

**"Serbia and the World
at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 14th 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 a circle of everybody's brief introduction, the free associations started with a story of a businesswoman describing an incident – her car parkway was closed by a careless driver, so she had to wait for him to move his car: When she asked him why he was so reckless, he overbearingly answered that he did it out of a caprice and that she should be more tolerant (!). His answer reminded her of the '*terrible Nineties*' in Serbia, when the thugs of all sorts ruled the streets. A musician producer in his twenties replayed that from his international experience, among else 14 years living in Russia, that sort of thing happens everywhere, all the time; in Paris for example, Algerians are known to do that. Another young electro-engineer, who really lives in Paris and had come to Belgrade for Christmas holidays, disagreed: Though it does happen everywhere, here, each and everybody of us probably had similar experience (it worries him that his mother had it almost every day) and that here it is really a problem, and that the previous remark was too general. Asking how would people label that kind of behavior, the conductor got almost unanimous answer that it was aggression and arrogance. The musician producer repeated that he thinks that in Serbia there's a specific national state of mind with assumptions that here everything is bad. Belgrade is his native city, for him the best place in the world to live in, for that reason he chose to return: Asked what he would do in the concrete situation in an encounter with thugs, he warmly empathized with her. Another young man returned to the issue that similar incidents happen all over the world, but that this model of behavior is definitely a problem here. The conductor noticed that there seem to appear two threads around the subject: one associated to the terror of the Nineties and how hard it was and still is to cope with those phenomena and the other around them as manifestations of all badness of our society against such attitudes.

Then a woman, head of an IGO, cited from a survey of the public opinion in the region of ex-Yugoslavia – comparing to the other nations, it is the Serbs that have the most depressive outlook of the future, more than 70% have the bleak picture of the future, worse when compared to the last years reports. Yet according to many data we live economically better than Montenegrins, Bosnians, Albanians and Macedonians. She thinks that the idea that we are worse off than we deserve, is a kind of a trigger for such

depressive perception of reality that goes back to the Nineties and a characteristic feeling of injustice done to all of us. Ideas behind that notion are ranging from those that the wealth is in the hands of all the wrong people, thugs, who are allowed to indulge in their whims at our expense. All the while the Government does nothing to stop that, to those that international community posed only as a spectator.

Invited by the conductor to talk about their feelings as a personal reaction to what was being said, she said that she feels impatient: “Come on people! How much longer will this last? Look at the reality! Just look across the border how they live in Macedonia. Look how bad are the roads in Bosnia. Look at the Romania and Bulgaria, they are worse off than us, and yet they joined the EU”. She continued saying that she is torn between empathy and anger. She is angry because people are constantly whining. A young man agreed with her that whining is unnerving and that this sort of behavior did not exist before so much. Another young man repeated that it exist everywhere, but a journalist disagreed stressing that this sort of behavior never existed in such form before, and that the fact that this manner of behavior is present all over the world does nothing for him, it doesn't provide comfort, it is only disappointing. He is interested in his own life, because he has been hibernating for the last 15 years. Being asked: “So who is to blame for that?”, he retorted that he is partly to be blamed because he stayed here, but chances to do some real work and earn a decent living without constant pressure are scarce.

A woman entrepreneur remembered a similar incident when more than twenty cars had been stopped by a reckless driver, and no one dared confront him. What would be a normal reaction to that amount of aggression? Is there a possibility of some normal psychological defense mechanism? It probably symbolizes issues that happen in all areas of life. She was reminded by a construction worker in his twenties that it was far worse during the Nineties, to whom she replied that if the aggressive people do not suffer any consequences for their actions, morally at the very least they will go on because they can. Group wondered as to what can be done, offering practical suggestions, with the common idea to find a way to make aggressive and arrogant people and groups of people feel bad about themselves and their behavior. Institutional level of the subject came into discussion by another incident, which was being told: this time a car was tolled illegally by a Parking Service, and the car owner went through three levels of hierarchy, eventually meeting the general manager who behaved so arrogantly that the man concluded that he does not want to waste his time and energy even if he was obviously right. He concluded his story by saying that people in the positions of authority identify themselves with the power that does not belong to them.

The group returned to searching for the arguments and practical ways to deal with this: “I would have taken his photo and put it on the website 'irregular parking'”, “that would only set him to beat you up”, “but there must be normal mechanisms to deal with this”, “everyone should take a stand about this”, “I would apologize to him in order to show him what he was supposed to do”. Another woman said: “worst of all is this feeling of powerlessness, my car was damaged, and I know by whom because I had parked on his favorite spot, and I went to the police, but what could I have really done? Tell them who it was, so he can beat me up? I had the idea to enter the café he frequented to say ok, if this makes you happy, than I'm thrilled”.

“We shouldn't comply. We should act”, said the civil engineer, adding that he also faces similar situations and does what is in his power to stop the impudent behavior. Music producer said that we shouldn't take it personally, compared to Moscow, Belgrade is heaven. In Nice, the center of the French glamour he was chased by Arabs because his

girlfriend had not covered her head. A young doctor communicated that he had his car battery stolen and reported it to the police (everybody there laughed at him, but he decided to go through with it.) They found the battery, and he was required to attend a trial as a witness; he attended several times, but the defendant was never present, and the whole thing began to look like a farce; he went anyway, determined that it was his debt to society, and felt good about it. He concluded saying that on some levels it is possible to act, on others, it is not and this fact of our current social reality should be accepted. Yet, among the main things, is indeed to protect oneself psychologically.

The group went on discussing whether citizen's action is really justified and useful and when it is counterproductive. A newspaper man said that it is very dangerous not to engage, because it sends the wrong message to the social networks around us; he reminded that 30 years ago, in this country ordinary citizens chased assassins on the streets of Belgrade. He invited to civil disobedience as a way to deal with arrogance of the establishment, government and individuals. "Any kind of reaction is good, just don't surrender nor apologize for your own impotence!"

The conductor summed up the reactions, noting that the group seems to be working through and going in depth with the issue of arrogance and aggression (car issues probably symbolizing personal and social mobility and power) and invited the members to explore other themes.

Lady a medical doctor in early fifties told that in the last six months she had two overlapping events: one was that after a longer period of illness, she returned to work, and the other that she enrolled into new education and entered a psychotherapy group. She noticed that people at work grew apart since she left, and she tried to initiate gatherings and team spirit. She noticed that some began practicing yoga, others attended workshops, and these were people who were not inclined to put much emphasis on personal development. She personally finds her new activities of further studying the human nature fascinating; like the fresh breeze in her life, and it has taught her that no one can see the whole truth. It has also taught her to love people more. And this gave her the idea that we should continue to spread this breath of fresh air through work in groups for the good of all as opposed to everyday contamination by the news and media, and stop whining about how bad our life is. The group embraced this idea to discard lament and gave few examples among which the young music producer told the story about a dead cat laying in front of his building whole day while he and his neighbors called different public services but not one of them came. The next day one of the neighbors put the carcass in the bag and disposed of it. Conductor observed that the group seem to be exhausted with lamenting, rolling in the mud and fatigue with injustice. This engendered initiative to act constructively in individual level; everyone should deal with their own problems, even those that are supposed to be dealt with by the state. Whether civil initiative should be more organized in order to deal with problems or keep in mind that we pay public servants to deal with it. The journalist said in revolt: "the carcass of the cat should have been placed at the entrance of communal building".

Group talked further about the attitude to wait for someone else to deal with problems and that people often feel left alone with their problems, they talk to the TV set instead. Community crumbled. People lost the trust in their fellow men. Young woman psychologist said this reminded her of the recent much publicized case of taking away children from the parents (of Serbian origin, family Nastic case) in US because the man found photos of parents bathing their children, where children were naked. This prompted discussion in several directions: is the Serbian state doing a great deal to help

them; the cruel breaking up of the family, whether in Serbia similar Public services are effective, how is Serbia treating its citizens here and abroad, is the Serbian government creating a diversion from the main problems via news management, and how world media in Russia or UK manage such news.

The discussion returned to the issue of the individual actions and cleaning our own backyard first, about arrogance and some incidents abroad. Returning to the theme how to react when confronted with arrogance, an ex-entrepreneur, who decided to retire from his blooming business and dedicate himself to self-development, suggested that is best to work both on individual issues and acting through the groups in order to implement positive changes in the society. A young student of sociology said that the transition our society is going through puts an emphasis on the individual responsibility, and her generation is aware that there is nobody to blame (not even NATO for bombing us) and that the whining that is so unpopular here on the group, also helps us come in contact with feelings and manage to go through mourning.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. We have identified the following themes:

1. Aggression and arrogance as common phenomena in their various forms (arrogance of the establishment, of the State, of the individuals) and questions how to cope with it.
2. Whining – is it a normal need or an attempt to escape struggles, an easy way out; is it inherent to our culture; whining as a phenomenon of pseudo-thinking; stuckness or aspect of normal mourning; whether to accept position of weakness or take action; is the feeling of injustice done to us self-destructive and should finally be taken off the agenda.
3. Questions of civil action and whether it is sensible or not to invest effort into it. Should the citizens organize themselves or wait for the State to do something on their behalf. Civil actions as a way to deal with nonfunctional institutions (the example with the cat) – there is no one to blame, we need to act, not to lament over the situation.
4. Work on personal development – pessimistic outlook prevails – what are the reasons. Joy of learning, making personal initiatives and progress and what is the right measure of involvement.
5. The theme of breaking up the family (example of family Nastic) and state intervention, what are the reactions to this injustice. What does the State do for our citizens abroad and what on the home ground?
6. Is there enough sense of togetherness and confidence that we can do things together? Generation gap – the exhaustion of older generation and there are no results so they focus on the individual plane. Can individual work and work done by the groups have the power to resolve difficult situations, and to what extent? The theme of taking individual responsibility divided into two directions: individual efforts spreading through the society as a whole and organized.

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: Aggression and arrogance as common socio-psychic phenomena in Serbia are remains of the 'difficult Nineties' in the region, but partly a transmission of similar global phenomena as well. Impotence to cope with them better is because they are placed in various social structures: in the establishment, in groups and in citizens.

Analysis: These phenomena can be traced back to the infamous Nineties when they were pervasive. Feelings of impotence to better resolve those problems are circularly projected between persons and systems, avoiding facing them and taking responsibility, thus creating states of being stuck and often with fatal consequences. In the search for the ways how constructively to fight them was mentioned: raising the standards of living, keep in mind the necessity of patience to wait for the effects of positive social changes, the importance of individual initiatives and resistance to act-out aggression is essential, because the real change starts there, of the ways to fight the negative side is to have courage to look at it and learn about it, there seems to be a certain resistance to that, but there is a need to learn.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis: Whining, which is currently quiet spread around, has its positive and its negative aspects.

Analysis: The phenomenon of whining has several dimensions: ranging from the non-responsible style of life (waiting from others to solve your problems, from state institutions to other people), a way to let issues off the steam, to adjust to powerlessness and the tendency to criticize everything while doing nothing over means to communicate our own weakness to take a stand. Thus, it can also be something constructive, when it stands for noncompliance to the aggression, or as a way of ventilating a bit of stress and of coming into contact with problems and with various rejected difficult emotions. It may be even a path to curative mourning.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis: Focusing on individual work is often helpful for improvement, but can easy lead to hermetic view of life, so that the need for movement towards more potent civil actions should be considered.

Analysis: Internal individual and small group learning and development may bring positive changes for all levels: it may create in groups and organizations a field of much easier finding resolutions for problems, work on facing destructiveness and overcoming it, capacities for enough continuity of action, possibility of offering internal knowledge and values towards the external. However, focusing to much on the individual work can

lead to hermetic view of life and diminish the need to rebel against failures of the system, to show more revolt to the system. It is for a worry that the necessity of critical consciousness of any society, of the authentic social elite seems to become sleepy, forgotten or dissolving. Wikiliks as an individual initiative showed the power of individual actions – are we taking part or not on these sorts of the global processes.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis: Creation of a new social identity is slippery, uncertain, thus producing huge fears in the background.

Analysis: After so many changes on all levels the problem of future identity is crucial. Issues arise like: what to take over from the West, what from the East, what from the past, what aspects of basic identity may be lost in the changes, what shall our further changed identity be like. The dangerous spirit of competition is rising even on the faculty of philosophy, where it was traditionally not much present throughout many previous generations. The new generations of children and students hold much less avant-garde then before, they are less interested in social initiative – a tendency that is probably global. The global consumerism is invading the social web very fast, creating larger gaps between poor people and new rich, as this society has not been used to. Diminishing of solidarity is a great worry, which was discussed around the issue of the recent earthquake in Kraljevo.

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