

Towards a mindful future: Surviving the 21st century



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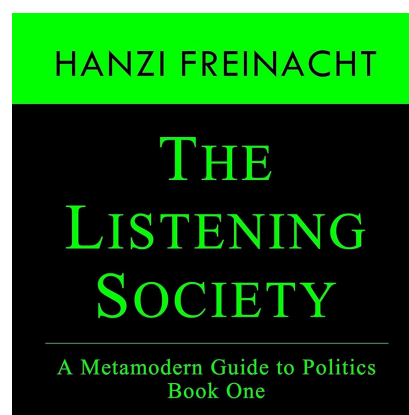
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Our world has been caught in the storm of inter-tangled and increasingly complex problems: ecological, economic, technological, geopolitical, informational... the list goes on. Paradoxically, many of these threats are linked to what we used to call progress, but was actually a mindless race filled with deep imbalances. While our technology and weaponry enter the sci-fi realm, our mental health deteriorates, and society becomes fragmented. As historian Yuval Noah Harari has warned, “for every dollar and every minute we invest in improving artificial intelligence, it would be wise to invest a dollar and a minute advancing human consciousness. . . . If we are not careful, we will end up with downgraded humans misusing upgraded computers to wreak havoc on themselves and on the world” (Harari, 2018).

This insight forms the basis of our research team’s ongoing efforts, aimed at conducting a

thorough analysis of the interrelationships between media, education, sensemaking and mindfulness. The results – it is hoped – may signal a new direction for future media literacy education reforms, both in the Balkan countries as well as further afield, as well as laying a blueprint for other concrete initiatives in the region. Within this paper, we outline a vision which principally emphasizes the role of mindfulness, not only as a personal practice but also as a key element in institutional and societal reform.

To put it briefly: if we want to survive the 21st century, a mindful systemic change is needed. We will have to strive toward building a more holistic wellbeing-based society, with a serious joined effort of the public, private and civil sectors in fostering *inner skills* that citizens need in order to collectively face these great crises. It requires, in the words of metamodern authors Daniel Görtz and Emil E. Friis, a *listening society* “that considers the emotional wellbeing of people just as important as their economic welfare; a society that takes into account the more intimate psychological needs of human beings: good relationships, inner security, meaning, self-knowledge. This would be a society where depression, stress and alienation have become political issues in the same vein as security, jobs and housing are today” (Freinacht, 2019). This embodies the philosophy of *political metamodernism*, which is “built around one central insight. The king’s road to a good future society is personal development and psychological growth. . . . The idea is that there is an intimate connection between understanding how humans grow and evolve – intellectually, cognitively and emotionally – and how good or bad a society is going to be. Hence, it should – or must – become a top political priority to support the psychological development of all citizens.” (Freinacht, 2019).



It is encouraging that, across the intellectual sphere, we are beginning to witness the emergence of an increasing number of thinkers, initiatives and organizations dedicated to such visions. The growth of this global fractal ecosystem inspires hope that we may soon reach a critical mass of influence, leading to the emergence of a strong and enduring social movement focused on developing more holistic social systems.

From a long-term perspective, the educational system is obviously the paramount institution for fostering the aforementioned skills in the new generation. It is the only public instrument that could make such a broad and long-lasting impact. To quote Zachary Stein, “there is no viable future for civilization that does not include a radical change in the nature of our educational systems” (Stein, 2022).

Mindfulness would need to play an indispensable role in this project: introducing children to thoughtfully tailored mindfulness practices, particularly focusing on mindful communication and empathy, is not merely conducive to creating a more pleasant school environment. Moreover, by focusing on the inner development of children, we have the possibility to establish the roots of a vastly different, more compassionate society. And nurturing these skills within the general population, starting with the youth, is not an expense but a long-term investment, both ultimately cost-effective and essential for protecting our collective future. The next generation will set the stage for how the future will look and the children currently going through the education system will be the leaders of tomorrow.

However, in many current education systems, schools often remain blind to real-life struggles of students. Children are so often forced to learn formulas and definitions they will never use again in their lives, and that have little to do with the deepest needs and troubles of their being. When society fails to hear the innermost needs of its children, the inevitable outcome is a deteriorating civilization in which we witness the new generations increasingly struggling with mental health problems, with the detrimental influences and polarizations of social media, and the resulting chaotic consequences of a non-empathy-based education system, like bullying, violence, and in the U.S., even horrors such as school shootings. For this reason, the fundamental reform of education systems must be elevated to the level of a major political issue requiring

international cooperation, with guidelines that reflect the broadest possible consensus among experts, careful monitoring, and ever-evolving iterative adjustments.



However, we would need an effective political leadership committed in efforts to realize this vision. How do we create that level of political will? The will to implement mindful policy into not just the education system, but across the political program. Unfortunately, mindful, conscious individuals are currently less likely to engage in politics and therefore less likely to have an impact on real societal change in this way. At the moment, with a few exceptions, such people tend to be repelled by the divisiveness and manipulation perpetuated by, for example, the political party system. Nevertheless, there are positive examples that can point the way forward.

The Mindfulness Initiative originating in the UK, has, for example, put hundreds of politicians and staff members through mindfulness trainings over the years, and inspired a

number of other national parliaments to begin looking at introducing their own programs. The results in the UK look to be very promising. Participants have noticed significant benefits for raising the culture of political dialogue to a higher, more conscious level.

Our vision would be that this is introduced in Montenegro and across the board in the Balkans – building on and complimenting the groundbreaking work spearheaded by Iva Mia Krušlin and her associates in Croatia. Obviously, there are differences of emphasis culturally when we come to look at the question of how to integrate this into the Balkan political frameworks. However, at the national parliament level the benefits seen in the UK experiment of increasing the level of respect, of improving the level of debate and learning how to “disagree better” (Ormston & Bristow, 2023) could have an equally profound impact in Balkan parliamentary culture.

These efforts have shown that it is indeed possible to *bring the topic of inner development into politics*. For the first time now, we are beginning to see the power that mindfulness could have if introduced across-the-board in policy areas. From reforming the education system to improving mental health and rehabilitating violent offenders, the implications are profound.

With more initiatives like this in the public sphere, our view is that a new generation of leaders would gradually begin to emerge. And as this unfolds, we can visualize a potential positive feedback loop, in which conscious individuals with new skillsets would feel that there could be a place for them in parliaments where they see others who are proverbially speaking the same language – resulting in a greater number of individuals who engage in a way that is empathic, emotionally mature and open, and speak from a place of deep conviction and authenticity. Seeing this – seeing an elevated level of political debate – the public would have the chance to reconnect once again with the representatives who serve them in a healthy way. The media might even rediscover a respect for politics, becoming allies of political change rather than agitators, in a way in which respectful scrutiny could still take place to serve democracy. Honoring the democratic contract of the free press, in a way that serves us, contributing to a healthy societal media literacy. This would be in stark contrast to what we currently have: an often toxic relationship between politicians, media and the voting public. Establishing this new relationship, and this new type of political culture, could eventually result in a real chance for fundamental systemic change in the

21st century. We must dare to dream. Even if it feels naive to do so! Anything less and we fail to articulate the vision we are collectively as a species capable of implementing.



Such a movement deserves to be taken seriously, with real investment. An investment of time, energy and financial resources to bring this properly into the public conversation. Building awareness amongst the public, around not just the existing efforts already taking place, but the potential this has, requires a huge campaign, comprising of both social media and coverage in the traditional press, as well as documentary making and various other avenues.

It is beyond the scope of this presentation today to talk about the level of financial resources it will require to build the kind of campaigns that are needed, but this is the topic that needs to really be looked at. Our view is that we must be bold and we must not be shy of illustrating a big, ambitious vision. Especially when we consider the risks of not doing so.

Lastly, it is imperative for the potential of this vision (in which our species not only

survives, but thrives in the 21st century) to reach national parliaments and significantly affect both domestic policy and foreign policy – to breakout of the academic mindfulness and mindfulness-teaching spaces, into bigger intellectual spheres, in order to reach recognized leading thinkers who can raise significant awareness at the international level. By reaching these corners that are accustomed to working with big-picture thinking, such as the communities related to metamodernism, sensemaking and integral theory, to name but a few, we can introduce the notion of political mindfulness to a far bigger audience, and attract new leading lights to the space, with real cultural leverage.

References

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