

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Bulgaria and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In part 1 of the Listening Post the members were invited to share their experiences and preoccupations in a variety of social roles that they occupy in their everyday life. This part was also of usefulness in 'breaking the ice' between the members of the whole group, as the event was an unknown experience for all members involved. A dynamic atmosphere soon developed and most members shared several of their everyday social thoughts and concerns.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1.

1. Participants identified the following social roles of personal interest at the moment
 - Of a mother (actual or a future one) with the inherent uncertainties and waverings.
 - Of a neighbour of neighbours who 'started to knock on the common wall between us immediately after I raised my voice in a conversation with my husband. Our common walls are tin as a window-curtain. There was no one there until very recently.'
 - Of a citizen in a situation, in which s/he has to decide whether to address or not a public service. During a walk in a park she registers a water leak and calls the public water company in order to realise that she was the first one to react despite the fact that hundreds of other people have already attended the damaged pipe area in the park.
 - Of a member of a NGO operating within the legislative reform's field. What does the cause of the organisation consist of? Is it a flight from or a fight for something? Is there a risk of missing the suffering person nearby while trying to help the many others in the larger society? At the same time maintaining working routine in the organization proves to be difficult.
 - Of a member of an NGO, protecting human rights of stigmatised people. There are problems of stigma and

disqualification from society towards the organization but also between members within the NGO.

2. Themes identified

Problematic teamwork in organizations: there are many members of the organization but does it make the NGO a viable one? Are members employees or adherents? Formal membership in the organization does not equal with like-mindedness, someone with which you can share organization's meaning and values. There is an experience of absorption/suffocation by the processes and relations within the organization.

Parenthood: to be a parent means also to feel one's own mortality. Is that a kind of claim for maturity, for taking responsibility? What are the fears connected to this?

Distance, remoteness vs. closeness, intimacy in relation to the organization. Usurpation of the organization? Change in organization means also a change of identity and a change of belonging. Conflict identity and conflict belonging in the context of contradictory messages (double bind communicational style).

Neighbours, borders/walls. Alienation / intrusion. Leaders – followers. Activity – passivity.

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. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1

A relative isolation of participants in their social world (in the park, in the organization, in the prison) makes impression. They are rather active than passive. A third feature of their social experience is the relative discomfort they feel in their roles of *activists*. They are not happy. A possible explanation is that the discomfort is provoked by the activity in the context of some relative social isolation (misunderstanding, antagonism etc.).

Probably there is some social need for meaning, for strong cause, strong organising centre of human experience (such as motherhood or some important social/public sector reform). Fears from substitution here can be interpreted as fears from loss of meaning.. Meaning here can be regarded as a symbol of connection with social environment, as social usefulness of the work invested, of the effort and of the gesture.

Emerging innovative organizations are vulnerable in their identity of innovators (generators of social innovations) which need to establish themselves socially, to be acknowledged and integrated in society. They are in-stable. There is a strong tension between leaders of followers, between centre and periphery. Probably analogical processes take place in society as a whole. There is a particular sort of newcomers, of newly married, who have a big burden of tasks to resolve both inside their families (are we going to have any children?) and outside – with their new neighbours (who, why, and how is making noise?). It is quite possible as well that the neighbours and our immediate friends are not that old, and that only our relations with them could need some change and transformation.

Hypothesis 2

Dependency relations (motherhood, parenthood) can provoke fear and anxiety. Is it the same valid for an organisation and human relations within it? Sometimes conflicts emerge between the private/intimate sphere (roles) and the outside sphere (of roles and relations). As if the public, public roles and tasks intrude and colonise the private-intimate sphere of relations. An ambiguous, contradictory attitude towards these roles appears. NGOs, sometimes, become socially isolated in their role of change agents and bearers of the “new and progressive”. This outside social isolation brings some intra-organizational alienation to the fore.

Hypothesis 3

The prison theme and the theme of prisoner and the prison guard raise the question about the (social) power and its consolidation and rigidity. How a community of like minded from one side and the organisation of those from the other complement and contradict each other?

In the context of strongly fragmented identities (broken/traumatic relations with the past, with neighbours, with personal experience) we become dependent upon the causes and the organizations that promise belonging, cause and meaning. Our need for emancipation then is both strong and ambivalent/conflictual.

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