"Bulgaria and the World at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held on on Sofia on15th 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.

- From the social role of a former participant in the Listening Posts events — the current venue for the LP provides much more space. There is 'more air'.

- From the social role of an employee that is going to leave the office: "During the last year four of us had left the service — more than 50% of the staff. Time came for me to leave too. I am keeping it in secret. Apart from this I am planning to leave the country — I am prospective emigrant. A beginner in this role. I do not know how all this will happen..."

- From the social role of an employee: "I was on the edge of quitting my job because of conflicts with my boss — he was trying to underpay my work on a particular project."

- From the social role of a person with totalitarian past: "I went to the state commission that governs the public access to the files created by the totalitarian political police. I intended to ask for information about my relatives that had emigrated during totalitarian years. While parking my car in front of this agency I was fined by the municipal officials regulating parking in the center of the town despite the fact that I have properly paid for my stay. Later I understood that I have been cheated by the nearby municipal officers: when I asked them whether the place was permitted for parking they did not explained me that it was reserved for invalids only. It appeared they have been secretly enjoying my ignorance of the rules. I was furious."

- From the social role of an organizer and moderator of a Listening post event: "For the first time I was approached by someone who applied for the event but wanted to video record the session for the purpose of a 'scientific' analysis later at a conference. I was surprised by the way this event is being used and utilized in our context."

- From the social role of a member of a multi-agency team: "Because of the constant fights and rivalries there I am on the edge of leaving the team at every team meeting. One of results of such kind of culture is the failure of the Bulgarian candidate for EU commissioner — Rumyana Jeleva. We miss the ability to work in reams. I have emigrated once, and I came back. I am not in a mood to emigrate any more."

- From the social role of a student: "When communicating with my fellow students I feel pressured to accept some norms and rules, which I don't understand. I feel this too mannered, snobbish and false and it makes me avoiding the university community because of this. I feel this as a role I am forced to perform. I feel many people around me inauthentic and pretending to be what they are not. I feel as if receiving messages from my environment such as 'You are a student, behave seriously!'"

- From the role of a person looking for a job that satisfies his 'more than pure material needs': "I used to work in a service where my main problem was that the wage was too low. Only this year four colleagues left the office. I consider emigration too...or rather a study visit. I feel something like an imperative to emigrate, while there are things I feel difficult to separate with here — such as my domestic workshop and toolkit I have collected and arranged in my basement. Sometimes I am afraid that emigrating means that I flying from, escaping from my life… From another point of view we are all emigrants. What kind of capital do I possess during such a journey?"

- From the role of someone traveling abroad: "I also think of myself as of a prospective emigrant. The more I travel abroad the better I feel outside my country. People abroad are not that scornful and envious. The waitresses are polite…many others too."

- Others from the group objected this from their own experience of traveling abroad: "This — about the better and polite people living abroad — is ficticious. I have tested it while in the USA", someone said.

- Another participant shared her feelings after reading a Milan Kundera's novel: "Adventure is something essential which is missing from her but also from the lives of many contemporary citizens inhabiting the global yet the same and uniform world."

- From the role of a project coordinator in various projects during 2009: "I am tired and surprised by the efforts and the energy needed to be invested in this role."

- From the role of a citizen using the underground railway in Sofia: "I fall in love with the tube! Especially this year — after it have connected the two opposite parts of the town. For the first time since I've been living here I felt cosy and comfortable."

- From the role of a visitor of a megapolis: "I was in Berlin. At crossroad lights there were small crowds of 300-400 people waiting to pass. Here – in Sofia we live in a kind of a village. Megapolices are much lousier."

- From the role of a newcomer into the big city: "I am coming from a smaller town and Sofia is a megapolis for me. However I think I've coped and accommodated fairly quickly. I feel well within the big city. The big city is the kind of city I want to live in."

- From the role of another newcomer but with longer experience: "Today I came with a taxi and I asked the driver how the traffic was today. The driver told me it was smaller, because most of the village people currently overpopulating the capital have returned to their villages and the city has been unburdened from their arrogance and bad manners. I am coming from a small provincial town and I was asking myself whether the driver hasn't fail to recognize me and has considered me as a proper, 'true and genuine' citizen of the capital. Had I become already a 'capital city man'? What does it mean? Is it something like an entitlement?"

- From the role of a consumer of the public transport service: "For me the taxi drivers are one of the factors of the aggressive city environment." Recently she confronted sharply one taxi driver that tried to cheat her and her teenage daughter. Another member added that in the UK for example the taxi drivers' manners were quite the opposite — "very polite and honest."

- The same participant shared that a friend of him unexpectedly called him from the provinces where he had moved some couple of years ago. The friend told him how peaceful and harmonic the life in country side was.

- Another member associated with the theme and shared her experience of a peaceful walk into the city's main park where she enjoyed the harmony of the animals' life and pitied the urban humans absorbed by consumerism and vanity.

- Another member shared her nostalgia over Sofia of the early 1980s "when the city was much calmer and quieter" and when she was used to go to her favorite sweet shop in the centre of the city and afterwards to throw a glance over the posters at the entrance of the well guarded, and with restricted access, embassy of the USA.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

During this stage participants[1] worked in three subgroups of three and later shared the themes they had identified:

- A 'feeling of home' and a need for cosiness and comfort.

- The theme about the escape from Bulgaria and the current live and about the emigration as a widely chosen option. The challenge of integrating oneself within particular social environment.

- The processes of leaving some particular social spaces and entering new ones. The change process.

- Quitting, leaving places and emigration. Social norms and regulations.

- Professional work and the market of expertise and skills.

- Ecology and environment.

- One's place in the world and the problems of everyone's identity.

- Individuals in aspirations and searches. Comparing experiences abroad and at home.

- The theme about the natal place conceived of as a process of living and understanding — not as an abstraction but as happening and being.

- Home and comfort.

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 relational and physical space that is being mastered and in which people gradually attain proficiency is expanding. We are already able to study our past in a way that was forbidden not long ago, as we as to travel within spaces with speed and comfort unexperienced until very recently. The feeling of competence out of the experience acquired is rising.

As a result of these processes some of the individual members of society search, recognise and discover places of cosiness and comfort in the city and outside it such as a reliable village house or a city underground railway. For others this process of expansion of the spaces we are living in provokes feelings of being thrown and lost as in an anonymous megapolis.

In these new spaces we meet new people. Some of them are hostile and exploiting such as some cheating taxi drivers. Others are inauthentic and false, or alienated from us.

During these moves and travels there is often a movement from some periphery to some places experienced as a centre. The Center is coveted, despite the fact that often it seems to be elusive, alienated and strange. These experiences provoke feelings of provinciality, backwardness and need to overtake, to make up for a loss and to catch something elusive.

Hypothesis:
Travel and development are processes of encountering the Other and the otherness of the new social realities.

Probably because we do not feel authors of most of these realities such encounters challenge our feelings of authenticity and belonging.

The crisis of belonging and authenticity mobilize our attitudes towards flight from and seldom towards fight with. These collective attitudes could organize and evolve into cultures of emigration.

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[1] 11 people submitted their applications but 8 of them attended the meeting.