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POLICY BRIEF

A European Spring? Addressing the Public Discontent in Society

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Summary: *Governments have difficulty in dealing with rising public discontent. Recent years have seen attempts to encourage and embrace civil society. Surveying empirical evidence from public administration research, we argue that such an approach to public governance is likely to be ineffective and possibly dangerous. The recognition of mutual dependence, a dialogue with the alternative civil society and co-production emerge as more promising directions for restoring public trust.*

The rise of a new civic activism

Around the world we see signs of a new ‘civic activism’. The ‘Arab Spring’ has arrived, as have all sorts of demonstrations in Europe against the political and financial leaders that are being held responsible for the disruption of the economic and political system. ***The discontentment shared by large groups in society is fuelled by the feeling that society is becoming more unequal (increasing poverty), unjust (who is paying for the crisis) and pitiless (in its treatment of vulnerable groups).*** This perception is partly correct: although in the long term inequalities have diminished, the last two decades have seen the growth of socio-economic divisions in society.

The scale and depth of this discontent in society cannot be underestimated, because its origins are diverse and mutually reinforcing. These of course include the economic and financial crisis, seen by many as a failure of a hyper-capitalism left uncontrolled by government. The consequent scaling back of welfare arrangements, the rise of unemployment and the growth of a flexible labour market have contributed to feelings of uncertainty and loss. Recent data show that this has especially hit specific socio-economic groups, most worryingly the young. The danger is that in the perception of such groups the growing complexity of society is reduced to a simple conflict: the ‘other’ is treated and regarded as an enemy, a competitor in the

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struggle for life (and jobs, health care, and so forth). On top of this comes a widespread belief that our traditional democratic institutions are no longer fit to deal with the issues that are the result of the complex world we live in. As Huyse has argued long before: politics is like a Gulliver, tied with ropes, unable to deal adequately with the complexities of current society.

How to deal with the discontent

Given these different origins of the protest movement against ‘the system’, it is very difficult to point at a common denominator. And, perhaps more importantly, *it is extremely difficult for governments to come up with the solutions to address this discontentment*. Many of the currently chosen solutions lack a firm basis of evidence:

- **Technical solutions.** If public discontent could be dealt with by improving the performance of governments, then the task ahead would be relatively straightforward and this has for many decades been the prevailing view within schools of public administration. Yet public administration research of the past decade has shown clearly that there is only a weak link between government performance and public trust or approval. There are of course many good reasons to do good work in government, but it cannot in itself be the answer.
- **Populist solutions.** As with every crisis, populist parties all over Europe offer an easy solution, with which they are quite successful and attractive. They claim that their policy solutions, which are essentially nothing more than ‘*Kurieren am Symptom*’, are easy and effective: close the borders, delete social welfare schemes, make people work longer, deregulate etcetera. Populism can succeed exactly because, as noted, popularity is only partially related to effectiveness in government.
- **Symbolic participation.** Many governments, national, regional and local, try whatever they can to be more responsive in the face of discontent: organising citizen-councils, town-hall meetings, referenda and other kinds of citizen participation. Deliberative democracy is given as a vitamin supplement for representative democracy. Research evidence shows, however, that such initiatives are only successful to a limited extent, because they generally attract the least attention from those who are the least content. The scale of their impact, insofar as it can be measured reliably, is rather low.

Moreover, we may really doubt whether governments themselves take such initiatives seriously. This leads us to an important question: *Is this discontentment taken seriously by the powers that be? Or do they only ‘pretend’?*

Towards a manufactured civil society

In the past decade, the dominant hypothesis has been that civil society is slowly dying away (a notion supported by prominent intellectuals such as Robert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni). If this was true, political leaders have no reason to fear a revolution originating from this ‘dead’ civil society. Given the recent bout of demonstrations by sometimes huge crowds, the hypothesis of an eroding civil society appears somewhat out of date. However, it is worth revisiting this argument, because it has been the catalyst of government efforts to revitalize civil society that continue into the present.

The argument was that, due to trends like secularisation, individualisation and cultural fragmentation, civil society is in decline and, as a consequence, this would cause serious problems regarding the ‘governance’ of social order. Therefore, governments have started to think of methods to revitalise or even reinvent ‘the social’. Traditional social organisations, which suffered from falling membership numbers and support, have been transformed into quasi-government organisations. In addition, policies were set up to breathe new life into ailing community structures and/or to re-empower the project of citizenship. It has given rise to criticism that civil society is increasingly captured or controlled by ‘greedy governments’. This can be a dangerous road, for two reasons.

To begin with, there is the risk that politicians and policymakers believe that they actually control civil society. While this is currently most evident in a country like Hungary, it is a risk that occurs in all European countries in the shape of a modern, less hierarchical and more collaborative ‘public governance’. While *such policies may be driven by good intentions, evidence shows that they produce side effects and can in fact undermine the vitality of civic life by producing a ‘manufactured civil society’*. The artefact that has been crafted is not identical to a social field that is rooted in (and legitimised by) civic values, traditions and support. This encapsulated civil society no longer stands fully for what it originally stood for: more and more, it is becoming part of the governmental machinery. *Therefore, bottom-up civic engagement and social innovation become a search for new ways and/or institutions, because grievances are no longer adequately articulated.*

A second danger is that governments mistake the artefact for the real thing, causing blindness for what is happening outside the domains of ‘public governance’ it has carefully nurtured. Past studies show, for instance, that many formal participatory councils or meetings attract only a small number of participants that is not a representative cross-section of society and therefore become largely symbolic. As a consequence, there is often insufficient political and institutional sensibility for the widespread indignation about what has happened to our economic and political institutions, and for other forms of growing aversion from the way in

which our societies are structured. Given these dangers, the capital question is: *what can governments do to allow societal grievances can be articulated in a democratic and effective way?*

Directions for a solution

The challenge is to make the European Spring - which has already begun - a positive force in the public debate and practice of government, rather than a source of discontent and disturbance. In the literature on state - civil society relations, a dominant voice is that of 'mutual dependence': governments depend on civil society for their expertise and critical voice concerning important issues, while civil society depends on government for resources that enable them to fulfil their mission. This is a thin line, a critical balance, because government should accept that civil society is critical (often towards government itself), and because civil society should accept that government at least partly wants some control, in return for resources and support. Hence, *the recognition of mutual dependence is a basis for a solution*. Translated to this discussion, it has several implications.

Governments at all levels now openly acknowledge that there are social trends in society that are 'under their radar'. What is most upsetting in riots such as those in English cities in the summer of 2011 is not the violence in itself, but their sudden eruption and the failure to understand their background. In civil society, there are many 'radars' that detect the issues that lead to discontent and grievances. However, in that respect there may be a difference between the established civil society and an alternative civil society that is not integrated into systems of deliberation. *Policymakers need to give the alternative civil society a voice in the public debate* as well. The advantage is twofold: first, critical voices are channelled through the democratic process, and second, policies may be enriched, by taking into account the issues (and perhaps solutions) offered by civil society. In doing so, governments must be careful not to encapsulate civil society: a civil society that becomes part of the state machinery loses its critical voice and hence its comparative advantages. A Pirate Party that joins the ranks of parliamentarians will eventually become part of established civil society, as has historically happened to nearly all social movements. This means that *the search for the alternative civil society is a continuous process, with periodically shifting partners and often no clear spokespeople*. This is an intensive process; but the alternatives are populist parties or discontent on the streets.

Civil society should take up its responsibilities, too. More than is the case today, civil society and citizens should *not only express grievances, but also engage in dialogue* with others in order to find solutions. According to Stéphane Hessel, *"il ne suffit pas de s'indigner, il faut*

aussi qu'on s'engage". Government alone cannot longer deal with the complexities our societies are confronted with and need the collaboration of others to deliver effectively. The focus on seeing citizens as customers may have succeeded in creating consumerist attitudes, which may have some benefits with respect to service quality, but may also detract from the active participation that is needed to fix the more fundamental problem of a deficit in public trust. As noted before on the basis of research in public administration, ***an exclusive focus on delivering good public services cannot suffice to restore public trust, because in itself the relationship between performance and attitudes is too weak.***

Finally, participation is often equated with participation in deliberation over government decisions over public services, but it is fruitful also to consider involvement in the actual production of services. ***Citizens and civil society can co-produce their public services,*** together with government: taking up responsibilities in public services, and not only expecting governments to ensure public services, in return for taxes and fees. If Rifkin is correct in his claim that we are entering the era of empathy, then this would probably offer fertile ground for civil society and citizen engagement in the public domain. The work by Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom and of several European scholars has explored the conditions under which such co-production can work and suggests that this type of participation may be more effective in fostering trust and social innovation than traditional forms of consultation.

Conclusion

Experiments in this direction have already been attempted. A number of these show a fruitful collaboration between an alternative civil society and government, inspired by bottom-up initiatives: co-production, alternative economies, critical voices and social innovations. ***The key is for government to walk the tightrope of welcoming and embracing these initiatives, yet without holding them so tightly that the life is squeezed out of them.*** This requires, as we have argued in this policy brief, a basic openness and restraint on all sides.