

## The Ninth Meeting of the OBSE Economic Forum, Transparency and Good Governance in Economic Matters, Prague, 15 – 18 May 2001

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### TO SEE FOREST THROUGH TREES

(Transparency and Global Consumption World)

#### Experience

*Thank you very much for the invitation and for the possibility to talk here.*

*A few days ago I bought some flowers for the office because coming spring inspired me to create nice working environment. I asked the seller for the bill and she wanted to know how much money I would like to write on the bill. I answered: ""Write real price, other purchase will be from my own sources". The seller wanted to write on the bill more money than I spent with the explanation that **everybody likes to show more expenditure than reality is**. The division goes into private pocket. **Does it mean that everyone lies and steals?** I explained that the purchase was for the organization that I established and that I manage, so I have any motivation and any reason to steal my own "child".*

#### Doubts

*The topic of this meeting is "Transparency and Good Governance in Economic Matters". This is ambition and nice goal nevertheless I would like to ask: "**Are we sure that we see "forest and not only some tree"?"** I am personally not sure that transparency and good governance in economic matters "tree" could be solved without healing whole "forest" that means global human values and priorities. Why? And what does it mean? On Friday evening I came home from the exhibition Ecolife where I organized the presentation "Time is Life" parallel to the governing thesis "Time is Money". I had chance to observe human manners there and one of my insights was that a lot of people asked me for free ticket although the entrance fee was only 40 Kè. I saw them later walking*

*between stands shopping thousand things and spending hundreds Ke. Once I tried to explain that there is high rent in the building that the main organizer must pay electricity, water, etc... I do not know how much people wanted to understand but relating to this meeting it is clear to me that for our global world where time is money transparency and good governance in economic matters will be very difficult. From my point of view impossible. We live in culture where economy is the god, the goal, and the main and determine discipline. The situation could be different in culture where economy would be part of other human activities – only tool. But opening radio, listening to the politicians, watching television I realize that the main words belong to the economy and than violence. The connection is evident. For money that stands on the top of human effort people do everything, invest their lifetime, use schwindle, lie, steal. Paper laws could help for the way of behavior = the form, but deeper reality?*

**I am missing - in the Czech Republic where I live - something like non-written ethics, rules and norms for polite and everyday behavior.** The explanation is not difficult. We learned - almost all our history - how to survive under permanent manipulation. ("Habsburg's Catholicism", "Nazism", "communism".) Absolute belief in money in modern history could be called new philosophy or ideology "Consumerism".

## Consumption Culture and Czech History

Few years ago I was invited by Donella and Dennis Meadows, co-founders of Roma's Club, writers of *Limits of Growths* and *Behind the Limits* to inform their friends – top world scientists how consumption culture came into Middle and East Europe. I firstly explained that by my opinion consumerism is buying for buying. Artificial needs are created to get people to want more than they need, newer and nicer, to collect things, money and property. Big department stores have become the churches of the twentieth century. People spend a lot of time observing and looking for the right things. WHY? It is difficult to answer. People depended on nature before the industrial revolution and now they depend on things. **Consumerism seems to be the religion of the end of our century, but consumerism has its roots deeply in our Czech history.**

The consumer culture is not new in Central Europe. It did not begin in 1989; it only has a new form. In the early part of the 15th century the Czech preacher Jan Hus criticised the Catholic churches for property holdings, collecting money, luxurious lifestyle and the desire for power. At this time people could buy at their clean conscience. As everybody knows, Jan Hus was burned at the stake for several reasons. The aristocracy was the consumer society during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. **One positive example against consumerism was our first president Tomáš G. Masaryk. He was personally very modest and encouraged society in Czechoslovakia to honor the small things.** In spite of this, Czechoslovakia was ranked third in industrial production in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. During the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis the Jews were used as a physical resource. Their property was consumed by other people-

*either Nazis or collaborationists. Even their bodies were consumed by this sick consumer culture. Under the communists, materialism was the main ideology. The communist government needed busy people, not people critically thinking about the political situation. People were motivated to have things such as country houses, cars and to eat more than necessary. I remember people being proud of their big bellies and saying this is our socialism that nobody can take from us. People obeyed and spent a lot of time developing their life styles, but the communists tried to control this. No private sector was allowed. There was limited travel and limited information. People envied their western richer neighbors and did everything to be on their level. Jioí Ruml, spokes person for Charta 77 in 1984 said that in order to have material things the Czech people gave up their conscience, their honor, truth and their dignity and called this "consumer socialism".*

*After the Velvet Revolution consumerism continues in another way. The Velvet Revolution opened the borders and new freedom brought the promise of new political possibilities and gave permission for people to consume openly without limits. Our president Václav Havel dreamt that truth and love would win above lie and hatred. He talked about ethics and his own staff at the Prague castle did not presented a very good practical example for our nation with their interpersonal relations and with their interest of new Italian furniture, new BMW cars and new castle's motorcycles. Our minister of finance, who is now chief of the Parliament Václav Klaus, said we needed to tighten our belts, but at the same time our new post-communist Parliament instead of creating legislation for modesty and tightening the belt rise their own salaries and than went on vacation. Václav Klaus encouraged the consumer culture through the privatization process, which was supported by Viktor Ko?ený. He was a student at Harvard; saw the opportunity to make an intense profit in the privatization process, returned home to buy stock shares of Czech citizens. He established the Harvard Fund and inspired the Czech people's interest in owning property through stocks.*

*People started to be very busy partly because they changed their lives, partly because they fall into the consumption machinery. The new freedom opened new life possibilities and a lot of new challenges. People saw their big chance in life to be rich, to be important, they began to be members of several organizations, members of several boards. They wanted to be everywhere, do everything forgetting that they have partners, children, and friends, that the day has only 24 hours and their lives are limited to seventy or eighty. The relations between people inside families are worse; people spend much less time with their children and partners. They need to make business or attract it. These possibilities of being rich fall short of the expectations of the Czech people. They have become disillusioned because of new money scandals in the privatization process and the money practices of our political people and parties are something that discourages the Czechs from believing in anybody or anything. After ten years of the leadership ideology of free market economy, the new consumerism is an important part of Czech life. When you come to visit us, you can see huge*

*advertisements everywhere. We know what is the best for us from billboards; we experience a lot of cars on the street having troubles crossing the street. Number of cars grows because having a car is the sign of a better living standard. Only a few people think that this situation in our small country is absurd. There was very good public transportation and there is no enough room for building new roads and parking places.*

## Suggestions

*Before I came here I received the list of participants of Ninth Meeting of the OBSE. On the list of Czech Delegates were 26 men and 3 women. **By my opinion the biggest fault is that on the top of the society is only the analytical man's narrow thinking government and the consumption myth helps them to keep power and to manipulate people easily.** The structure of the "forest" is evident. Monoculture. Do you believe that transparency and good governance could be solved with such structure of task division?*

*At the beginning I mentioned the experience with flowers and with the bill. Czech proverb tells "Fish smells from the head". **People on the "top" in society create model's way of behavior. People on the "bottom" usually repeat and follow leaders.** Where and how to create honest and modest leadership is the question and big challenge. This year is "The Year of Volunteers" by United Nation. What about to suggest elected representatives to volunteer their service for their homeland as the first step for transparency of their motivation?*

*I wish good luck to this meeting.*

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