"Poland and the World at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post held on 7th 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.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following common themes have been identified:

1. Children, procreation parenthood
This theme has emerged as an experience shared by many participants of the Listening Post. It was felt that the topic of having children and being parents is all around. It seems that almost all of our friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and members of our families are somehow preoccupied either with having small children or with considering, planning or attempting to have them. Women of different age appear to feel that right now 'it's the right time' to have babies. Men have become equally involved in parenthood as women, and it is often a case that they spend more time with children than mothers do. Being pregnant is no longer an issue at workplaces, and is experienced as considered worthwhile by the society.

In parallel, a problem of infertility has been voiced. It was felt to be equally omnipresent as pregnancy and successful parenthood. Some participants mentioned adoption as more and more popular and accepted way of becoming parents, advertised even by Hollywood. One person felt it was a less risky, 'ready-to-go' way, since a baby to be adopted is already born, and somehow 'ready.' Another person brought up parents' fears and anxieties that adoption evokes. It has been also mentioned that adoption can somehow 'unblock' people who experience inexplicable infertility, as they became able to conceive their own baby just after they adopt a child.

2. Alien-ness, otherness, and diversity
This theme started with a story of one person talking about a sudden uneasiness experienced by her when she exchanged a shake-hand with a black person in a student's dormitory in Strasbourg. It felt that as the contact got physical, diversity became otherness or alien-ness and a primitive fear appeared. Maintaining an open 'politically

correct' attitude started to be experienced as difficult. It was acknowledged that physical differences between people do matter, no matter how might we pretend they don't.

A number of participants talked about physical disabilities and illnesses, especially among children. It was felt to be an extremely difficult topic to address while having a conversation with parents of such children, and couple of participants mentioned that women are much more able to talk about these topics than men are. Two of the participants talked about men escaping from issues of disability and illness simply by refusing to discuss it and to think about it. Another participant suggested that men may be 'delegated' to such behaviour by women.

3. New social groups
Another theme evolved around stories of various original social groups that the society consists of. One person described himself as a frequent radio-listener. A question arose "WHO are those people who listen to radio." Similar question was asked in respect to people who do or do not attend a Sunday church mass. The conclusion of a discussion that followed was that thanks to Internet everyone could belong to social groups of any kind nowadays. For instance, there are yearly meetings in Warsaw of a group gathering woman with at least three children. Another example given were international groups focused around internet network games.

4. Spirituality and religion
Some participants raised the theme of religion and spirituality. One person expressed his growing disappointment with a growing gap between real-life experience and teachings of the Catholic Church. He referred to unpleasant experiences some of his friends had to deal with in the recent time. A topic surfaced related to an idea of 'a crisis as a punishment for sins' that is felt to be somehow supported by the Church, which might be alienating in ever so subtle way people that are sick and suffer.

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Having children as a protection against chaos.

We experience rapid shifts in/of our environment, borders between 'known' and 'unknown' are being diluted, we are bombarded by too many various stimuli. All this evokes a fear of a contact with the 'unknown,' an increasing confusion, and desperate attempts to (re)define what is and what is not 'normal.' In this context, a natural seems to be striving to regain safety by encircling oneself with something 'known,' by reducing the amount of stimuli and by creation of a more stable system of traditional values. This results in common interest and social acceptance of having more children and spending time with them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Individuality and the need for belonging.

Rapidly shifting reality makes traditional social groups fail contemporary expectations. Instant access to information, easy communication via Internet enables us to find social groups that are perfectly tailored for our needs at no time. This means that 'belonging' does not have to be traded for 'compromise' in order to fit in, that people are more and more conscious of their individuality and exceptionality. This leads to an ever-increasing number of new groups and the threat of loosing 'belonging' is less and less acute. As a result of never ending creation of new groups there are still more and more groups that we do not belong to: more borders, more divisions, and more 'others.' Those various types of otherness lead to increased fear and anxieties.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Social norm of tolerance — private guilt and fear.

Since there is always a social group for which you are 'OK,' we lost a clear-cut sense of what's good and what's bad. Since we are all different and 'OK' a pressure grows to be open and tolerant to everyone and everything. In the same time, chaos evokes in us a feeling of fear of 'otherness.' Since this fear is contradictory to a social norm promoting tolerance, we begin to feel guilty. This fear is difficult to contain and we express it in a form of 'bubbles,' 'blasts' that carry guilt-creating topics. This way various foundations and charity organizations form which — in the name of the whole society — contact this topics and people that evoke our unease.

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