



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The LP started by one participant, an architect, who wanted to highlight the word that described her previous year – change. Changes happened in the country’s political domain, she changed her job and she noticed changes on so many levels that required constant flexibility and adjustment. Another participant recalled end-of-year frenzy about the end of the world, and *lapsus linguae* of a friend who instead of ‘end of the world’ said “move of the world”(Serbian words *smak* and *pomak*).

The conversation in the group turned to discussion about the value system in our country, following a statement of a participant, an actress in the National Theater, who recalled a sentence by our only Nobel peace prize winner for literature Ivo Andric: “Why should my thought be less valuable than a thought of an American, French or Englishman”. The participants were wondering how a country as small as ours could integrate into the world thoughts, world flow. Somebody said that he had a feeling as if information reached us belatedly, regardless of the internet and apparent connectedness. It seemed as if an additional effort was needed to even think.

A number of participants said that they had faith in individual powers and strengths, in the importance of committed diligent work / that it was the sole source of sense irrespective of the place/country of residence, and “The way is within us, not in the place where we live”. The only thing that matters was what we as individuals could do for our personal development. Smart people were withdrawing from the public scene. Intellectuals were not willing to get engaged in solving socially important issues in the public domain, they just operated in the professional arena.

Some felt the need to discuss national identity and why it was so difficult to us Serbs to get out of the ‘mud’, to express ourselves and be proud of our identity and who we were. It seemed as if the new generations wanted to annul the national identity, and that it was easier for them to go and face the world in an equal footing. However there were voices of young people who felt the need to say state that they were proud to be Serbian, that they felt an inner strength and belief that changes were possible if we kept working in a committed way. Some participants had the experience of living abroad, and they were of the opinion that in order to be accepted in foreign environment one had to stay true to oneself.

A participant who used to live for several years in Africa, in Rwanda, said that maybe the real question was when we as Serbs would start valuing more opinions of other small nations because the global issues are much wider than what was called the West. Another participant said that she was travelling a lot and that she never encountered any unpleasant thing because she originated from Serbia, and she asked why so many issues were expressed through national identity. Then she was replied that even if we did not feel the need to be put into a national category, others would push us into the Serbian identity when we meet other nations and cultures.

A participant, who attended many listening posts in the past, said that she for the first time had positive inclinations for our nation while sitting at this listening post. The social part within us, she continued, was something very heavy and very difficult to transform into words. It felt as if there was a chaotic movement within ourselves that was vibrant and lively, however we stay blocked and mute.

A need for more active approach was identified, an almost utopist need to better the world. However another voice was heard saying that there were so many bad examples around us in terms of bad behavior, people not respecting each other as if we forgot what meant to behave and be nice to other people.

A participant found it interesting that Rwanda was mentioned, as the country known for the genocide committed during the civil war. Maybe mentioning of Rwanda was a call to see what the genocidal and destructive parts within us were.

Towards the end of the first part of the listening post, a participant said that he declared himself as Serbian; however there were many other elements that made him which were more important than that part of the identity. For him the real challenge was how to grasp that a number of truths exist simultaneously in our reality.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

1. The time of change – how to find and keep one's identity in constantly changing environment
2. Voice of an individual / group / small nation – is it heard and by whom
3. Destructive forces within ourselves and others – how they hinder us from reflection
4. How to appease personal identity with the national identity in multicultural society
5. The young are tired of the burden of the past and are wondering how to find optimism
6. Accountability in the aftermath of the legacy of civil wars in the former Yugoslavia (in the light of the acquittals of non-Serbian indicted from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague)

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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

Hypothesis: In these times of constant change it became very difficult to find and keep one's identity; therefore in this constant struggle in which our own voice was not heard by others, it became habitual to turn deaf ear to other voices, even to such extent that when we are given opportunity to reflect together and speak freely to one another, many are unable to find words or their voice.

Analysis: The constant issue floating in the time of change is whether the change will be in the positive or the negative direction, and the anxiety around this was present all the time. The participants were wondering throughout the listening post how to define different issues in the constantly changing environment. The good and bad are simultaneously present, and many felt confused. One participant wondered if we can hear our own inner voice in a situation in which we do not hear other peoples' voices. Many were sharing the extreme difficulty of verbalising the

difficult topics and issues that are on our mind. Participants also discussed change of the value system that triggered and caused enormous anger. However, a question was put forward if it was possible that something new can be born from that anger and how it could be done. “Are we prisoners of our own choices, in terms of having a value system. How to stay true to it in a world clearly appreciated different values to the ones we hold true”, one participant asked. Another one said that deep in us there was a wound, that all the time we were trying to project it outside of ourselves to alleviate the pain maybe through making different choices for which we constantly ask ourselves whether they are good or not. The feeling of chaos was at times dominant, and the question was if the chaos was able to be transformed into order. Did the fear of inability to create order inhibit the participants to think, was one of the questions put forward.

Throughout the listening post relation between the internal and the external space, hatred felt inside and the one outside was explored. Participants were wondering how difficult it was to face issues whereas there was a constant need for the inner voice to be heard and that it made connection with what was out there. Then there was a dilemma what voice to send out and what will be actually heard. It seemed as if this connection that enables communication was cut off in a situation in which there is a paramount need to connect the personal with the social/public. “What are the mechanisms present that undermine the natural need to connect”, was the question posed at the end.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis: Difficulties in appeasing personal identity (who am I) with the national one (where I come from) stem from the atmosphere in which the perception of many of those with whom we want to socially and economically connect in Europe and the world (where I want to be) is that Serbs should be not only accountable, but guilty for almost the entire legacy of the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. This brings about deep feelings of injustice, pain and sorrow but also hatred and shame towards ourselves and others that extremely polarizes, entrenches and splits the society in two groups – those who are annihilating national identity and those who feel very proud. This polarization keeps society in a feeling of being stuck, unable to find inner strength for change and for developing meaningful connections.

Analysis: Participants were wondering how we deal with mentioning of genocide, how difficult it is to endure hearing that word. Some were posing the question if because of deep difficulty it was easier to talk about genocide in the context of Rwanda, rather than recognising that it happened also in our backyard. There were some voices saying that they felt they were being pushed into national identity, whereas they would rather choose it for oneself. Discussion developed around a nationality and if it was a defence against all the bad things that have happened in the recent past, and inability or ability to face and reconcile with it. “Individual attempts in this direction are positive”, a participants said – “However they are not enough at the present moment”. The individual achievements in terms of recognising that atrocities did happen were tremendously important so as to create critical mass that could have more significant impact to the wider community. The power of intellect and having faith in it was deemed important.

Many who had a clear sense of belonging to Serbian national identity were recognising existence of inner strength, however mainly when in contact with other cultures and nations, outside the national boundaries. There was a sense of maturing of the national issue – people did not longer feel so much frustrates when different labels were put on them.

One participant, found the courage to initiate the discussion about the recent acquittals of the Croatian generals, who stood trial before the ICTY for war crimes committed against civilian ethnic Serbian population in Croatia in 1995. The participant, who had to flee Croatia as a teenager, spoke through tears that she felt the need that her people (the Serbs) remember her being a victim and mention this shameful verdict. She felt ashamed, although she was a victim, and a part of an exodus of 200,000 Serbs who were forced to leave Croatia at the time. Moreover, the verdict of the international tribunal was felt as shameful re-writing of the history she was a part of.

Great sorrow was also felt because the same has happened to Serbs who had to leave Kosovo, whereas recently the ICTY acquitted a commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, an ethnic Albanian, who was charged for committing atrocities against Serbian and non-Albanian civilian population. Another participant whose father, a former Yugoslav Army general, was found guilty and sentenced by the ICTY, said that she did not want to initiate the subject because she did not want to burden people around her with such profound pain, “We are the people that cannot even talk about themselves, we cannot talk about the hardships in which part of our people live even today in parts of Kosovo. It is such a profound pain, that we do not even recognize it.” Participant, who came from Kosovo, said that it must be that the pain was felt at some level, since it was so difficult for groups to formulate hypothesis and many felt as if they were mute. Another participant added that it petrifies him that the Hague Tribunal – at the deeper level – resonated with our own atrocities towards ourselves, where even today the life of Serbs in Kosovo is a non-issue in public discourse. The injustice that we feel is connected to the level of our own accountability toward ourselves as people.

A number of participants did not have any trust in the institution of the ICTY, as it was seen as political court. The state and its institutions were perceived as spineless, without any right act of protecting and defending its own citizens at so many levels. “If everyone claims we are guilty, maybe that is why we feel ashamed so much”, a voice was heard. The depth of sadness felt was also associated with very deep feeling of shame.

“It is an issue of the institutions – and what the ICTY epitomizes – to which level it resonates with our own internal judge. It feels as out-of-mind that such an important institution that was established to look into who was accountable for the terrible atrocities of civil war was displaced and set up in another country and the discourse was then bound to be that we discuss about so important issues as issues outside ourselves. It is directly connected to our own inability to be in touch with truth that somebody was committing atrocities in our name and look deep into who was accountable among ourselves. We as society allowed that somebody else deals with judicial process on our behalf. Now, when summary of verdicts is visible, we feel angry. Should we be angry with ourselves as well?” one participant asked the present at the listening post.

The latest acquittals from the ICTY compromise the international justice and make it very difficult for the different peoples living in the Balkans to confront their recent past. Actually, the work of that international tribunal will have quite the opposite effect, as it contributed to regression to the nationalistic spirit of the '90s. This is also what contributes to the crisis of national identity, which even goes to the level of the genocide of our own national identity.

In the beginning of the discussion the issues were looked at from the global level (end of the world), then it was lowered to the national level (we are Serbs, the small nation and what it actually means). There was an obvious need for us to look into what we were and who we were as a nation. When one starts looking into it there were many positive examples of famous writers, scientists and sportsmen that bring about positive feelings; however there was another side as well and even the mentioning of genocide. Question arises how to approach such a complex issue because our own nation was in the past victim of genocide in the World War II. However members of our nation also perpetrated atrocities in the recent civil war. This brings about confusion in people, but it should not because different very deep feelings that exist among people should be named – many people who were victims are also descendants of victims. They feel deep sadness and sorrow while at the same time others who are aware of the perpetrator parts feel shame. What to do with all these different feelings. Historical examples show that when shame is felt, then feelings of deep remorse should follow – one should just recall what has happened in Srebrenica. Immediate thought that follows is what should Croats feel when they go to Jasenovac, and then one asks what to do with all of this. Remorse, remorse was important, one participant underlined, continuing: “We should also never forget the victims, take care of them and help them that their voice is also heard”.

In order to make this leap/change at many levels – personal, social, etc., there is a need to face the hatred, then remorse, then excuse and cherish the process while keeping all the time in the mind the innocent victims and enable them to speak so that their voice could be heard. It is so very complex to be able to do that in parallel, firstly for ourselves at the personal level. In the

interconnectedness, the challenge is how to make the step towards taking personal responsibility for individual step forward. A participant who was ready to take responsibility, found it difficult to feel compassion for the other party that was not ready to acknowledge victims on the opposite side. How to be accountable while not being collectively guilty was the question that resonated with many of the present at the listening post. Participant offered an example from Hawaiian psychiatrist who woken by acknowledging being accountable for everything that had happened to his patients, and at the end it had an inexplicable healing effect. Recognizing accountability helps, she said.

Another participant said that she recalled the time when she started reading history that she did not want to be human if humans did such terrible things to each other, it was better to be a lion or an elephant.

In closing, participant shared a story about a Polish businessman who had a car accident which he survived. The very same night he had a dream in which a small Jewish girl asked him to give her back her ring. When he woke up, he remembered that he had such a ring that his grandparents gave him. Later, he found out that some Poles took jewellery from Jews at the time they were deported by Germans from Poland to concentration camps in exchange for water or a promise that maybe they would be saved. When he found out this, he immediately took the ring to a museum. The participant was wondering what would be a good enough symbolic gesture, such as the one from the story, to redeem the historical inheritance we have received to be able to move forward.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis: A possible way forward for building something new, for making the right choices in life is through strengthening awareness on importance of individual action, personal positive engagement at different levels, including professional and social one. This could also be a path to better and more positive image of our society and reputation of our nation.

Analysis: There were many reflections connected to the belief in the possibilities and capacities of an individual to contribute to positive change, through individual actions and engagement at the personal, professional and social level. Some participants believed that that change can occur through synergy of small, individual contributions. Furthermore, the step forward made during the listening post was lying in the fact that towards the end the group made it possible that difficult, weighty feelings could be felt, and participants managed to find words to express them.

Some were asking if something new can be born from the destroyed places, when the older generations are not taking into consideration voices from the young people, the older do not make any space for the young. The young were tired, and were wondering how to stay optimistic and joyful – is it again left to the individual to find it for himself/herself? The young talk about numerous defects of the modern society, which is drying out the life out of new generations who just feel exhausted, they cannot take it anymore. There is a need to find what are those things that are making the young happy on a daily basis – how to find beauty, be compassionate and find happiness in everyday life.

Elections and the political choices that can or cannot be made in today's political scene were discussed. Many said there was nobody to vote for and they abstain from voting, however in that way they make room for the others to make choices that determine our collective future reality. "We think we can choose the future, however what is the level of destructive influence of other people's projection to the reality we have chosen?" was one question. That was a shared feeling among many participants, which created strong resonance that it was so difficult to raise one's voice again and have hope.

The power of the individual and the power of the group – how they are interpolated, somebody wondered. Questions were also raised if an individual can do anything: "Maybe we as individuals can move something, however what is the path / road to be taken in order to have some things moved or changed." Another replied that the strength of an individual lied in grasping all the negative and the bad aspects of ourselves primarily, before being able to move forward. "The first

step to change would be in the individual's ability to see all these different truths, that they exist, that they are connected to you, before making an attempt to integrate them.”

There is good and bad inside us and it is constantly in a dynamic movement influence by good and bad from the outside world. Using personal potentials, being responsible for one's own actions, respecting oneself so as to be able to respect the others is a possible way forward.

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