

**"Serbia and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 8th 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, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

After brief introductions were being made, the free associations started with an impression that feelings of anger have lessened among people in Serbia, either originating from general resignation with long lasting problems or due to some feelings of improvement. Similar themes bother people, institutional and systems dysfunction, but wrath itself is not strong as it was before. Could it be that during economic crises, more human solidarity occurs. Immediately, an opposite vision came out: "Yesterday, during the pelting rain, I found for myself a shelter under the street cart selling roasted chestnut. The seller complained about people becoming worse, and how they nag about his chestnuts being putrid, and his replies that he doesn't care, because it's all the same today with people, too. They just need provocations to lash out, and it made him feel like a human boxing sack."

Then for a while the group oscillated between these two opposite impressions, whether the atmosphere of the Nineties is returning with the degradation of values through addiction to TV, when Milosevic had his diverse impact onto citizens, to reality shows, and all kind of kitsch, or if there was more hope, work and social responsibility. Then the theme of deception within all cells of society, from state institutions to small ones, emerged. How did the general feeling of being betrayed happen, whether the Serbian citizens are really so extremely corrupted, or so naive to be tricked.

The recent funeral of our Patriarch of Serbian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Pavle with enormous numbers of citizens standing for days in lines in an honoring silence was from all participants experienced as having special meaning. This was understood as a need for goodness, justice, hope and real values, by some participants seen as a unique event, and by others as a similar one to the Belgrade Peace Protest in the Nineties and the funeral after the assassination of our Prime minister and leader of democratic changes after Milosevic, dr. Djindjic.

However, those positive human tendencies, had swiftly fallen into retreats, as if still not strong enough, and the anxiety of exposing oneself with various positive values may in many social situations be a problem.

Then the new traffic law issues came out, as a manifestation of hope for more regulation and solving corruption, chaos, unsafety. However, distrust is still everywhere around, even about the vaccination against virus H., in spite of clear medical advises.

Then again a voice of a student arose, that there are more than a few people who are making efforts for improvement in our country, and that many of the subculture phenomena just mentioned, are present in most countries around the world. "It's no good to only trash ourselves, as Serbs are very much prone to do!" The deception on the side of the large corporate world in USA linked to the world crises, although being highly developed democratic states, as well, the waves of some western trends of just pursuing one's interests without caring for the others, was mentioned as an example of the complexity of these issues.

The journalist member raised the question, whether it would have been different if reality shows and similar programs had existed in the past. "Of course, there were totally other values in our society then, there was the Sixties generation demonstrating. . .we were pacifists, listening Bob Dylan songs. . .!" But the journalist insisted that the freedom of choice of programs can't be the real problem, because in few years most people will find information and news on the internet, and not TV. Again the pedagogic need to educate young people, and criticize trash culture found more voices. Societies which value themselves don't let such things happen, and the example of the French minister of culture, when they had forbidden some trashy programs (Spanish TV series) was used as a positive example of mature societies who care more about young.

Transition and resistance to it: many things had been done, so many positive changes are happening although maybe too slowly according to our wishes and needs. But we can't compare to EU and USA, who were lucky not to see a soldier on their streets for decades. Here is a wish to go faster, and dissatisfaction that it's not so. There was also a comparison to other ex-communist countries, like Poland, and the appeal of one participant, a director of City of Belgrade Urbanism who wished that we would learn more from others and skip many child illnesses of transition, corruption in the first place. Then the recent state actions against organized crime, and drug trafficking, were positively valued.

"There was a time when everybody could see some aspects of corruption abound, and would get involved in some way, but not to forget, that there were people who chose never to do it. That is also a good reason for hope."

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 five interrelated themes:

1. Anger, wrath, in the society are becoming worse, or improving.
2. Proneness to isolation still present, manifested in clinging, even addiction to media kitsch, reality shows, cheap sitcoms. . .
3. Deception and distrust.
4. Positive values of people more in retreats than on the main scene, became briefly visible in the masses during Patriarch's funeral.
5. Confusion around elite and real authorities.

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

Hypothesis: It is difficult to recognize, whether in the Serbian society the presence of aggression and of feelings of bitterness, anger, wrath are increasing or decreasing, as although it might be paradoxical in a way, there seems to be possible to find manifestations of both of these opposite trends. These phenomena could be linked, on one hand, to further worsening of old problems, being intensified by economic crises, and on the other hand to some parallel very slow healing process that has been going on. The latter is relatively invisible, can just faintly be recognized from time to time.

Analysis: After so many continuous and repetitive social traumas, transitions, current world economic crises, there is a lot of turmoil and a mixture of a variety of processes, so it depends on the perspective which one would come to the foreground. The group agreed about the need for more people from smaller towns to participate at the next workshop, more workers, pensioners, as they are assumed to have quite different perspectives.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis: Social isolation tendencies are still extensively present in many ways, whether as a social defences, as national characteristics rooted in old historical times, as a genetic code, or as a reaction to being isolated from the world in the Nineties, and further on, or as a social resistance to changes.

Analysis: The theme of the country recently becoming free of visas to EU countries, which was a great news in December, being forgotten as the theme in the first part, is talked about and seen as an aspect of those isolation tendencies. Further isolation manifestations are also in the need of so many people to stay attached, or even addicted to TV news, to various trashy reality shows, cheap sitcoms, and other versions thereof. Concerns about losing contact and trust in proper values was discussed.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis: In spite of the actual efforts of the state in implementation of many social rules, regularities and laws, there is an impression of deception and distrust to be extensively present in different ways in various layers of our society. These phenomena could be among else be understood as a feeling of betrayal due to failed, expectations that the social changes would have happened much faster, in some different ways, etc.

Analysis: Experiences from other transitional societies like Poland, Hungary, etc. were expected to be picked up and overcome faster, but it seems that it is a period that has to be suffered and struggled long-enough, and in fact needs a very long time to be overcome. That heresy of the Nineties has developed strong roots in the society. Many

skillful doubledealers are sitting now in their high positions, costly houses, driving expensive cars, unlike those who respected social rules and values, creating feelings of injustice and bitterness. During the heated argument as to whether a statehood truly exists or not in Serbia, America has been given as an example of highly developed statehood, but then emerged a thought if the Americans “Respect the state more than truth”.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis: The beliefs, hope and faith in positive values like goodness, justice, wisdom, solidarity, are kept split off from the central scenes or mainstream, with fears to be exposed, attacked and hurt.

Analysis: Impressive manifestation of exposure to visibility of the peoples need and faith into positive values were seen in the hundred thousands of citizens in long lines that came to pay the tribute at the recent funeral of His Holiness Patriarch Pavle.

Many felt proud to live in a country where such a mass of people shined so positively in those days. However, it was in total silence, and the question as to where these voices are embedded in regular time, was found important.

Analysis and Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis: There is a confusion in the society about elite and authorities as the need to redefine the true meaning of those terms. And where they are, the real elite as people who are respected, seen as role models for positive identifications and expected to shed light, make initiatives? They are tired, exhausted, many living abroad in pursuit of better life, scared to expose themselves or take leadership roles. In each social area internally it is well known who are the proper figures of authority, but there exist two layers: the new '*as if elite*' having external power and impacts, and those more in retreat in a slow process of healing, integration and in search of articulation.

Analysis: There seemed to have appeared a phantasy, that if leaders like the Patriarch or the late Prime minister Djindjic, were alive, everything would be different. The proneness to passivity and clinging to strong need for somebody always to take leadership roles, and all responsibility, is still quite strong. As if all the power is often put into these leadership figure fantasm, and ourselves being perceived as helpless. However, disappointment in death of our leaders, seems not to be rising only in Serbia, but through out the world too. The idea that very strong positive leaders are to be killed from evil forces (Ghandy, Martin Luther King...), as if linked to the tendency that the elite retreated from exposure to central scenes. In this shaky region each time in history when the class of more democratic citizenship was being formed, another war and traumas came...There is also a habit not to take initiative, responsibility, also because an individual exposing himself may be like a kamikaze. The '*elite part*' in our selves slowly catches its breath, has things to say, becomes more mature, wishes to fight against corruption more openly and in good teams and institutions, but still not articulated well. A lot of opportunism is there, as well: why should I do it, when nobody else does it? Passivity as remnants from communism still have their impacts.

Convener: Marina Mojović