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Collective Punishment for Migrants

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In George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four," the Party holds a daily "Two Minutes Hate," during which it whips up a frenzy of collective fear and loathing by screening images of enemies of the state. Russia's government has been entertaining its citizens in a similar fashion, each time finding a new target: child-molesting Americans, perfidious nongovernmental organizations and gays and lesbians. In October, the flavor of the month is migrants, targeted by the lynch mob, the police and municipal authorities.

What unites these hate fests is their collective target: Entire groups are demonized or blamed

for actual or imagined crimes of their individual members. This phenomenon is worthy of a closer look.

One of the finest achievement of Western political thought is the separation of the individual from the community. Every human being is endowed with the freedom of conscience and rights. Responsibilities are recognized as individual, innate and inalienable and are not granted to a community based on its social status, ethnicity or religious beliefs. This is a uniquely Judeo-Christian concept, and it has been gradually spreading to other parts of the world.

But even in the West, it has been an arduous process because humanity is a tribal species, and we find individuality an uncomfortable notion. It began with the great 18th-century revolutions in France and North America and received further impetus from the failed European revolts in 1848. But even as it continued through the early 20th century, discontent with the breakdown of national and religious communities mounted, culminating in the nationalist orgy of 1914.

That war gave rise to an even more radical backlash against individual rights. Bolshevism proclaimed absolute allegiance to a new and largely imaginary global community, the proletariat, while Nazism bolstered traditional national divisions with pseudo-scientific racialist claims.

It took the horrors of two world wars and the destruction of the entire European continent for great powers in Western Europe to recoil from communal strife and to embrace the rights of the individual as a fundamental principle of political organization.

True, identification with some kind of community remains a basic human instinct, and it probably cannot be eradicated. It pops up constantly as nationalism, tribalism and even football fandom. Nevertheless, the past six decades have been a golden age of human rights and individual freedoms across the Western world. Europe, which had been historically divided along national, confessional, ideological and other communal lines, has become increasingly unified and integrated.

Russia largely missed out on the extension of individual rights, with the exception of the first and last decades of the 20th century. During the years immediately preceding World War I, Russians started acquiring rights and freedoms, and that brief period was marked by the most splendid cultural and economic efflorescence in the country's history. But the backlash was all the more terrible, with the entire layer of productive and creative people physically eradicated.

In the 1990s, after more than 70 years of communism, Russia was dazed, traumatized, defeated and corrupted, but, for all the problems of that difficult transition period, it wanted to rejoin the mainstream of Western civilization the way its former Eastern European allies have done over the past two decades. But then the flood of easy petrodollars and the rule by siloviki put an end to such aspirations. Now the Kremlin, having reached the limit of commodities-based prosperity, is pushing Russia back into self-imposed isolation, stoking the most primitive communal instincts of the lowest rungs of its population.

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