

# PARTICIPATION AND PROFESSIONALISM IN POLICY WORK: QUESTIONS FOR POLITIES IN TRANSITION

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**Summary** The emergence of ‘policy analysis’ as a skilled occupation in the governmental process raised questions about the significance of this work for democratic control in government, and the relationship between the discourses of elected leadership, expert policy analysis, and public norms and understandings, in the construction of policy. The questions are even more acute in the ‘transitional polities’ of Eastern Europe, where the norms of democratic accountability are less well established, but the rules of the game are ‘under reconstruction’. This paper reviews the way the themes of professionalism and participation relate to policy work in transitional polities, the tensions that policy workers face, and the way that the diverse discourses available are mobilized in the discursive construction of policy and policy work.

**Keywords** policy analysis, democracy, expertise, Eastern Europe, policy discourse

In Western liberal democracies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particular attention was given to policy both by practitioners in and observers of the governmental process. Lasswell’s call for a ‘policy science’ (Lasswell, 1951) was followed by the emergence of a new occupation of ‘policy analyst’, backed by graduate programs, conferences, jour-

nals and professional associations (Radin, 2000), reflecting a claim for the professionalisation of policy development (Cabinet Office, 2000). But at the same time, there was a heightened concern for the direct involvement of citizens in policy development, and the development of forms of ‘public participation’ in policy discussion, and there was

always ambiguity and tension between these two principles of 'professionalism' and 'participation'.

The collapse of the Soviet system in the later years of the century led to a great deal of conscious regime-building as political actors across Eastern Europe tried to work out what a post-Soviet political order would look like. There were strong forces pushing for the adoption of what was claimed to be a Western model (Pal and Buduru, 2008), but this raised questions about how the liberal democratic concept of 'policy' as a driving force in governing might be used in analysis and practice, what sort of practices it might involve, and to what extent these practices might be seen as 'policy work'. In particular, there are questions about how ideas of 'professionalism' and 'participation' might be applied in countries where neither principle had played much part in government in the Soviet era.

### **Policy, participation and professionalism in liberal Western discourse**

Reconciling aspirations for democratic control with the practices of the modern bureaucratic state has always been problematic. The formal resolution has been through the formulation of representative government combined with bureaucratic subordination: 'the people' either elect office-bearers directly, or elect representatives from whom political office-bearers are chosen, and their choice is made on the basis of the alternative programs set forward by the contenders ('policies'); the electoral outcome is therefore held to reflect the preferences of the people. The state bureaucracy is made entirely subject to these office-bearers, and is therefore to be un-

derstood as the 'arm' of the elected leaders, using its professional skills to implement the leaders' policies. In this way, the activity of government can be represented as a chain of command which combines participation and professionalism: the people participate through voting in terms of their preferences, their votes determine who leads, the leaders give directives for the accomplishment of these electorally-determined preferences, and the bureaucracy implements these directives with professional skill.

But this was a formal resolution of the tension, and the experience of government tended to be different. In particular, there seemed to be a Newtonian tension at work: to every principle of government, there is an equal and opposite pathology. The principle that leaders are chosen by popular election was matched by the pathology that the actions of leaders are determined by the determination of retain office by winning the next election, and include the strategic manipulation of support by partisan allocation of the resources of government. The principle that governments should set up specialist agencies to implement their programs was matched by 'technocratic inertia': agencies were committed to their own specialised concerns, and translated the preferences of government into actions which matched their own agendas, and above all, ensured their survival.

In this context, Lasswell's call for a policy science was an attempt to combat the power of both inertia and partisan allocation in government. He called for the application of social science to the problems of government to create a 'policy science' which would be interdisciplinary, applied and explicitly normative. This would increase the ability of citizens to interrogate government about

its activities and to express their own preferences, and in this way, it would strengthen democratic control. But the 'policy analysis' which emerged in response, largely in the US – and it is argued (e. g. Torgerson, 1985) that this was not what Lasswell advocated – tended to be narrowly technocratic and exclusionary, seeking to resolve debate through quantitative calculation rather than to expand it, and to 'advise the prince' rather than enhance popular involvement. In any case, there has been a continuing institutionalisation of specialised policy work, notably in North American where there has been a growth in graduate programs to prepare people for employment as 'policy analysts', professional associations to support them, and journals and conferences for the development of a specialist discourse of 'policy analysis'.

While the creators and advocates of this new specialised discourse saw it as a new and 'professional' approach to policy, it had to contend with much longer-established and equally professional discourses among 'subject specialists': discourses on health policy dominated by medical professionals, on water supply dominated by engineers, etc. One of the arguments for establishing 'policy units' in the specialised agencies of government was for them to be a counterbalance to 'technocratic inertia': e. g. when faced with an urban water shortage, water supply engineers might be very good at designing and building another dam, but less good at considering whether this was a better option than e.g. changing the pattern of demand, or making better use of the water already available. So an *expertise of choice* (as we can think of the emerging 'policy analysis') has to contend with an established *expertise of subject*. Moreover, those appointed as 'policy analysts' often found that while they

were trained in the systematic comparison of options to 'advise the prince', they found themselves spending much of their time negotiating with other policy analysts, with their analytic skills being used as 'duelling swords' in the search for a mutually-acceptable outcome (Radin, 2000). They found that much of policy task was to get an outcome: to 'make things happen.' What they needed (and were claiming) was an *expertise of process*. All three forms of expertise can be seen in the emerging professional policy work in the liberal democracies.

But while this 'professionalisation' of policy practice has been going on, there has also been a growing demand in the liberal democracies for a more participatory style of governing, and 'professionalism' in policy work seemed to be the antithesis of participation. Some argued that policy analysis should explicitly aim to compensate for unequal access to the corridors of power, and seek out the views of marginalised and excluded interests in order to serve as their voice. A mainstream (and more cautious approach) was to see 'consultation' as an acceptable way to reconcile the two values: policy workers could organise occasions in which the public might express their views on official proposals, in a carefully-controlled way (Bishop and Davis, 2002; Gramberger, 2001). The growing desire to see the facilitation of public participation as part of professional policy work can be seen in the UK Cabinet Office's *Professional policy-making for the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Cabinet Office, 2000).

At the same time, in many of the liberal democratic states, the hand of government has been reaching more and more into the life-world of the citizen, meaning that the involvement of the citizen was becoming not an optional extra, but an integral part of the policy dy-

namic. Policy concerns about, for instance, energy use, child obesity or gender relations embodied a challenge to accepted understandings and lifestyles, and for policy action to be meaningful and significant, it would have to engage with the life-world of the citizen, and professionals working in these areas focused on how to facilitate the active involvement of citizens in their projects. This 'reaching down' sometimes (but not always) encountered a 'reaching up': in many circumstances, citizens were themselves becoming more expert, particularly in areas where people were grappling with new problems, like HIV-AIDS, or the task called for detailed knowledge and credibility which distant bureaucrats did not have, and these mobilised citizens were aware of their expertise, asserting 'just because we're amateurs doesn't mean we're not professional'.

In liberal democratic polities, then, professionalism and participation have a tense and ambiguous relationship with one another. On the one hand, the professionals claim a mastery of relevant expertise and the ability of determine the optimal course of action, currently manifested in the demand for 'evidence-based policy'. There are also strong incentives for professionals to want to maintain their control over programs. Boxelaar *et al.* (2006) offer an interesting analysis of a program in which the officials concerned saw the task as mobilising farmers to collectively construct and enforce a regime of improved harvest practice – that is, as a very strong form of participation – but the agency management wanted it to be seen as the 'delivery of services' by the agency to its 'customers'. But the rhetorical tide is running strongly in favour of participation, and participatory activity is increasingly institutionalised in government,

and is often recognised by professionals as functional as well as normatively desirable, and the assertion of professional dominance of expert judgement is challenged by the recognition of 'competing rationalities, as Lin (2003) puts it, identifying the contest between scientific, cultural and political rationalities in the field of health care. The relationship between professionalism and participation is contestable – and contested.

### **Policy as part of the agenda of change in polities in transition**

For some years now, I have had some involvement in both academic and practitioner discourse in Croatia. In these continuing discussions, I have been struck by the differences between the questions that Croatian users of this text have about policy and the questions that readers in liberal democracies like Australia have. The section that follows reflects on these observations and the significance they have for our understanding of policy as a way of 'making sense' of the process of governing.

Of course, there is more than one way to use 'policy' as part of the road map of governing in liberal democracies. In particular, we can see a distinction between a 'sacred' account and a 'profane' account (Colebatch, 2009). The sacred account presents policy as an exercise in authoritative instrumentalism, in which actors called 'governments' identify problems and choose means to solve them, with policy work (particularly 'policy analysis') servicing this process of choice; the 'profane' account sees government as an arena populated by a range of organisational forms with distinct and competing agendas, with policy work being largely concerned with the management of interaction, and

policy analysis being part of the discourse of negotiation – the ‘duelling swords’ (Radin, 2000) that policy workers use. Policy practitioners tend to be aware of both discourses, but recognise the moral primacy of the sacred discourse, and see ‘profane’ observations as being deviant, contextually specific (‘it’s a bit different here’) or humorous.

The transitional polities of Eastern Europe were also accustomed to a divergence between sacred and profane accounts of governing, but under the *ancien regime*, this had been between accounts of socialist transformation under the guidance of the Communist Party, and practical accounts of ‘getting by’ in a world where personal links could be much more important than formal provisions (see, e.g. Kenedi, 1982). But ‘policy’ was not a major element in the former sacred account, and its appearance in the discourse of the post-communist polities reflects the salience of liberal democratic models, and in particular, the expectations of external forces – aid donors, education programs, and the ‘global panopticon’ being assembled by bodies like the OECD and the World Bank (Pal and Buduru, 2008). This became even more pronounced in the transitional polities seeking entry to the EU, as the process of candidature called for more explicit statements about practices of government – ‘policy’. The electoral process – seen in the liberal democratic model as a key point for mobilising ‘policy’ to shape the direction of government – was less significant.

Where ‘policy’ did seem to be more important was as part of the mobilisation of ‘civil society’ in the interrogation of the work of governing. Just as Lasswell saw ‘policy science’ as a way of contesting bureaucratic inertia, there seems to be a strong interest in Croatia in using

the concept of ‘policy’ as a way of contesting present practice, calling for statements about guiding principles and objectives. The discourse of policy is being mobilised as a way of interrogating the work of governing. Whereas in the liberal democratic account, policy is seen as the concern of government – indeed, as the output of government – to a significant degree, the concern with policy in Croatia is as likely to come from outside government as from inside it, from ‘civil society’ organizations, bodies which are public but not part of government. And these bodies are likely to have a high level of expertise, and to meet the state bureaucracy as skilled players, and not simply as members of the public who can bring only ‘ordinary knowledge’ to the table. And it may well be that these challengers bring in a discourse which is rather different to the discourse of bureaucratic provision that the state officials are accustomed to, but one which is in use in outside forums like the aid donors and the EU.

This makes for an interesting contrast with the experience of participation and policy in the liberal democratic tradition. There, participation was seen as the antithesis of expertise. Professionals were expert, and the demand for public participation was initially couched in terms of democratic values: the public are entitled to be heard. It soon came to be argued that the knowledge of the public (‘lay knowledge’ or ‘ordinary knowledge’) was as worthy of consideration as the expert knowledge of the professionals (see, e. g. Throgmorton, 1991), and over time, it too came to be institutionalised. In Australia, one woman’s newspaper article about her own experiences led to the formation of a Breast Cancer Survivors Group, which was soon incorporated into the working practices of the

health department, funded to produce manuals of good practice for the guidance of both clinicians and patients, and ultimately linked up with other groups of activists to form a national body called Cancer Voices with its own staff (Colebatch, 2009: 107). The 'amateur' perspective, expertly delivered, had become a form of expertise in itself, but the amateurs might felt the strain of having to play by the professionals' rules (see, e.g. Van der Arend and Behagel, 2011). And in many areas, especially where existing policy settings were being challenged (e. g. climate change), there was as much expertise outside the bureaucracy as inside it. In the Croatian case, though, the demand for participation came less as an assertion of the democratic rights of ordinary citizens, and more from a process of exploration in the development of a new political order, as the state bureaucrats found themselves having to share the policy space not only with parties and political leaders but also with a motivated and informed array of public organizations (and to a large degree, outside organisations with specific expectations, like the EU, the OECD and aid donors).

### **Professionalism and participation in the discourse of policy work**

Professionalism and participation are, then, competing rhetorical themes in the discourse of policy work, and there is much ambiguity in the way that they are applied to constitute and to explain practice. In liberal democratic discourse, they were originally seen as being at the opposite ends of the policy process: political participation leads to electoral outcome leads to directives to professional experts. But this was matched by a 'profane' narrative in which pro-

professionals were happy to have the participation of organised interests in managing diverse areas of social practice – collaborations which were later identified as 'policy communities'. With social and attitudinal change placing more stress on the individual, the 'sacred' account expanded to favour direct participation in policy as well as indirect participation through the ballot box, and this gave rise to a number of routinised practices of participation, ranging from public meetings through exercises in consultation to citizen juries. This was paralleled by the 'outing', as it were, of the profane narrative, with the involvement of the interested parties in policy development coming to be seen not as a surreptitious subversion of democratic control, but as 'stakeholder participation', an interpretive turn which culminated in claims that 'government' by authoritative direction was giving way to 'governance' by negotiation among self-organising networks (Rhodes, 1997). While the accuracy of this claim was disputed by researchers who found that the networks were not self-organising and government was not diminishing in significance (e. g. Bache, 2000; Johansson and Borell, 1999), this did little to diminish the appeal of the term, or the assumption that in some way, government has become more participative.

At the same time, there has been no slackening of the institutionalisation of expertise in government. The identification of new fields of concern, such as climate change or childhood obesity, is accompanied by the recognition of new experts, and the commissioning of new studies. Even fields as close to the life-world as the care of young children are becoming increasingly professionalised, with only trained and certificated workers being permitted to deliver care. One



Australian policy document raised the possibility of bringing into this regime of control grandparents, who, it felt, were often used as a 'substitute' carers (not as substitutes for parents, but as substitutes for professional carers) and lacked the appropriate training and support. And there has been a widely-voiced demand for 'evidence-based policy', following the lead given by 'evidence-based medicine', with the random controlled trial, the ultimate exemplar of professionally-controlled knowledge, seen as the 'gold standard' of policy knowledge. So the demands for greater participation in the policy process are being paralleled by equally-strong demands for greater reliance on professional expertise.

## Discussion

This raises a number of questions about the mobilisation of the concept of policy in the process of political change, particularly (but not only) in the transitional polities of Eastern Europe. There are, for a start, questions about the nature of governing practice. To what extent is 'policy' used in practice, and what is it used to mean? What is conveyed by the term? We can identify a number of parallel strands in policy discourse – one about authoritative decision-making, another about the structuring of collaboration, and another about the identification of problems and the search for appropriate responses to them (Colebatch, 2009). All of these are in use, in variable combinations. What 'policy work' might involve depends on the way that the task is seen.

This leads to the question of the extent to which policy activity is identified as specialist work, and what sort of work it is. It is easy to assume that policy is a

form of specialist practice within the governmental bureaucracy, but it commonly involves reaching out to non-government organisational forms and drawing them in to a pattern of concerted action. A health agency concern to reduce avoidable injury draws in sporting administrators, widening their horizons and making them participants (perhaps unwitting) in health policy (Poulos *et al.*, 2012). And there is always the question of the involvement of the people whose behaviour is to be affected – the objects of the policy concern. Is there organising going on among these people, and if so, are the activists doing it being drawn into the official sphere?

This, of course, raises questions about the relationship between official and non-official perspectives in policy practice. We saw that participation in the policy process tends to make policy activists more professional, as their expert knowledge increases, as does their understanding of the workings of government, and in many cases, their policy activity becomes paid employment. This is always a source of tension for activists, and friction between activists and their supporters, who fear that their increasingly-expert leaders have 'sold out'. At the same time, we can see professional work becoming more oriented to participation – e. g. professionals in education policy trying to mobilise parents and the local community in support of their policy goals, who may well employ experts in 'community consultation'. Activist leaders may also adopt more professional modes of relating to their followers – e. g. the e-mail newsletter rather than the mass meeting – and this itself may lead to tension with their most active supporters. Some Australian trade unions have taken to employing professional recruitment agencies to recruit new mem-

bers; the decline in union membership seems to have stopped, but there has been a great deal of unease that the traditional commitment of activists is not enough to sustain participation.

This is linked to questions about structural change and practice in the world of policy, both among participants and among professionals. As policy activity becomes a form of specialist work, there is likely to be change in civil society organizations, with increasingly professional management recruiting specialised expert employees to strengthen the organization and in particular, to meet the expectations of the governmental bodies to which these organizations relate – a process termed ‘institutional isomorphism’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) and likely to lead to anxiety about whether it is more important to be ‘red’ or ‘expert’. Here, we can see the links between Scott’s three ‘pillars’ of institutions: the cognitive (what we know), the normative (what we value) and the regulative (how we are organised) (Scott, 2001). Of course, institutional isomorphism cuts both ways, and bureaucratic organizations try to make their peace with activists. For instance, a water authority constantly in conflict with environmental activists may set up an environmental protection branch and recruit environmental experts to staff it, and in terms of understandings and working practices, they are likely to be closer to the environmental activists they have to deal with than they are to the construction engineers in the mainstream of the agency. This raises questions about ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (and which is which), and how relationships among the different voices are constructed and maintained. There are both tactical and strategic questions for the activists (and also for the professionals), and there are

likely to be continuing tensions about whether it is better to be inside the tent or outside it, and if inside, whether it is better to have an agency dedicated to that policy concern, or to try to establish a position in the mainstream of policy discourse. Cha (2006) found that the establishment of a Ministry of Gender Equality by the reform government in Korea was used by unreformed bureaucrats in mainstream agencies to pay no further attention to the government’s policy on gender: that was the concern of another ministry.

Questions of structure and practice are even more problematic for professionals trying to recruit the participation of the unorganised – e.g. those working on policy development in relation to child obesity or alcohol use. There are no obvious channels to mobilise, and to the extent that the target populations are activated, it is in ways that the professionals find it difficult to relate to.

This brings us to confront the question of the social construction of professionalism and participation, and in particular, the applicability of liberal democratic forms of practice in transitional polities. The literature about participation in policy is grounded in the liberal individualism of Western concepts of democracy, and reflects shared assumptions about norms of government: working together for change might make a difference, and it worth doing anyway. How applicable is it in the ‘weak state/weak society settings of Eastern Europe’ (Grdesic and Koska, 2009; see also Kenedi, 1982; Ledeneva, 2006). What are the social contexts which favour participation? Are there significant differences in this respect between the countries of Eastern Europe?

There are similar questions to be asked about professionalism in policy



practice. The perception of policy as a specialised field of practice is still relatively new, even in Western Europe; the confident prescriptions of the UK Cabinet Office, for instance (e. g. 2000) are part of an attempt to bring into existence the standard practice which the manual describes. And the idea of professional policy practice has to contend with existing perceptions of professional practice in engineering, health, welfare, etc. Here, we can see the cognitive, normative and regulative pillars of institutionalisation at work: having an organisational location ('Policy Branch') offers a location where the discourse of professional policy practice 'makes sense', and

the norm of applying it to shape outcomes seems applicable. But these niches in government are not naturally-occurring: they appear because some actors (perhaps even outsiders like aid donors or EU gatekeepers) pushed for them to be created, and we need to ask how they are staffed, what activities they engage in, and how they are perceived by the other participants. In other words, we need to ask how 'participation', 'professionalism' and 'policy work' are constructed, and how they impact on the process of governing – both in the transitional polities of Central and Eastern Europe, and in the liberal democracies from which they terms sprang.

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## **Participacija i profesionalizam u radu na javnim politikama: pitanja za zemlje u tranziciji**

SAŽETAK Pojava analize javnih politika kao kvalificiranog zanimanja u procesu vladanja otvorila je pitanja o važnosti te vrste posla za demokratsku kontrolu vlasti, te o odnosu između diskursa izabranih vođa, profesionalnih analitičara politika i javnih normi i razumijevanja u konstrukciji javnih politika. Ta su pitanja još istaknutija u 'tranzicijskim političkim sustavima' Istočne Europe, gdje su norme demokratske odgovornosti manje uspostavljene, a pravila igre su u izgradnji. Ovaj rad razmatra u kojem su odnosu teme profesionalizma i participacije s radom na javnim politikama u zemljama u tranziciji, za tim napetosti s kojima se suočavaju oni koji rade na javnim politikama, te na koji se način različiti dostupni diskursi mobiliziraju u diskurzivnoj konstrukciji javnih politika i rada na javnim politikama.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI analiza javnih politika, demokracija, ekspertiza, Istočna Europa, diskurs javnih politika