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BOOK REVIEW: PUBLIC INTEREST: PUBLIC INTEREST: A PAPER ON PUBLIC POLICY THEORY AND PRACTICE

Simona Kováčová*

KONEČNÝ, S. 2021. *Verejný záujem: Príspevok k teórii a praxi verejnej politiky*. [Public Interest: A paper on Public Policy Theory and Practice]. Bratislava: Mayor, 2021. 158 p. ISBN 978-80-99994-00-4.

As a relatively young scientific discipline, public policy is an independent and at the same time cross-cutting sui generis discipline with a multidisciplinary character, that is characterized by its own conceptual apparatus, theoretical anchoring and methodological basis. The mentioned attributes are also a key criterion of its autonomy. Nevertheless, it is not an isolated scientific discipline. The study of public policy with a wide interdisciplinary scope, synthesizes and takes over theoretical and methodological knowledge from other theoretical-application scientific disciplines. For example, from the field of law or public administration, whose tools are also used for procedural analysis of the public interests' formulation and implementation, in the context of solving specific problems. Therefore, we can approach public policy as a discipline that takes over the interpretive frameworks of economics, sociology, political science, law and other disciplines, leading to the analysis and prediction of the process of forming and applying diverse public interests, related to solving specific problems of the human community. Professional study of public policy theory requires a systematic approach to knowledge acquisition in a logical sequence, and it is not possible to realize it without understanding several levels of meaning of a public policy key category, characterizing its subject, i.e. "public interest" as a starting point for public policy theory. However, the terminological phrase "public interest" is often marked by a certain vagueness and despite the fact that it represents the

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primary category of public policy, the Slovak book market cannot be presented by titles of a scientific nature focused in detail on public interests' research separately. The response to this deficit is a current scientific monograph entitled "Public Interest", authored by **Doc. PhDr. Ing. Stanislav Konečný, PhD., MPA**. The professional text, clearly characterized by the aspects of a scientific monograph, is thematically oriented to the public policy sphere, through a precise analysis of the concept of "public interest" in a multidisciplinary dimension. The chosen methodological approach also becomes the starting point for a clear synthesis of the definitional essence of the term "public interest", from the point of view of public policy theory, as well as for the explanation of the procedural side of the emergence and formation of "public interest".

The main aim defined in this way is gradually achieved in three logically consecutive (main) chapters, into which the monograph is structured. In its final form, it is a high-quality monograph, demonstrating the erudition and unambiguous orientation of the author in un-isolated research issues.

The content of the first chapter is based on an analytical approach to the definition essence of the term "interest" and "public interest" from the perspective of several scientific disciplines, which might seem too complicated, in an effort to define key terms uniformly. Just as there is no uniform definition of the term "public policy", partly due to the existence of several equivalents to express internal structural terms "politics"¹, taken mainly from the anglophone professional literature, so there is no uniformity in the interpretive definition of the term "public interest". The indicated absence, caused, among other things, by the specificity of individual scientific disciplines (philosophy, economics, political science, law, etc.) created space for the formulation of clearly summarized statements, relevant to the theoretical research of the interest, respectively of "public interest". In other words, the effort to highlight a multidisciplinary approach in the context of the "public interest" research is valuable, because it has become the starting point for an interdisciplinary synthesis of the key public policy term, with an emphasis on identifying possible semantic intersections and differences that were expected due to the interdisciplinarity of the public policy theory. This chapter is also enriched with a typology of individual and supra-individual interests, with an aspiration to terminological specification of "personal interest", "private interest", "common interest", "group interest"... In this context, it is

¹ Three-dimensional framework – "polity", "politics" and "policy", i. e. expressive units demonstrating the multidimensionality of this concept.

interesting to consider whether the semantic level refers to the possibility of creating a synonymous order (at least in some cases), or whether these terms are special semantic terms excluding synonymy, due to differences and specific characteristics of interests, in terms of selected scientific approaches. Therefore, the author's ambition for a deeper analysis of the researched concepts essence has its meaning and justification, because it serves to orient the reader in the issue of individual and supra-individual interests. At first sight, it might seem that "personal interest" is nothing more than a synonym for "individual interest". However, the author was not satisfied with this statement, and therefore he used an analytical approach to define the differences between the "personal and individual interests" of the citizen as an actor of public policy, respectively "personal and private interests", which can be integrated under the most general term – "individual interests". Due to the fact that the monograph also offers answers to the indicated controversy, the initial theoretical analysis, in order to interpret and define the "interest", "public interest" from the perspective of related scientific disciplines, can be clearly considered exhaustive – but in a positive sense and sufficient in the terms of content.

From the methodological point of view, the second main chapter is also suitably constructed. Based on the using of analytical-synthetic procedure, the author identifies another concept that is operationalizable for the needs of public policy – i.e., the "public". In a broader discourse, there is again reflected plurality of approaches to understanding this concept. The character of the chapter is in its form a set of knowledge, clear summary of relevant scientific findings, which are contained in the section on the "constitutive features of the public", as a result of the author's initial theoretical analysis of the term "public" from the perspective of several related scientific disciplines. The difference in individual approaches, related to the semantic, interpretive as well as terminological differentiation of the term "public", is not surprising, because of the specific subject of individual sciences, among other things. On the other hand, the mentioned plurality based on scientific arguments through selected titles of authors, relevant to the question of the "public", created an opportunity to present the author's own expert observations and conclusions on the definition of "public" in the public policy context. It has also become a prerequisite for finding answers to the questions: *"Who is entitled to legitimize the public interest"?* or *"How is legitimization carried out"?* or *"In what specific ways is it possible to legitimize majority and minority interests"?*

The starting point of the third chapter is to clarify the concept of "legitimacy" in general. In connection with the above, we must state that the content of legitimacy is further specified on the basis of a scientific discipline, that adapts its object of legitimacy, which supports the diversity and variety of definitions. It gives legitimacy a new dimension. In legal science we can talk about the legitimacy of the law, the legitimacy of the administrative body decision, etc., while e. g. in political science it is primarily about the legitimacy of power, political systems, regimes, etc. Political science as well as law are related scientific disciplines, and therefore there are mutual intersections between legitimacy in the political and legal context. The fact that at the political level, legitimacy is most often associated with power, does not mean that legal or e. g. sociological concepts would completely abstract from this connection. Different social science disciplines can interpret the object of legitimacy, characteristic of another scientific discipline through their conceptual apparatus and their methodological procedures. We also emphasize that relatively much attention is paid to the definition of legitimacy in these frameworks (legal and political). This fact is confirmed by the plurality of information sources and professional studies analysing these types of legitimacy. On the other hand, there is the absence of comprehensive legitimacy analysis of the public interest, which cannot be ignored, if we want to point out the specifics of public policy from the aspect of the object of its legitimacy.

Subsequently, the author presents approaches to legitimacy. He was not limited to traditional legitimization theories, respectively monodisciplinary approaches to legitimacy, which, as he explains "do not go beyond the methodological framework of one science" (e. g. *Weber's typology of legitimacy*, or *Easton's theory of legitimacy*, as inspiring to address the legitimacy of the public interest), but he also focused on modern legitimization theories, specific for their interdisciplinarity. From this framework we can mention the very interesting concept of *autopoietic legitimization* of **N. Luhmann**, who in accordance with the concept of autopoiesis spoke about the autolegitimization of law; another relevant theory of legitimacy is the *concept of democratic legitimacy* associated with the name of **P. Rosanvallon**; or e. g. **D. Beetham's** typology of legitimacy. In this part, the consequence of the application of a suitable methodological procedure is the presence of the author's own evaluation opinions, which help the reader to better understand the researched issues in a practical dimension. It follows that the author did not limit himself only to the explanation of the mentioned concepts, on the basis of the presentation of

knowledge in a theoretical framework. Particularly interesting and inspiring is the part in which the author raises questions about the procedures by which the majority and minority interests in a democratic society are legitimized. For the needs of the researched issues, the author emphasizes the most important ways in which the public legitimizes the mechanism of creating public interests (i.e. participation in elections, participation in the plebiscite, referendums, support for petitions, strikes, etc.), and evaluates them in terms of their role in the process of legitimizing the public interest.

The quality of each monograph is also underlined by the list of bibliographic references, which maps all information sources actually quoted or paraphrased in the text of the monograph. The final list contains an adequate number of relevant information sources of domestic and foreign character, which are listed in alphabetical order and with the acceptance of formal standards. A sufficient number of monographs, scientific studies suitably supplemented by relevant electronic sources, confirms the high level of the author's orientation in a wide range of various bibliographic sources.

The composition of bibliographic sources, the application of appropriate methodological procedures, ways of gradually achieving the main goal of the publication and scientific answers to formulated questions, demonstrate the highly professional approach of the author and his interest in the researched issue. Author did not slip into superficial and vague interpretations and conclusions, but vice versa. In addition to the above, the monograph is characterized by the relevant professional author's argumentation including the high ability to systematize ideas and formulate the own scientific conclusions, which are inspiring for further scientific discussion. The text has an explanatory, clear, notional (factual) character, is logically structured and understandable to the reader, because despite the theoretical level of scientific analysis, the monograph does not ignore the practical dimension. It allows a better understanding of the public interest issues as well as the process of emergence and formation of public interest. Therefore, the monograph can be evaluated as ambitious attempt to expand knowledge in the field of public policy, so it means that it can be useful for students of public policy, as well as other related study programs (political science, law, public administration...).