

Public policies and political sciences: theories or patterns

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Abstract

The concept of "public policy" entered the specialized studies and in current language in Romania quite late (at the end of the '90s) and there are still many ambiguities at the level of common sense over the scope of this nation.

The concept of "public policy" experiences a series of definitions, starting from the most simplistic one – what governments choose to do or not to do – to the instrumentalist one: a course of the action with a specific purpose, followed by an actor or group of actors in addressing a problem.

Key Words: *policy, public, government, program.*

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The analyze of definitions found in the specialized literature shows that the notion of political is crucial for defining "public policies", and is used in several senses, either to define an area of public activities, a group of objects or programs undertaken by government, a set of rules or a law passed in a field, the product of governmental actions, or even the impact of government activities on society.

The following elements are common to all these acceptations:

- ❖ Policy is a set of actions ,decision
- ❖ Policy is adopted by administrative public institutions that have public power
- ❖ Aims to achieve some actions that satisfy certain general interests

The features of public policies are:

- An ensemble of measures
- Comprises actions , activates, decisions or financial resources, whose achievement or allocations is ensured by constraining force (
- Represents the general framework of issues identified being the subject of public policy
- Subjects or recipients are determined by the object of public policy issues (Profiroiu, 2009: 13-14).

"Public policy" as an academic pursuit emerged in the beginning of 1950s and since then it has been acquiring new dimensions, and is struggling hard to acknowledge the status of a discipline of the comity of social science. As a study of products of government, policy forms a significant component in many courses in numerous disciplines –political sciences, public administration, economics, and management. So rapid is the growth that many researchers, teachers, public administrators now feel that it is becoming more and more unmanageable. The disciplines required to comprehend public policy cut right across the old academic lines of demarcation. Indeed, it is this

interdisciplinary quality which makes the field of public policy interesting and thought-provoking.

“Public policy” is a concept now much in vogue. It is a frequently used term in our daily life and in our academic literature, where we often make references to the national health policy, the new education policy, wage policy, agricultural policy; American or French foreign are so labelled as public. The concept of public policy presupposes that there is a domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common.

In the past, studies on public policy were dominated by researchers and students of political science who largely concentrated on the institutional structure and philosophical justification of the government. The focus was rarely on the policies themselves. Political science was to some extent preoccupied with the activities of the various political institutions and groups in relation to their success in the pursuit of political power. It hardly recognized the role which such organizations played towards the formation of policy as one of its main concerns. Yet the policy is an important element of the political process.

Thomas Dye, a leading scholar of policy analysis, says: *“Traditional (political science) studies described the institutions in which public policy was formulated. But unfortunately the linkages between important institutional arrangements and the content of public policy were largely unexplored”*. He further believes that today focus of political science is shifting to public policy- *“to the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity”*. While the concern of political science about the processes by which public policy was determined, has increased, most students of public administration would acknowledge that the public servants themselves are intimately involved in the shaping of the policies. The study of public administration has hitherto tended to concentrate on the organization of public authorities, the

behavior of public servants and increasingly, the methods of resource allocation, administration and review. With such an approach, it is difficult to determine much about the way policy is formulated, although it is generally contended that the experience of policy implementation feeds back into the furtherance of policy –making process. But public policy is more “political” than public administration. It is an effort to apply political science to public affairs but has concerns with processes inside the field of public administration (Sapru, 2004: 1-2).

From our point of view, a public policy represents a set of measures taken by a legal authority and responsible aimed at improving the living conditions of citizens or designing measures taken by a legal authority and responsible aimed at improving the living conditions of citizens or designing measures to stimulate economic growth. It provides, in general, a concentration of different actors and a correlation of the lessons learned from their institutional and personal experiences. It can often take the form of regulation or incentives that determine the social and economic environment.

One of the aspects that we need to understand in the process of policy making is that it can be seen both as an analytical process (solving problem), but also as a political process.

More than the analytical approach of the policy-making process is important the set of activities and approaches that Deborah Stone calls “rationality project”, which in U.S.A, and other countries too, represented a long process of rationalization of public policies, by maximizing the achievement of public objectives.

Education, health, social assistance, transportation, roads are some of the aspects that from the social context in which we conduct our lives. In their absence, life would certainly be unbearable, concerning the privileged perspectives in which are situated as beneficiaries of those benefits. Even though each individual has different medical or education needs, everyone has

such needs. And the level of their members depends on that every individual reap the benefits of development and survival.

The implementation of these commitments regarding the welfare of society members are achieved through public policy. But what is common to all these acceptations are the following elements:

- Policy is a set of actions, decisions;
- Policy is adopted by administrative public institutions that have public power;
- There must be aims to achieve some actions that satisfy certain general interests.

Into a concise definition, public policy represents “*what governments decide to do or not to do*”.

Among that most relevant definition of public policy , we mention:

- Everything a government decides to do or not to do;
- A set of interrelated decisions, taken by a political actor or a group of actors, concerning a set of purposes and means that need to be achieved in a given situation;
- A course of the action followed by an actor or more political actors, with a purpose in trying to solve a problem.

The features of public policies: an ensemble of measures; comprises actions, activities, decisions or financial resources, whose achievement or allocations is ensured by constraining force; represents the general framework of issues identified as being the subject of public policy; subjects or recipients are determined by the object of public policy issues; aims to accomplish some objectives or determined purposes.

Through the patterns of occurrence of public policy, we can meet more situations:

- Public policies - determined by research;
- Public policies, by imposing the offer;
- Chaining of public policies.

This process of providing public policy highlights several actors: policy providers, the administration, participants in political action (Profiroiu, 2009: 13-18).

If public policies consist of a group of activities and decisions taken by different actors with a view to resolving a problem that is politically defined as public in nature, it is important first and foremost to look into the actual concept of “public problem”.

In this chapter, we discuss the processes whereby a social problem is identified and then “defined” as a public problem as well as the different characteristics of agenda setting. According to our analytical model, the political definition of the public problem (PD) constitutes, in effect, the first product that the analyst must study when tackling the cycle of public intervention in the context of an empirical study.

In reality, the processes involving the political definition – and redefinition – of public problems have not been the subject of theoretical and empirical analyses that are comparable, in number at least, with those carried out on the (subsequent) stages of policy programming, implementation and evaluation. Obviously, the failure to take stakes associated with the definition of the problem tackled by a policy into account is a definite drawback when it comes to the analysis of this policy, including studies carried out on its implementation.

Yet we know that the problem definition stage frames and generates virtually everything that follows in the policy process, so our failures to examine problem definition sentences us to operate through a glass darkly (DeLeon, 1994: 89).

As Anderson (1978: 20) and others demonstrate, the development of a policy cannot be interpreted as a simple resolution of given problems defined on the basis of their inner characteristics. It also involves the constitution and definition of public problems. This is a political designation process that influences or determines the actors involved in the policy (that is,

the public authorities of the political-administrative arrangement, the target groups, the end beneficiaries and third-party groups), and the actual nature of the public actions carried out (that is, the modes of intervention selected in the political-administrative program).

From this perspective and by way of introduction, we stress the need for a (re-)constructive analysis of public problems. Then, in accordance with the structure proposed in Chapter Six, we will move on to the general definition and functionality of the concept of “public problem”. Finally, we identify the agenda-setting processes on the basis of the strategies of the frame this first stage.

In order to analyze a problem relevant to the public sphere and on this basis legitimize public intervention, it is necessary to adopt a constructivist approach. In effect, it is reasonable to assume that no objective fact constitutes a problem in itself (Cobb and Elder, 1983: 172; Dery, 1984: 11). The (social and political) definition of a problem always represents a collective construction directly linked to the perceptions, representations, interests and values of the actors concerned on an individual basis and/or as part of organized groups. Thus, all social reality should be understood as a historical construction, situated in time and space. It always depends on the constellation of the people affected by the problem and/or those whose behavior may need to change to solve it.

It is important that the reader fully understands what we are saying here: it is never a question of denying the objective conditions that constitute a problematic situation (for example, what represents a threat to climate stability, the permanent nature of the situation of growing number of people seeking

employment whose material and psychological situation becomes precarious, the high frequency of acts of violence in urban areas, the massive influx of war represent one of the dimensions) even if it proves fundamental in some cases-that constitute a social problem. Thus, the role of the policy analyst consists in indentifying the processes, actors and arguments by means of which these objective conditions are perceived and defined as problematic and requiring state intervention.

The adoption of constructivist approach to the reality of the social problems and policy has at the least three implications for the manner of analytical consideration – that is, the reconstruction and interpretation –of public actions (Vlassopoulou,1999: 13-17) and, even more specifically, the policy products (Larrue,Varone, 2011: 131-132).

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