

**"Serbia and the World
at the Dawn of 2012"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 14th January in Belgrade**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The LP started by one participant who wanted to share a good feeling of uniqueness from 31 December, the New Year's Eve, and the opening of the new bridge in Belgrade after almost forty years. The participant said: "There were so many people; I was really surprised, as if they wanted to be more interconnected. Also, I thought that they wanted to be present at a unique, special event and to be able to forget the daily (everyday) things. When did we have such a rare opportunity to feel special?"

The image of the bridge was blocking any mental activity of another participant. This image of mass gathering of citizens of Belgrade at the bridge immediately revoked remembering the Nineties and people gathering on the bridges during the bombing as a sign of defiance and protection of bridges with human shields. Although the new bridge is important and at the same time the most basic need of a big city as Belgrade, politics is too much present/involved, and there is a feeling that citizens are misused by politicians, as they were puppets-on-the-string. Also, many flocked to the opening of the bridge, which is an inanimate thing and not to meet each other. "There was a feeling of alienation among those on the bridge at the opening", another participant said.

Other participant thought that when talking about the bridge we talk about being together. Participants were thinking about the meaning of the strongest theme that emerged – the bridge – it meant uniqueness, connectivity, constructing something new; for the others it also evoked thinking about manipulation, misuse, death of one of the builders – example: why politicians are saying that they are giving the bridge as a gift to the citizens of Belgrade – didn't we pay for the bridge ourselves, we do not need the middlemen to give it to us it's ours. Politicians make savage consumers from us.

The image of bridges also evoked the image of posters that appeared on some other bridges – the posters had the following message: 'while you are celebrating New Year, do you ever wonder how your fellow citizens will celebrate it in Kosovo'. However, this could not be heard on TV in the news.

The manner in which the decision to position the bridge was also under scrutiny of one of the participant and he felt that it was done in a bullying-like manner, and there was not enough of expert and other types of discussions regarding such an important issue such this one. He was very determined by saying: "The bridge was not build on the right place." However, there were a number of participants who just could not understand why someone would be as negative about such a clearly needed thing as the new bridge: "Why are you so negative", a participant asked. The reply was that it was not negativism, but that the bridge was seen as a paradigm of violence in our society.

“Where are the bridges inside of ourselves, if we would think about it, we would be able to reflect on Kosovo as well”, somebody asked.

In the Nineties it was clear who the violent villain was; and nowadays violence is much more sophisticated – and a participant wondered how to recognize it and fight against such a thing and not end up being a victim.

Discussion was returning to the positive feelings of a number of participants saying that: “I have recognized the need in people to have something beautiful, that things are moving into positive direction, even it is an illusion. I want to see the positive side, and it is easy in my age to make things clear for myself. I understand the young who have other types of rebelling energies, whereas I have the need to look at things from aside”.

Where are the young people and their voices – in the Nineties it was clearer against whom the people – mostly young – were protesting, today the political manipulation was more sophisticated and more difficult to raise voice against. Nowadays, the young generations and their voice could not be heard in our society, the students protest only about very narrow issues connected to their student’s life and budgets at the university – not about any of the important social issues.

We are talking a lot about somebody else’s fault, how about the things we can do ourselves in terms of our habits, attitudes, behaviors towards ourselves, our immediate surrounding and the society, said one of the present.

A participant from Novi Sad said that she liked that the LP started with positive attitude. She also reminded that there were no important construction building works without politics. She thought it was brave to say as somebody coming from Novi Sad that she liked Belgrade and that she decided to contribute to Belgrade as the capital. She wondered how we could positively infect our environment – there was so much negativity around that positive attitude did not have enough grounds to catch on. She concluded by saying that bridge must have been discussed at a public hearing.

Participant working in an NGO said that governmental structures accept critical views as a personal attack. Another participant said that there was a voice raised by an association which wanted to protect rare birds that used to live where the bridge was built. This association was laughed at when they were trying to raise their voice.

The issue of censorship was raised and examples from everyday life (twitter) were presented underlining the fact that the government structures are actually not taking into real consideration the actual voices of citizens.

Mentioning of twitter raised the issue of Serbian language and the invasion of foreign words into it. A participant felt sad that Serbs were forgetting their own language, and that English language was becoming dominant. Another one said that we as a nation had unresolved issues regarding identity and hence tendency to accept uncritically foreign influences.

Another participant who lived outside Serbia in the last seven months said that she felt sad that we can protest 24/7, however she wondered if protesting was really resolving injustices. There was a need to be realistic and to start from oneself and individual efforts – only through small individual efforts things could be changed.

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:

1. Connections (cohesiveness/bridges) inside ourselves, in society and the world.
2. Political manipulation and violence and how to resist it in today's consumer society.
3. Accountability towards ourselves and society we live in – lost citizens' role.
4. Highlighted need for progress and solidarity but lack of ability and capacity to rejoice and reflect on things that frighten us.
5. Communication, understanding and identity.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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

Hypothesis: Strong need to anchor ourselves around the concrete bridge as the strong need to feel safe and secure in a world full of uncertainties and the loss of faith into our own strengths as well as other people and their good nature.

Analysis: Idea of connectivity, epitomized in bridges, was used for releasing negative attitudes underlining the lack of willingness to confront with ourselves, to look into ourselves and the possibility to oppose the violence; negativism was seen by a participant as diversion against integration at individual level. Another was completely at awe that there could be so much negativity around such a beautiful and significant thing such a new bridge. Many wondered was it possible to reflect at all upon what connects us and what divides us; what we really wanted to build and develop inside of us and in the outside world; was it possible to build bridges between individual/family level and the social one – where is the civil society and the middle class?

At the global level, the year 2012 has been announced as the end of one age and the dawn of the new age – what will happen December 2012? Will it be the end of the world as we know it? Was it possible that the dominating theme of connections and bridges was present as the theme because of exploring possibilities of transcending the old and entering New Age. A participant said: “This is the global 2012 Listening Post, and people around the world may be thinking about the end of time and the Mayan prophecy – the old age which lasted 5,000 years, which ends in December 2012, and the upcoming new age and what it is that can connect the two – what can be the bridge and connect these

two ages – is it love, solidarity, collective good that transcends nations, political egos and everyday worries?

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis: There is a general feeling that citizens are misused by politicians. People are self-absorbed and unwilling to participate in any kind of political activism other than elections because their microcosm is the only thing they can preserve untouched from negative influences; political activation is of no use either because politicians can turn deaf ear to people's voices or people just do not want to bother anymore.

Analysis: Tendency to criticize and see the negative side only is the reflection of betrayed trust into political processes and the constant splitting and polarization in the political arena between 'us vs them', 'positive vs negative', 'young/students vs senior citizens'. Although there was a significant number of participants who said that they choose to see the good side they seemed to be more pushing and expressive in putting forward their opinions, whereas those who were raising critical voices said that they want to preserve the right to critical thinking and asking questions – as a basis of democratic society. Modern, urban way of life leave citizens little time to stop and reflect on how they live today, if they have chosen the bridge of somebody (politicians) forced them into a choice; whether we have enough saying in the decision-making processes in our society – those were the questions that echoed in the question – what is more important baby or the bridge? (Baby in this question represented everyday's love and closeness as compared to an inanimate thing which lasts more than a human life, i.e. legacy we leave to our children).

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis: As regards the issue of accountability at the social, political and the individual level, the hypothesis was that there was a lack of accountability at all three levels, and especially at the individual level, because individuals were not ready to not start from themselves (to look one selves in the mirror) – our daily habits – what we eat, if we recycle, how we behave to people close to us – do we ever stop to think about that and if not – should we stop expecting others to be accountable.

Analysis: We lost citizens' role (identity) – the middle class accountable to maintaining healthy approach to life that can gather us around good ideas, even outside the governmental establishment. There is a visible lack of ability to articulate concerns so as to enable us to reflect on them and find solutions. Our society is such that there is no space for rejoicing. We are craving for solidarity, but a different one than just gathering on a bridge. The question – what makes you happy was posed several times throughout the discussion. The way in which the new Belgrade bridge was built for some participants underlined the lack of dialogues, expert hearings i.e. accountable behavior on the part of city authorities, architects, civil engineers, citizens etc. The city did not give birth to bridge – it gave birth of imploded institutions due to the manner the process was led by the authorities. Non-functioning institutions affect our daily lives in this and other domains. During Tito's time social situation was more stabile, one breadwinner could sustain family, although political obedience was asked for; however two decades ago we entered more chaotic multi-party political system with liberal economy – which is enormous transition that challenges accountability at all levels constantly. Issue of inclusive society was tackled – was there a will to really listen to different opinions, or the hearing processes, when they are open, were there just pro forma. Censorship was raised as yet another concern.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis: In transition societies such the one we lived in, citizens feel highlighted need for progress and solidarity but lack of ability and capacity to rejoice and reflect on things that frighten us. Only if we manage to keep faith, optimism and ability to believe in our own capacities, the feeling of fear and social injustice could be diminished.

Analysis: Many were reiterating that they felt general lack of social capacity to rejoice. People were living in bad conditions as if we lost the capacity to see the good in others. This topic also echoed with the question where was the bridge inside us, where was the connection and the uniqueness that would keep the faith. Interesting thing highlighted by some participants was that even those who belonged to the 'positive group' had more 'loud and energetic' attitude and behavior than those who belonged to the so called 'negative group'. The group as a whole felt a strong need to mend and promote good in the world around us, although constant fear was present that virtue of the world is lost for good.

Analysis and Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis: Need to preserve language from foreign influence exist because there is a need to enhance communication, mutual understanding and unity regarding national identity.

Analysis: Issues relating to language emerged due to perceived lack of understanding between people. Strong concern about the need to preserve Serbian language was seen as an issue connected to tradition, identity as well the ability to communicate enabling proper understanding. There was uncritical acceptance of foreign words, especially coming from the English language, into Serbian. There was an attempt to explain that all languages are live and that they are also influenced by other languages of today. The group analyzed the fact of re-occurring topic of language and how it related to or influenced our understanding of national identity. In an attempt to connect this with the topic of bridges, one of the participants said that the Serbian tradition was also to build bridges which are not cost-effective. Serbian bridge builders were famous all over the world, however when they build bridges in our country, those bridges represent wonderful pieces of craftsmanship, but very often are more expensive or bigger than needed. Some participants also mentioned the bridge on the river Drina (identical to the title of the novel written by Andric, awarded by the Nobel peace price for literature), and in the analysis came to thinking that our national body is scattered – there is a need to integrate the Serbian national body. A participant noticed that even the Serbian 'mixed' marriages (marriages between Serbs living across the Balkans) are challenging – there is a need to gather around one important issue, and again the question was echoing – what it was that connects us? What is the glue of the Serbian identity – the one thing that connects us unquestionably?

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