

1 **Living in Putin's Land:**  
2 **The Wealthy, the Ignored, and the Persecuted**

3  
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8

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11 **DR. GILL**

12 Good afternoon everybody. Let's get started. Welcome to a special series on Russia, for the  
13 Teach-In series. The teach -ins are designed to give folks relevant information you can use to  
14 form opinions. They were founded back in 1965 at the University of Michigan when students  
15 were confused about the Vietnam War. They were being lied to by their government they  
16 couldn't make sense of the media so they bought in experts where they could share the list up  
17 and then they could ask direct questions of those people. And so you guys are here for a reason.  
18 Chase knows a whole lot about Russia, and I'll tell you about him in a second, but he's gonna  
19 share some things that he thinks, might -will be helpful to know from his perspective, and then  
20 you guys get to ask him whatever you guys want to know. So that when you leave here today  
21 you leave with information you can use to understanding this relationship between the United  
22 States and Russia. I'm an American historian. I'm here to learn today, okay? So Chase is pretty  
23 damn special. He graduated from Boise State as an honors student in history and political  
24 science. He did two years in the Peace Corps, in turn at the Departments of State and Defense in  
25 Russia, and he worked on human rights issues there. We're lucky to have him back as a research  
26 associate at The Frank Church Institute. This guy knows his stuff. Next week we're gonna have  
27 a follow-up. Lynn Lubamersky from the Department of History who studies Russia and she's  
28 gonna talk about Russia's interference in our elections. Okay? Break down the whole cyber-war  
29 thing. So, I hope you'll come back for that as well. Chase? Thank you.  
30

31  
32 **MR. JOHNSON**

33 Well, thank you very much, Dr. Gill, for having me. I'm really excited I love to dweeb out about  
34 this, so I'm happy that you're here to dweeb out with me. Before we get going, this is kind of the  
35 domestic component of our series on Russia, so I wanna set just a few ground rules. A few things  
36 I don't want to talk about today. One, Donald Trump. Let's take a break [*laughter*] for an hour.  
37 We could all use it. Two, the 2016 election. That's next week. Today we're talking about  
38 domestic Russia and they don't have too much connection with that. And three, Russian geo-  
39 politics and foreign policy. I'm happy to talk about Syria, or Afghanistan, or what have you with  
40 about Russia later. There are classes on that here at the university, but today we're going to talk  
41 about domestic Russia. I'll skip my introduction because Jill gave me a good one. I want to run

42 over the three main groups in Russian society real quick, and then we're going to get into a little  
43 context. So we have the wealthy, all wearing nice suits with good houses. The ignored, Russia's  
44 absent middle or lower classes in rural area. And the persecuted. These are the poor folk that we  
45 hear a lot about in the news. This includes women, dissidents, LGBT, religious and ethnic  
46 minorities. And real quick on the ignored, I view these as rural Russians, industrial workers,  
47 Millennials, new industry, and westernizers. So let's set a little bit of context. Why am I going  
48 to talk about the economy first? Because the economy drives so much of what everyday life is  
49 like in Russia. It is a society that is very closely connected to what it's economic reality and  
50 position is. Also, political economy is kind of my jam, so I'm going to fit it in whenever I can.  
51 This here is Russia's export portfolio. Now over half of Russia's state wealth comes from it's  
52 exports, so when we talk about services delivered to common day, every day Russians, it comes  
53 through resources levied from their exports. Not necessarily tax revenue or anything like that,  
54 so exports are very important. Notice a big big black hole right here. Number one export in  
55 Russia crude petroleum. Number two, refined petroleum. After that petroleum natural gas.  
56 Russia is a one-trick pony economy. It is heavily dependent on it's energy exports, and it's  
57 revenue and ability to deliver services is very much predicated on what position in the energy  
58 economy is. Now, you may ask we have some other large economies in the world. How do they  
59 compare? Here's Germany. You notice it is much more diversified. Here are their natural gas, or  
60 their energy exports here, but nothing quite heavily dominates their economy the same way.  
61 Here's another example, China. See it's more of a patchwork quilt. So what does this big black  
62 hole of exports mean for the Russian economy? And real quick, think about what the oil industry  
63 does for a country versus other industries. It's a non-inclusive one. It's one that requires high  
64 amounts of corporate investment. It doesn't necessarily create a lot of middle-class jobs the way  
65 tech, or medium and light industry might. So the result is this. This is the trajectory of Russian  
66 incomes over the last 20 years. These lines here are Moscow and oil producing regions. Down  
67 here are none. That is quite the gap. Now considering how volatile Russia's economy is, and the  
68 volatility of the world energy market, this means it is either stagnant or, I would argue, probably  
69 a regressive income for Russia's rural populations and non-oil producing people. So keep that in  
70 mind. Now there are no paragons of virtue in the world today when it comes to income  
71 inequality. You can see here. Here are some big economies, like here's us and here's Turkey.  
72 And this is the wealth controlled by the top 10%. 10-the top percentile of the most wealthy, and  
73 Russia is, as everyone pretty much can see here, 85% of Russian wealth is controlled by it's top  
74 10% and they are definitely winning that game. Here is Russia compared to the U.S. by income  
75 graphic. People making less than 10,000-10 to 100-100 to a million, more than a million. 95 85  
76 to 90% of Russia makes less than \$10,000 a year. Now this is a G.A.'d economy we're talking  
77 about here. A supposedly western economy. A WTO member, yet they have a massive sector of  
78 their society is quite poor. And really when we talked about how wealthy Russia is, yet this

79 many people are poor, that means there is no middle class in Russia. There are people who exist  
80 at our income levels that we're used to, but they are few and far between. So let's talk about  
81 who's benefiting from this. Here are a cast of characters along the bottom. This is Igor Sechin.  
82 He is the CEO of Rosneft, state energy company and energy minister. Humble public servant.  
83 Here is Dmitry Peskov. He is the spokesperson for Vladimir Putin, humble public servant, also  
84 a billionaire. Right here I don't see this in the news very much that is Vladimir Putin's house  
85 outside of Moscow. I don't know how many tens of thousands of square feet. It's quite a bit. He  
86 doesn't work in the Kremlin. He works exclusively from here. On the far right is Prime Minister  
87 Dmitri Medvedev. We will talk about him and his houses in a bit, but this is the Russian power  
88 structure as I see it today. It is a marriage between the oligarchs I think we can assume who those  
89 are industry moguls, oil barons, and these people have agreed to profit share with Putin and our  
90 second group, the Siloviki. Now to have an oligarchy you need a political power buttress, and  
91 this is one that I don't see talked about as much. But this is the military, the bureaucratic power  
92 centers

93 If you can issue a contract in Russia you have quite a bit of power when it comes to leveraging  
94 wealth. The church is another big one and ex-KGB. So this is humble public servant billionaire  
95 Dmitri Medvedev's house. One of his six, and I want to draw special attention right here  
96 [speaking Russian]. That is the duck house. Keep that in mind, but his ducks are living quite  
97 quite nicely up there. Up next, this is humble public servant Dmitri Peskov at his wedding.  
98 Congratulations. Billionaire. He's wearing a watch that cost \$37 million rubles. His government  
99 salary is about 60-70 thousand dollars a year. So... I want to know where he's investing. ...Up  
100 next, this here is Vladimir Putin's daughter. Her profession: she is a professional acrobatic rock  
101 'n' roll dancer, and a billionaire...so, I didn't know what that was until recently, but I had no idea  
102 that professional rock 'n' roll dancing was so lucrative.

103  
104 [laughter]

105  
106 So, I don't want to talk about this side...wealthy strata too much because they get a lot of attention  
107 today, but here's some good books to read Won't keep this up long. I can send you -- I'll loan  
108 them to you if you want. But Fiona Hill does a great exposé of Russian power. I've actually  
109 assigned this book in my class. Putin's Kleptocracy looks at how wealth is gained, how do people  
110 get into the wealthy strata, and Bill Browder recently...brainchild of the Magnitsky act  
111 sanctions... has detailed how these oligarchs profit share with Putin. ...and he...he's done some  
112 great work...and I- I encourage you to seek him out. He's on a lot of podcasts these days. So let's  
113 talk about the ignored real quick...and...so I want to set up a bit of a context here as well...These  
114 people exist in that lower income bracket like I mentioned before, less than \$10,000 a year...They  
115

116 lack modernization in industry and agriculture... There are massive discrepancies in wealth here,  
117 but also this is Putin's voting bloc. Putin is a populist. ...These are the people who have  
118 subscribed to what I like to call [speaking Russian] --Make Russia great again.

119  
120 *[uneasy laughter]*  
121

122 ...They receive a single narrative through state media...They don't speak other languages, so they  
123 don't seek out foreign media. A lot of them don't have internet, and they don't really get out much  
124 it's hard to get outside your bubble when you make less than \$10,000 a year. So this is the best  
125 piece on Russia's ignored that I have ever seen, and it has aged phenomenally. It is by Ellen  
126 Berry. Maybe you can you read that there? It's from the New York Times. Still up. It's an  
127 immersive journalistic piece called The Russia Left Behind. She travels between Moscow and  
128 St. Petersburg and stops at villages along the way. She doesn't concern herself with Moscow and  
129 St. Petersburg. And we'll see some of the people she met in a little bit. So remember this graph?  
130 Massive discrepancies in wealth between oil and non -producing places? This is what it looks  
131 like in practice. The -- Russia's villages are dilapidated They're falling apart. Many of them are  
132 disappearing altogether, and the people who live there...I mean this doesn't exactly look like a  
133 budding growth job sector. Does it? ...So anybody who looks at Russian history before the Soviet  
134 Union, back into the past will know that Russian peasantry in rural-Russia was it's bed rock for  
135 hundreds of years. Those were very important power sectors that kept the Tsar in power, that  
136 manned the revolution for the Soviet Union, and that narrative is falling apart under Putin's  
137 Russia. And it's going to create a very different Russia on the outset of Putin's Russia. So, nobody  
138 really knows what it's going to look like, but I'm kind of concerned. Here's another example, this  
139 is Norilsk, Russia. The northern-most town in the world with over a 100,000 people. Now, with  
140 this extractive industry, this extremely wealthy elite leveraging state resources, what you don't  
141 get from these places from this type of power structure is administration that benefits everyday  
142 people. So, like an EPA, or good health care, or something like that. This doesn't exactly look  
143 like a well-regulated city with a good EPA. There's no public spaces. There's no parks...I think  
144 this is the school if I can kind of go through my mind's eye of what old Russian schools look  
145 like. ...But this is extremely Spartan city planning. This is a...population meant to make money  
146 for the wealthy and that's about it. Now that doesn't just exist in rural Russia. This is the suburbs  
147 of Moscow, and Moscow is the largest city in Europe. 21 million people live there, and most of  
148 them live this way. In block after block after block of Soviet-era apartment buildings. Some  
149 people live up to 10 people per flat here. So we often see a very vibrant, very rich center of  
150 Moscow. That is the reality for a very very few number of Russian people. So, now we get to  
151 our first group from the persecuted, but they're members of the ignored, and these are political  
152 dissidents, and in Russia people are starting to push back against these realities, and I don't blame  
153 them. This is a sign from the recent protests, "I want a house like the ducks." They... Medvedev's

154 ducks are kind of living better than they are. This picture was taken just a few days ago. This is  
155 how...I think this is Vladivostok celebrated Putin's 65th birthday Here's our duck again. It's kind  
156 of become a symbol of political dissidence in Russia, and that sign says, "We don't believe in  
157 your ducks anymore." So, very clever. This was the same day in Moscow. And... what I want to  
158 draw your attention to here is these guys on the right. They're also members of the ignored:  
159 Russian military, Russian law enforcement. They're not paid well. They don't get very good  
160 benefits, and to me...I mean it could be that sternly Russian demeanor...but they don't look too  
161 happy to be there. but they exist in a very very rigid power structure run by our first group. Now  
162 also what I want to draw attention to here is Russia has the capacity to get outside this reality.  
163 Their education system is phenomenal. Left over from the Soviet Union. Some of the best  
164 universities in Europe. They have some of the best scientists in the world. Most of them are  
165 working here now because they couldn't find industry in Russia. I love this headline: Russian  
166 science is amazing why hasn't it taken over the world? Well, it's because Russian scientists went  
167 to Wall Street. They went to Silicon Valley, and they went to American universities. So we're  
168 benefiting from Russia's lack of a middle class right now. ...It's not exactly a zero-sum game  
169 so...you know...previous... administrations like Medvedev's tried to get a tech industry launched  
170 in Russia, but it doesn't benefit the wealthy like oil wealth does. So they failed. Also a concern  
171 for these political dissidents, very tech savvy ones, is Russia's slow rollback of civil liberties.  
172 Social media networks must keep their servers on Russian soil to exist. There is a Facebook  
173 Russia server. Now this makes them vulnerable to states surveillance. It makes them vulnerable  
174 to kill switches from the Russian government. Russia has done everything it can to build a tech  
175 wall from the outside world. And Putin said this himself, he said, "In times of crisis maybe we  
176 need to shut the internet off." Now I think he and I would have probably a very different  
177 definition of what a crisis is, but it's important to remember that Putin is extremely fearful of  
178 political protests. So, the persecuted. We're going to talk about women, dissidents...we've talked  
179 about dissidents...LGBT, ethnic and religious minorities, so move a little quickly through  
180 this...This is kind of a controversial topic. ...I don't want to stand up here and presume a sense of  
181 morality. I certainly have my own moral convictions on it. I'm sure you can probably assume  
182 what my politics are, but I want to remain academic today. So to do that, I'm going to let the  
183 Russians speak for themselves on this issue. I'm going to let our group one speak for themselves.  
184 Putin said, "I am not a woman, so I don't have bad days. I'm not trying to insult anyone. That's  
185 just the nature of things." ...That speaks for itself. ...Russian Duma member, a woman herself,  
186 Yelena Mizulina said, "A man beating his wife is less offensive than when a woman humiliates  
187 a man." This woman introduced this legislation. ...a move to decriminalize domestic violence  
188 there. This was about a year, a year and a half ago, since then we have seen a massive uptick in  
189 domestic violence in Russia. ...Police don't respond. They get a warning and whatnot, but here  
190

191 40% of women face domestic violence in Russia. ...There's a story...a woman called the  
192 emergency services there and said, "My husband is beating me." And they said, "There's nothing  
193 we can do, but don't worry we'll collect your body if you die."

194  
195 [gasp from audience]

196  
197 [surprise from audience member]

198  
199 ...So...well I'll get a little opinionated here. Maybe it's time to get work on Russia.

200  
201 [laughter from audience]

202  
203 This was a...all this comes from a Washington Post article from July 5th written by a very good  
204 friend of mine, Elena Volkova. She's very good on Russian human rights and women's issues.  
205 ...456 Russian jobs women cannot hold. 80% of crimes against women are committed by a  
206 spouse or family member. Most women in authority positions are handpicked for counter-factual  
207 arguments, or to make a good optic like the woman who introduced the decriminalization of  
208 domestic violence. Then we can say, "Hey, that's a woman's idea, so it must be good for women."  
209 ...But, what I want to leave you with is that this is not precedence in Russia. Russia has been  
210 extremely progressive when it comes to women in the past. In time adjusted terms. This is  
211 Alexandra Kollontai. She was the Soviet ambassador to Norway. In the early 20s and she was  
212 the first woman to represent a country as an ambassador. Can you imagine the man-splaning she  
213 had to deal with at summits?

214  
215 [laughter]

216  
217 So...now...it's bad for women. It's even worse for girls in Russia. This is a quote directly from  
218 the Children's Rights Ombudsman speaking about child marriage: There are some places where  
219 women are already shriveled at age 27, and by our standards they look 50. And, in general, the  
220 Russian Constitution forbids interference with citizens' personal lives. Remember Ellen Berry's  
221 New York Times article I talked about? This is a scene from it. This is a wedding between two  
222 14-year-olds in a village outside Moscow. So let's talk about LGBT. The last topic wasn't cheery  
223 enough for you. ...This is the president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, speaking about LGBT.  
224 One caveat I want to give you on this is when the Russian elite talk about LGBT issues they only  
225 mean gay men. So, what I mean by that, trans people don't exist or are either doing it for a show.  
226 Gay women they're okay with that 'cause they're creeps honestly. And other things like intersex,  
227 a-sexual, what have you, queer...those aren't even in the vocabulary yet. They're talking about  
228 gay men. So, he said: We don't have those kinds of people here. We don't have any gays and if  
229 we did take them from us so we don't have to have them at home. To purify our blood, if they  
230 are here take, them away. ...This is the reality for gay men in Chechnya today...They are often  
231 rounded up, interrogated, tortured, held in camps, and a lot of them are killed. There was a report

232 that came out a few months ago. It did pretty well in American news that around 3 to 600 gay  
233 men were killed in Chechnya. Well when I met with human rights activists from the north  
234 caucuses in our embassy, they said that's usually like a quarterly instance. This has been  
235 happening for a long time in Chechnya. It is nothing new and ...I...whenever you see a causality  
236 figure I would just assume it's higher. It doesn't just happen in Chechnya either. Across Russia  
237 young gay men are baited into meeting through dating apps like Tinder or Grindr. They're  
238 done...this is done by neo-Nazi and skinhead groups and they're either beaten or killed. Some  
239 countries have started offering refugee status and asylum to Russian gay men. Canada has and  
240 has resettled a few dozen so far. But the reality is pretty grim. Here's Putin's take on the matter.  
241 He said you know...it's okay to be gay. Just don't do it in front of children. Don't know what that  
242 means, really. ...He said that around the time of the Sochi Olympics. ...so...yeah. ....speaks for  
243 itself. Here is a video I can send the link if you want. There's a social experiment done. ...in the  
244 center of Moscow. Right among the elite and wealthy strata that I talked about. Two young men  
245 walked through the streets holding hands and these...subtitles speak for themselves...someone  
246 came up and...this was right before he started swinging punches actually. So, it's a pretty...pretty  
247 bad situation. ...for...for civil rights in Russia. So I'll wrap this up then we'll do some questions.  
248 I'm very much more interested in questions. My My three conclusions from looking at these  
249 three groups in Russian society. Russian civil rights are at least one generation away, probably  
250 30-50 years, if they will come at all. This is the fastest I see it happening. So, this is...we're  
251 talking about illegal immigration, immigration in general, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities,  
252 religious minorities, and women. Mitigating these issues we talked about are at least a generation  
253 away. Russian civil liberties, freedom, privacy, freedom of speech ...they're going to get worse  
254 before they get better I think. There's a very tense... there's a palpable tension among... among  
255 the elite when it comes to the ability for Russians to speak their mind. This sign here says, "No  
256 to a censored internet". ...This young woman didn't...was just standing there on Red Square.  
257 She's being issued a court summons here. ...and conclusion 3. This is Ramzan Kadyrov of  
258 Chechnya by the way...and-and I hate to say it, but this is kind of the most depressing thing about  
259 it. Is post-Putin's Russia concerns me much more than Putin's Russia. ...There are people who  
260 are much more radical on the spectrum when it comes to this. When it comes to leveraging  
261 Russian power. Leveraging a war crimes of Russian history. A very regressive media  
262 environment. People who condone genocide and imperialism...and Putin has created this power  
263 structure where everything revolves around him. Remember the slide back with the Sloviki and  
264 the oligarchs and Putin at the center? ...he doesn't have a real line of succession, and so I'm  
265 worried what potential radical elements could come in after him. He's also waged a very  
266 successful war of attrition against political dissidence. Boris Nemtsov was killed...Ms.  
267 Politkovskaya a journalist was killed. So most ...composition politicians are in exile now. An  
268 acquaintance of mine is the only Russian Duma member to have voted against annexation of

269 Crimea. Very very brave man Ilya Ponomarev. He cast his vote and ran straight to the airport.  
270 [chuckles] Now he splits his time between San Francisco and Kiev...so, with that...not exactly  
271 the most optimistic way to end it, but thank you very much for listening and I would love to field  
272 some questions.

[applause]

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

273  
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275  
276 ...my question is...when did the...when did the history change Russia? You're saying that they're  
277 ...that...there was a very... driven...that it was driven by villagers and everything

**MR. JOHNSON**

279  
280  
281 uh huh

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

282  
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285  
286 When did that teaching of that history become more ...just the one vein?

**MR. JOHNSON**

287  
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289  
290 Right. That-that's a very excellent observation. The Russian Revolution that formed the Soviet  
291 Union was done on the backs of working class and peasantry ...Soviet leaders lionized that those  
292 groups for a long time. I would say after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When these industries  
293 fell apart and people moved into cities. ...or when these industries no longer got investment.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

294  
295  
296 [inaudible] [Russian accent]...I'm glad. They were the main driving force for the revolution. was  
297 working class citizen and the [inaudible] present day...and I am from Russia by the way.

[laughter]

298  
299  
300  
301 If you...if you was [inaudible] the Russian people even talk to me and I-I agree with some of it  
302 of course, but I couldn't give you the number of others. That's from living in this country for 17  
303 years, so in a sense I did not live in what you call Putin's Russia, but I-I lived there and grew up  
304 there. and I lived there in the Soviet Union [inaudible] The Russia before Putin.

**MR. JOHNSON**

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306  
307 Great. I'd love to hear what you have to say.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

308  
309  
310 My question for you have you been in Russia?

**MR. JOHNSON**

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313 Yes, I lived in Mosco for some time.



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**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-what 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

358 that guy has...I don't know...maybe the chances of being [inaudible] ...that that was the guy  
359 responsible for that huge gap in the wealth. He's one of the guys who did that to Russia in the  
360 90s.

361

**MR. JOHNSON**

362 Yeah. I-I see that lost on-

364

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

369

**MR. JOHNSON**

370 Yeah.

372

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

374

375

**MR. JOHNSON**

376 Right.

377

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

383

**MR. JOHNSON**

384 Yeah.

385

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

389

391

**MR. JOHNSON**

392 great...great.

393

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

394 [inaudible] They would be fine with it.

396

**MR. JOHNSON**

397 Let's go over here.

398

399

400

401 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
402 Well first off I gotta say that more and more lately, I am so grateful for my ancestors comin' over  
403 here and leaving behind [inaudible]

404  
405 **MR. JOHNSON**  
406 [chuckle] uh huh.

407  
408 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
409 That said. Could you talk a little bit about Gorbachev?

410  
411 **MR. JOHNSON**  
412 uh hm

413  
414 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
415 Because we love him here. We value his progressive things la-la-la, and they hate him there.

416  
417 **MR. JOHNSON**  
418 Yeah.

419  
420 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
421 I mean he lives there in disgrace? Right?

422  
423 **MR. JOHNSON**  
424 Yeah. Well...this...I-I-I love this point about how popular Putin is 'cause compared to Yeltzin  
425 and Gorbachev Looks great on independent opinion polls of him done there and Putin has  
426 verifiable upwards of 88-85% approval rating... So, I-I see a lot in kind of our cartoonized media  
427 here that follow the colla-the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union was Ronald  
428 Regan or Pope John Paul- it-it was Gorbachev 100% In my opinion...and...by  
429 reforming...by...ironically giving voice to dissidence in the Soviet Union these issues became  
430 laid bare, and it had ...this stagnation or these difficulties in the late Soviet Union. They had built  
431 up for a long time and then finally people could talk about them. ...and that was extremely  
432 powerful. And then when it collapsed ...things didn't get better like people thought they would.  
433 They got much worse. ...and...so...I I have a lot of friends who served in our embassy there in  
434 the 90s and...told some pretty [cough] [inaudible] stories. ...and...yeah, let's go right here.

435  
436 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
437 I don't know. It seems like they're entire economy is not sustainable. It seems like Russia is going  
438 to have to expand it at some point.

439  
440 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
441 [Russian accent] I would argue with that. You will know which path Russia has paid off  
442 completely it's national debts and even [inaudible].

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**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 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

486 think it's that much different...so... yeah?

487  
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**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

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**MR. JOHNSON**

Hmmmm ...his...he-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.

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**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.

512

513  
514

**MR. JOHNSON**

Yeah.

515  
516

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

518

519  
520

**MR. JOHNSON**

uh huh

521

522  
523

**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

525

526 take stability over civil rights, freedom, whatever...it's alright if it's a dictator as long as I know  
527 what the rules are and I know how to operate under those. I think that's very much the  
528 environment Putin is in.

529

**MR. JOHNSON**

530  
531 Yeah.

532

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

537

**MR. JOHNSON**

538  
539 [chuckling]

540

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

541 and him doing all these great wonderful things. But they see that as "He is a strong leader and  
542 represents a strong Russia."  
543

544

**MR. JOHNSON**

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

548

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

549 I was curious could you describe the education system? Oftentimes when you see that kind of  
550 [inaudible] throughout it's propagated by a difference in education. How do they have their  
551 educational system set up?  
552

553

**MR. JOHNSON**

554 Oh! Our gentleman in the back, were you educated in the Soviet Union?  
555

556

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

557 [Russian accent] I [inaudible] in Soviet Union, [inaudible]  
558

559

**MR. JOHNSON**

560  
561 Yeah.

562

**AUDIENCE MEMBER**

563 But by the way, I am one of those scientists who you mentioned fled Russia in the 90s because  
564 there was very little to do and very [inaudible] condition in science in Russia at the time.  
565

566

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

575  
576 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
577 Is it publicly available?

578  
579 **MR. JOHNSON**  
580 Uh huh.

581  
582 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
583 Provided by the state-

584  
585 **MR. JOHNSON**  
586 Yes.

587  
588 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
589 -and set up through their governments? Available to all though?

590  
591 **MR. JOHNSON**  
592 Yes. So, they have universal access, totally funded K-20...so... Yeah.

593  
594 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
595 So is...Crimea an independent state that you were saying your friend...voted against the  
596 annexation

597  
598 **MR. JOHNSON**  
599 Uh huh. [chuckle]

600  
601 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
602 Why-why is that? Why?

603  
604 **MR. JOHNSON**  
605 I think Crimea's status depends who you ask right now. ...I-I still maintain my U.S. government  
606 stance that it's part of southern Ukraine. We can talk about if you want, but ...it...Google changed  
607 their ...their border and includes it as part of Russia now... I would say it's definitely not an  
608 independent state though...It's working with Russian administration. ...Yeah?

609

610 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
611 [cough]...What do you think is the source of the... ..this Russian homophobia, so like in  
612 Chechnya it's kind of understandable because they promote a very fundamentalist...

613  
614 **MR. JOHNSON**  
615 uh huh.

616 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
617 ...sort of Islamic view but...

618  
619 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
620 [Russian accent] [*inaudible*] ...same reason

621 **MR. JOHNSON**  
622 What was that?  
623

624 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
625 [Russian accent] If you look at Soviet Russia for example and how there [*inaudible*] you will  
626 find the same-the same treatment of...  
627

628 **MR. JOHNSON**  
629 Yeah. Orthodox Christianity I think is very prevalent ...less than 50%...actually less than 20%  
630 of Russia by some measures are practicing Orthodox Christians ...but it's a...it's... omnipresent  
631 in culture and politics and the church itself is quite anti-LGBT. So...yeah.  
632

633 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
634 I was actually...I was curious about that because it seems like a ...like there's this attitude of like  
635 the...maybe that the male it's- that sticks out...it's dropping the hammer and it makes me wonder  
636 if there's a reason for that? Because... I was always under the impression that...the promotion of  
637 people who were different...technically... also could encourage...like...alternative thought. so  
638 maybe there's some motivation for... ..influencing... the society a certain way...and possibly... a  
639 state collusion with the church.  
640

641 **MR. JOHNSON**  
642 Yeah, yeah.  
643

644 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
645 [Russian accent] I was going to say. It is much more than Soviet Union...under the Russian  
646 society [*inaudible*] [*inaudible*] more open...generally...under [*inaudible*] [*inaudible*] ...that's  
647 about where they're now...  
648

649 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
650 It's concerning that it might be like ...social [*inaudible*] if that's real.  
651  
652



653 **MR. JOHNSON**  
654 Yeah. Yeah. It's-I think that the state and church collusion. Is certainly a very strong argument  
655 why it is the way it is...and in the end... I mean...I don't want to get into palace intrigue or  
656 Kremlinology or this...I hear that we used to look inside the minds of Russian leaders...you'd  
657 have to ask them. Yeah?

658 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
659 What is the main church then?  
660

661 **MR. JOHNSON**  
662 Orthodox Christianity-- Russian Orthodox...yeah  
663

664 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
665 How do you think they become pow- I mean in society? Cause at one point when they were  
666 communists there was supposedly no religion, right?  
667

668 **MR. JOHNSON**  
669 uh huh. Yeah ...it's heavily ingrained in culture. The Tsarist Empire was predicated on a religious  
670 base...  
671

672 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
673 [Russian accent] *[inaudible]* [Russian accent] *[inaudible]*  
674

675 **MR. JOHNSON**  
676 um hm...and I know I can speak strongly from the Georgian context 'cause I know it quite well.  
677 I lived there for much longer...the church really lead and galvanized the Georgian people at the  
678 time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were seen as an organizing force ...Georgian  
679 patriarch Ilya the Second was active at that time leading protests against the Soviet Union and  
680 Georgians attached their ethnicity and identity and language very closely to the Georgian church,  
681 and so it was kind of a gathering place for them at the end of the Soviet Union. Yeah?  
682

683 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
684 So my question's kind of two part with the media ...are citizens...like...aware that...the  
685 mysterious... ..candidates or opposition going missing or like the suspicious reporters...being  
686 suddenly killed or all of that. Does the media report on that? or  
687

688 **MR. JOHNSON**  
689 yup.  
690

691 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
692 or does the citizens just don't care? 'cause they're like...alright well you know we like Putin and  
693 then also like, I saw reports where like...Russian favorability of the American government's  
694 slightly increasing since 2016. I wonder if, like, if the media played a part in influencing that?  
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**MR. JOHNSON**

...yeah, very good question...so yes that these dissidents and their deaths are reported...They're carefully framed. Putin said about Anna Politkovskaya...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 Chechen government is extremely pro-Putin at the moment. Every once in a while we'll get this palace

738 intrigue reporting about a divorce between Putin and Kadyrov...it's hard to tell. I don't believe it  
739 too much...but, the two wars in...in the past 30 years have been wars of attrition and Moscow  
740 did quite well in them.

741

742 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

745

746 **MR. JOHNSON**

747 Right.

748

749 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

755

756 **MR. JOHNSON**

757 Yes, causes.

758

759 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

763

764 **MR. JOHNSON**

765 yeah.

766

767 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

773

774 **MR. JOHNSON**

775 I want to get to a couple more questions, but Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram is a really great follow  
776 up by the way, if you want to see inside his life.

777

778 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
779 [Russian accent] somehow Putin made it [*inaudible*] so maybe they decided it's better to be  
780 friends this way is [*inaudible*] and look at permanent work. ...since then

781  
782 **MR. JOHNSON**  
783 Yeah...

784 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
785 [Russian accent- *inaudible*] they [*inaudible*] both come from [*inaudible*]...guaranteed  
786 [*inaudible*]  
787

788  
789 **MR. JOHNSON**  
790 What is his name? Ramzan Kadyrov. You have a question?

791 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
792 So my-my question is when did...'cause I know that like during...World War II America and  
793 Russia were kind of...allies ...where did the major divergence that kind of pit us against each  
794 other begin?  
795

796 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
797 [Russian accent] [*inaudible*] different [*inaudible*]  
798

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

803 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**  
804 I was...so...I-I'm a bit nervous because I read the news probably...like a drug addict doing drugs...  
805

806 **MR. JOHNSON**  
807 [chuckling]

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

813 **MR. JOHNSON**  
814 yeah...

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**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 weighs 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 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

861 and this is why I'm very much in favor of much more contact with Russia. Much-you know  
862 trying to find these areas of common interest because that's how you chip away at at the more  
863 difficult ones, so...yeah I think Syria and what comes after it are very much in the concern of  
864 both both Russia and the United States. Yeah?

865 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

869 **MR. JOHNSON**

870 Yeah, that's ...have you ever watched Game of Thrones?  
871

872 [laughter]

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

879 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

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

883 **MR. JOHNSON**

884 Yeah, I'll do one more question  
885

886 **DR. GILL**

887 Very very fast. 20 seconds  
888

889 **MR. JOHNSON**

890 Yeah.  
891

892 **AUDIENCE MEMBER**

893 So-Soviet Union centralized economy, radical changes move in the free market, what do they  
894 have now? Is it back to centralized? Do they got some free market elements? What do you see?  
895

896 **MR. JOHNSON**

897 One trick pony, really. Leveraging the world economy to get the most out of their oil wealth.  
898 That's my 30 second answer. I'd talk more.  
899

900 **DR. GILL**

901 Let's thank this guy. I hope you guys [inaudible] Thank you for the good questions. Next week  
902 we've got a Russian historian coming in to talk about cyberwar and the involvement of Russia  
903

904 in elections in democratic nations, and then after that a couple on race in Idaho. So please grab  
905 the sheet. There's some short descriptions there and we've also got a human rights week that's  
906 happening with a number of events across campus. Please [*inaudible*] the speakers on the back  
907 of the human rights sheet There's one October 26th for bringing down these guys that fought the  
908 Aryan Nations up in northern Idaho. For 20 years they're coming here to teach those social  
909 justice. I hope you'll enjoy. Join us there. Thanks guys.

910

911 [END OF TRANSCRIPT]