

## "Greece and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



### 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. The group was temporarily broken up in four, smaller sub-groups and subsequently these sub-groups later reported their identifiable topics to the original large group. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. The first theme revolved around the notable change in the quality of human relationships in everyday life. This was primarily associated with the experience of everyday living ("the routine") as flattening. In particular group members reported an oppressive feeling that blocks expression of feelings (both happy and sad) as well as casual communications. For example, how in contrast with past decades casual interactions with neighbours are becoming increasingly rare. There was general agreement that recent social shifts from 'communal living' to 'individual living' have given rise to considerable feelings of loneliness and isolation.
2. The second theme focused on the prevailing trends in popular culture, with special emphasis on the social obsession with superficiality and appearance. This theme was closely associated with the growing influence of television in contemporary Greek society, a television that is experienced as increasingly aggressive and invasive ("televiolence" as a member put it). The members also reported a growing sense of disappointment and frustration as society is felt to be wholly preoccupied with how things look rather than how they really are and concerns were voiced on the close association of these attitudes with the lack of spirituality as well as of meaningful interests (such as, hobbies).
3. The last discussion theme was concerned with the role of the Greek state and its relationship with citizens. There was repeated emphasis that state laws are experienced as unfair but even more so that the state asks more from the citizens than what it offers back in return. Furthermore, there was a sense that citizens are left unprotected in a social environment where the only sense of justice is that applied by the media.

### Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the data gathered from Parts I and II, with the aim to collectively identify the underlying dynamics – conscious and unconscious – that may be predominant at the time of the group meeting. As well as developing hypotheses as why they might be occurring at the moment. As such at this point the members are working with their 'psychological' or 'internal' world.

This part proved the most challenging and tiring for all group members. But all were committed in making their best effort, through an engaging discussion, to make sense of this experience. In this last part the group agreed on three main hypotheses that bear significant relation to each other:

#### Analysis and Hypothesis 1

**Analysis:** There was a reoccurring sense in the group that the experience of everyday life in Greece is going through tremendous changes. Old habits and ways of relating and living in society are slowly fading away and are replaced with a more structured lifestyle. Casual chats in the streets with strangers or with neighbours are slowly becoming extinct, while the traditional afternoon siesta is increasingly pushed aside by the need to work more to earn enough to live. There has also been a significant rise in the time people spend on the Internet, by definition a solitary activity. Financial needs are felt as overwhelming, accompanied by rapid cultural changes, evoking feelings of loneliness, solitude and futility. In other words, citizens feel disconnected with their environment as well as with each other.

**Hypothesis:** The rapid, almost uncontrollable, social and cultural changes in contemporary Greek society have left citizens feeling uninvolved and disconnected with their environment and values they held dear (openness, communication, casual attitude to work). Society seems to be dealing with this rapid change by regressing to a more individualistic lifestyle, one that focuses more on survival and the accumulation of goods (in this case, financial wealth), resulting in newly-emerged social phenomena of isolation and lack of human contact (as a member put it, “humanity is ailing”).

#### Analysis and Hypothesis 2

**Analysis:** The above topic was closely related with another area that was felt as important, what is referred to in Greek as, the 'theathine' (literally translating as 'the view of Athens from above' but everyday used as 'one's preoccupation with appearance and the surface of things'). The Greeks have been traditionally preoccupied with how they look, what is being said of them and, overall, keeping a 'good name in society'. Nevertheless there has been a marked difference in the increasing predominance of such attitudes in popular culture and social life (“in the past, it used to be different”). On one hand, television is seen as a notable symptom of this shift through its non-stop promotion of celebrity culture and insatiable appetite for sensationalism. On the other, members of society are felt to be alarmingly obsessed with the way they appear regardless of the real consequences, as a member said “there is an assumption that you can have everything you want (or wish for), regardless of reality”. This leads to an emerging culture of superficiality and forgetfulness, which is closely associated with the growing European influence and the change of role models from talented artists (that used to be in the past) to meaningless celebrities. Overall, meaning seems to be desperately missing and the substitute offered by the media is felt as increasingly hollow and unreliable – in the words of a member, “a giant with paper legs”.

**Hypothesis:** The integration of European and global influences in Greek popular culture and identity has left a void in the place of traditional ideals, beliefs and values. Instead of acknowledging loss and searching for a new sense of meaning, society defends against this change by idealising these new influences and mindlessly and superficially (i.e. in a concrete way) adopting them. The result is the exacerbation of certain destructive aspects (obsession with appearance, 'theathine') of society over more creative and thought-provoking ones (artistic influences, engaging interests, hobbies).

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3**

**Analysis:** The problematic relationship of citizen and state in Greece is a reoccurring theme from last year. This time the relationship between citizen and state was discussed in terms of its antagonistic quality and how the wish to have the state providing some protection and guidance is left unfulfilled. In that respect the Greek state was compared with other European ones (or with the popular assumptions of them) and found to be lacking in fairness, the provision of adequate health and education. It was also noted that honesty in Greece is not rewarded, instead it gets you left further behind. Financially the state was described as 'the worst borrower' one that takes and never gives back, indirectly pushing the citizens to borrow further from aggressive banks. In the words of a group member, the state was experienced as "a chain with broken links".

**Hypothesis:** The rapid changes in Greek society, in accordance with the country's position in Europe and the world, are at odds with the state's rigid and old-fashioned mentality which is viewed as backward and unable to adjust to European standards. In a time of change [as seen in the previous two hypotheses] society defends against feelings of uncertainty and fear by projecting into the idea of 'the state' feelings of frustration (for not being led out of uncertainty) and aggression arising from the disowning of 'bad borrowing' (as previously in the case of European influences, i.e. society as a 'bad borrower' of the European lifestyle) and responsibility, resulting in society experiencing its links (with its institutions) broken and a growing sense of insecurity in its citizens.

**Convener: Dimitris Vonofakos**