

**"Serbia and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 11th January**



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 their various social roles. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to reflect together and share free associations about their experiences in various social roles connected with the actual social situation in Serbia and the wider world. The session started with introducing each other in few words. There were 12 men and women, mostly middle-aged, with different professions in private and public sector, mostly in senior positions, one retired around 70, all with various family situations. There was not anybody younger than 40 and anybody being unemployed and the group noticed that shortcoming. Someone, also, remarked that nobody had mentioned his political orientation and asked if it was a too intimate issue. (The workshop happened to be just a week before the parliament elections in Serbia.) At once we were middle in an emotional turbulence of various reactions with a vivid group anxiety of being overwhelmed with fragmentation. "Politics is primitive, dirty, and is going to reset us to the fifteen years period of lays and misdeeds! I feel in this reflecting group like on an other planet! Secure, away from those terrible posters!" (I saw this as a fight-flight ba and I thought about social defences where politics should carry all the danger.) This was turned by a lady telling about a new famous 23 year old hip-hop singer from a Serbian province, exelent student of serbian language, whom she enjoys listening. Another male member picked this up telling one of the songs, "*You are that virus!*", meaning sitting lazy at home, pessimistically criticizing the social darkness around, complaining about life, and in reality problem is in yourself, not taking an active attitude and even any responsibility. There was a wave of sympathy in the group towards those messages. "Bravo!" (As if we had finally found a young member. It was a turn to the opposite more optimistic side with some aspects of ba pairing). An important theme came in: "This song is about that traditional serbian collectivism of rather everybody be unhappy than let a single person be happy by doing something on his own." Another lady reflected further on turning towards inside oneself as a mechanism of surviving those 15 horrible years - "*internal emigration*". Working very hard in her private practice with intensive professional development had been a conscious choice on which she was proud, although aware of a kind of isolation from wider social world and the fact that, for example, one could not isolate children from the bad cultural situation.

The expectancy of the social changes towards democracy had been very strong, but also the disappointments afterwards. The retired psychiatrist asked: "Aren't those turnings

towards private practice - those really positive changes from the awful old communist system, from that evil unprofessional hierarchy?" A lady architect gave her example of an opposite way round, being first in an shelter of a good private company, then working abroad in USA, and then finding herself in a senior position in the large system of the Serbian urbanism. "All countries need also large systems. The things are moving, but too slowly in relation to our needs and expectations."

Many complex experiences from members who lived abroad came in. There was a flux from private to public, from external to internal, from traditionalistic to globalistic over to anti-globalistic and alter-globalistic, from social to personal, with some group splitting and oscillations between opposite opinions, but also efforts for finding links and paths for integration. Many painful themes were touched, massive traumas, guiltiness and victimization, including quite complex issues like the way media and brands are forming the peoples minds, difficulties in the confrontation with new realities, the paradox of feeling better during the years of expectancy of democracy than now in spite of the obvious positive changes, freedom bringing responsibility and new kind of worries. Various social defenses were mentioned like: "We always think that some system does not let us express ourselves well, always there's someone guilty outside!" or the north serbian absurd stubbornness: "Now I don't want that even in the way I do want that!"

Helplessness towards the increase of crime and drugs was seen as the Fight of David against Goliath. The group members could share their worries including some more personal fears like one father who talked very emotionally about "devaluation of emotions" and "infection of materialistic values" at his son. Many worries of the negative aspects of the social changes were expressed: consequences of globalisation, cameras around, the expansion of the worst brands. "The design of the actual political campaign is so similar to the American!" The transitional period many people see as copying of the west and some others as an anarchy. The session finished with the worries for children and that most important is to love the children, as well the doctors to love humans.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. They could be clustered in three groups as below.

- a) *Politics and the changes in society*
- c) *Worries for the future of children*
- d) *Understanding the actual psycho-social process*

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

Analysis:

As this Listening Post happened to be held just a week before the parliament elections in Serbia, the politics was very present in the discussions, starting from the very first question if it was a too intimate issue. The obvious fear of the group to be overwhelmed with the political marketing and to lose the chance for using the reflecting space in a more creative way, came out at the beginning. So, first politics was pushed away as a danger carrying all the dirtiness, primitiveness and then allowed to come into the group discussion in a form of a song "*You are that virus*". So, suddenly its face changed from the outside ugly destructiveness into a young Serbian hip-hop-er with an appeal for waking up from laziness and taking active attitude towards the inside virus. The group was able to use this process as a mirror for further reflection on the presence of politics in everyday life, in value systems and communications. Is the power of politics something from which ordinary people should fly away or something that a citizen should take part in? There was an agreement that the massive social traumas with the national catastrophe had been very much connected with the awful politics (national and world) which was guilty for so many horrible victims. To believe into the potentially positive power of politics is very difficult for the Serbian citizens today after the whole war period and excommunication from the world. The healing process is connected with making conditions for democratic discourse, but happens also very much in small everyday things. (Will you criticize corruption and at the same time give a wrong model to your child in helping him with small lays at school!)

The group went deeper into the issue of passive position towards society problems and politics. Beside the extremely traumatic 15 years period, also the communist Tito's time had the impact onto the formation of a kind of regressive position. "We are like those spoiled children mentioned to be angry on their parents for not buying them this and that, expecting from the society and the politicians to nurture us and fit to all our needs without doing anything on our own. We became inert and dependent, and in a defense to take the more adult positions." "It might have been also a kind of corruption in Tito's times." Our regressive way of thinking is: "It is not good here, we do not want to go anywhere, because it's not going to be better anywhere, and here it has to be better, because somebody has to provide it for us and nobody is doing it!"

There are ambivalent attitudes towards modernity in Serbia, even to the issue of human rights with difficulties to understand that in essence they are just very close to the ten rules of God. Resistance to changes, caused by clinging to traditionalism and collectivism, post-traumatic withdrawal, historical issues etc., is linked to the crises of identity. It is difficult to see that individual and national identity is a lively dynamic phenomena, that a Serb from the 19th century is just not the same as the Serb from the 21st century, and to learn how to implement achievements from the developed world in authentic local way by keeping the local identity. On the other side there are highly intellectual individuals and groups, even small institutions, quite well involved in the postmodern matrix of multiple perspectives, inter-subjectivity, continuous shifting of meaning and identity, who are emphasizing the deconstruction of rigid grand stereotypes and narratives. There is a continuous clash between those diversities.

Hypothesis:

The inert and passive position towards politics and social changes is caused by the regressive position inherited from Tito's communism time, as well the sequels of the war

traumas with losing any faith in the positive power of the citizen. It can only be learned slowly through providing spaces for real discourse. In a way this process has been mirrored in the group.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

The other issues present very much during the whole Listening Post have been the worries for children and their future, many kinds of worries: value systems, quality of educational system, drugs, crime, deprivation and devaluation of emotions, opportunities for experiencing other cultures when Serbian citizens are excommunicated from Europe and world, capacities for good partnerships and creating families. There was a complex discussion about the distribution of responsibility between the society and the family: How much do we accuse society and push the responsibility outwards? At a few moments in the group there was a strong and emotionally loaded agreement that just the love of the children should be at the first place.

The group was then focused on thinking together, if the children being so present in the event, had some other meaning for the group. Why are we worrying so much for the children and not for ourselves? Were we talking unconsciously about parts of ourselves through them, too? Was it a split which came just with all the catastrophic experiences of bombing and similar, with the self-sacrifice and putting all the hopes for survival into our children or something else? Was it something about the space for emotions and enjoyment in our lives?

It was very interesting how it happened that with those questions the group did open some new space for exploring emotions. For a while there were many expressions of various difficult emotions: all kinds of fears with the need to name them all, very deep helplessness and hopelessness, emotional emptiness and then came anger, too. There was an exploration of male-female diversities in this issue. The members could share some more personal and complex feelings, contain them and even respond with empathy. Paradoxical fears of positive feelings were discovered and analyzed. It seemed that the isolation was mostly projected to the oldest member, with some ideas afterwards that he had been unconsciously seen as the carrier of the old times.

Hypothesis:

Presence of so many fears and worries for children contain the natural sacrifice for next generations as a way of surviving in catastrophic times, but also a need for finding space for our own emotions, for allowing the contact with the difficult emotions as well the need for enjoyment.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:

After the mini process of working through of the difficult emotions, there emerged a space for remembering some more positive emotions and also for more complex thinking together about the psycho-social processes.

Many times the 15 dark years were named "*the black hole in time*". The diversities of its meaning for various generations were discussed. So many losses! Of health, of self-esteem and self-evaluation, of opportunities for development, of youth enjoyments...! For a long time everything had been about survival and that is so sad. Among the ways for survival various retreats were analyzed, example retreats to professional and family islands. Socially isolated spaces and absolute leaning only on oneself were discovered to be a quite common mechanism, with rejection to trust the wider communications, especially institutions. Along with them went strong mobilization of all kinds of energy, often with effects of quite fast and successful developments in some areas. Computers and internet were mentioned as an important instrument of finding the windows towards the world and keeping contact network. The resources of inner energy are used, maybe, too much and the exhaustness and tiredness came..., health problems, too.

Where are we now? As if in some new post-black-hole-time area. Unfortunately, we had explored well the catastrophic phenomena and feelings, but as if being addicted and sometimes not knowing how to separate from those. In this new vague space full of divergent changes we are confused, scared, ambivalent and puzzled, in front of the unknown. We are in the inter-space of something, functioning often in a split, sometimes holding on the black-hole-habits with the loss of faith in any contact with external world and institutions and sometimes as if not all the hopes and faith had been destroyed. It is like being on the edge, paralyzed of fears from both sides to be swollen up, from the old as well from the new. Along with many oscillations we slowly have to accept the transitional time with all its unpredictable multi-faced realities and learn to encounter the unknown. On the other side, in spite of all the social deficiencies and regressive positions, there are, also, some wishes for creation of new bridges and new kinds of institutions, repairing some of the old ones. But all of it on realistic grounds!

One absurdity: Coming out of the post-traumatic chaos with the a need for regulated systems, we are encountering new kinds of unregulation in the turbulent, fast changing world. Very special skills are needed....

Hypothesis:

The 15 years of darkness for Serbia are often experienced as a "*black hole in time*". Among the successful surviving mechanism are found to be retreats to quite isolated professional and family spaces detached from wider society. Time of social transition is loaded with complex phenomena: clinging to catastrophic phenomena, fears of being swollen by the old as well by the new, fears of recovering contact with faith and hope into social communications, slowly learning encounter with the unknown and permitting the wishes for new bridges to emerge. Some people have awareness that special skills are required for being able to follow the fast changing world social matrix.

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