be like ...social [inaudible] if that's real.
MR. JOHNSON
Yeah. Yeah. It's-I think that the state and church collusion. Is certainly a very strong argument
why it is the way it is...and in the end... I mean...I don't want to get into palace intrigue or
Kremlinology or this...I hear that we used to look inside the minds of Russian leaders...you'd
have to ask them. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
What is the main church then?

MR. JOHNSON
Orthodox Christianity-- Russian Orthodox...yeah

AUDIENCE MEMBER
How do you think they become pow- I mean in society? Cause at one point when they were
communists there was supposedly no religion, right?

MR. JOHNSON
uh huh. Yeah ...it's heavily ingrained in culture. The Tsarist Empire was predicated on a religious
base...

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] [inaudible] [Russian accent] [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
um hm...and I know I can speak strongly from the Georgian context 'cause I know it quite well.
I lived there for much longer...the church really lead and galvanized the Georgian people at the
time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were seen as an organizing force ...Georgian
patriarch Ilya the Second was active at that time leading protests against the Soviet Union and
Georgians attached their ethnicity and identity and language very closely to the Georgian church,
and so it was kind of a gathering place for them at the end of the Soviet Union. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
So my question's kind of two part with the media ...are citizens...like...aware that...the
mysterious... ...candidates or opposition going missing or like the suspicious reporters...being
suddenly killed or all of that. Does the media report on that? or

MR. JOHNSON
yup.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
or does the citizens just don't care? 'cause they're like...alright well you know we like Putin and
then also like, I saw reports where like...Russian favorability of the American government's
slightly increasing since 2016. I wonder if, like, if the media played a part in influencing that?
...yeah, very good question...so yes that these dissidents and their deaths are reported...They're carefully framed. Putin said about Anna Politkovsaya...her mark on Russian society was insignificant at best. Those were her comments on her death...and he-he rarely...Putin himself rarely comments publicly on dissidents. If ever, but the media does. They're often George Soros funded. They're often...have a line to Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton's a very favorite target of Putin and his-his group. ...And...what was the second part?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
That kind of answers it 'cause it seems like both from an article I read like there's more favorability from Russians towards the American government and that may be because Donald Trump was running against someone whose going to satisfy the body of Russian...

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER[Russian accent] There's no-no favorable view of the [inaudible] [noise of jets] [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
I would agree with that actually. So... ...I-I read an op-ed a while ago that...Russia benefits from an incompetent United States than it does from a friendly one. ...'cause our interests...really don't [inaudible noise of jets]

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] I think it's not so.

MR. JOHNSON
Okay. Except...yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...So...I as a layperson or what [inaudible] ...I just heard a little bit about Chechnya...revolting Can you talk about that a bit?

MR. JOHNSON
Well Moscow fought two wars with Chechnya. One in the 90s and the second ...99 early 2000s...i-it it's been a thorn in the Russian side for centuries. ...There are caucuses on the [inaudible] and [inaudible] and the like... Really great reading on this is Tolstoy's short story of Hadji Murat. ...and...so Chechnya revolting again...certainly possible...The Chechnen government is extremely pro-Putin at the moment. Every once in a while we'll get this palace
intrigue reporting about a divorce between Putin and Kadyrov...it's hard to tell. I don't believe it too much...but, the two wars in...in the past 30 years have been wars of attrition and Moscow did quite well in them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] Well-well not because [inaudible] mid-90's was [inaudible] for Russia [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Right.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] and then eventually when [inaudible] departing depends on [inaudible] Moscow [inaudible] government leave them alone for a couple of years. They have their own government. They will carry along there, but then eventually ...eventually a couple of years later they decide in political power [inaudible] it's the same [inaudible] kind of ...ISIS and [inaudible] at the time. ...you do not cut people's heads, but [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Yes, causes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] Then eventually a couple years later around 98 or 99 they decided it's not enough we're gonna [inaudible] move invade the neighbor [inaudible] At that time Putin was worried...like you said Yeltzin had made Putin prime minister [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] In one second Chechnya was [inaudible] from them [inaudible]. Invaded...and that's how Putin [inaudible] made a-made a [inaudible] [inaudible]a part of the [inaudible] religious leaders [inaudible] during the first Chechen War [inaudible] won [inaudible] were leaders of... Chechen threaten [inaudible] [inaudible ] all of the [inaudible] became his [inaudible] his son became...

MR. JOHNSON
I want to get to a couple more questions, but Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram is a really great follow up by the way, if you want to see inside his life.
AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] somehow Putin made it [inaudible] so maybe they decided it's better to be friends this way is [inaudible] and look at permanent work ...since then

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah...

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent- inaudible] they [inaudible] both come from [inaudible]...guaranteed [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
What is his name? Ramzan Kadyrov. You have a question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
So my-my question is when did...'cause I know that like during...World War II America and Russia were kind of...allies ...where did the major divergence that kind of pit us against each other begin?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] [inaudible] different [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
World War II plus one. Even in the lead up to it General Patton said if I was between Germans and Soviets I would attack on both sides. ...so...it was pretty tense at that time. Any other questions? Going once. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
I was...so...I'm a bit nervous because I read the news probably...like a drug addict doing drugs...

MR. JOHNSON
[chuckling]

AUDIENCE MEMBER
...but...wh-what from my observation...it doesn't seem like Russia is in a position to engage in like a full on imperialist mode right now. Kind of like how geopolitically American doesn't seem to like be in that position either, and now both countries are engaged in proxy wars ...in the Middle East...and I'm

MR. JOHNSON
yeah...
AUDIENCE MEMBER
wondering ...like...i-if Russia is is...trying to move into a position where they can imperialize?

MR. JOHNSON
I don't think so. I don't think we'll see this aggressively expansionist Russia right now. I think...my main thesis of Putin doctrine of foreign policy is that it's done for domestic reasons. Domestic consolidation. So...and he doesn't...he doesn't have to ...involve himself in foreign quagmires ...to do that...He can poke and prod and create a frozen conflict here and there, like in East Ukraine, but I don't think he needs to... certainly the misadventure of Afghanistan weights heavy on his mind, so. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Can you speak for just a minute about...like why Russian ...interests in Syria are so prevalent? Like to how [inaudible] and kind of just this backwater place.

MR. JOHNSON
Right.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
So why do they think it's so important?

MR. JOHNSON
Right. Well before the Arab Spring in Syria was home to Russia's only foreign military base in the world ...The naval port of Tartus...and Assad was seen as a regional ally ...a regional port of entry if you will into Middle Eastern politics and that is rooted in a few decades of history, and so ...I mean the calculus is complicated. They -they didn't intervene in the beginning...They ...worked very expertly against American intervention in 2013...and they themselves eventually intervened when it looked like Assad was losing the war in 2015. So...it's-it's about their-their strategic allies in a region which they have moderate interest I would say not exactly with the level of interest of the United States, but Rosneft has oil contracts in Kurdistan and what not, but for them it's about maintaining... their interests in the region. Whatever they may be. There are 20 million different theories about what exactly those interests are. So...

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] I have [inaudible] Syria is not very far from [inaudible] a region where [inaudible] Russian. They go [inaudible]

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah. ISIS gave us and Russia the opportunity for an alliance of connivance there. I was in DOD at that time. I can't speak too much about it, but there...yeah in-interests intersected there conveniently, and that's what happens when two large powers operate in a complicated world...is
and this is why I'm very much in favor of much more contact with Russia. Much-you know trying to find these areas of common interest because that's how you chip away at at the more difficult ones, so...yeah I think Syria and what comes after it are very much in the concern of both both Russia and the United States. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER
That last point you raised about Putin's hold of power ...after he leaves or is removed what kind of complex scenarios might come from that?

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah, that's ...have you ever watched Game of Thrones?

[laughter]
It...there are a lot of people guessing on who comes next. People might be jockeying from time to time. ...Putin did give the presidency to Medevdev [inaudible] in an election as he would have anyways. But, and then took...you know got it back. afterwards...personally I... because of the last couple of years I'm not in the prediction business anymore. So

AUDIENCE MEMBER
[Russian accent] I agree with your concern about much more radical [inaudible] can come [inaudible] pretty much [inaudible] than now.

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah, I'll do one more question

DR. GILL
Very very fast. 20 seconds

MR. JOHNSON
Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
So-Soviet Union centralized economy, radical changes move in the free market, what do they have now? Is it back to centralized? Do they got some free market elements? What do you see?

MR. JOHNSON
One trick pony, really. Leveraging the world economy to get the most out of their oil wealth. That's my 30 second answer. I'd talk more.

DR. GILL
Let's thank this guy. I hope you guys [inaudible] Thank you for the good questions. Next week we've got a Russian historian coming in to talk about cyberwar and the involvement of Russia
in elections in democratic nations, and then after that a couple on race in Idaho. So please grab the sheet. There's some short descriptions there and we've also got a human rights week that's happening with a number of events across campus. Please [inaudible] the speakers on the back of the human rights sheet. There's one October 26th for bringing down these guys that fought the Aryan Nations up in northern Idaho. For 20 years they're coming here to teach those social justice. I hope you'll enjoy. Join us there. Thanks guys.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]