

**"Lithuania and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 10th 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.

Participants were invited to identify their place in society today and explore their concerns and preoccupations with the social roles and social positions that they find themselves in. They were asked to share their experiences from the point of view of their identifications with their roles, be it a government employee, a student, a business person, a worker, a medical staff person, or a parent. Although people found it difficult to speak about themselves, once instructed to think of themselves as social roles or categories that they occupy, rather than who they think they are in their private lives, people loosened and opened up. Nevertheless, they still had difficulty in dissociating their personal feelings from the roles that they are currently playing. In many cases there was a clear tendency to look for faults and blame somebody else for their unhappiness with their circumstances and/or lack of success. The blame was projected upon current government, legal system and lack of legal protections from corruption and unfair dealings that take place among various alliances within business and political worlds that reverberate throughout society.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The underlying theme among all the concerns expressed by the participants pointed to the uncertainties and insecurities that they have felt for the future and well-being of their families, themselves personally, as well as prosperity and well-being of their country. However, there were very few mentions of a global situation in terms of a 'clash of cultures' and tensions between global and national economies (with the exception of a permanent threat posed by the proximity of unpredictable Russia). Participants were mainly focused on their own lives as affected by an immediate situation inside their country. Themes expressed can be grouped as follows:

1. Personal concerns:

speed of life, lack of quality time with the families or friends; erosion of loyalties, friendships and family ties; financial debt (as "being in debt for life", since many people have taken out huge loans to finance their big purchases, such as homes and apartments); concern for the future well being of their children;

2. Social , cultural concerns, moral preoccupations:

loss of talent to the foreign universities and other foreign establishments due to the lack of funding and opportunities in Lithuania; problems in health care, lack of doctors and medical expertise, in countryside in particular; bribery still plays a role, especially on a local level, among small businesses as well as among local government officials, who often take advantage of uninformed citizens; split between generations in terms of cultural identifications, as well as increasing split in the way life is perceived by those who emigrated and return for a visit, and those who stayed back and do not leave the country.

3. Economic and political concerns:

threats from outside (mostly Russia); as well as from inside in terms of:

- a) lack of confidence in the political and governmental decision making processes;
- b) lack of transparencies in business dealings and political decision making;
- c) distrust in a legal system that lacks mechanisms for legal protections;
- d) corruption and greed (especially among politicians and major business figures)
- e) increasing divisions in wealth among society members, among haves and have-nots; huge discrepancies in income levels;

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.

Although it was a challenge at first (i.e. participants had difficulty in understanding the separation of their psychological worlds from their social worlds), but as discussion progressed they all agreed that their way of thinking very much determines how they perceive their external worlds and what actions they take in response to perceived obstacles and everyday challenges.

These are some of the analysis and hypothesis that could be drawn from preceding reflections and explorations:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The awareness of a major 'paradigmatic shift' that older capitalist democracies and stable regimes are presently experiencing does not seem to enter directly into Lithuanian consciousness as expressions of unpredictability for the future, but only indirectly, as a vague feeling, as one person expressed, that "something is wrong with everything". Politically, culturally and economically Lithuania has already gone through a major shift in its political system some sixteen years ago, when people brought their deeply harbored hopes and desires into expression only to witness many of them dampened down through observations of internal political in-fights, strategic change of affiliations among governmental officials (i.e. from a communist party member to a social democrat, from a former KGB reservist to a member of Parliament or a new

security official, etc, in order to remain on the inside of a new system), as well as uneven and unfair distributions of resources and widespread corruption and crime. Instead of opening political process for new minds to enter, transition into a new democracy was led by the same politicians, who almost overnight changed their language and affiliations to suit the new direction that the country has now embarked on. Many of these politicians often allied with shady businesses, had direct access to abundant public resources and greatly benefited from opaque and murky privatization process that has concentrated great wealth in the hands of the few, at the same time continuing to pour promises to the population. Loss of trust has never been regained by the general population who continues to think that corruption has not diminished but continues to burgeon only now hidden more carefully under political and legal verbiage.

Hypothesis: As people gradually withdrew from political process (many are still voting but voting mechanically, through name recognition and not in terms of issues) leaving decision making in the hands of elected officials. This disappointment and mistrust in current powers and powers-to-be, now in the seventeenth year of independence, reverberates throughout society down to the personal lives and feeling of the members of society and manifests not only in regards to national political-economic prospects but also in terms of people's relationships towards each other. Mistrust in authority that is now internalized finds expression unconsciously as general discontent with one's personal life circumstances. People tend to withhold encouragement and support for each other not only among colleagues and friends but also among family members (not to speak about lack of compassion and appreciation for the outsider). It also finds expression as lack of initiative and willingness to reach up, enterprise and improve one's conditions. Many people, especially younger generation see emigrating as the only way out (Fight/flight assumption).

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: In their reflections participants often agreed that their country is too small to compete with larger capitalist democracies or to have something unique to offer to the world. Some of them felt shame for the way their fellow citizens misbehave internationally (various run-ins with the law). At the same time they expressed disappointment for not being recognized by larger countries for their cultural and historical specificities.

Hypothesis: Covert preoccupation with the smallness of their country in comparison with other economically advanced countries, with regard to foreigners and strangers manifests in the feelings of pride on the one hand and inferiority on the other; exaggerated self-importance and narcissistic feelings on the one side and suppressed anger and aggressiveness on the other, as well as openness and hospitality toward outsiders on the one hand and narrow-mindedness and discrimination of non-natives, on the other. All these contradictions are difficult to detect with a "plain" eye, but find expression on a subtle level. They often manifest as negative exaggerations of personal situations and positive exaggerations of national achievements.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: The country is advancing fast on the outside. Especially city centers experience fast growth economically, real estate is booming, banks give out huge loans easily, European funds are being distributed for all kinds of projects that are geared towards rapid improvement of infrastructure and updating of country's administration levels. However, importance that is rendered on societal level to economic developments does not parallel with equal concerns towards social and psychological well-being of the citizens (for instance psychotherapy and mental health is gaining recognition very slowly and does not match the importance and priority that historically has been given to psychiatry and drugs). As the country develops economically, people experience feelings of being overwhelmed, being behind with their work duties and family responsibilities, constantly trying to "catch up" with the "next new thing", as someone said, "a feeling of being on a "runaway train, that skips stops". There is a feeling that people's opinions do not count, nobody listens to their concerns, instead they are flooded with numerous entertainment programs, travel and consumer offerings that they often get addicted to as a substitute for action.

Hypothesis: Observable divide between outside and inside life, between attention awarded to speedy economic developments and secondary importance given to an 'average' person parallel the split within persons between preference given to logics and emotions, that is - to logical, rational thinking and emotional reactions towards problems (the latter perceived as irrational or weak). By rendering importance to objective thinking, people project idealized expectations towards authority, institutions and political bodies to "know better" and take care of their problems. Resultant disappointments manifest as personal feelings of depression, anger, and defensiveness, as blaming others for personal failures or lack of success.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

Analysis: Group members also discussed issues of poor quality of health service, diminishing educational prospects for their children, lack of well paying jobs, lack of competence, bribery and corruption among officials within public and private settings, especially in countryside settings. Increasing discrepancies between income levels are becoming very visible. Good services and prosperous opportunities are reserved for those who can afford them. These are usually highly paid government officials, foreigners and business people. Business and government officials seem to be "living under different laws than everybody else". Businesses and great number of public authorities seem to function under assumption that if you have the right connections anything is possible, until you are stopped or caught doing something illegal. But until then, nobody will stop you. As one person in a law enforcement position in a small town admitted, "nothing is going to change until the higher government authorities on a national level will start doing their job responsibly, transparently and enforce the law. We look up to them". Another employee of a small, now privatized business division in a service industry in a smaller town said, "even if we want to be just and fair, the system doesn't allow us. If we punish everyone for cheating (bringing in more products that they are allowed) we will lose our business since it depends on the sufficient levels of suppliers who deliver their product to our market place. The more people come to sell the more business we generate (although small suppliers might suffer). Sometimes they bribe us, and we accept those bribes so that they can be assured that no punishment

will follow. Thus, we punish selectively just to keep peace and our business going. Good for us, good for them".

Hypothesis: Since money seems to follow those who act aggressively and selfishly, and legal protections of consumer interests and rights are not yet fully set in place, the feeling among businesses exists that the laws can be sidestepped ("judges and the law enforcement officials are also corrupt"). Such behavior becomes a standard for emulation and eventually is accepted as normal. Minding your own interests and/or aggressively pursuing your own goals becomes a norm. Corruption that one has lived with for so long becomes internalized as corruption of selves, that cheats one's self out of respect, care and regard for oneself and the others. The world around is perceived as corrupt and hostile. (As an example, in a recent Gallup poll Lithuanians saw their country as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, way below any advanced democracy).

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