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Dear Colleague:

The single strongest evidence that Russia is a part of the West is its cult of the individual. Let me illustrate. The philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev is so much an individualist that he rebels even against the idea of family resemblance. "I was always repelled by family resemblances, as between parents and children, brothers and sisters: family likenesses have always struck me as a challenge to the dignity of the human person. I only held dear the distinctly individual, the particular in man" (Dream and Reality). What is more important sub specie aeternitatus, Love between a man and a woman or the great political movements of the world? Boris Pasternak's answer leaves no doubt. In Dr. Zhivago, his heroine Lara takes a last look at her dead lover and poet, and says: "The riddle of life, the riddle of death, the beauty of genius, the beauty of loving--that, yes, that we understood. As for such petty trifles as re-shaping the world--these things, no thank you, they are not for us." The great American poet and democrat Walt Whitman gave the title Leaves of Grass to his collection of poems. I wonder what Joseph Brodsky would think of it. Uncomprehending and repelled, no doubt. To Brodsky, "grass" is the denial of individuality--of everything that is poetic. Grass, with its prolixity and sameness, is life, not art. Or as he puts it, "Life itself is defective because it tends to lack the quality of originality. It is too repetitive, too much like grass." Elsewhere he says, "Grass is propaganda." My last example is from the Mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. He regrets the fact that the Russian language lacks the expression "self-made man." "Faced with a successful individual," Sobchak says, "all we can think to ask is: 'Who backed him? Whose protégé is he?'" (For A New Russia, 1991).

Strange, isn't it, that you don't find such declarations of individualism in the USA? In this country, we are ashamed of being individuals. Even at the University, we try our best to be "just like folk." And, contra Sobchak, it is here in the USA (especially on university campuses) that individual successes are seldom attributed to talent and effort, but rather almost always to social environment--to being backed by a center of power. And whereas the Soviet state is threatened by the ancient hatreds of tribalism, it is here in the USA that tribalism is being pushed forward as a bright new idea--the latest thing, now that socialism has lost its hypnotic glamor.

Best wishes,

