



**Latvia and the World  
at the Dawn of 2012**  
Report of a Listening Post held  
on 12th January in Riga

**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 lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

In the first part participants identified and explored their experience in their various social roles such as mother and father, son, leader of professional organization, representative of Russian ethnicity, sociologist, entrepreneur, civil activist, consultant, manager, freelancer, change agent and other social roles.

**Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Participants were divided into three groups of two. They worked to name the emerging themes of the group. Themes that were put forward are:

- Values
- Relationships
- System vs. Individual
- Abuse/ love
- Social blindness
- Positive/ negative
- Dehumanization
- Respect/ disrespect
- Lack of imagination/ narrow view.

Few of them were taken for deeper analysis and development of Hypothesis in Part 3.

**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

### *System vs. Individual*

**Analysis:** After a short introduction among group members, Part 1 was opened by a strong, emotional and sad story about the cruelty of doctors and medical personnel against group member's father during his last months before his death. This introduction became a strong impetus for the following discussions (intellectual and exploring) revealing the separation and apparent incomparability between the cause of the cruelty – system and the victim – individual.

In the following discussions, members showed their disapproval and shame about 'the system' and illustrated some methods for taking themselves 'out of the system' for the sake of 'saving' personal values, principles, lifestyle. For example, three of the members shared that they had taken children out of the mainstream Latvian education system. Another member shared the fact that she had lived 9 years abroad and her friends were surprised about the decision to come back. Yet another member had presented himself as the leader of the Professional association, of a profession that is not legalized in Latvia.

The discussion of being inside/outside the system also became evident during the further group process. In the Part 3 during the 'here and now' analysis the group pointed out towards one particular member, who arguably had stayed 'outside', as if in the role of an observer, not giving himself into the group process/system. The member acknowledged his feeling of being outside the group discussion/process. It is also worth noting that this member had previously put forward his professional experience as a sociologist/researcher, academically studying the systems. He shared his disappointment about the fact that sometimes (quite often) he has participated in meaningless researches, that did not have a direct applicability or relevance for the society.

Already during Part 1, but also during Hypothesis formation members started offering following reflections about the situation in Latvia – 'collective identity and collective values of the Soviet times have disappeared, while new ones have not been established', 'cruel individualism has become evident in the society', 'other people are just the means to pursue one's own goals'. This further illustrated dominating discourse of the group – seeing an individual being abused by the system – being a victim of the system. However, in a different moment an opposite expression by a different member was traced illustrating her longing for using the system for her own individual needs.

One member offered a metaphor from cartoon Lion King, stating that it sometimes feels that the system has jackals in power positions.

During the analysis analogy was generated – when being part of the system, one becomes subject to large injustice resulting in anger and impotency.

### Leadership in the group

After the round of short introductions by all members and realization that 2 empty places will not be filled, one member moved his chair to a different place – to the other side of the table corner. It changed the dis-balance of 4 sitting against 2. It also made this member to sit opposite to the convener. One member made an interpretation as if he was "taking on the leadership role for the group". Then the same member (who moved the chair) presented the first strong and emotional personal story from his chosen social role of a son. This had a strong effect on the rest of the group members,

as one member started crying during the story and all others had been making some sort of reference to this touching example throughout the Part 1 and to a lesser extent in Part 2 and 3. (thanking, appreciating, excusing oneself for wanting to share something else). Another male member clearly showed his opposition to the appearing and dominating 'victim' discourse. He was offering adverse examples, illustrating personal responsibility in case of death of a close relative and in another instance, in case of achieving personal success. These examples showed his disagreement with the notion about the system failure and abuse by the system. Later into the group process this member was evaluated by some others as 'being outside the system'.

It could be argued, that the uncovered theme of system/victim in the initial story became 'dominating' over the other potential topics. It resonated with the majority of people to the extent that other members failed to put out their own voices/stories/experiences equally strongly.

Also it is worth noting that group did not talk and reflect about the power in the group. Was it to do with a 'story of victim in the power position' and resistance to challenge his authority?

**Hypothesis:** Because of the fear of being rejected by the system and/or authority, we silence our voices and stories, what results in the inability to define (read, understand, integrate) the reality in its completeness and diversity.

## **Analysis and Hypothesis 2**

### *Abuse/Pain/Love*

**Analysis:** The group was infuriated about the cruelty of a doctor and medical system towards the patient at one point, while at a different time group easily concluded 'we are all intellectuals, and somehow representatives of elite, and we really do not and cannot understand the situation of a bus driver or a shop assistant at Maxima (low cost supermarket chain)'. One member of the group expressed doubt about group's willingness to actually know, what bus-driver and/or shop assistant thinks and feels.

In Part 3, during the 'here and now' reflections, one group member with Russian ethnicity drew attention to the seating arrangement in the beginning of LP. As Part 1 started she was sitting on her own at one side of the table with the only 3 empty places next to her. She confirmed a strong sense of isolation and alienation. The following inquiry from other group member about the seating arrangement, arrival of the late group member and consequent change of some seating yielded a feeling of comfort and acceptance in the group. In Part 1 she had shared her experience as a representative of minority group – "often having associated oneself as a second class citizen, the feelings of offense and anger have been accumulating", resembling with "mentality of the offended and victim", leading to "feelings of large power and possible violence".

**Hypothesis:** Society in Latvia has inherited the tendency to conceal emotions and truthful attitude towards happenings in the public space. While being insensitive towards the pain (our pain and that of others), we become stakeholders of continuing abuse and violence.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3**

#### *Social Blindness/ Lack of vision for the future*

**Analysis:** Throughout the LP, a notion that ‘we do not have a clear understanding of who we are and what is the world around us’ had been reoccurring. For example, a member of the group illustrated that we (Latvians) create a different story about our country and the rest of the world than people abroad do, by bringing forward an example – in a popular politico-analytical program on Latvian TV high level politicians and recognized analysts had been telling very optimistic prognosis about the EU and Euro, while almost simultaneously international media (such as BBC and Financial Times) predicted big problems and changes in the EU. Referring to the group process, in several instances, it happened that after the depiction of a sad or 'negative' experience from one or several group members, another group member would follow/provide an example or evaluation of a related experience to reverse the picture and show that it is actually just the opposite case (e.g. the doctors in Latvia are actually good in comparison to some other country).

Discussions in the group revealed a lack of connectivity between formal data and research vs. real story and life of individuals – ‘we cannot see people and life behind the facts and figures’. Having lack of imagination in picturing the presence, we experience inability to create our own future. We cannot visualize what is actually going on, neither at present nor in the future.

**Hypothesis:** Due to the inability to hear, feel and understand each other on an individual level, the collective human values have deteriorated (disappeared), leading to even greater alienation among the individuals and away from the commonly held reality.

**Convener: Laura Mikelson**