
Vol. 2, No. 2/2012

General Public Interest: between Electoral Rhetoric and Administrative Actions

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Abstract: Traditionally, public administration is considered to be the operative side of government. It is supposed to include all the activities involved in carrying out the policies of the elected officials and some activities associated with the development of these policies. In this respect, well-known authors consider that the Public administration is all that comes after the last election promise and the election night cheer: the means and ends of government. The complexity of social life, however, has generated in recent years the appearance of a rationality deficit in the actions of government. It is the spread of some behaviour patterns that hinder the leadership of the system: rational options are replaced by investment policy, the administration accepts the behaviours that are substantially different from the electoral promises. This situation generates dissatisfaction of citizens, declaring themselves dissatisfied with the activity of the public authorities which, moreover, they have chosen. The intention of this study is to encourage analytical reflections on how the general public interest is represented.

Keywords: public interest; public authorities; parties; election promises

Each society is marked by plurality of interests, depending on the way of its organization. For example, referring to the two classes of capitalist society – bourgeoisie and proletariat- the following objective interests can be distinguished - profit maximization, keeping up the capitalist system for bourgeoisie and getting some acceptable conditions for income, work and life; enhancement of political and syndical rights; providing jobs for proletariat. (Zamfir, 1993)

In modern society the plurality of interests is maintained even if it does not belong to any antagonist classes. The modern societies are marked by diverse interests of individuals, groups, institutions. The public administration has the main role in promoting general interests.

Though, the complexity and plurality of interests make the activity of administration to be difficult. Taking into considerations the fact that the public administration is subordinated to the politics (Alexandru, 1999) and can cumulate it undesirable (Lane, 2006), the public administration is requested, on the one hand, to carry out the activities of law enforcement and concrete enforcement of law in order to satisfy general interest, and on the other hand to manage “common weal” balancing natural tensions between individual and group interests as well as general public interest. Well-known authors have emphasized the simple, ordered, coherent and satisfactory aspect of administration, being as an instrument in political power, through affirmation that the public administration is all that follows the last election promising and acclamations from the election night. (Starling, 2011)

The issues, regarding the quality representation of general interest, are approached in studies of specialty, especially, from the ethics point of view. The enrollment of these issues in a debate agenda is relatively brief, causing by the lack of a uniform and operational definition for such studies. The intention of this study is to show relevant information regarding the quality of general interest’s representation. The first part deals with theoretical reflections on the definitions of the term “public interest”. The analytical conclusion of the first part is followed by a description of the way in which the actions of policy makers converge to the general interest satisfaction. The analysis emphasizes the correlation between election promises, general public interest, made at the moment in such a way, and further actions of governors. Conclusions explain the reasons which distance those who are able to administrate from the promises made in Election Company, implicitly from the actions devoted to public interest.

What does the general public interest mean? The inevitable limits of any attempts to specify exactly what is meant by the “public interest” are considered to be: 1) social diversity, 2) history of relationship between social groups, 3) uncertainty of social knowledge, and 4) difficulty of political action. (Rughiniş, 2006)

The interest is defined from sociological point of view as: “the active expression of the system necessities (individual, social group, institution, community), or the finality which guides behavior. (Zamfir, 1993) The Marxist sociology gives the essential tee in defining this notion. Thus, each position in social organization is associated with specific and objective interests which incline to become conscious passing into aims, purposes, aspirations and even ideals.

According to the study made in 2006 by the scientists from Bucharest Institution for Public Policies, the interest represents „expected or predicted preferences of an individual when information is available on its position in the social structure”, or “set of decisions that could be considered, reasonably speaking, as being in the interest of community, taking into account available information about its situation.” (Rughiniş, 2006)

The authors insist on the fact that the concept refers to the multitude of variants, some of which are mutually exclusive. The public authorities are engaged to select between these alternatives. In this regard, public authorities select alternatives that match their political vision and wishes of the electorate, or create new variants. (Rughiniş, 2006)

Taking into consideration the two above mentioned definitions, the public interest is the result of a process of negotiation and arbitration between different social actors. The social, individual or group interest is changed into public one as far as the actors with more power contribute to the exact determination of the courses of actions. The definitions are considered to be incomplete because there is no connection with any key terms denoting “decisions in community interest”, or suggesting “system necessities (individual, social group, institution, community).” As the necessities can vary from one context to another and rarely describe universal or fundamental situation it is useless to “record” and to consider them as the public interest for the whole community. Normativist views that are closely related to determinism, postulates that nor man, neither community or society choose their future, it “comes” in the virtue of the inexorable laws. On the other hand, constructivist views show that people can take their fate into their own hands in their communities, in their socio-cultural values, there making responsible choices in their community interests.

Conceptualization of the public interest requires, firstly, a basis. A simple way would be to form this basis from the needs / interests related to 1. the sphere of private life, 2. sphere of social life, and 3. providing individual relationship with society, namely these being fit to the common good.

The sphere of personal life will include the following needs and interests:

- a) *Personal security.*
- b) *Housing and environment.*
- c) *Jobs.*

The sphere of social life will include:

- a) *Teaching services, Education.*
- b) *Social Assistance.*
- c) *Infrastructure.*
- d) *The quality of social context.*

The sphere of individual relationship with society will comprise:

- Issues / interests related to participation in political and social life.
- Ensuring opportunities of citizens and their organizations participation to the decision process through: the adequate information, promoting a policy of communication and dialogue with citizens etc.

Thus, considering the diversity, complexity and dynamics of social life and politics, public interest can be defined as a *system of defining values for ensuring the commonweal, values circumscribed for personal, social and quality of social context. It is indicted by the actors with more power to define courses of action and for its promotion the resources are identified and mobilized.*

An important aspect that should be noted is that the public interest is reworded regularly, usually the process of redefining coincides with electoral campaigns. The role of the actor with dominant political force to define courses of action can be political parties that after the elections become policymakers, public administration and electorate. Thus, public interest can be the same or it can be remodeled, according to the political parties messages which are re-engaged once in four years in the competition for power and taking into account the structure of the electorate.

The role of political parties and policy makers is to supply ideational the electorate. The role of the public administration in the formulation of a general interest is outlined in the one of the basic functions of the public administration, that of “intermediary mechanism of execution” (Alexandru, 1999) a significant aspect of this function being the bearer of citizens’ requests, desires, and legitimate needs. (Alexandru, 1999)

The electorate formulates preferences based on social position, identity, degree of tolerance and / or exacerbation of phobias, external orientation, and behavioural style. (Boţan, 2010)

Social policy context in the years after independence is marked by pluralism, in the competition for power being involved more and more political organizations. In

Moldova there are 36 political parties registered at the Ministry of Justice.¹ Total membership is over 300 000. Parties with most voters are: Liberal Democratic Party (LDPM), Liberal Party (LPM), “Our Moldova” Alliance and the Party of Communist (CPM).

Parties involved in the electoral competition could be, in a schematic and arbitrary way, divided into four categories: *large parties*, *parties of the dam*, *plankton parties*, and *lethargic parties*. The so-called *large parties* are those with sure chances (?) to overcome the electoral threshold; *parties of the dam* are considered those with the minimum potential to overcome the electoral threshold; *plankton parties* are considered to be with absorption’s potential of a significant part of the indecisive electorate. *Lethargic parties* are those for whom vote only their members, and not always all of them. (Boțan, 2010)

Even a brief analysis of election programs highlights the messages, which, more or less intelligently made, refer to the general interest. In order to save page space I present few examples.² The first task in the program of CPM [...] is *to promote increased social investment policy and to establish a social state. The access to a qualified medical care should not depend on income levels. The opportunity to obtain free secondary and higher education must be guaranteed in practice by the state. And the training itself, its quality and structure, must match the large spectrum of social, economic and cultural needs of citizens.*

For the purposes of policy, the efforts of LDPM are directed at achieving the following objectives:

1. *Strengthening the democratic system, where the main rule is free competition and peaceful alternation in power, where human rights are respected and protected by law, without exception.*
2. *Providing a decent level of prosperity, a developed economy, competitive on the regional and European level, the fact which is really normal, taking into account the geographical context of Moldova.*
3. *Sustainable development of the country by promoting social rationality that combines harmoniously personal and civic culture, which is a public good necessary for the progress.*

¹ <http://www.justice.gov.md/> Situation on January 17, 2012.

² All electoral platforms can be accessed on <http://www.e-democracy.md/parties/>

4. *Moldova's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic space, returning to the European civilization in sense of the shared values.*
5. *The reunification of the country through the political, social and economic activities, beginning with assumption that the citizens from the left side of Dniester are considered as Moldovans who were imposed to abide the group with monopoly power due to the interference of the third countries.*

LPM has a strong belief *that the only real solution to the social and economic solidarity is to increase individual welfare. LPM does not exclude the redistribution policy of resources as a means of achieving objectives of economic and social cohesion, but believes that the most effective form of redistribution is the access to education, the modern systems of care and health insurance and to the pension insurance. Moldovan citizens should have an effective system of social security in which they should be engaged and use all opportunities through which the state creates a favorable environment for economic development.*

In annalists' point of view, the features regarding differences deal with the external orientation and the behavioral style of political parties. The feature of external orientation is the expression of the fact that during its existence the Republic of Moldova as an independent state has the main problem of disappearance or surviving. The messages have foreshadowed the way ahead of Moldova being as public interest:

- to join with Romania- the unionist project from the beginning of '90s of last century;
- to integrate deeply into CIS structures (1994-2000), including accession to the Union of Russia-Belarus (2001–2002);
- to move towards European Integration. (Boțan, 2010)

Another feature that makes the differences is the degree of tolerance or exacerbation of phobias. This feature is decisive for electoral fragmentation and reflects the attitude towards those who identify themselves differently from the ethno-linguistic point of view. In terms of electoral behaviour, ruptures caused by exacerbation of ethno-linguistic phobias are more pronounced than those caused by traditional cleavages. Thus, it can be distinguished four major segments dominated politically and economically by:

- CPM promotes messages addressed mostly to Moldovans and Russian speakers, with a strong anti-Romanian load, expressed through fighting against the so-called Romanian danger;
- DPM (Democratic Party of Moldova) promotes messages addressed mostly to Moldovans and Russian speakers, constantly appealing to the tolerance and the avoiding of phobias;
- LDPM promotes messages addressed mostly to Moldovans and Romanians, constantly appealing to the tolerance and the avoiding of phobias;
- LPM promotes messages addressed mainly to Romanians, with an anti-Russian character presented under anti-communist camouflage. (Boțan, 2010)

To attract more votes, political parties from Moldova, register dozens of promises in election agendas. Often they refer to the increase of average wage over three times, increasing all social benefits, free travel in the EU to one an. Analysts argue that the election promises are realized less than 5%. The conditions of interest representation were analyzed by theories such as “iron law of oligarchy”, made by R. Michels, who notes that any leader tends to remove the concerns and interests of their constituencies, because of his status as a politician. (Vlăsceanu, 1993) The leader’s competence makes it essential for the efficient organization of the community, but at the same time, his thinking changes so that it becomes increasingly different from those who elected him. The difficulties of public interest representation caused by the divergence of private interests and perceptions of public interest, for which representation introduces a systematic distortion between expectations and decisions of citizens.

In most cases, the public administration authorities or other social actors undertake two types of actions for public interest: actions which compare two alternatives that could be reasonably considered to be public interest (for example, investing more in environmental protection or minimize environmental taxes to promote economic growth), and actions which cannot be argued, reasonably, that would serve the public interest, because the connection with private or group interests is too strong. This concept is frequently used negative, accusing decisions or policies of authorities for being biased. Besides these problems, there are other limitations: the appearance of new problems which were not discussed during the election campaign or the changes in the electorate preferences. Also, an important limitation is the competence and personal interests of employees of public institutions. Nils Brunsson finds that organizations which reflect and represent the

social environment - such as political parties, public administration or organizations with a mission to pursue the public interest - suffer inevitably by “the organizational hypocrisy”. (Brunsson, 2002)

To cope with conflicting requirements of different interest groups, the organization dissociates discourse from decisions and actions. Thus, the discourse may be directed to a social group, taken decisions can satisfy another social group, and actions will encourage other categories. The employees of such organizations are constantly caught in solving insoluble problems, tensioned between the incompatible requirements of different aspects of the problem. (Zamfir, 1993)

Although the representation of general public interest is an essential feature of democracy, it seems to introduce a systematic distortion between expectations and decisions becoming rather a political bargain than an ideal of rational legitimacy. (*Dictionary of Political Affairs, 60 stakes of contemporary France*, 2002). An efficient proof that tells how politicians are interested in keeping promises is the democratic development of a country. Moldova has a fragile democracy ranked 64, after Paraguay and Mali. Positions in the ranking are occupied by the Nordic countries, the U.S. is ranked 19th.¹

A useful method of responsibility of politicians, but also develop civic spirit may be monitoring the election. Practices and examples to follow in this respect are the activities of the American Times newspaper, which during the presidential campaign launched politifact.com platform. A team of five journalists and a few documentaries have identified the positions of politicians on the scale statements and promises true - false. They have continued the monitoring even after Obama's victory. The information here was used by the major newspapers in the world. Politicians were put under pressure, and the site received the Pulitzer Prize. This case has inspired two NGOs in Romania, which have created site “Who and what have promised” where the candidates' promises are exposed and analyzed. Soon Mediafax launches the project “Promismetru”.² This is only one method which can be applied in Moldova. The basic tool remains, however, responsibility which should be consciously assumed by politicians.

¹Democracy Index 2011. A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit. Available: http://www.sida.se/Global/EIU_Democracy_Index_Dec2011.pdf

² <http://www.digi24.ro>

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