

# April 17, 2022

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Today, political scientist and member of the Russian legislative body Vyacheslav Nikonov said, "in reality, we embody the forces of good in the modern world because this clash is metaphysical.... We are on the side of good against the forces of absolute evil.... This is truly a holy war that we're waging, and we have to win it and of course we will because our cause is just. We have no other choice. Our cause is not only just, our cause is righteous and victory will certainly be ours."

Nikonov was defending the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which Russian troops have leveled cities, killed thousands, kidnapped children, and raped and tortured Ukrainian citizens.

The intellectual leap from committing war crimes to claiming to be on the side of good might be explained by an interview published in the New Statesman at the beginning of April. Speaking with former Portuguese secretary of state for European affairs Bruno Maçães, Sergey Karaganov, a former advisor to Russian president Vladimir Putin, predicted the end of the western democracies that have shaped the world since World War II. Dictators, he suggested, will take over.

Democracy is failing and authoritarianism rising, Karaganov said, because of democracy's bad moral foundations. As he put it: "Western civilisation has brought all of us great benefits, but now people like myself and others are questioning the moral foundation of Western civilisation."

Karaganov's statement says a lot about why white evangelicals in the U.S. are willing to toss democracy overboard in favor of a one-party state

dominated by one powerful leader. They deny the premise of a system in which all people are equal before the law and have the right to have a say in their government.

Putin cemented his rise to power in 2013 with antigay laws that supporters claimed defended conservative values against an assault of "genderless and fruitless so-called tolerance," which "equals good and evil." Hungary's Viktor Orbán, an ally of Putin's, has been open about his determination to replace the multiculturalism at the heart of democracy with Christian culture, stop the immigration that he believes undermines Hungarian culture, and reject "adaptable family models" for "the Christian family model."

The American right has embraced this attack on our system. In October 2021, former vice president Mike Pence spoke in Budapest at a forum denouncing immigration and urging traditional social values, where he told the audience he hoped that the U.S. Supreme Court would soon outlaw abortion thanks to the three justices Trump put on the court. Next month, the American Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) will be held in Budapest, Hungary; Orbán will be the keynote speaker.

Increasingly, Republican lawmakers have called not for the U.S. government to leave business alone, as was their position under President Ronald Reagan, but to use government power to crack down on "woke" businesses they insist are undermining the policies they value—meaning companies that protect LGBTQ rights, racial justice, reproductive choice, and access to the ballot. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis and his supporters have threatened Disney for its mild defense of LGBTQ rights, insisting the company grooms children for sexual abuse, and Texas Republicans are considering barring local governments from doing business with any national company that provides abortion coverage for its employees.

To achieve such control in a country where they are a minority, they are skewing the electoral system to install a one-party government. Just like Orbán's government in Hungary, and Putin's in Russia, the one-party government they envision will benefit a very small group of wealthy people: witness the Russian oligarchs whose yachts worth hundreds of millions of dollars are being impounded all over the world. And, just like those governments, it will be overseen by a strongman, who will continue to insist that his opponents are immoral.

But here's the thing:

Democracy is a moral position. Defending the right of human beings to control their own lives is a moral position. Treating everyone equally before the law is a moral position. Insisting that everyone has a right to have a say in their government is a moral position.

This moral position is hardly some newfangled radicalism. It is profoundly conservative. It is the fundamental principle on which our country has been based for almost 250 years.

In 1776, the nation's Founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all people "are created equal...[and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..." They asserted that governments are legitimate only if those they govern consent to them.

The Founders did not live these principles, of course; they preserved the racial, gender, and wealth inequality that enabled them to imagine a world in which white men of property were all equal.

But after World War II, Americans tried to bring these principles to life. It is this attempt for America to realize its ideals that the radicals on the right

want to overturn.

After World War II, the Supreme Court began to insist that all Americans really do have a right to self-determination and that they must be treated equally before the law. Using the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee that no state can "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws," it began to upend longstanding racial, gender, class, and religious hierarchies.

It said, for example, that the promise of equality before the law meant that people of color had a right to a jury that was not made up exclusively of white people, that Black and Brown kids had a right to attend the same public schools as their white neighbors, and that white Americans could not kill or assault Black Americans without consequences.

It decided that states could not privilege one race or one religion over another and that people have the right to marry whom they wish, across racial and gender lines. It decided that people themselves, not the state, had a right to plan their families.

Then, to ensure that states were truly democratic, in 1965, Congress protected the right of all Americans to vote, giving them an equal say in their government and bringing to life the concept in the Declaration of Independence that governments are legitimate only when they derive their power from the consent of the governed.

Americans who had seen the horrors of the Holocaust—which was, after all, the logical and ultimate outcome of a society based on hierarchies—saw their defense of equality as a moral position. It recognizes the inherent worth of individuals without privileging one race, one gender, one religion, or the wealthy. It works to bring the principles of the Declaration of Independence

and the Constitution to life, stopping the violence that certain white Christian men in the past visited on those they could dominate with impunity.

Those radicals who are now taking away the right of self-determination, the right to equality before the law, and the right to vote because they are "questioning the moral foundation of Western civilisation" are launching a fundamental attack on our nation.

In his day, responding to a similar attack, Abraham Lincoln noted that accepting the idea of inequality was an act of destruction that would "transform this Government into a government of some other form."

Arguments based in the idea that some people are not capable of making their own decisions "are the arguments that kings have made for enslaving the people in all ages of the world," Lincoln said in 1858. "I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle and making exceptions to it[,] where will it stop.... If that declaration is not the truth, let us get the Statute book, in which we find it and tear it out[.]"

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Notes:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/12/vladimir-putin-defends-russia-anti-gay-conservatism>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-conservative-conference-with-hungarys-hardline-leader-reflects-republican-2022-04-05/>

<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/29/desantis-disney-dont-say-gay-repeal-00021389>