Poland at the dawn of 2020
Report of a Listening Post held on 11 Febr 2020 in Krakow

Convener: Iwona Sołtysińska

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Climate became a key word, requiring changes in behaviour: using less plastic, taking greater care of what you eat. It also comes with noticeable changes in the surrounding world e.g. air pollution, unseasonal weather ('15 degrees Celcius in February'). Participants believe that the quality of air in the cities may result in a mass migration in the near future. Different stances on climate change lead to divisions within society (participants describe feeling trapped in their own information bubbles). A participant described feeling an increase in aggressiveness experienced in everyday affairs – she described being hit by a car, driven by a person who was convinced they had the right of way.

The 'information bubbles' are described as antagonistic. Divisions run through families, groups of friends, and neighbourhoods. People feel obligated to defend 'their own', differences between people are being brought into focus - 'you're not one of us'. Tribalism is on the rise. It's difficult to remain neutral, you're expected to 'pick a side'. When meeting people examine each other, looking for signs pointing to which 'side' the other person is on. Parenthood becomes difficult in this situation, because even teenagers are subject to this requirement, which leads to political arguments in families. Explaining to your children what's normal is becoming increasingly difficult, especially since people don't really know what to believe. Because of the pervasiveness of fake news you have to double-check everything, before citing it in a discussion. People also worry about the state of health care, but especially psychiatry in the country, they don't know how to equip their children to be able to deal with the future.

There are less and less things everyone can agree on (e.g. if the economic situation in Poland is good or bad). People are afraid of being labelled as part of a minority like being vegan or atheist. It's easy to be left out (wearing a rainbow T-shirt is considered taking a political stance). Catholics are expected to explain the issue of paedophilia in the Church, feel responsible for their "tribe".

Everything becomes political, but the politicians don't solve any problems. The media lie in order to manipulate people's emotions, participants feel like their sources of

information are being taken away, and replaced with lies. They report ceasing to watch TV and listening to the radio. Schools aren't safe from disinformation any more. The younger generation has become conservative in opposition to post-modernism. They're nationalist, morally conservative, their world view is clear cut, everything is black and white.

On the other hand climate change seems to be bringing group of people together – not eating meat ceases to be an individual decision. A participant decided to go back to eating meat after 20 years of being a vegetarian, and started to feel excluded – eating meat has become shameful. Another participants describes her decision to share food from her orchard with others, because 'there is no more good food'. People are becoming more aware of what they eat – e.g. slow food, eco food.

The state fails to take care of people's basic needs (e.g. healthcare, education) so NGOs have to pick up the slack. This generates uncertainty, citizens have to look after themselves – you need money to be able to do it. The third sector performs well, a participant describes being surprised at how people banded together over helping others in the recent past. Technology helps in increasing the scope of humanitarian aid. On the other hand people who work with NGOs describe the people who work there as 'tired and burned out'. Independent volunteer actions spring to life, people organize to help others (i.e. activities for senior citizens).

Business is booming in Poland according to another participant, both domestic and international business is varied and growing. The participant feels that we need to take advantage of this situation while it lasts.

New technologies enable new ways of manipulating information (i.e. Brexit, Trump's election). This results in a feeling of instability and loss of points of reference. The new generation seem unintelligent and glued to their smartphones.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2, the aim was to identify collectively the major themes emerging from Part 1.

Theme 1: Uncertain future

Tangible changes in the world, brought about by the climate change, as well as changes in behaviour in others, are resulting in rising fear concerning the state of the future.

The ruling party's fear mongering through media channels is also contributing to the pervasive feeling of uncertainty. This is also influenced by political tensions around the world (i.e. Trump, Poland, Brexit).

There is a feeling that old tools for dealing with the world are no longer useful, and people no longer have the capacity to care for each other. People are asking 'what now?'.

Theme 2: Rising divisions – tribalism, digging in, radicalization

There are more and more divisive issues within society (i.e. economy, religion, the Catholic Church). Young people are becoming radicalized. People feel responsible for their own tribes, and not much else.

The confusion is increased because of the uncertainty caused by the media – facts are becoming a scarce commodity. Very often in the public sphere facts get mixed up with opinions.

The algorithms of Big Data companies meddle with public perceptions of problematic issues. We are being locked inside our own internet 'bubbles' or 'echo chambers'.

Theme 3: Unstable, arbitrary functioning of the state

The government is becoming increasingly ideological. This results in decreased trust in state agencies. The responsibilities of state and third sector used to be clearer, nowadays it's hard to tell who's responsibility it is to take care of different aspects of society.

This results in more and more sectors being 'deserted' by the state and responsibility being handed down to individual people and organizations. In the face of this, citizens need to be more involved.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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, participants 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.

Hypothesis 1: The search for a safe us. The increase in complexity results in fear, pushing me to seek safety within a familiar context, which leads to an increase in conservatism and nationalism. This gives a certain clarity as to who is who, but it remains unclear which 'us' will turn out to be the dangerous one.

Hypothesis 2: Because of fear of an attack from others I avoid taking sides, declaring my stance on important matters. This keeps me in a "hanging" position, stuck and unable to act.

Hypothesis 3: Cognitive laziness. Because of being stressed, overworked and overstimulated, I find myself hard pressed to expand additional energy on analysing the world. This leads to unqualified, stupid people. I isolate myself from excessive complexity and until something happens, I'm able to create a world for myself.

Hypothesis 4: Because I feel endangered and powerless I'm looking to integrate myself into local movements and initiatives. This is also a way of exerting influence over the world. My own way of looking to make a change.

Kraków, February 15th 2020, Iwona Sołtysińska