

Public Policy: Bridge over Troubled Water?

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Motto:

„An nescis, mi fili, quantilla prudentia mundus regatur.“

“You have no inkling, my son, what little knowledge it takes to rule the world.”
Pope Julius III (1550-1555)

By Way of Introduction

In the Central and East European countries, public policy is still rather a rare, we might even say alien, beast. Let me therefore attempt a general reflection on its status and potential bonuses. And let me say that many of the problems we encounter in our countries duly reflect problems experienced in more general terms by the entire humankind.

1. The State of Humankind

Surely, you will not be caught by surprise to hear me say that the world is not developing along the easy way. Arguably, tensions, conflicts and sudden twists and turns have been an inherent part of the civilization's development from time immemorial.

What, then, sets ongoing changes (sometimes referred to as the third transformation) apart from the changes of the past, and is there a difference at all? Actually, there are quite a few differences, and these can be defined as the following fundamental developmental disparities:

- Even though humankind has installed a number of international organizations and mechanisms in order to tackle its shared problems, the world has probably never been a more dangerous place (unilateralism, weapons of mass destruction and other previously unheard of means of annihilation, state-sponsored and international terrorism, global warming indicated by an exponential curve, plus other environmental risks.).
- Mankind may well be able to produce ever more resources, but
 - their consumption already now is 20 percent over their self-renewal capacity on planetary scale;
 - all efforts for their equitable distribution and use over a long term have failed in principle (consider the gigantic disproportion between arms spending and war effort on the one hand and help to marginalized and deprived individuals on the other hand)).
- Globalized financial markets apply the maximum-rent seeking strategy against individual countries. The global market speaks a single universal language – it is the money that talks. Conversely, nation-states, in their effort to reach understanding, cooperation and harmonization of their policies, have to grapple with too many cultural, linguistic, value-oriented and general civilization differences as well as inherited prejudices to be tackled, let alone overcome, in a swift and efficient manner.

- Globalization, regionalization, the emergence of horizontal cooperation networks, the overlapping of the market, the government, and the media, all this renders responsibility for the consequences of political and administrative decision ever more obfuscated.

In addition to coming to terms with these global developmental changes, the Central and East European countries have had to tackle the unprecedented task of parallel transition from centralized planned economy to a market one, from an autocratic political system to democratic pluralism, and from authoritarian public administration to one conceived as a service to citizens.

In spite of the obvious – and partly or at a limited territory even viable – efforts to assert humanistic ideals and rational solutions, one is not in a position to claim that irrational attitudes towards the steering of human affairs (with all their adverse impacts on humankind) has been on the retreat. The plausible conclusion is that humankind has not yet learned to manage its own affairs well. The human race has unleashed such dynamic and uncontrolled civilization changes that the methods of governance inherited from the past centuries hopelessly trail behind the actual developments. This situation creates dangerous hotbeds of conflicts and tensions that fan the flames of destruction and doom.

2. The Roots of Bad Governance

It is the chief presupposition of enlightenment that the power of reasoning has been bestowed upon us to use it in solving the task that we are facing, no matter how challenging and extensive they are. Unless one gives up trying and elects to identify with this assumption, one inevitably must ask where the roots of insufficient capacities of governance lie so as to be able to seek and find a remedy.

Let me try to single out a few crucial neuralgic spots characteristic of the methods of governance as we know them, and to offer a possible way how to approach and treat them:

- Disproportion between the global regulatory power of the market and the absence of a global level of public administration; the remedy is indicated by Europe's integration trends as represented chiefly by the European Union and similar (albeit not as well developed) efforts on the level of other world organizations or political summits.
- Lack of sufficient coordination on the global, national, regional and local levels of administration; the remedy possibly lies in networks supported by modern information technologies and in new regimes of public administration based on shared responsibilities.
- Differentiation of the living conditions and lifestyles carries the destruction of the organic forms of social cohesion; market liberalization leads to the weakening of institutional forms of maintaining the conditions of social cohesion – Welfare State. The largely defensive remedy against these pressures is quick adaptation of informal assistance, civil sector institutions and the welfare state to the changing conditions.
- For all the lofty slogans preaching environmental considerations and sustainable development, it is not considerate attitudes to the other forms of life and the fate of the generations to come, but rather, it is the selfish and short-term interests of individuals and corporations geared towards maximum profits that prevail. Change may only come through conscious modesty as a lifestyle and effective regulation which would protect long-term public interests.

- Lack of responsibility on the part of the political representation, and lack of responsibility for public affairs on the part of the citizen, adds up to a multiple effect. Neutralization of this negative feedback is in upbringing and education for civic virtues and in bringing all forms and frameworks of participative and direct democracy on equal footing with the traditionally better-developed democracy through representation (which, however, is no longer able to keep in step with the developmental dynamics and growing complexity of the public political roles).

3. Public Policy as a Tool of Supporting Good Governance in Central and Eastern Europe

Public policy is both a scientific discipline and a societal practice. As a scientific discipline, public policy offers the cognitive instruments helping to understand the nature of such societal problems as crime, unemployment, access to education and health care etc., their causes and consequences, as well as to elaborate the best ways of their solution. As a societal practice, public policy comprises the ways by which democratic societies are trying to identify and solve such problems.

Public policy as a scientific discipline uses the terms of reference of sociology, political science, economics, law, organizational science, public administration and other disciplines for analyzing those processes of formulating and implementing differentiated public interests used to resolve specific problems connected with the life of humankind. At the same time, it is devoted to the institutionalized management of these processes via the public, civic and to a certain degree the commercial sector in a form that can be used in political practice. Public policy is therefore a scientific discipline *sui generis* that cuts across many other scientific disciplines.

Public Policy as a Scientific Discipline

What is the situation of public policy as a scientific discipline in the Central and East European countries? Unlike the United States where public policy began to take shape during the 1960s, change in our region was not brought about until after the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. Today's capabilities duly reflect this delay in time. Although there exist a number of think-tanks here that are working to develop analytical and advisory activities derived from the theoretical concepts and implementing the methods of this discipline, such efforts have yet to overcome their teething problems such as ideological, methodological and/or disciplinary bias as well as short-termism. Another problem lies in the often not-too-sufficient differentiation between critical scholarly advice and pragmatic political service as is apparent in the activities of some public policy think-tanks and/or individual analysts. The educational capacities of public policy are quite modest – complete university programs are available only in a few countries of the region. Likewise, public policy education in in-service programs for civil servants is every bit as marginal and rudimentary.

However, the educational base is gradually extending. Last year, NISPACEe supervised the release of a textbook that reflects specific public roles facing public policy in this region.

Public Policy as a Societal Practice

In this region, public policy practice maybe lags behind the requirements more severely than public policy theory. Without attempting to give you an exhaustive overview, I would like to point out the chief deficits of good governance in individual nation-states:

- Weak governments tend to have meager means and resources to enforce vital structural and functional change in the economy and policy. This is due to Constitutional limitations (such as the proportional election system or limited powers of the central governments) as well as insufficient support from political parties, and their (often fragile) coalitions.
- Representation of group and individual interests through political parties is far from perfect. The party system is unstable and the parties' internal management and funding is not transparent. Recruitment and party life are low-profile and thereby not conducive to improvement in the field of human resources. Party oligarchy calls the tune.
- Insufficient capacity for strategic management gives precedence to the satisfaction of selfish and narrow-group interests to the detriment of public and long-term interests.
- Government ministries cannot coordinate their activities.
- Political and administrative decisions are made and enforced without sufficient analytical support or stem from limited single-disciplinary analysis.
- Communication between the actors on the public stage in the course of drafting, adopting, implementing and evaluation of policies is insufficient and lacks expert and capacity-backed support. The same holds true of communication between actors in the public, commercial and civil sectors, as well as politicians, officials, academics and citizens themselves.
- Internationally tried and proven methods of administration and management, such as multi-year financing, performance auditing, target programming, target-oriented management, matrix organizational structures etc., are not applied efficiently.

In Conclusion

All in all, there exists enormous need in Central and Eastern Europe of the further development and perfection of public policy as a scientific discipline as well as educational program delivered by universities and included both in the in-service training programs and in societal practice. To support its development is to significantly reduce huge political losses brought about by bad governance. Its innovative potential is therefore quite massive and indispensable. Yet still, many obstacles and hardships lie ahead.

The ideal model of good governance is not known, and probably never will be. What really counts is the speed of transformation whereby every innovation of governance enabled by public policy will have ceased to fully meet the challenge the minute it was introduced. We are zeroing-in on a habitually fugitive target. It is therefore not for me to claim that Central and Eastern Europe is not in for developmental setbacks or local disasters caused by the significant failure of public policy, as evidenced by the recent developments in the Balkans.

A well developed public policy or the lack of it may be that proverbial tip of the scale. The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe is instrumental today and will probably be instrumental tomorrow as well. This is the behest of its founder, Alena Brunovská, and today I accept the award named after her with pride, gratitude, and the feeling of great commitment to her legacy.

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