

## Public Policy in Troubled Waters<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

At the 12<sup>th</sup> 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 the 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 to 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 of the reasons why, ending the title of my presentation with a question mark, not a full stop.

Nowadays, even if public policy is a fast developing, booming discipline, threatening and unsolved problems of governance and the human situation made me more pessimistic in Prague in 2019 than in Vilnius fifteen years ago. I would like to offer you some hints as to why, paradoxically enough, public policy is dramatically lagging behind the evolving needs to solve the problems of governance and, consequently, mankind.

I will begin 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

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1 This is the updated version of a key-note speech at the 27<sup>th</sup> NISPAcee Annual Conference “From Policy Design to Policy Practice”, Prague, May 24–26 2019.

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this gap as I foresaw in 2004, and encourage all of us to try to build, if not bridges, then at least footbridges to close these widening chasms.

## **Public Policy – A Booming Discipline**

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Apart from the many journals devoted to various aspects of public policy, one can see a short, newly emerging, but successful history of Biennial International Conferences on Public Policy (ICPP) with fewer than one thousand participants in Grenoble (2013) to 1,300 attendees in Milan (2015) and Singapore (2017). More than 1300 participants from 84 different countries took part in the conference in Montreal (2019), which was organised with more than 20 themes, 170 panels and 300 sessions.

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

## **Threatening and Deepening Problems of Societies and Governance**

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Similarly, there is clear evidence of huge developmental discrepancies which make our lives less secure, less understandable, more fragile and, in many ways, unjust. Let us look at this phenomenon at global, European and national levels.

### **At Global Level**

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More than seventy years after the end of WW2, associated with failures of post-colonial development in the developing world, we witness the destruction of a post-war international order: unscrupulous violation of international laws by superpowers, technological development of weapons of mass destruction and other previously unheard of means of annihilation, local wars, and, last but not least, the rise in terrorism.

Mankind is able to produce more and more resources, but consumption exceeds capacity in an increasing ratio of exploitation over the earth's self-renewal capacity. Measured by the indicator called the ecological footprint, humans used natural resources 1.7 times faster than ecosystems can regenerate in 2018.

Global warming is on the increase (as indicated by an exponential curve). There are other risks associated with environmental deterioration, such as the 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 the long-term have been unsuccessful. The chasms are widening between the rich and the poor.

## **At EU level**

The decades-long dominance of neoliberalism, slightly weakened only after the financial crisis around 2008, made most national welfare states more fragile and residual – with more serious negative consequences in the post-communist world. (Orenstein 2003) The European Union was not able to resist the pressure of economic globalisation on its Member States. In some instances, it even mediated it from a global to the national level. (Potůček 2018)

The European “troika” (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) were rolling democratic decision-making procedures at national level. The most obvious example was the way in which it forced the Greek state to solve its indebtedness despite the democratically expressed will of its citizens. Despite various political declarations, we witness persistent – and sometime even increasing – indebtedness of many Member States.

As a whole, the EU has been surprised by the recent inflow of legal and illegal migrants and unprepared to deal with it in an efficient and justifiable way. The disproportional exposure to different Member States generated both internal and external political, administrative and ethnic tensions.

Unsolved social problems, such as youth unemployment, precarious employment, unaffordable housing or resistant pockets of poverty contribute to the relatively low legitimacy of the European Union in the eyes of citizens, which is often associated with the rise in political extremism and authoritarianism.

## **At the Level of Nation States**

Many political representatives are finding themselves in a trap; most of the problems that 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 the 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 a hybrid constellation of de facto authoritarian regimes formally applying democratic processes and institutions (in Latin America, in the Middle East, and in some ex-communist countries).

## **General Symptoms of Crisis in Governance**

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In his seminal book "*The Capacity to Govern*" Dror (2001) called attention to the obvious incapacity of mankind to rule its own affairs. In my perspective, the context of recent economic and political development has accented his conclusion.

Let us mention just a few important aspects which make public policy aimed at satisfying public interests even more and more difficult. The power and wealth of multinational companies exceeds the regulatory power of nation states and international political and administrative attempts to channel them. For early evidence of this phenomenon see Lindblom 1977. There are many examples of wealthy moguls of market and powerful media owners' intrusion into a political and administrative sphere. There is no country which can declare a victory in its fight against corruption. Globalisation, regionalisation, the overlapping of the market, the government, and the media – all this renders responsibility for the consequences of political and administrative decision even more obfuscated.

I see another aspect of governance crisis in myopic decision-making without strategic perspective and precaution. One can identify it at global, European and national levels. Behind it we can identify the impact of the political electoral cycle, or the lack of competence of decision makers, or both.

## **Why is Public Policy as a Scientific Discipline Lagging Behind Such a Development?**

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The general cognitive capability of humankind is dependent on the application of theories as a comprised generalised experience. Nevertheless, the development of civilization generates new situations which were previously unknown. Thus, theories are unable to catch up with such unique societal transformations.

Whereas cognitive problems to be solved are complex, disciplinary boundaries and explanatory frameworks of different social sciences used to be rigid. Scholars from different branches of science are not really motivated to help each other and collaborate.

Social sciences face great difficulties in analysing the impact of globalisation as their traditional subject matter used to be nation states. They have tried to solve this

problem, amongst others, by applying concepts of governance (including multilevel governance), political and social network theories, social construction theories and so on. These approaches are, despite innovative approaches, rarely strong enough to explain complex societal phenomena.

We still witness a widespread incidence of “imperialism of economics”, one-sided explanation of societal problematics, often driven by strong, hidden or open, partial economic interests.

### **Can We Enhance our Capabilities in Order to Close the Gap Between our Knowledge and the Capacities of Governance?**

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As scholars responsible for general societal welfare, we are obliged to mobilise our cognitive capabilities by closing the gap between disposable theories and real-life developments. As an example this 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 utilise the approaches of associated disciplines (demography, sociology, economics, political science, informatics, public administration, media studies, cultural studies, psychology, anthropology, and medicine...) (Potůček 2017).

I would call particular attention to all forms of public policy education. It should be based on the mediation of both the 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. Anheier (2019) sees their way forward as follows:

- *“Become more reflective on 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 also on their formation;*
- *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 valid and essential to allow the polarised elite to engage in policy discourse.”*

Last but not least, another important skill is to learn and apply effective ways of direct collaboration between academicians, politicians, civil servants, journalists, and citizens in participative decision-making.

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This is the genuine content of the 27<sup>th</sup> 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 going exactly in this direction.

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