

Recent Evolutions Concerning the study of Public Policy

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1. Introduction

The study of the public policy is a rather new concern, which occurred in North America and Europe after the Second World War (even if, of course, the governments coped before too, with problems regarding the policies implementation) for a better understanding of the relations between the government and citizens. At least two sources had a great contribution to the development of the policies' study:

- a) The greater and greater scale of the problems with which, in different countries, the governments coped. The public sector's growth, the higher and higher complexity of the problems created the need for the use in the elaboration and implementation of the policies, of techniques and abilities which implied a specialized understanding.
- b) The increased preoccupation of researchers, especially those in the universities, for the study of public policy: for many researchers in the politic and administrative sciences, the idea to apply the formulated theories in "solving" the social problems – not only the economic ones – motivated at a great extent their attempt to find bridges between science and governing, between knowledge and practice.

The process was not a smooth one, and there was no immediate burst of this type of researches. Only in the years '70, and especially in the years '80, the field gathered a well defined identity. (by developing programs of studies – especially for masters –, by publishing specialized studies in magazines dedicated to these topics or in manuals, by formulating the main types of theoretical approaches, by establishing in 1971 the Organization for the Study of Policies in the United States). Thus, speaking about a science of the policies became to make sense.

According to one of its pioneers, H. Lasswell (1951), this science has three defining features:

- it is *multidisciplinary*: it applies methods and knowledge of different fields, as well as study of political institutions, economic sciences, the theory of organizations, law, administration, statistics, etc.;
- it is oriented onto *solving problems*: it has not a purely academic (and often sterile) character, but it is oriented onto real world problems, seeking solutions for them;
- it is explicitly *normative*: it is a science which assumes explicitly the fact that it cannot be absolutely objective; in analyzing the government actions it uses values together with the techniques, and to goals besides means. According to Lasswell, the science of policies has as its main direction "the improvement of knowledge necessary to improve the practice democracy.

In short, the science of policies in a democracy is emphasized, in which “the fundamental goal is human dignity, in theory as well as in practice” (Lasswell, 1951: page 15).

The early studies about policies dealt with specific matters of the policies, the causative determinants of various policies as well as the relation between the policies and their social effects. In fact, the study of the policies tries to understand why nations do a certain thing, and not how they do that thing. They link the resulting processes and emphasize the impact, the systematic evaluation of the results and of the unwanted consequences.

The scientific literature existing in the field so far considered the matter of government as implying to take into consideration the multiple relations between the various social subsystems and to emphasize the political factors in the study of administration. Taking into consideration these relations, the administrative action should be examined in the frame of the process of public policy. It's obvious, no doubt, the fact that much literature has been written about the public policy in the frame of political science and the other social sciences, but contrary to what we might believe, neither the idea, nor the notion itself of public policy had a central place in the present concerns. And, furthermore, taking into consideration the new trends, namely the trend to reduce the state's activities, this lead to a decrease of the interest for public initiatives on the one side, and on the other side the shift of the focus more and more towards the problems of governing.

For a better understanding of this notion we can consider three definitions largely used:

- a. According to the first definition, formulated by Thomas Dye, the public policy are „all that a government decides to do or not to do” (Understanding Public Policy, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998).
- b. A second definition, more complex and more conceptualized, is offered by William Jenkins. He says that public policy are „a set of decisions connected together, made by a political actor or by a set of actors, referring to selecting objectives, and means for reaching them in a specific situation in which these actors should, in principle, have the power to make these decisions” (Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, Studying Public Policy. Policy Cycles and Policy Decisions, Oxford, University Press, 1995).
- c. The last definition which we will consider belongs to James Anderson. Anderson says that public policy is „a course of action oriented in order to reach a certain goal, followed by an actor in the approach of a problem of interest” (Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, Studying Public Policy. Policy Cycles and Policy Decisions, Oxford University Press, 1995).

In the second of the presented definitions decisions are particularly emphasized, decisions interconnected together, while in the last definition, the action and its goal are emphasized. These definitions underline the key elements of public policy analyze: **the political decision**, made by political **actors**, to use certain means in order to solve a **problem**.

From the definitions enumerated above we can establish that there are several important levels at which a public policy is elaborated or at least influenced. We can name at least three such levels, at each of whom, many representative interests exist, which we name actors. The three levels at which the public policy are realized are:

- *International level* – the international institutions play a more and more important role regarding the national and local policies. Some accuse them that they try to replace the states as a political identity; others see the internationalization of policies as an ample process of globalization.
- *National level* – in most cases the public policy are identified with this level. We can even assert that a traditional approach in the field of public policy is that which says that only the decisions of the central administration on problems of public interest represent public policy;

- *Local level* – the local policies express a limitation of the concept of public policy, actually understanding local public policy. The differences between the two terms are given especially by the quality of the decision makers and by the geographic applicability of the decisions.

In the case of public policy, these have applicability at the level of the whole national space, while local public policy have applicability mostly at local level, in the geographic space limited in terms of area of action for the given administrative institution. By the quality of the decision makers, we understand especially their belonging to the structures of the local or central administration.

2. Public Policy - a sub domain of political sciences

The study of policies is a sub domain of political sciences¹. However, the approach has an interdisciplinary character: the policies analyze implies elements from other fields too, for instance economy, administrative sciences, management, theory of decision, etc. For these reasons it is difficult to make a precise definition of the public policy. As Hogwood and Gunn state (1984; 2000: chapter 2), usually (for instance if we look in the pages of newspapers), the phrase „public policy” is used with several meanings:

1. Policies as labels of some fields of activity. The most frequently found use appears in the context of the asserts of general nature regarding the economic policies, social policies, or of foreign politics of a government. In this case, the policies describe rather the fields of the government activity and implication.

2. Policies as an expression of the general goal or of the desired state of fact. In a document of a politic party, or in the one of a government, the term „policy” is used in order to indicate the general goal (or finality) of a government activity, in general or in a certain field; also, it is used in order to describe the state of fact which will be reached once the proposed goal is achieved. If we study *The national strategy of economic development of Romania on middle term*, adopted by the Government of Romania in March 2000, having the consensus of all the representative political parties, we will see that this is the meaning of the term „politici” there.

3. Policies as specific proposals. Many times the term is used to describe some specific actions that the politic organizations (groups of interests, parties, the government itself) would like to see achieved. Such proposals can be *ad hoc*, can be necessarily related to other proposals, or can constitute the means for achieving more general goals of these organizations. We say, for instance, that the municipality has a policy for sustaining the schools, or that the government has a clear policy of sustaining the small and medium sized enterprises, etc.

4. Policies as decisions of the government. In the most cases, the researchers focus on the analysis of some specific situations: there are famous analyses such the one of Allison (1971) on the Cuban crisis of 1962; as well as we talk about the policy of the Government in the Bancorex case, or „FNI” or Sidex, etc.

5. Policies as official authorization. When we say that the government has a policy regarding a given problem, often the allegation means that there are laws voted by the Parliament or a decision of the Government, which permit or require a certain activity to be carried out. Or also, we can say that when certain legislation in the field came into force, the policy has already been implemented.

¹ Adrian Miroiu, *Introducere în analiza politicilor publice, course for students*, Bucharest, 2001.

6. Policies as programs. Less familiar, we say however sometimes that we have a policy of a government organization when it has or applies a certain program. A program implies the existence, in a defined and relatively specific sphere of activity of the government, of a package of measures which include: regulations, organization, and resources. For instance, we can talk about a program regarding the student scholarships or retraining of the retraining of the unemployed personnel in a certain domain, etc. The programs are seen usually as means through which the governments try to achieve some more general goals.

7. Policies as products. In this case the policies are seen as what the government offer, in contrast to what it promised or authorized through the legislation: the supply of goods and services, the application of rules or the collection of taxes. The form of these products is different from one domain of the policies to another, and sometimes it is difficult to decide which the final product of a government policy in a certain domain is. In the case of health services, for instance, more funds, a greater number of trained personnel or the increased of the number of beds are necessary conditions, but not sufficient, for the improvement of health services; they are, though, something else than the desired product: the enhancement of the health state of the population (they are ways or means in order to obtain it).

8. Policies as results. Another way to see the policies is from the viewpoint of their results that is what is practically obtained. The approach to policies from the perspective of their results can help us to evaluate whether the declared goal of that policy is reflected in what is effectively obtained after the implementation of the policy.

9. Policies as theories or patterns. All the policies imply some presuppositions regarding what can a government do and which are the consequences of its actions. These presuppositions are rarely explicit, but in spite of all this, they imply a theory (or a pattern) regarding the relation cause – effect between the phenomena and the processes involved, or the relevant correlations between them. One of the tasks of the analyst of the policies is to detect the theories or the patterns which are implied in the policies and examine them about their internal consistence or the validity of their presuppositions.

10. Policies as processes. The policies imply a process which extends on a longer period of time. A policy appears then as expressing the whole movement of change in a given field. We say: the policy of restructuring the mining sector; or the policy of reform of the education etc.

3. The cycle of public policy

The explanation of policies is based on two main aspects:

- „The cycle of policies” explains the policies as a logical series of steps (e. g. defining the problem, identifying the alternative answers, evaluating the options, the decision, the implementation, the evaluation);
- „The analysis of policies” in the American style, which is based on the elaboration of methodologies in order to determine the results of a given policy and to realize comparisons between alternative policies regarding their results.

The process of policies' implementing is a complex one and implies dimensions mechanisms and actors within a network of interrelations. One of the more known means to make it easier to understand is to divide the process in several distinct stages and sub-stages. The cycle of a policy is the succession of these stages of the implementation process of that policy. The idea that we can

realize this cutting up of the process of any policy comes from the early papers dedicated to the analysis of policies. In general, it is not accepted at present anymore; but often we resort to it in order to make the presentation of the process more intuitive and easier.

According to Howlett (1995), to each stage of the cycle corresponds a principle of solving the problem.

Principles of problem solving

1. Problem recognition
2. Proposal of solutions
3. Choice of a solution
4. Application of the solution
5. Monitoring the results

Stages in the cycle of public policy

1. Formulation of the agenda
2. Formulation of policy
3. Making a decision
4. Implementation of the policy
5. Evaluation of the applied policy

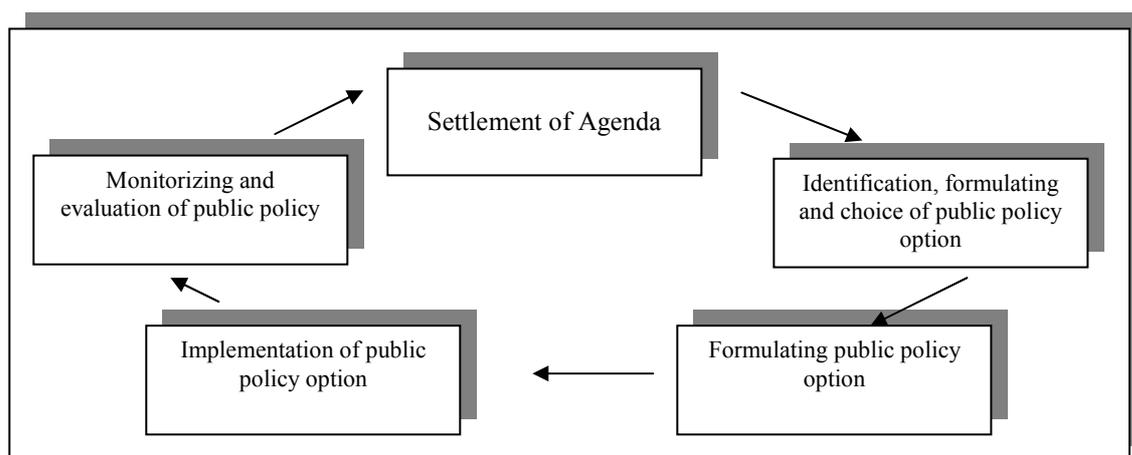
According to this model, *formulation of the agenda* refers to the process in which the problems get to the attention of the governors; *formulation of policy* refers to the process in which the policy options are formulated by the governors; *making a decision* refers to the process in which the governors decide to act in a certain way (or not to act); *implementation of the policy* refers to the process in which the governors apply the adopted policy; *evaluation of the applied policy* refers to the process in which the results of the policy are monitored both by the government institutions and the society.

According to the Guide regarding the elaboration, the implementation and evaluation of the public policy at central level, realized in 2004 in the framework of the Unit of Public Policy, under the coordination of the General Secretariat of the Government, the process of public policy consists in a succession of specific activities which have as a finality the elaboration of normative acts adopted in the Government meeting. This process comprises three phases: elaboration, implementation, evaluation. To each phase corresponds a series of specific stages. The determination of the stages is useful both in the sequences of elaboration, implementation, and also in those of evaluation, thus being easier to identify those causes which contributed to a possible failure/blocking of public policy or to obtaining unsatisfactory results in comparison with the proposed objectives.

The cycle of the public policy comprises the following stages presented in frame 1:

1. Establishing the agenda
2. Identifying, formulating and choosing the option of the public policy
3. Formulation of the option of public policy
4. Implementation of the option of public policy
5. Monitoring and evaluation of the public policy.

According to the model presented in this guide, *establishing the agenda* consists in identifying a set of problems which are to be solved; *identifying, formulating and choosing the option of public policy* presumes the generation of possible alternatives, the analyze and formulation of a proposal of options of public policy for a problem which was included in the agenda of a government institution; *formulation of the option of public policy* refers to the elaboration of the frame strategy of implementation of the option of public policy agreed at political level, and of the legislative frame (one or several normative acts) needed for its implementation; *implementation of the option of public policy* has in view the totality of the activities through which an option of public policy is brought into effect by adopting a normative act, respectively by the elaboration and applying an appropriate plan of action; *monitoring and evaluation of the public policy* consists in following, obtaining the useful information and evaluating the results all along the process of the public policy.



Frame 1
Stages of public policy process

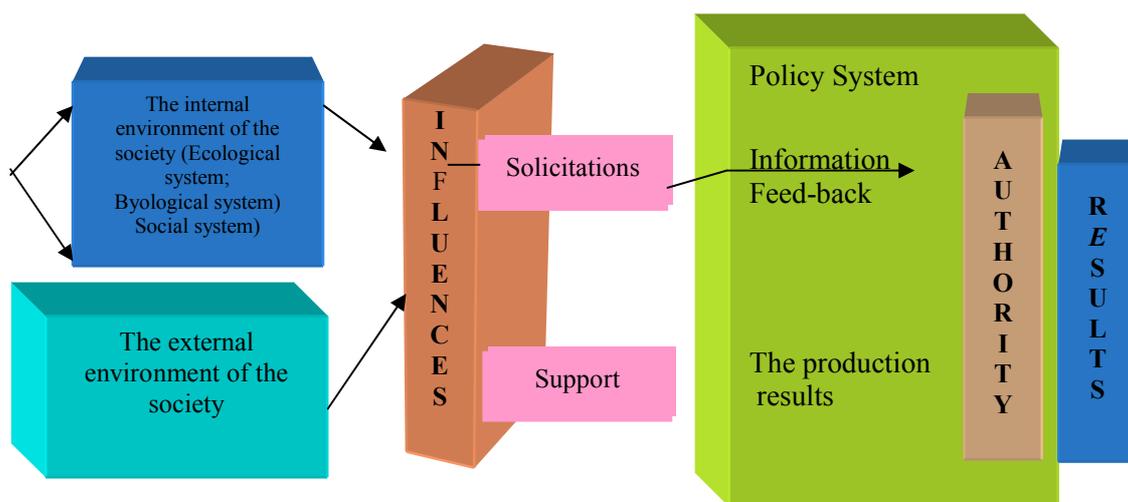
The cycle of public policy was given also other conceptualizations: For instance, according to Hogwood and Gunn (1984; 2000) the stages of the cycle of public policy are the following:

- (1) To decide to decide (identifying the problems or establishing the agenda)
- (2) To decide how to decide (or filtering the problems)
- (3) Defining the problems
- (4) Forecast
- (5) Establishing the objectives and priorities
- (6) Analyzing the options
- (7) Implementation, monitoring and control of the policy
- (8) Evaluation and revising
- (9) Maintaining, succession and finalizing the policy.

Another conceptualization is the one issued by Brewer (1974), which comprises the following stages:

1. Initiation of the policy
2. Estimation of the alternatives
3. Selection of the option
4. Implementation of the policy
5. Evaluation of the policy
6. Finalization of the policy

An example of model of the policies which is not based on stages is the one of **the black box**, proposed by Easton (1965). In this model the process of the policies in its interrelations with the environment in which it evolves: Easton discusses the influences (inputs) which came through various channels (parties, mass media, groups of interests); processes inside the political system; the conversion of these inputs into results.(see frame 2)



Frame 2
The influences on the content of public policies

These models are not necessarily found in all real cases, because in the society there is a plurality of actors, situations and problems. Nevertheless they are useful for the mode in which the public policies are built.

In Romania like in the other democratic countries it is very important to understand the central role of the administration (at local, national level) in the elaboration of policies. Also, it is important to understand the fact that the role of the public authorities in participating to this process is not the one to solve all alone, on the contrary, the citizens should involve too in the process of making the decisions.

The democratic decisions require a consensus of the citizens and public authorities. The process of elaboration of the policies begins at the moment when the people in a community perceive the existence of a problem. These perceptions can appear because of the mass media, of the politicians, of the groups of citizens or of the public institutions. The people then formulate ideas on how the problem should be solved as well as possible. The people who have different opinions try to convince the public authorities to adopt their ideas and apply them.

In this process it is possible to appear differences of opinion regarding how, what to do, and who shall do. Alternative proposals appear frequently. The whole process includes collecting and analyzing the data by evaluating actions and gathering arguments which sustain one proposal or the other. When an action plan is agreed, the citizens should convince the local authorities to adopt the respective public policy. Once this policy adopted, it should be sustained.

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