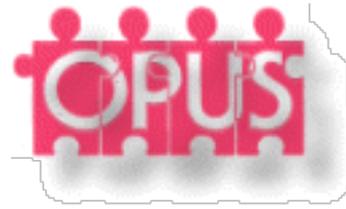


## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Czech Republic and the World  
at the Dawn of 2015  
Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

### Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context.

### Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. These themes were broad and varied and the summary below provides the main focus of the separate themes.

1. Existential woe, loss of direction of our societies, failure in ordinary kindness
2. Education, future, job insecurity
3. Money: its power, and financial instability/precarity
4. International political crises: Ukraine, Isis, terrorism
5. Globalisation and multiculturalism
6. Sense of impending anxiety, collapse apocalyptic.

### Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal world', their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Existential woe, loss of direction of our societies, failure in ordinary kindness**

**Analysis:** The participants expressed a pervasive sense loss of direction. A frustration and sometimes anger at the start of their adult lives as entering into a world which seems to have lost its way. Their was a sense of a lack of meaning to hold onto, and a great anxiety about their perceived futures, and the various menaces facing the world

today. This was compounded by a feeling that ordinary human kindness was under threat. There was a sense of living in a culture that has 'gone wrong' or is perverse or corrupted in some way, and wondering what can be done if anything. Participants hypothesized that this was as much a psychological malaise and crisis as a social and political one, and wondered whether new ways might be found to reawaken a sense of goodness in the human spirit.

**Hypothesis:** Through group reflection, the participants got in touch with a complex mixture of feelings around this topic: rage anger at the world for its failings and the various injustices, and the fact that it was at this point in world history they were being asked to enter as adults, the anxiety and insecurity about their lives and precarious futures, despair that anything could be done (maybe it was better to accept that we were a bad lot), and a small and fragile hope that perhaps it may be possible to find a way. There was a sense that our group, perhaps, made up as it is by people connected to various conflicts in the world, may embody something of that hope for a world we would like to live in.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Education, future, job insecurity**

**Analysis:** The participants expressed criticisms both of how the educational system is structured in general, and of a doubt that in today's world it would help them very much in finding a meaningful job, or any job. Fears of the future, how would they manage to find a job in today's world and raise families? Do they want to bring children into this world at all? If they found a job would it be a mindless meaningless employment they were get no satisfaction from? There was a fear and distrust of the global economic system to either work fairly, or even in to work at all, with some important differences of opinion (too much or too little government oversight, etc).

**Hypothesis:** The group found it helpful to verbalise their anxieties about the future and their anger at the situation they find themselves in. They had several suggestions as to the improvement and transformation of education in general and this perhaps gave them at least a greater sense of agency in facing what is to come. Remaining frustrations and anxieties were left of course, but with some relief that these could be talked about openly and not only worried about alone.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3: Money: power, financial instability/precarity, and the crisis of trust**

**Analysis:** This area seemed to be both in part a separate topic, but also part of the hypothesis about what lay behind the other topics. There was a sense in the growing power of money to corrupt various

institutions, political, media, education. This was part of a sense of confusion and powerless over knowing who to trust and what to believe. Given the presence of people from more than one side of an international conflict, the awareness of media distortions in reporting was acute, with all sides wondering who could be right and who to trust. Some participants felt more resigned to the inevitable triumph of the power of money as though nothing could be done, others wondered whether there may be ways for democracy to re-establish some balance in this area. There was also the theme of consumerism as both sapping our values and eroding a sense of self, which therefore needed to be tied up more and more with products. The environmental effects of this were also acknowledged. There was a sense of being both a critic of, and part of this system. Behind all this the sense of general instability of our economic system, that it could collapse again at any moment, and that they could get chewed up in its wake. Again with some wondering if something better might be able to take its place, and others fearful of possible alternative futures. The rise of fundamentalism was connected to this theme.

**Hypothesis:** There was also a general sense, linked to hypothesis 1, that the power of money was part of the corruption/loss of values. There was also a fear that the rise of fundamentalism/terrorism may be in part a desperate attempt to re-establish value systems in a world where it was felt to be lost. A fear that the 'cure' may be worse than the disease. In other words there was the idea of a kind of gravitational pull between two destructive forces, between 'lack of values' (pure selfishness) and 'too much/strict values', between nihilism and the final victory of money over everything else, and fundamentalist violence. With this in mind, the question of how to find some kind of space in between became important.

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 4: International political crises: Ukraine, Isis, nationalism, and fundamentalism**

**Analysis:** This was an important area for the group, especially with several participants coming from one or both sides of several of the international political crises of today. Following from the last discussion, the problem of who to trust and the distorting power of various interests over the media left people feeling afraid, angry, and confused. Direct knowledge of the group of the psychosocial landscape in various countries added to their sense of how this works and how difficult it can be to work against. Along with expressing their feelings over this topic, especially painful in some cases due to person or family connections, the group explored aspects of the psychology behind conflict and war. The sense of 'us' and 'them'. The ecologically threatened nature of the planet and the likelihood of new and more frequent 'resource wars'. The ability of leaders to unite fragile and precarious sense of

individual selves into the sense of a group mission, identity and collective confidence. The seductive pull of this dynamic was acknowledged along with wondering what could stand against it, socially or psychologically?

**Hypothesis:** This part included some more personal feelings of pain in relation to the crises, and motivation to explore the psychological causes. While there was some relief with a feeling of understanding aspects of the psychology behind the lure of nationalism and fundamentalism, the forces identified seemed ominously large and it was difficult to imagine a way out. The background effects of the corrosive power of money both on destabilising our identities, and our economies, as well as distorting the media were also addressed as factors contributing to the problem on multiple levels. When describing fundamentalism and ISIS in particular, the issue discussed above was important, the understanding of fundamentalism as a reaction to the erosion of values and the importance of finding another way between the extremes. Finally there was a sense, however small, of our group itself embodying something of the hope looked for, as if people from a diverse range of national backgrounds can come together and genuinely share their experiences, emotions, and aspirations, in a spirit of cooperation and openness, there was at least hope that this is possible in principle. However the difficulties of how to extend this experience to their wider psychosocial worlds were acknowledged as well.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 5: Globalisation, multiculturalism, and the rise of the European far-right**

**Analysis:** Again, this was an important area for the group, given its background. There was a discussion of the effects of globalisation and multiculturalism, and its positive aspects, including the group itself, as well as the negative sides. In particular the backlash in the rise of far-right anti-immigration groups and parties in Europe. The problem of maintaining a sense of identity in a globalised world, both for those emigrating to other countries (including many participants in the group) and for the countries experiencing a change in demographics and culture in their societies. There was a sense of anxiety, and a desire both to 'fit in' to their adoptive group, and also to maintain a sense of identity from their home countries. There was also a fear of what it would mean to be the target of anti-immigrant rage. Overall though there was a sense of being happy to live in the Czech Republic, where it was felt some of these problems were less severe than it appeared elsewhere. There was also a discussion of the sense of multiple identities we all have, not just national, but religious, ethnic, political, cultural, musical, etc. Certain examples of the media were given of individual cases where such internal psychological conflict (between different group norms in the same person) erupted into murderous violence.

**Hypothesis:** The group discussed the difficulty for finding a place for 'I' among the various 'we's', and also for working out how to allow the various competing group identities in our own selves to come to some kind of peaceful co-existence was important. In other words, it is not only a matter of finding out how to allow the different cultures in a globalised world to live together, but the fact that each of our minds is to some extent already a mixture of competing psychosocial group identities, and therefore we are individual conflict as well as social conflict. The link between such individual conflict and group conflict was noted, and a suggestion that how we manage our own internal competing group identifications may be one path towards reconciling them in the outer world, and vice versa.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 6: Apocalypse and the sense of impending collapse,**

**Analysis:** This final theme was explored also as a dimension of all the others. There was a widespread fear and dread in the group about a range of potentially apocalyptic threats we are facing. These included:

1. Climate change and ecological collapse, and the role of money and consumerism in fuelling our destructiveness to nature,
2. Fundamentalist terrorism and the dangers of attack, following the crises in Ukraine and elsewhere a sense of war being the new normal state of affairs and anxiety about it become more generalised especially given the environmental crisis and the possibility of resource wars, as well as the psychological and identity crises fuelling nationalism and fundamentalism.
3. A sense of nearing the edge of another financial meltdown, possibly even worse than the 2008 crash.
4. The 'psychological collapse' of morals, and identities.

The group explored their fantasies, both fears but even excitement about the possible 'end of the world', including the idea that we may leave this world and find another planet to live on. But others suggested even if this were possible we would only bring our problems there. Would the world be better off without us was another theme, especially in relation to nature, which brought up both depressive feelings of guilt, as well as a sense of sadness, and fear.

**Hypothesis:** The weight of the cumulative crises which seem to face us now can lead to despair, and even a desire to give up. The 'apocalypse' may not only be frightening but almost a relief. If it were really over we wouldn't have to worry about any of it anymore. However with these feeling goes a feeling of deep sadness, that this would be a terrible way to end the human adventure. And there was an awareness that we need to confront not only the objective threats

we face, but the psychological causes behind them, which have been described in the other sections, but in addition the part of ourselves which desires the end as relief, our own apocalyptic desires which may be one of the dangers we face, pulling us towards our end. The Listening Post ended with a feeling there was still much to digest and work on but that the fact we had been able to face such difficult themes and verbalise them consciously was helpful, although challenging, intellectually and especially emotionally. The idea of our group as a microcosm not only of the Czech Republic but the world also gave some home, although fragile, about the possible futures we face psychologically and socially.

**Convener: Joseph Dodds, PhD.**