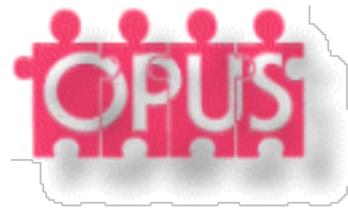


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Serbia and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCIES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

After a brief explanation of this particular workshop being a part of an international project, the free associations started with a question if the group was actually representative of the Serbian society. There were several empty chairs for people who announced being late, however the empty chairs immediately evoked a question - what those empty chairs might represent. The question was immediately followed with expression of certainty that the group will be able to represent and think and feel for those who might seem absent. A participant recalled a time when our country was represented by the empty chair in the United Nations, during the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

A participant shared her concerns about not being able to communicate to her superiors in a satisfactory manner, that she was recently criticized and how it made her feel apathetic. Another one followed with sharing after-holiday mixed feelings of apathy and sadness. Another participant, an engineer, offering his practical approach to life, responded that only if one's inventiveness was killed, one fell into apathy. Offering an idea to the other has a price, and we have to be determined in our wish to be creative and share our inventions with the others even so. One should not allow that his or her spirit is broken. Of course, it was a challenge to find a balance between professional and private life, which would give us enough feeling of liberty.

Another participant, an art historian, said that creativity was always under attack and threat, however the real creativity cannot be killed. Only those who persevered in working and their creativity were remembered today, she said, underlining that history rarely remembered those who blocked and hampered. A woman remembered time when she worked in the theater, where she listened to many actors being dissatisfied that they could not show enough of

their creativity, how they were suppressed, and that a number of them in their pursuit of expressing themselves in a more creative way became producers/directors.

Participants went back to issue of being creative, and how can one be creative in every day's life or in professional tasks such as negotiations. When thinking about creativity, immediately there are images of limits, boundaries, stalemate and rut.

A women participant tried to explain how she dealt with difficulties of being stuck, limited or misunderstood. She would make an effort to redefine her role and position to the others, while being self-conscious about how the things she wanted to communicate to others corresponds to them and their shared reality. According to her, creativity could be found in smallest things and situations. Entrenched systems where everybody knows their place and position are always more comfortable because one is not requested to think too much. However, it is inevitable that a situation comes when we need to activate ourselves and either become more flexible and create space for ourselves, or decide to cut things off and leave. This participant remembered that she recently became aware of the fact that we send so many non-verbal messages to our environment and that very often even before we begin direct communication, some form of communication already happened at the time we thought about it.

A participant wondered when was the last time she actually did an act of honesty, generosity and kindness such as the one she recently read about in the newspapers. Namely, a disabled man, a father of six children whose wife had MS, found a wallet with 3,500 euro and returned it to a tourist from Bulgaria who accidentally lost it. Several participants confirmed remembering this story. One participant was appalled by the fact that the tourist gave only 10 euros to this unfortunate man as a reward. He felt that such 'reward' even more humiliated the man. Another one wondered why nobody remembered that the disabled man was actually a beggar who lived only on what the others gave him. The beggar obviously made a choice not to live on money that was not given to him in an act of charity.

Then participants came back yet again to topic of creativity and how much our creativity depended on the other. What an individual can do for herself/himself to feel better and wondered also weather we could acknowledge ourselves that we did enough and to feel satisfied, without the need to get recognition from the others. They also wondered if it was worthwhile sharing, when there is always someone censoring it and recording it.

There was a myriad of associative question-making. Participants were wondering:

- how to hear each other better so as to contribute to healing of rotten systems,
- how to develop a good enough structure in the world full of 'pains-in-the-neck' and those who suffocate us;
- how to have enough faith and weather having faith was good enough;
- how to find those who think alike and join forces.

Then, remembering the Great War (I WW) emerged through numerating famous battles at the River Kolubara and the Mountain of Cer, withdrawal of the entire Serbian Army and civilians in exile a century ago, in the winter 1915. In mass exodus through the mountains of Albania to the Greek island of Corfu, tens of thousands of people died. Having recuperated at the Corfu, the French navy took Serbian soldiers close to Thessaloniki, where they were a part of the allied forces at the Thessaloniki front. The breakthrough of the Thessaloniki front ended with return to Serbia, reclaiming of territories and liberation of Belgrade. There was some creativity in winning battles in the Great War.

Echoing recent reflective citizen workshop held in Novi Sad, creativity was back in focus, as it emerged there as well. If creativity is not allowed to develop and thrive, it turns into negative creativity and aggression. Maybe strictly scientifically speaking our citizen group was not a representative sample, but it definitely represented a nucleus of a voice that expressed need to be assisted in surviving. From a global perspective, 7 million people living in our country represent only 0.01% of world's population, however it is enough for having a seat in the United Nations. Additionally, the participant shared a feeling as if contamination - mental contamination was present in our society as well as in other societies. It is not easy to measure it in the way we measure pollution of living environment. Although there was not enough capacity in our society for qualitative change to the better, there is a seed of reflective citizens to try to overcome such contamination. The participant recalled a friend describing an event which he described as rebellion of mediocre part of society, as if they were currently on the stage and have the power.

In art, however, one participant reminded, representative sample is not defined. She said that she wanted to believe that this group was representative. She also said that one lonesome Nikola Tesla (Serbian physicist/scientist) did more for the human kind than many other scientists who had better societal connections. She also said that she did not know if mediocre parts of society were in power, she actually dared not and half-jokingly said that might be arrested if heard by some.

In an answer to mentioning of mediocrity, a participant asked oneself and the others who were actually these mediocre people. She wondered if they were also people who have hearts and feelings and capacity to learn. She wanted to know why we separated ourselves from the mediocrity when we could be a part of it as well.

Once again the group returned to the topic of creativity which was for one participant connected to the ability to be heard by somebody important and also to get feedback. In case there is no feedback it brings about aggression.

One participant asked the question how it was possible that creativity and ability to listen to others was mentioned so many times during workshop, without anybody mentioning the present moment and the recent terrorist attack in France. There was an immediate reaction to this controversial issue. Participants strongly reminded of the need to keep to our own issues, worries, hardships and everyday challenges. They were questioning artistic and cartoonist's liberties as regards topics that may be perceived as ridiculing religious figures. Having been through so much ourselves, after enduring so much trauma, there were voices that we should primarily be concerned with our own concerns. Especially after all experiences of how media distorts information and portrays events in a questionable manner.

Then another one asked what happened to our own capacity to feel empathy with human suffering and victims. There are less and less borders in modern world, everything that happens is close enough and should concern us all. Artistic expression and creativity needs to be allowed and nothing was so far away not to interest us, one of the participants underlined.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The group was asked to separate into smaller working groups to try to identify the major themes that had emerged spontaneously during part one. Then a spokesman from each shared with the whole group and we clustered them in three main themes:

1. Representative group, representative society and 'good-enough' voices
2. Creativity and how to communicate in a creative way to be heard, understood and recognized; challenges on our path to realization of a creative idea; issue of idea/creativity ownership
3. Aggression born out of lack of reaction and feedback
4. Apathy as a result of obstructed creativity and how to fight it

5. Lack of empathy and how to resist autistic parts of us that are not responding to human suffering
6. Censorship and freedom of speech.

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 identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and develop 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 1: Masculine principle that constantly 'pressures' societies to an immediate/decisive action, results in lack of reflective space for analysis, thinking, listening and feeling.

Analysis of hypothesis 1: Many questions were floating during the workshop. Participants wondered what disconnected us from the ability to listen and to be heard, to acknowledge and be recognized, to be open to sympathy offered by others and have enough empathy towards the suffering of people outside our group/s. Discussions on representativeness were connected to wondering about the actual power of an individual. Also, participants were connecting questions about who and what is representative of a society to the issue of validity and importance of our voices as individuals. At the same time there was a strong expression of the societal need to be open to different, dissonant voices. This particularly emerged through mentioning of the popular political program 'Impression of the Week', shown on the Serbian TV for more than 20 years, which recently ceased its broadcasting in a heated public debate.

Hypothesis 2: Inherent need to communicate, to be creative and to be heard – simply put: I want to exist/be.

Analysis of hypothesis 2: Strong presence of the theme of creativity and communication was cross-cutting majority of the discussion. There was a need to stop complaining and take a stand - not in aggressive way, but an energetic one. We need to crystalize our own values as a society and stand behind them in even more vigorous and energetic

way than before. In order to be capable of sympathizing with those outside our group, metaphorically speaking, our society needs to make an effort and see its own citizens, those who are different, disabled, underprivileged, who endure suffering and live on charity. As one participant said, 'a man is not a man without capacity to reflect', there is a need to be disciplined, persevere and standing for what one believes in.

Hypothesis 3: Powerful tutors who create 'the truth' and perception of 'what is good' through media, control and manage societal changes – from climate change to financial turmoil and terrorism; by-products are immense social apathy and destruction.

Analysis of hypothesis 3: Information age is 'poisoning' and overwhelming us with different, very often negative issues. Under the pretense of being connected through social media, we are losing ability to communicate directly face to face. Power of media to be the bearer of the only truth, when there are so many different points of view and opinions is worrying the participants. Media is presenting tragedy after tragedy, especially on TV, recalling for example several major airplane crashes. As if the whole world is in pursuit of black boxes as the only true record of what actually happened. Participants wondered what some metaphorical black boxes would record about the contemporary moment in which we live in. Would there be space for any positive message? More questions were put forward, especially the ones asking leaders to be more accountable for the direction of our social development.

Hypothesis 4: It is difficult to understand events that happen to us without putting them in wider cultural, political, historical and religious context; this is becoming even more difficult with growing lack of freedom of speech and censorship.

Analysis of hypothesis 4: Palpable need for media space where different voices in dialogue would be allowed was reflected in discussion among participants. It was important to have such a space and participants discussed what they were ready to do themselves in order to create such a space if it did not exist. We express our frustrations in the privacies of our homes, and there is nobody to hear it. Participants remembered petition of 20,000 citizens of Serbia requesting resolution to a local business problem following a fire. Nobody from the authorities reacted. Again the issue of what was a good-enough sample or a representative group emerged in this context as well. Remembering our history and the immense feelings of helplessness and futility in so many situations we often tend not to make an effort because it was bound to fail. Such an attitude is so imprinted in our collective experience that we create critical mass of reaction and solidarity only when pushed to the edge of existence.

Optimistic voices were heard towards the end, recognizing that the power lies in the ability to recognize what hurts us still and to be vocal about it, and even to find the strength to sing as our ancestors did – they sang even in the most horrifying situations. Opening up in such manner would unplug our ability to empathize with others and stand up for what we believe in. Creative resistance could be one of the answers at individual and group level, because we are all so interconnected. Towards the end of the workshop, one participant instead of singing recited the part of John Donne's poem:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

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