**"Serbia and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"**
**Report of a Listening Post
held on 9th 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.

The conversation started with the youngest participant, a student of sociology, with an expression of her disappointment about the marginalisation and dehumanization of some groups of people, telling a story just from a day before from a railway station, when a Gypsy, obviously living there and just finishing his morning shaving, had been ignored for a simple question, if the holidays were still lasting. The talk continued about homeless people, being many of them in the world, and some difference, when they keep the habits of being invisible than when they seek help, like that man. Then a women artist said, "The lack of empathy seems to be growing and not only towards Roma. Just last week an awful thing happened to me." In the bus which was braking, she fell back, injured her head with amnesia; somebody helped her go out, but then left her alone at the station, afterwards being very sad about that experience. The group reacted with concern and empathy for her and then continued associations about homeless people: fear from them, prejudices, projection of some general discontents and rage into people, who are different in a way and thoughts that these threats might not be just about minorities "Maybe we are talking about us all, that in a way we all feel homeless and marginalized, even with the changed politics and openness still ignored in many ways." On one hand, these things make us rather sad, on the other; it is so hard to believe! As if it is so difficult for all of us in these times. We are angry towards the helpless, reject them, and if we were equal, an anxiety might overwhelm us, that they could take us into the abyss with them.

Then a middle-aged art-photograph came with a notion of smile: "The little Gypsies, that beg around have a smile on their faces." Some other members joined. Our citizens need that smile that we had once, when we had been living in a happier country. They offer us an opposite example, which makes this city be prettier. There came a joke, if they give him compliments like "you tiger", and fresh laughter came into the room. The convener said, that as if the group was talking about two groups of people having important exchanges — the marginalized group carrying for us the difficult feelings, and us receiving smiles from them.

Then the talk went on to the aspect of too much negativity being emphasized, too much catastrophes...the past, present and future...as if only that is interesting to people. Just darkening, in the papers, media etc. without receiving positive examples. A sociologist working with children in school, told about researches, children choose to do. All are about deviant things like paedophilia, drugs, no themes about love, romantics, like it had been just few years ago. There was more individualism, not so much longing for uniformity. This moved discussion about young people living in a closed world, not being able to travel for years and how they need more pedagogic work from the elders.

Then a journalist came in with disagreements: "You say that media darkens, as if these things wouldn't exist, if not publicly exposed?"

A woman from high business wanted to add some optimistic view concerning young people. To her experience there are many positive changes happening, many got new jobs and learn slowly to take responsibilities, many are frightened, but becoming more mature. A great difference since the 90's! A young man from private business agreed with her and wanted to add, that most people are starting to accept the new realities. The theme of safety came in, how the capitalist way of living with a great uncertainty of loosing job any time, and with the economic crisis, which is so strong now, and how the 'safety syndrome' of the socialists' habits had been difficult to change in the minds of people.

A young women dentist said that she never had experienced that safety in this country with all the war turbulences and having to leave her hometown, she is not used to safety and that in the west there is much more safety in the way that you know at least whom to approach for problems. The discussion about safety went further... A women, owner of a restaurant: "As if now people don't have a wish for new, as if the socialists syndrome still poisons them. We are falling behind." The difficulties of leadership were touched.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. They could be clustered in three groups as below.

- Strong impact of media
- Too much negativism and the need for positive approach to life and to reality
- Fear of the new and of the responsibilities
- Insecurity, failed empathy, solidarity and need for love and romantics
- Smile

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Media are guilty

Analysis: In this part the group started with the analysis of the social dynamics around the theme of media: Was the significance of media for the mental state of the citizens over-emphasized or not? Do they come really out of the needs of listeners/readers or some bodies else? In economic language, whether the offer form the demand or the demand forms the offer? Where is the gravity centre of responsibility for the impact of media? There were opposite ideas. On one side the 'poor Serbian consumer' is flooded by 'pink culture', catastrophic news, perverse scenes, ugly oaths and mostly negative examples, especially dangerous for youth development, and on the other side, the fact of choice. Namely, the decision what TV program, newspapers and so on, to take in is the choice of the individual, the family and of schools to educate. Anybody may filter the food of media for his own microcosms. Not enough exposition of famous researchers, artists and other wise and creative personalities like in the past on the cost of expansion of rather simple minded, even indecent, TV stars just through their money. There was a critic of the political and other elite or pseudo-elite for supporting and flirting with the kitsch (with few examples discussed). As if everything allowed with the model of 'I can do anything!' An analysis came, if the political and other leaders would change their attitudes, and some from the past were mentioned, would it change the folk, or if citizens would show how sick they were from the behaviour of particular persons. These ideas were seen just as wishful thinking for a social-cultural revolution.

There was, also, an obvious pressure towards the journalist member for some explanations, who stressed that the censorship in Serbia is still higher than in the western counties, aspects of control and strict censorship being a reflux from the old regimes, difficulties to get the full information, but the development of professional codex about the way things are presented, and other professional rules is finally becoming stronger. He said: "Don't you think that newspapers are a reflection of the society?!"

It was found that the mainstream in society has disappeared, which usually makes the balance, and more raise of opposite parts: the poor and the new rich... And that we have a kind o 'cultural guerrilla', forces making impact more and more and many examples already of TV cannels with a good-enough imago were remembered. It was talked about the kitsch in other countries, as well, maybe, as a global phenomena.

Hypothesis: The relationship between the media and the citizenship: it is found to be many phenomena of hiding behind the media and the politicians, with some unrealistic expectations from them, and pushing to much responsibility for the poor cultural scene and negativity onto them. The splitting between the ideas of their grandiose significance and the total relies of responsibility from them, is seen as a reflection from wider society. The 'either/or' as a defence from facing some even more difficult issues. A scapegoating in the group towards the pressman to take responsibility and explanations, reflect the social imago, that media could and should organize the chaos and the shattered value systems, like the doctors to hold the whole health of the nation. These may come out of deeper helplessness and confusion in our country and in the wider world.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Roots of negativity and stuck-ness into it

Analysis: Where does that idea of total social responsibility come from and why does it exist? Is it from old totalitarian states of mind or something else? Members of society are wandering about the question, where the power and responsibility is located? In the time of transition and of creating new cultural and social space, it may be a normal process to search for those being guilty and for designing new arrangement of power and responsibilities. Freedom of accusation with arguments was, also, stressed: Why do not judge, when it doesn't necessary mean to hide your own guilt? One of the reasons for preservation from this is found to be the fear of aggressive reaction from the accused persons, like what would happen in this group, if the journalist member would start to insult others. It is a well known phenomena in the actual society, that those persons in spite of accusations with arguments, often react with lays and attacks. These kind of characters are still often on stronger social positions.

Again remembering of some positive examples from media came in and a wale of refreshment overwhelmed the group. The group recognized this and discussed as a reflection of the deep social needs and wishes for positive models and any kind of positive examples.

The other important issue is found to be the diversion of positivity into negativity. There is a confusion about the question of, how does it happen, that some obviously positive things, like formation of the Medical and Engineers National Chambers all together with their ethical and other important committees, and with the joy of belonging, are very fast diverted into being seen as a possibility of something negative, as a potential corruptions and so on. Regularly these processes then go into further degradation of joy, hope, faith, very fast expend into multiple negative images. The first reaction from the group was: "This is the typical Serbian syndrome!" We went deeper into the questions, what could that be? The fear of the new, the paranoia that there is always something dark behind. It was discussed to be connected with the lack of enthusiasm and love, breakdown of families and with that the lack of shame from your family when you behave unethically.

The notion of 'the total lack of…', through the talk had been changed into not really total, but the positivity being hidden, shy, not on the main stage, marginalized and separated from one another. Then a joke: "Media can unite us, and therefore guilty!" and again a laughter.

The war is the most brutal and most terrible phenomena for humans and the consequences long lasting through generations…The poison of the multiple social traumas have not been worked through and there is not enough space for those so important psycho-social processes. Those are the killers of the smiles! Then another 'killer of the enthusiasm' is found to be the sarcastic notions: 'Don't be so eager!… Hold your horses!' the humbleness of somebody who keeps, or who dares to expose any wishes, faith and hope. The group searched for reasons to this: feelings of helplessness, dark malignant envy, connected to many complex processes. This is found to be a syndrome escalating in the last fifteen years as a consequence of war and other degradations of institutions and society, then over the lack of trust between people and so on the chain of dark forces goes on. The values could not make roots, as through the centuries of various wars and revolutions the elite was damaged. But it is the first time in the Serbian history that it happened, that the national honour has been really

humiliated. We feel rejected from the Balkans and from Europe, unfortunately from ourselves, as well, being partly enacting in of these projections. In that way the enthusiasm, which should be the moving force for transformation and would fight with those various dark forces, has been killed. We have fallen into cultural darkness and identity confusion. The lack of a good self-image and of self-esteem and loosing faith, that anything may have positive impact. A young doctor gave an example of how hard it is to hold to a fundament of medical institutions, when the older teachers all the time stress what high professional work and research had been done only in the past! The group came to the importance of a good distinction between the positive and negative aspects of traditionalism. As if safer the stories about past then looking towards the future, as if we are living in the underground, to which we are used and afraid of going out into freedom.

Hypothesis: The roots of the overwhelming social negativity are many, but most of all the consequences of war and other social destructions perpetuating them further through various psycho-social layers, consciously and unconsciously, destroying positive relationships and faith into any aspect of good self-image. Stuck-ness into these positions is especially found to be the mechanism of perversion of good into bad even without any real cause. These processes make the problems more complex and deepen the stuck-ness, especially in the context of transitions and global crisis. In other countries with tradition of social rules and order it may be easier for people to look into the future, even if more from inertia, and here after all the destruction, especially destruction in many phases one after the other, there is a need for an idea to be able to look into the future. Under those huge burdens it's very difficult to repair the self-respect. Comparing to what we had gone through, we are still good. There are small positive changes, but important to be respected. They create or keep alive small islands of positivity, shining with optimism. As an important social mirroring was found to be the group experience, that when becoming aware about other similar islands, a transformation starts from aloneness into relief and delight and a vision of an invisible large group of islands. In the Serbian transitional society under the surface there are expectations for more mature social distribution of power and responsibility, but complex sequels of traumas and old regimes are still frustrating these positive needs.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Smile on the streets

Analysis: The notion of smile happened to be mentioned many times through the whole workshop from the very first story about little Gypsies begging on the streets with their smiles, through the need of the group to recognize moments of the group being in smile, whether to jokes or in moments of stronger group cohesion and relief, also in the part 2. the group insisting : 'smile' to be a separate theme, until the end, when smile had been discussed further. The face of aggression at the streets is agreed to be still a phenomena, but slowly decreasing. The young businessman said, "What a paradox. We are talking about total absence of smile, and I read in British Guardian how a group of journalist visiting Belgrade had been surprised with a lot of smile in the streets and many other pleasant phenomena?!" There was a reaction: It is towards strangers, it is our well known hospitality to be nice to strangers... and again a joke: "Maybe if our artist member had been speaking English, it would have been better for her!" On the other hand the participants stressed what a pleasant surprise in the workshop had been for them to realize the potential of joining thoughtfulness about deep social issues, which worry them so much.

Hypothesis: The smile as a motto was present through the whole workshop on the concrete and on the symbolic level, and has been understood to have deep and multiple meanings. The smiles of the little Gypsy children with their lovely directness in spite of all the life misery, is seen to represent the forgotten human need for the simple joy of living, also the forgotten Serbian smile after all the sufferings and social burdens. The basic Serbian spirit of faith into life, goodness and wisdom being for such a long time very lonely, shy and scary, hidden in separated mental enclaves and capsules, is seen to have survived the huge destructiveness and when encountering similar aspects in others, like most of the participants had stressed that had happened in the group this time (very different than in previous LPs, as emphasized by participants of those) may create a wonderful smile sending to each others and to strangers at the streets and wider. This was not understood as a manic defence, but a rather different phenomena, which the group had a wish to explore more, but the time was over.

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