

CONSEQUENCES OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL INTERACTION ON PUBLIC POLICY OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper has as its main objective the critical analysis of role played by different organizations, social groups and people, in general, in the design, implementation and evaluation of the public policies. Our approach contradicts the traditional perspective on the role of the state in the public policies, seen as the only actor involved in this process, being neutral, beyond group interests and acting for the public good. We demonstrate the important role played by key social groups, starting with the birth of public policies, through the process of social and political mobilization. We are concerned especially with the role of the state in regulating of social competition between people and groups, in imposing rules within this competition and in the distribution and redistribution of social rewards (wealth, power, prestige, etc.). We demonstrate the role of the interaction between people, groups and organizations in the public policy fabric, through examples and mini-case studies taken from public policies, mostly in Romania. The present paper does not give definitive answers to these problems, but it is an invitation to polemics and it opens suggestions for future research.

***Keywords:** interpretative turn, policy failure, political mobilization, public policy, social groups*

INTRODUCTION

This paper has as its main objective the critical analysis of role played by different organizations, social groups and people, in general, in the design, implementation and evaluation of the public policies. Our approach contradicts the traditional perspective on the role of the state in the public policies, seen as the only actor involved in this process, being neutral, beyond group interests and acting for the public good. We demonstrate the important role played by key social groups, starting with the birth of public policies, through the process of social and political mobilization. We are concerned especially with the role of the state in regulating of social competition between the social groups involved in the policy making process. The states are imposing rules within this competition and, also, regarding the distribution and redistribution of social rewards (wealth, power, prestige, etc.) to people, social groups and different organizations. But these rules are, in fact, the results of the multiple social and political interactions, benefitting the cause of the most visible and influential social groups. In order to understand all these mechanisms, we use inspiration from the interpretative perspective in public policies, network policy and policy community approaches. The recent

researches and studies from this millennium lean towards a "postmodern" analysis of public policies [1], which expresses the actual power relations and the struggle of different social groups for visibility and legitimation. The visibility and legitimation offer to the respective social groups the opportunity of access to various benefits, both of materially and symbolically kind. We try to demonstrate the interaction between people, groups and organizations in the public policy fabric, through examples and mini-case studies taken from public policies in Romania, but also from other countries, investigating situations such as: the techniques by which various groups try to influence the public policy design, implementation and evaluation; the techniques by which various groups try to neutralize the action of other groups; the social construction of the target groups; the policy failures and/or success; reforming labor legislation; creating equal opportunities. The present paper does not give definitive answers to these problems, but is an invitation to polemics and it opens new research potentialities.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Our methodological approach is based on a recent paradigm switch in public policy analysis: from positivism to interpretivism [2]. This important change opened the use of hermeneutics and discursive methods in a field that was dominated by rational choice and quantophrenia. Consequently, the scientific study does not necessarily look for causalities anymore, but seeks to understand the interactions between the social and political actors that make up the fabric of public policies. Thus, the analysis of public policies becomes a relational one, no longer focusing on institutional mechanisms and systems, inputs and outputs, but on the relationships between different stakeholders.

Therefore, the methods we used are from the category of those based on secondary and qualitative analysis: bibliographic analysis, conceptual analysis, critical discourse analysis, processual analysis and hermeneutic analysis. As main sources, we used studies and scientific articles, but also information taken from the mass media and official documents. The research does not only have a general and synthetic approach, but goes down to the concreteness of specific social situations, involving several mini-case studies and comparisons.

THEORY

In the scientific literature of our days, we can find works that analyze public policies, their archaeology, and history, based both on accumulations and leaps. But, in our opinion, looking for policy initiatives prior the birth of public policies does not mean finding origins and explanations. Similar to the study of any issues, here too there is no single answer, but rather a complex of factors that favored the genesis of public policies. We can talk about several theoretical perspectives, sometimes overlapping.

Several authors, reflecting, in fact, an intuition of common sense, arrive at the idea that policies are based on ideas. The change of ideas and the emergence of new ideas lead to the birth of new policies and/or to the modification of existing ones. But where and why do other ideas come from? Specific circumstances give birth to a spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*), but policies can also be both the unintended and deliberate consequences of professional practices or bureaucratic routines and, sometimes, of hazard [3].

The explanations being so complex and diverse, it is necessary to simplify, even if this means a deprivation of the cognitive content.

Before establishing a public policy, it is necessary to be aware of the social problem to which it is addressed and to put this problem both on the public agenda and on the agenda of the government [4].

How does a subject or a risk group come from obscurity and marginality to the spotlight of public attention? In our opinion, this aspect has had a dominant approach that puts too much emphasis on legislative and institutional processes [5] and ignores the role of people, either as individuals or gathered in social groups.

The study of social groups in public policies shows their political mobilization and their interaction with state institutions and other groups. In order to become important in this interaction, social groups must first of all establish themselves as actors, build their identity and become visible in the public space, visibility being an important political and economic resource [6]. History shows how the working class organized itself as a socio-political actor by forming unions and parties and by alliance with other dissatisfied groups (farmers, intellectuals, small owners). These organizations and alliances contributed to the forging of the welfare state. Esping-Andersen launched an interesting direction of research by analyzing the impact of political ideologies on public policies [7]. The ideology of the political parties in power - for longer or shorter periods of time - influences the policies of the respective governments and the models of welfare states.

Apart from the working class, other groups also enter the stage of history and build their identity, express their demands, organize themselves, become visible, vocal and important, for both Government and society. This process is influenced by the speed with which these groups access resources. Thus, women have faster access than ethnic and racial minorities because some of them were part of the middle and upper classes. Instead, due to strong taboos, sexual minorities had to wait until the 80s. The conclusion of this analysis is that the target groups of public policies are not determined rationally by the public authority, but they are (self)constructed socially and politically [8].

The construction of target groups can be positive or negative. In the positive one, target groups are defined as excluded or disadvantaged and the specific

policies are based on the empowering paradigm. If the target groups are defined as dependent or deviants, this determines paternalistic or punitive policy paradigms [9].

Interactionists are more interested, however, in the complex and specific process of bringing issues to the public agenda, through the interactions between social and political actors, during the design and implementation of public policies. A policy community is created [10] between public authorities and the related sector, represented by trade unions, professional associations, other NGOs active in the field, specialized media, etc. All these actors are sometimes in conflict, other times in agreement, but always linked to each other and working within the same framework. The involvement of associative actors in public policies is justified by the need for peaceful resolution of potential conflicts and by the principle of representing the interests of all social and professional categories; however, through a political "alchemy", only certain organizations are considered representative of the respective social groups and, thus, be elevated to the rank of a respectable social partner. Thus, this "alchemy" gives access to the stage of public policies of some groups and prevents the entry of other groups.

In this way, policy networks [11] are developed, where all the involved actors (stakeholders) interact. The dynamic between the role of the state and that of social groups in public policies is very complex. Peter A. Hall [12] applies the concept of social learning to the macroeconomic policy design in the period 1970-1989, when an important paradigm shift took place, from Keynesianism to neoliberalism. Why are the policy paradigms changing? For Hall, the problem of authority is central for explaining this change: how authority is perceived, how it is redefined, who owns it, how it is exercised. Thus, the interactive dynamics between the state and society and the mutual exchange of ideas, information and practices between different groups (bureaucrats, political leaders, pressure groups, mass media, audiences, experts) contribute to public policy change. This process is not completely elucidated by the British author, who leaves numerous dilemmas and questions unanswered. Thus, the origin, change and disappearance of a public policy is a research enterprise, that can be explored endlessly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The public policies are hard-to-anticipate results of social-political interaction. This interaction explains, for instance, policy failures, as perverse effects of "rational" policies. For example, the passive social protection policies of the unemployed are based on a Keynesian reasoning: the major cause of economic crises in a market economy is overproduction. Governments can minimize this problem by stimulating consumption. For this, they must support the incomes of those – unemployed included - who lost them precisely because of the crises. By alleviating these problems, the rulers provoke other harmful ones, such as economic dependence, passivity and discouragement. Thus, they have little chance of becoming productive again. The Governments, no matter how

competent and well-intentioned, fail every time they design and implement policies - for the public good or the risk groups - when they do not take into account the expectations, needs and desires of the people, as well as their social and psychological characteristics.

Since rulers are human beings and not divine, they are not able to decide what is good for other people, sometimes even against the will of these people. Conflictual policies, which are not accepted by relevant groups in society, have little legitimacy and high risks of turning into failures. We can give here the example of the construction of blockhouses in the villages, within the "systematization of localities", project implemented in Romania by the Ceaușescu regime (1965 - 1989). Theoretically, the creation of modern, urban living conditions should have pleased those who lived in houses with latrines at the bottom of the garden, wood-burning stoves and water taps on the street. However, the regime disregarded people's attachment to this way of living in individual, autonomous housing units, that create their identity and psychological comfort - and not in the "housing factories" that were the blocks.

The interactionist approach also explains why very well-designed, very rational policies - having sufficient resources and competent specialists - still fail. The failure of these policies may be due to the fact that they did not take into account the interactions between the groups involved. A typical case is that of the representative interlocutor. The government - in order to simplify and streamline the social dialogue in the policy design process - often selects, from the multitude of associations and confederations, only one, which it considers, for various reasons, more representative (or, perhaps, more convenient). This selection can determine a process of coagulation and unification of the actors from the respective sector; but it can also cause the violent reaction of the groups that were excluded from policy design and the sabotage of the respective policy by these groups. Thus, in Romania, the selection of representatives of non-governmental organizations in the Economic and Social Council is quite arbitrary and this has often blocked the social dialogue in important sectoral policies, such as environmental protection or consumer protection. But not only conflictual policies, but, also, the consensual ones can fail. Even if some consensus has been reached in society regarding the definition of urgent social problems and the solutions for them, the implementation can be a failure. We can find two examples from reforms of Romania's electoral legislation: the increase of the mandate of the President of the Republic from 4 to 5 years (revision of the Constitution in 2003) and the 2008 replacement of the party-list (proportional representation) in the general elections, with an "uninominal" (in fact, mixed) voting system. Both measures were based on a rational approach, trying, on previous experience, to improve the results of electoral processes. Thus, increasing the president's mandate to 5 years would have led to the delay of the presidential elections compared to the parliamentary ones and would have contributed, thus, to the separation of the two types of elections. The voters would have decided more adequately, the electoral competitors would have had greater equality of chances,

the risk of a certain party capturing all the positions in the state would have decreased, democracy would have been more consolidated. In reality, this measure accentuated the conflicts between the president and the government, damaged the coherence of public policies, led to additional costs related to the electoral campaign and elections, created tensions and confusion in the public space. The other example, the transition from party-list voting to quasi-uninominal voting, was also based on relative consensus and previous experience. Thus, it was found that candidates of low value, opportunists, clients or sponsors of the parties, who were not really accountable to the citizens, hiding behind the party, were passed and elected on these lists. Instead, by voting for "a person and not a list", the voters could make a more specific choice, guided not by an abstract ideology but by the knowledge of a person in the flesh, who will answer to them in case of non-fulfilment of promises. The power and autonomy of the citizens would have increased, their options would have been more diversified, with greater chances for valuable competitors, even if they were not supported by strong parties. The results of the implementation of this measure were, however, disappointing: the quality, credibility and efficiency of the Parliament did not increase, among its members there were many personalities outside politics, without political skills but enjoying popularity as well as local potentates capable of manipulating the voters through their own patronage network. The above examples show the limits of rationality in public policies: good intentions and lessons learned from previous experiences are not enough. No matter how much the knowledge advances, it will always be impossible to accurately anticipate all the consequences of socio-political interaction on the policy outcomes.

We saw that there are consensual or conflicting policies. Most of the time, the interaction takes the form of a competition between social actors, and reason and science do not win, but power and influence. Competition is not always a fair or transparent one, or based on equal opportunities. The interested groups (stakeholders) have different resources and the strongest, most influential, most skilled or most able to negotiate and forge coalitions will win. For example, employment policies can be decided not only by governments but also by the most influential social actors in the respective national, social and political context. These actors can be unions, employers' associations, foreign investors, etc., and the complex game of interaction between them has led to the metamorphosis of policies in the field, reflected, for example, in the revision of the Labor Code in Romania [13]. The post-communist Labor Code was adopted in 2004 with the imprint of the Social Democratic Party and of the unions, but in 2011, during the economic crisis, foreign investors won the cause and some social rights were restricted.

The concept of influence can be useful in clarifying why the aspirations of a specific social group are favored. The influence of a group (on the mass media, the public and political decision-makers) is determined by the resources of that group (money, people, connections, visibility, skills, information, organizations) and the way these resources are strategically used to exert pressure on society.

Thus, we can understand why, in many cases, the (re)distribution of resources is not directed to the most disadvantaged groups but, on the contrary, to the best positioned on the map of power and influence. The neglect of some needs of poor groups and the favoring of others is visible, for example, in the way urban services - schools, kindergartens, hospitals, public transport - are distributed in Bucharest, where poor neighborhoods are systematically disadvantaged.

The techniques by which various groups try to neutralize the action of other groups are also interesting. Thus, some public policies are also legitimized by co-opting, integrating or appointing representatives of pressure groups (trade unions, churches, and associations) in different public, consultative or decision-making bodies. That is why there is a real inflation of such "committees and commissions", with a rather symbolic than instrumental role. They are, at best, debate forums and do not exert a real pressure on the decision. Their activity is formal and ritualistic. Pressure groups can also be neutralized by offering advantages: fiscal facilities, regulatory and control power in the respective field (for example, the College of Physicians, administrative boards and autonomous bodies but under state control, such as Social and health insurance organizations).

There are periods when the attention - of the public, media and government - turns to one risk group or another, without apparent plausible explanations, as if it were fashion. Thus, at the beginning of the '90, the problems of people with disabilities reached the public space in Romania. These problems were hidden (literally and figuratively) by the communist regime. Literally, because the residential institutions for these people were generally located in isolated, hard-to-reach areas. Figuratively speaking, because the suffering of these people was not "nice" in the typical communist atmosphere of forced optimism and avoidance of difficulties. Discovered and placed like a mirror in front of the Romanian public by foreign television reports, the tragic realities in institutions for people with disabilities triggered the beginnings of a process of awareness and empathy. A new legislation was adopted regarding the improvement of the social protection of these persons, the State secretariate for the disabled was established, (timid) deinstitutionalization measures were taken.

A decade later, another problem and another risk group became "stars": the adoption of children, especially the international adoption of institutionalized children. It has gone from the very lax policies of the 90s to the complete blocking of international adoptions. A key role in this dynamic was played by the European Parliament, which considered the way in which these adoptions were carried out as a generator of abuses and corruption.

In fact, we can consider public policies not only as action but also non-action, ignoring some social groups, disregarding some needs, lacking of measures and programs for social improvement, silencing and hiding some social issues. This can often be explained by the phenomena of social marginalization and exclusion,

as in the case of the Roma, the young NEETs, the LGBTQ+ community in Romania.

Not only individuals and groups can behave according to their own interests, aspirations and needs, but also organizations and political and administrative institutions, such as: the government, parliament, political parties, local public administration, etc. There is not always a coherence and a unitary approach on the part of these institutions, each being interested in its own survival and development, in increasing its own resources and influence. That is why cases of both concealed and open conflicts are not rare, such as the case of the relationship between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Interior regarding the management of the pandemic in Romania (2020-2022).

Among the groups that contribute to the policy design are also those that play a major role in their implementation: workers in the public sector, in large state bureaucracies, in central and local administration and in public services. Their everyday professional experience turns them into important sources of information regarding needs, problems, dysfunctions "in the system". Thus, they can signal the need for new policies or reforming of existing ones. A reform of the Highway Code cannot be conceived without the policemen's point of view, nor a new Education Law without the contribution of teachers.

Communication in contemporary society, facilitated by new technologies and the expansion of mass media, has contributed to the spread of so-called "good practices" in public policies. Many countries and communities face similar problems and needs and their public policies are often based on the knowledge and use of the experiences of other states. Thus, public policies are based on a continuous process of mutual learning, of finding and disseminating the best solutions, which have yielded results in other contexts and which can be "replicated", adapted or combined. For example, the administration of Bucharest wanted to be inspired by the way public services in Vienna are organized and to apply this model to the capital of Romania.

The transfer of public policies takes place not only horizontally (from one state to another, from one community to another) but also vertically (from the supranational to the national level and vice versa). Actors of public policies are located not only at the national and local level but also at the international level. Organizations in the UN system (including the World Bank) and the European Union have played a major role in the last decades in advancing the ideas of equal opportunities and in putting these ideas into practice. European integration can also lead to a new map of power, because the European Union is sensitive to the problems of excluded or marginal groups, who, as a rule, did not have much influence domestically but who can lobby in the European Parliament or that can find listening and support in various European forums.

Last but not least, we must mention the role of political leaders, of individuals, of strong and visionary personalities, who contributed to the forging of progressive policies, sometimes starting from apparent utopias.

CONCLUSION

The main conclusion of the study– illustrated by the analyzed examples in our paper - is that the interaction between the state, different other organizations and social groups plays a key role in the design, implementation and evaluation of the public policies. This role is reflected in the policy outcomes, in its success or failure. It was surprising that although failure is characteristic of conflictual policies, it can also appear in consensual policies, when their implications are not sufficiently taken into consideration. Public policies are actually the result of this social-political interaction. Thus, the groups that manage to gain - thanks to the resources at their disposal - visibility and legitimacy are also the ones that decisively influence public policy outcomes. Certain groups use various techniques for neutralizing the action of other groups: control of resources, co-opting the other group leaders, integrating the relevant members or offering benefits. The social-political interaction is inevitable but sometimes it can weaken the public policies. That is why a well-articulated legal and institutional framework is desirable, which will determine predictable and well-established relations between all stakeholders.

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