THE INEFFICIENCY REDUCTION IN SCHEDULING THE PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA

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Abstract *In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that a major problem related to the reduction of the inefficiency of the public policy agenda is that of representation. In other words, to demonstrate how many or how few of the public opinion priorities are translated into public policies, especially through suffrage mechanisms or other connection types developed between the elected officials and citizens. On one hand, representation is the key to the proper functioning of any democracy and an important value itself. On the other hand, a good functioning of the democracy must take into account as a primary value not only representation, but also the means of solving the problems. This involves information processing, communication, and the way through which the public's preferences are created and influenced by the governmental strategies and through collective dynamics along with establishing the public agenda. The main conclusions one may draw from this presentation are the following: reducing the inefficiency of the public policy agenda implies the congruence between the parliamentary and public agendas; bringing forward the concept of policy congruence is possible only if there is an obvious congruence between citizens' priorities and governmental activity; placing citizens' priorities on different levels in the governmental and parliamentary agendas (although priorities of the Government may be similar with those raised by the Parliament) may suggest multiple possibilities for influencing the two agendas by forces other than the public opinion.*
Keywords *public policy, democracy*

1.   THE PUBLIC POLICY PROBLEMS AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

For our purpose, a public policy problem can be defined as *a condition or situation that generates needs or dissatisfactions, and in order for them to be corrected, a governmental action is required.* For example, conditions like polluted air, altered food, over populated prisons and cities produce situations that might create potential problems for citizens, taking into consideration that their dissatisfaction and discomfort are rising.

The degree of dissatisfaction or discomfort (that also involves governmental intervention) is measured by citizens through *a standard* or a *criterion*; if these two rate a situation as being normal, inevitable, or one for which they are directly responsible for, no governmental action will be taken, because that situation does not represent a citizen's will, so it does not find itself on the public agenda.

And so, the public agenda represents a set of problems to which the public participates (Jones, B.,D., and Baumgartner, F.R., 2005, p. 206). Because the public opinion has the tendency to become vague and confuse when it comes to technical

problems or complex solutions, we have to mention that the public agenda does not include the public policy solutions that are granted for either by the political elites or by certain public segments.

We also emphasize that situations do not become problems unless they are perceived as such, expressed and brought to the attention of the authorities; this kind of action is frequently used by officials, politicians that find themselves in search of problems.

More than that, a situation becomes a problem on the public agenda if it identifies itself with an area of state intervention, for which a governmental solution is possible. Regarding this, Aron Wildavsky said that authorities will rather ignore a problem if it is not multiplied by its solution. Hurricanes and earthquakes cannot be considered problems due to the fact they are unpredictable, but the damage that they cause does indeed represent a public policy problem and many programs that seek to reduce the damage effects of these natural phenomena have been created (Wildavschy, A., 1975, pp.134-140).

The cases in which solving the problematical situations is in the best interest of people different than the direct beneficiaries are quite frequent. For example, the Romanian administration has begun its „war against corruption" more as a reaction to media and international officials, rather than a consequence of the actions of those directly affected by corruption.

For Romania, the most important problems on the public agenda for 2009-2010 , are represented bellow, after a national survey performed by the Gallup-Romania organization.

So, the chart bellow contains the answers obtained for the following question: *What are, in your opinion, **the most important three things** that the present government should resolve by the legal end of its mandate in 2010?*

Way of interviewing: face to face interviews in the respondents house, and also telephone ones, by using the same questionnaire. The questions were the same, no matter the way to interviewing.

Representative type: probabilistic group, stratified, multi-staged one. Dual frame of representation: houses with telephones connected to the main market telephone operator (representative in 761 houses) and the adult population of Romania (400 representative houses selected through the random method. Both representations have been projected according to the territorial distribution of the adult population of Romania. The assignment of the representative sample was proportional to the group size.

Stratification criteria: 8 historical regions and the urbanism degree (8 different types of regions).

Units of selection: In the representative case of the face to face interviews, the primary units of selection were the regions. The selection of the houses in this case was made through the random method, and people were selected through the "last birthday" method. In the case of the representation sample for the telephone interview , the primary unit of selection was the house itself, and people were also selected through the "last birthday" method.

Figure 1. Answers obtained for the following question: What are, in your opinion, the most important three things that the present government should resolve by the legal end of its mandate in 2010?
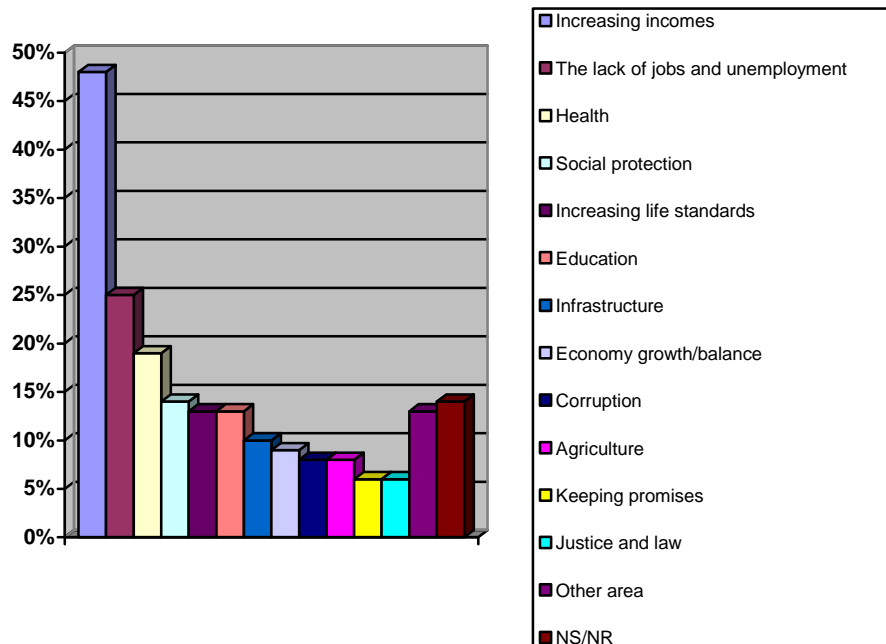
Source: Gallup Romania, national survey- September 2009

Moderation: In order to fix the unequal selection probabilities and adjust the different types of non-answers, the final representative segment was moderated through the RAKING method and the moderation variables were: region, urbanism degree, sex, age, race, occupation, level of education and having a telephone subscription. The moderation algorithm used as references official statistic data especially from the last demographic survey.

Representativeness: the moderated final segment is representative for the adult population of Romania, with a ±2.9 % error percentage, with a 95% trust level. Besides segmentation errors, the way in which questions were asked and the practical difficulties when writing down data from the field or by telephone can also cause other errors that might alter the results of the survey.

Date when the information was collected: September 2009.

The answers that were collected emphasize the priorities of the Romanian public for 2009 and 2010 but it doesn't pay any attention to their preferences in terms of real solutions.

The ideal solution would be for us to consider the connection between the public agenda and the governmental one. But we must say that, if we use the results of the previous survey as a temporal method of the governmental agenda, the process of establishing a connection between the two types of agendas is altered by the existence of possible threats caused by the irregular types of questions, by the number of respondents etc. (Jones, B., D. and Baumgartner, F.R., 2005, p.226).

When analyzing the previous survey and also comparing it to similar surveys in past periods, we can notice a quite slow dynamics of the public agenda when it comes to Romania (there is a powerful domination of the problems that refer to the increase of incomes and jobs; on the other hand, the problems that were generated by the big global challenges- such as terrorism, pollution, energy crisis, organized crime- are almost completely left aside.)

And this happens in spite of the fact that also in the situation in which various problems continue to stay in the public's attention, the way in which they are defined changes along with the change of the values and conditions that generated them. More than that, when a way of thinking changes, as a result of the changes and transformations that took place at a societal level, situations that were considered to be normal at a given time, can turn into a problem. For example, domestic violence which has been considered throughout ages a personal problem is now treated as a felony.

2.   THE GOVERNMENTAL AGENDA

Shifting problems from the public agenda to the governmental one is the result of a political process that also determines the adequate solutions. Is the fact that people with disabilities should have the right to a proper means of transportation a transportation issue or an issue connected to human rights? Special means of transportation for the disabled ones is the solution to the transportation issue. The human rights perspective involves equal rights for the transportation of the disabled people and also the existence of proper devices that can allow these disabled people to equally use the public means of transportation (Popescu, L.G., 2006, p.298).

Causality is the second aspect of a public policy problem. A situation can turn into a problem but what are the causes that generated that situation? Many problems- delinquency, poverty, inflation and pollution – have multiple causes. Inflation is characterized by a generalized growth of prices, measured by the index of commodity prices and it represents a political public problem with multiple roots: under-production of goods and services, excessive demand of goods and services, too much money flowing, the result of a psychological inflation (people expect prices to rise) etc. In order to solve a problem, we should pay attention to the causes, not only to the manifestations (symptoms) but, in many situations, it's not easy to identify or detect the main causes. Identifying the roots of a problem and negotiating a compromise regarding them is not an easy task for the policy makers, because defining the problem turns into a problem itself.

The difficulty in creating a governmental agenda is also determined by the fact that the nature and purpose of many public political problems are hard to express because of their dispersed or ''invisible'' nature. And because determining the size of the problem is often inadequate, those who elaborate public politics don't correctly evaluate the given situation and it becomes impossible for them to offer adequate solutions or even to undertake governmental actions in order to solve the problem. Next to these inaccuracies we can also mention the inadequate understanding of the causes of the phenomena. Other problems that are difficult to quantify are: children abuse, illegal immigration, tax evasion etc.

Another aspect connected to the governmental agenda refers to its capacity of being easy to control/manipulate, as some of the problems involve a higher level of behavioural changes than others.

Controlling the problems is also conditioned by their tangible or intangible nature. Problems like lack of jobs or bad project management can be easily solved by increasing the resources and the incentives held by people or agencies.

The object of this paper is the public policy agenda. What are those characteristics that tell a public problem apart from a private one? Generally, the public problems are thought to be the ones that affect the lives of a substantially large number of people, while their consequences are also felt by people who aren't directly involved in that issue.

Let's say a citizen is dissatisfied by the value of the amounts that were taxed under a certain fiscal law. As long as that citizen acts in his own behalf, trying to find a derogation from the fiscal institutions, in his favor, then we are talking about a personal problem. But if that citizen, along with other people directly or indirectly affected by the same problem, try to modify the legislation, than the personal problem turns into a public matter.

The fact that a situation or a condition is perceived as a problem doesn't mean that it depends only on its objective dimension but also, to a great degree, on how people relate to that situation. If a person has a certain social standard, it's not a real problem for him to find a job, as he is not threatened by the increasing unemployment rate; he even considers this a necessary step in lowering inflation. But for a worker, unemployment is a threat and he will negatively react to this. A person's perception is influenced by its own experiences, values and situations that involve him/her. There isn't a single and valid way of defining the problem, even though many people have opinions and preferences when it comes to a certain situation.

There are frequent cases when various ways of describing a problem converge, to get the public's vote. We decide if a certain situation can or cannot be considered a public problem if we take a look at the terms that was used to define that problem and to accept the proposed definition. More than that, the terms that were used to define it and the causes that generated it determined the emergence of those solutions that were considered to be adequate.

The following survey illustrates the acceptability rate of the Romanian public when it comes to the public agenda. When asking the question: "*What are the areas in which the present government took the most measures, according to your own expectations?*", you can see the answers in the chart below.

The methodology used for this survey is similar to the previous one.

This survey emphasizes a quite weak support of the governmental agenda. We also have to mention the rather high percentage of those who wish to answer (27%) *I don't know/I'd rather not answer.* These numbers prove the existence of a category of citizens still in *latent* condition, meaning that they are only preoccupied by personal problems and are thus not interested in what happens around them.

There are many explanations for this; starting with the fact that their only preoccupation is *fighting for what tomorrow brings* and ending with their lack of civic

responsibility. The same explanations can be used when talking about the lack of interest when mentioning the important global challenges (human rights, energy, terrorism, security, delinquency) among the priorities of the public or governmental agenda.

Figure 2 Answers obtained for the following question: '' What are the areas in which the present government took the most measures, according to your own expectations?''
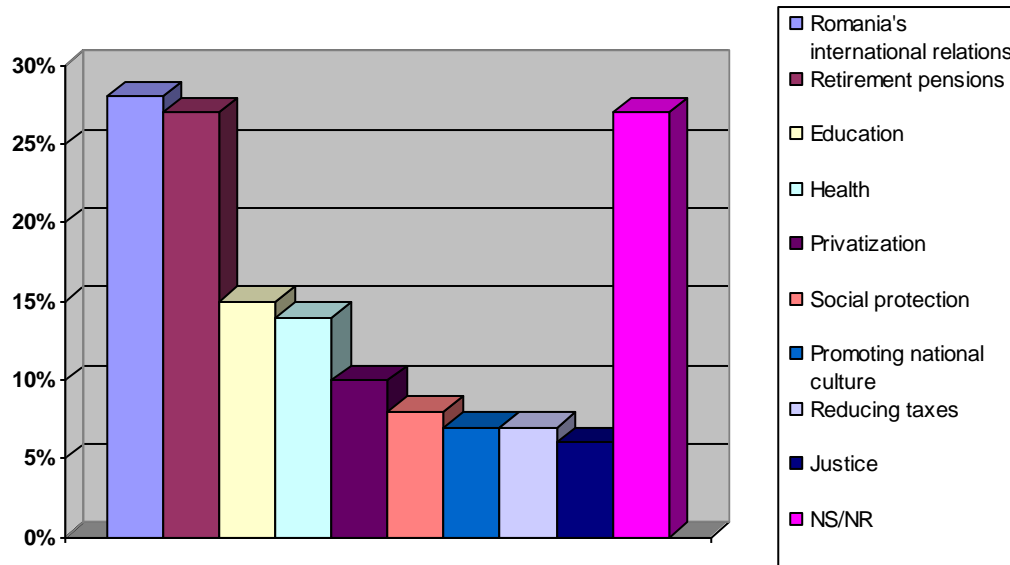
Source: Gallup Romania, national survey- September 2009

3.   AGENDAS CONGRUITY

Limiting resources naturally determines a limitation in the space of the governmental agenda. Other forces than the public opinion try and fight to get a space on this agenda and this is also important. It's obvious that we will no longer have a representation if the policy makers and the ones that obey them prioritize problems differently. More than that, representation can lack even if such a correspondence does exist, due to the blocking of political public actions, either by the political system (its level of complexity can generate various blockings) or by the leaders whose opinions are different from the public's.

4.   THE PARLIAMENTARY AGENDA

The activity referring to the parliamentary debates is a first line component in the process of public politics. In other words, when a convergence between the parliamentary agenda and people's needs appears, the parliamentary debates can react more easily at the process of changing informational flows than the ulterior stages of the process of public politics. As a consequence, it is reasonable to expect a quick answer offered by the

parliament, an answer that has to comply with the priorities on the public agenda. We cannot talk about convergence when the parliamentary debates concerning a problem of great interest for the public have been led about a year after the problem was brought to the public eye (Jones, B.,D., and Baumgartner, F.R., 2005, p.245).

5. THE EFFECTS OF THE CITIZENS PARTICIPATION AND THE DECISIONAL TRANSPARENCY ON THE INEFFICIENCY REGARDING THE PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA

The democratic context involves the citizens' participation in actions meant to influence the political decisions. If only a small category of citizens exert their right to vote than only their interests will be represented in the adopted public politics and the interests of other people will not be taken into account.

But if these categories of classic *non-voters* do come to vote, they will offer democratic support to those candidates that fight for their interests, by almost totally ignoring the projects of public policy that are included in the electoral offers. From this perspective, it is important for us to understand the causes for which certain groups of citizens do come to vote and why others don't. In the representative democracy, the vote is the most common form of participation. For most citizens, exerting their right to vote is seen as an act of civil responsibility.

There are also other forms of participation. Let's take the example of a citizen that is dissatisfied by the substantial growth in taxes year after year. What are his options at the following elections? He has four potential answers*: loyalty, voice, leaving* and *not going to vote*. According to this formulation, going to vote is a form of *loyalty*, a passive yet constructive answer offered for the governmental actions.

The voice is an active and constructive answer that manifests itself through forms of support for the officials/candidates that promise to lower taxes, even supporting/ joining one of the groups whose main goals is lowering taxes.

The destructive answer is both active and passive. The citizens who think that they ''cannot fight against City Hall'' will definitely *not go to vote*. We can no longer talk about participation in their case. The active version of the destructive answer is leaving *(*''voting with your feet'') (Lyons, W.E., and Lowery, D., 1997).

Citizens will shift their attention towards a community that is closer to their tax related preferences. Every citizen is put face to face with these options of participating. When talking about the health of a political system, it is desirable for most citizens to constructively participate and only for a small part of them to decide not to go voting.

''The citizens participation is the process through which the preoccupations, the needs and the citizens values are incorporated in the process of making public decisions''.

Main values for practicing public participation:
- the public should have a saying when it comes to the decisions that affect their lives;
- public participation also includes the promise that it will influence decision making;

- the public participation process brings forward interests and seeks to solve everybody's needs;
- the public participation process requires and facilitates the involvement of those people potentially affected;
- the public participation process invites participants to define their personal degree of involvement;
- the public participation process shows participants the way in which their contribution affected the decisional process;

By assuming a number of extensive measures that are targeted to public scrutiny and stimulation of political inputs, citizens are offered the possibility to participate in the government act in a way that doesn't involve vote presence or joining a group of interests. In other words, the number of citizens that can govern is increasing.

Advantages of the citizens participation in administration:

- re-establishing and building trust between administration and citizens;
- supporting the administration in a faster identification of the community needs, with a greater degree of satisfaction for the citizens;
- free information about the decisions that must be made by the administration;
- leading the community towards peace and not conflicts;
- a more creative mutual approach (administration and citizens together) towards problems and opportunities;

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