

PUBLIC POLICY IN TROUBLED WATERS

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Working paper still in progress. Comments welcome.

At the 12th Annual NISPAcee Conference in Vilnius, Lithuania in May 2004 I presented a public lecture “*Public Policy: Bridge over Troubled Water?*” (Potůček 2005) It was also the month when nine Central and Eastern European countries plus Cyprus became new members of the European Union.

It might be intellectually interesting and practically potentially productive to have a look at previous thoughts and hopes and confront them with the actual situation and future developmental trends. Let me offer you this critical self-reflection.

The theme of the old lecture was identical with the present one. I tried to confront the problems of governance we faced at that time with the potential of public policy as - at least in Central and Eastern Europe – a newly emerging, promising academic discipline and societal practice. The spirit of the times in our region was quite optimistic. Nevertheless, I put forward some reasons why ending the title of my presentation with a question mark, not with a full stop.

Nowadays, even if public policy is a fast developing, booming discipline, threatening and unsolved problems of governance and human situation make me more pessimistic in Prague nowadays than in Vilnius at that time. I would like to offer you some hints why, paradoxically enough, public policy is dramatically lagging behind the evolving needs to solve problems of governance, and, consequently, humankind.

I will start with the empirical evidence of the development of our discipline. I will continue by enumerating present and developmental challenges of governance at a global, European and nation-state level. Calling your attention to the widening gap between the two, I will both argue why I do not see any robust bridge crossing this gap as I foresaw fifteen years ago, and encourage all of us to try to build if not bridges, then at least footbridges to close these widening ruptures.

Booming discipline:

Apart from plentiful journals devoted to various aspects of public policy one can see a short, newly emerging, but successful history of Biennial International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP) with fewer than one thousand participants in Grenoble (2013) to 1,300 attendees in Milan (2015) and Singapore (2017). I am sure that the fourth ICPP conference in Montreal (June 2019) will attract even more numerous participation.

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International Library of Policy Analysis, issued by Policy Press in Bristol may serve as another indicator of the world-wide spread of the discipline: between 2013 and 2018, fourteen volumes, overviewing the state-of-the art of the discipline in particular countries, comprised Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Israel, Taiwan, Turkey and United States. Publishing houses are keen to publish monographs and textbooks, universities launch new courses and study programs...

Threatening and deepening problems of societies and governance:

In a parallel way, there is clear evidence of huge developmental discrepancies which make our life less secure, less understandable, more fragile and in many ways unjust. Let us have a look at this phenomenon at global, European and national level.

At global level:

- The destruction of the formal and informal post-WW2 order, associated with failures of post-colonial development in the developing world. The world has probably never been a more dangerous place (unscrupulous violation of international law by superpowers, technological development of weapons of mass destruction and other previously unheard means of annihilation, local wars, and terrorism on the rise).
- Mankind is able to produce more and more resources, but their consumption exceeds the resource capacity in an increasing ratio of exploitation over planetary self-renewal capacity.
- Global warming on the rise indicated by an exponential curve, plus other risks associated with environmental deterioration, such as extinction of millions of living species (Climate Change 2019). The attempt to universally accept and obey the international agreement on the fight against global warming has failed. (Paris Agreement 2015)
- All efforts for the more equitable distribution and use of resources over a long term have been unsuccessful. Scissors are opening up between the rich and poor.

At the EU level:

- The crisis of welfare states at national level due to globalization. In the EU, partially also due to Europeanization. (Potůček 2018)
- Low legitimacy of European Union in the eyes of European citizens.
- The European “troika” (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) were rolling democratic decision making procedures at national level (Greece, Italy...).
- The story of Brexit. The threat of further disintegration of the EU (present elections).
- An inconsistent engagement of the EU in Ukraine, deteriorated relations to Russia.
- Political extremism and authoritarianism on the rise.
- The rising indebtedness of the majority of the EU Member States.

At the level of nation states, political representatives are finding themselves in a trap; most problems citizens believe they should solve are outside their political and economic control. This is closely associated with an open crisis of liberal democracy and traditional forms of democratic mediation of interests. On one hand, we can observe splitting liberal democratic

societies with deepening societal and economic cleavages (namely in the United Kingdom, France, USA, or Italy). (Ringen 2013)

On the other hand, we witness the rise of authoritarian regimes, some with booming economies, but all seriously violating basic human and political rights. (Ringen 2016) In between these extreme cases, we can find countries with hybrid constellation of authoritarian regimes misusing formally democratic processes and institutions (in Latin America, in the Middle East, in some ex-communist countries).

General symptoms of crisis in governance:

In his seminal work *“The Capacity to Govern”*, published at the very beginning of the third Millennium, Dror called attention to obvious incapacity of mankind to rule its own affairs. The context of recent economic and political development has accented his conclusion.

- Power and wealth of multinational companies exceeds the regulatory power of nation states and international political and administrative attempts to channel them. (Lindblom 1977)
- Globalization, regionalization, 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.
- The capture of public administration by wealthy moguls of market and powerful media owners’ intrusion of market and media actors into a political and administrative sphere).
- Widespread myopic decision making without strategic perspective and precaution at all levels, due to the lack of competence and impact of political electoral cycle.
- Controversial influence of social media in public space.
- The overarching incidence of corruption.

Why is public policy as a scientific discipline lagging behind such a development?

- Theories are not able to catch up with unique societal transformations, not experienced in the past.
- Cognitive problems to be solved are complex, disciplinary boundaries and explanatory frameworks of different social sciences are rigid, scholars from different branches are not motivated to help each other and collaborate.
- Social sciences face great difficulties to analyse the impact of globalization as their traditional subject matter used to be nation states. They have tried to solve this problem, among others, by applying an analytically not very strong concept of multilevel governance.
- There is a widespread incidence of “imperialism of economics” as one-sided explanation of societal problematics, often driven by strong, hidden or open, economic interests.

Can we enhance our capabilities in order to close the gap between our knowledge and capacities of governance?

As scholars responsible for general societal welfare, we are obliged to mobilize our cognitive capabilities by closing the gap between disposable theories and real-life developments. As an example might serve the need for a better explanation of the role of mass communication, and

namely social media, in governance, as there is the undeveloped recognition of media power in influencing the minds of citizens as well as political representatives. Greater attention should be paid to the development of more general conceptual frameworks able to absorb and utilize the approaches of associated disciplines (demography, sociology, economics, political science, informatics, public administration, media studies, cultural studies, psychology, anthropology, medicine...). (Potůček 2017)

I would intensively focus on all forms of public policy education. It should be based on mediation of both latest theoretical and methodological achievements of the discipline, and sharing experience of their implementation in practice. As such, it represent a serious challenge to public policy schools. Helmut Anheier (2019) sees their way forward as follows:

- *“Become more reflective of the conditions of democratic society that make public policy schools possible now and in future, and therefore focus not only on the realisation of given political objectives but on their formation as well;*
- *Take seriously the curricular reforms needed to address the needs of a changed student body on the one hand, and the changed needs of employers on the other;*
- *Anticipate the profound changes that digitalisation is bringing not only to public administration systems but also to society at large;*
- *Find ways to show that evidence matters and that the Weberian ethics and call for public stewardship are still very much valid and essential to allow the polarised elite to engage in policy discourse.”*

Last but not least, another important skill to be trained is to learn and apply effective ways of direct collaboration between academicians, politicians, civil servants, journalists, and citizens.

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This is the genuine content of the 27th NISPAcee Annual Conference with its heading *“From Policy Design to Policy Practice”*. I hope that you will be able to turn my scepticism into a cautious optimism by a concentrated effort to make the outcomes of this conference an influential set of present and future steps exactly in this direction.

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