Aspects of Citizen–Public Services Relationships: The Case of Greece

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The 1980s will go down in the history of administration as a decade of rapid and often unforeseen changes. Throughout the world, previously unthinkable administrative reforms took place. New administrative institutions, new staffing and personnel administration policies, streamlined organizational patterns, structured models for flexible functioning and, of course, the systematic spread of administrative information systems made up the panoply of contemporary programs for the reform of the administrative state.

Undoubtedly, these changes have transformed day-to-day administrative practice and have shaped public services of a new type. The appearance, and the actual functions, of many public organizations have changed. It would be no exaggeration to emphasize that these changes, which have been adopted by states with differing historical backgrounds, economic development, culture heritage, and demographics, have brought about a revolution in the theory and practice of public administration.

The triumph of market forces, the globalization of the economy, the dizzying development of information systems, the Internet, and the “shrinking” of the globe by telecommunications are some of the factors which marked the “end of geography” (Kouzmin, 1995, p. 1). These conditions have given rise to a re-orientation of state action, the liberalization of sectors of state intervention, and the development of re-organization and de-bureaucratization policies. A practical consequence has been that the mission, the role, and the purpose of public services have changed. A new model of administration, differing from the bureaucratic one, has emerged. This model, called New Public Management, predominates as a world-wide trend in administrative reform.

The present study will investigate the nature and content of this new administrative model, calling attention to the fact that at its core it seeks to improve the relations between the state and citizens; the study will then describe and assess the measures and policies that have been implemented in the Greek public service. More specifically, the study will analyze measures and policies in the Greek legal system. It will emphasize the repetition over time of certain measures and suggest that a necessary condition for the modernization of these measures and policies is the fundamental re-invention of the administrative system.

New Public Management: The New Administrative “Paradigm” of Administrative Reform

Bureaucracy as an object for investigation has attracted the interest of many analysts. Sociologists, economists, political scientists, historians, and, of course, adminis-

Abstract: A number of governments, falling along a range of political persuasions, are pursuing service quality initiatives. A focus on service quality is part of the general direction of public sector management reform. Quality policies are responsive to economic progress and social needs. Although service quality is affected by many things, citizen-public service relationships are fundamental. The social need for a modernized Greek public administration has been posed many times. Public policies seeking to reform public administration in Greece have been designed with a particular emphasis on the complex policy space of the relationships between state services and the citizens. Using the New Public Management as a theoretical framework, this paper examines critically how these relationships have been organized. Methodologically, the paper is based on the content analysis of relevant official reports, documents and administrative archives. The paper reveals that the discussion of this reform, the measures adopted and the reforms themselves are often recycled.
Bureaucracy is at one and the same time a phenomenon of historical importance and of significant ambivalence.

bureaucratic procedures, the multiple levels of administration and hierarchy, operate as factors causing the observable distrust of citizens toward administrative institutions?

These questions have long occupied analysts and public servants who are looking for ways of dealing with the crisis of governance from which contemporary administrative systems suffer. At the very center of these explorations is the practicality of the moral obligation of every public servant to satisfy the needs of citizens.

Consequently, one approach to the design and organization of public services, a normative one, stresses that the functioning of any type of public service is not dependent upon public problems. On the contrary, public organizations exist and must operate for the society and not for “themselves.” No public service has a specific value in itself, nor is it legitimated when it acts as an end in itself. In the developed economies and in democratically structured and operating states, the relations of public services with society are determined by their role, their mission, and the criteria used to mark their distinction from private enterprises. The New Public Management and the practice of the current administrative reform programs expresses this structural approach.

Although the term “New Public Management” is variously defined, (Ferlie et al. 1996, p. 10), agreement exists about the steps required to move from a bureaucratic model of organization to one that, according to Gray (1999), “is business-like but is not like a business.” New Public Management, without eliminating the classic and universally accepted values of impartiality, neutrality, and lawful action, also emphasizes the need to adopt the principles of open, transparent, high-quality, effective, and efficient administration. A fundamental administrative change lies at the center of this tendency — not the constant increase of inputs, but a better use of limited resources. The New Public Management and corresponding reform programs (Frederickson, 1999) call for an extroverted public administration.

An administrative system that is bureaucratically
A strategic aim of most, if not all, of the administrative reform programs devised in recent years has been the redesign of a public administration oriented toward results. Designed is interested more in procedures; it operates more or less satisfactorily for the internal customer (the bureaucrat), but questionably for the external customer, the citizen. Bureaucracy ensures legitimacy through an absolute and unbending devotion to procedure, while in the New Public Management, administration gains legitimacy through results, as defined by the satisfaction of the expectations and needs of the citizens. The objectives of administrative action in New Public Management must rest on the satisfaction of these needs. This setting of goals has changed the manner of conceptualization and understanding of public services. The citizens are the final judges of the services with which they are provided, and it is they who trust (or distrust) the institutions of administration. The period of history in which the citizen was regarded as the passive recipient of certain goods and services has passed; now administrative policy for the reform of the state centers on citizens — their wishes, needs, expectations, and demands are the basic criteria for administrative decision making.

A strategic aim of most, if not all, of the administrative reform programs devised in recent years has been the redesign of a public administration oriented toward results, defined as the satisfaction of the needs of the citizens. The re-orientation of administrative action toward the citizen is of major importance when contrasted with Merton’s classic description of bureaucratic behavior as that tied to administrative procedures incapable of assisting and serving the citizen (Merton, 1940, p. 563).

The on-going demand for administrative reform: State–Citizen relations at the center

Public administration as an object of study and as a field for political confrontation has been at the very center of debate in recent years. More than one proposal has been formulated that puts forward ideas on improvement and combating the courses and consequences of bureaucratization. The ultimate aim and
objective of all these is to overcome the administrative crisis (Makridimitris, 1991; 1996) through which the entire Greek administrative system is passing and whose consequences and side-effects are diffused throughout society.

Since the mid-1980s, the demand for administrative reform has become more topical than ever. During that time, there was an increase in the output of studies, plans, and reports dealing with the pathologies of the public administration and their necessary "cures."

In greater detail, one of the recommendations of a report by the Center of Planning and Economic Research was to improve relations between the state and the citizen. Special weight, according to the report’s authors, should be attached to the following:

1. Transparency in administrative action and in the participation of the citizen in it;
2. Simplicity and speed of public administration;
3. Mutual trust and co-operation between public services and citizens;
4. Exploitation of new technology, chiefly information science, in public administration, balanced with protection of the citizen from abuse and interference in his/her private life;
5. Social control of public administration.

However, a few years later a new report noted that “it is no longer sufficient that administrative action should be lawful; it must be accompanied by effectiveness in terms of the satisfaction of the needs of the public.” A 1997 report (published in Makridimitris and Michalopoulos, 2000), proposed the following administrative principles that ought to govern state-citizen relations:

1. Administrative simplification;
2. Organization of two-way communication between public administration and the public;
3. Creation of consultative structures.

These guidelines were adopted by a 1997 strategic plan, which set as the mission of the public administration its operation in terms citizens expect (Ministry of Interior, Public Administration, and Decentralization, 1997, p. 13). Including public administration within the international competitive environment, this strategic plan placed citizens at its axis of reference. A year later, a new program, titled “Quality for the Citizen,” set the needs of citizens at the center of its aims (Ministry of Interior, Public Administration, and Decentralization, 1998), while in the same year, a report described as pathological the hostile image that society held of public administration. It was, then, perfectly reasonable that in this report, satisfaction of the public should be set as a strategic aim of administrative modernization.

The improvement of relations between the public service and citizens is an on-going issue. The reports cited above and corresponding empirical research (Vima, 2000; Kathimerini, 2000) confirm the unsatisfactory nature of these relations. Consequently, the crucial question that arises and to which this study will turn concerns the recovery of confidence in the public service by citizens.

The Legal Framework of State-Citizen Relations: A Historical Review.

Reform movements, both frequent and dense, have characterized Greek government efforts at improving relations between citizens and the public service. From the time of the decree “concerning the delivery of reports and decisions” until more recent legislative regulations, history records numerous attempts to improve the services provided to citizens.

In fact, from the time of the bourgeois modernization of Greek society (Mavrogordatos and Hatziiosiph, 1998; Makridimitris, 1997), the legislature has taken care to force public authorities to respond effectively to citizens complaints. Thus, Act 149/1914 established, in Article 2, the obligation of replying to citizens’ reports in principle within 30 days and of sending the reply by post. In the event of an administrative omission in this regard, disciplinary penalties range from a 20 drachma fine to dismissal.

Legislative Decree 3983/59 attempted to improve the relations between the state and citizens. Its stated aim was a functional improvement of the public services. More specifically, provisions were made at that time for setting up a service to investigate complaints within each ministry (Article 1), while an information
and complaints office was set up in each prefecture (Article 3). Article 5 adopted a form of "one-stop service." The measure places the onus of searching for supporting documents on the authority to which the relevant application was submitted rather than the applicant.

However, from the mid 1970s, we can observe attempts to improve the relations of the state with citizens. In an effort to combat bureaucracy, which at that time also was regarded as the source of distrust of the public administration, Greek officials issued a circular ordering simplification of administrative language (Varvaressos, 1979, p. 8). At the same time, moral and pecuniary incentives grew to urge civil servants to study and propose ways to combat bureaucracy (Presidential Decree 248/76). Furthermore, the "Center for Administrative Information," known as the "177," came into being (article 27, Presidential Decree 770/75 Government Gazette 248) to provide citizens with information about the administration. This inter-ministerial center served as the model for the Ministry of Education.

The Consumer Service Bureau also began operating at the Ministry of Commerce. The bureau provided services to citizens-consumers, either by telephone or through issuing information pamphlets. Various other measures attempted to simplify administrative procedures in various fields (pensions, birth certificates, building permit, etc.) (Varvaressos, 1979, p.10).

In the 1980s, the government issued a series of regulations aimed at building trust between the state and citizens. More specifically, within various frameworks, the Ministry to the Presidency of Government Citizens' Communications and Information Bureaus served as independent organic units within ministries, reporting directly to the minister. However, a few years later, a more widely-known law — 1599/86 — attempted to improve the terms of service to citizens. For these purposes, the law set up citizens' communications and information bureaus in every prefecture and allowed for similar bureaus at the local level by a decision of the municipal council, provided that the population of the municipality was larger than 20,000 (Article 17). These units had a broad field of action that covered areas such as briefing citizens, accepting suggestions and proposals for improving relations between the state and citizens, issuing information bulletins, allowing visits by citizens, and assisting them in their communications with various public services. To supplement these organizational interventions, the dispatch law stipulated document and certificates by post within specific time-limits given on application forms (Article 12, para. 1). In the event of an application reaching a service unit not able to deal with it, that unit must forward it to another service unit and inform the interested party (Article 12, para. 5). Furthermore, Article 13 Law 1599/86 allows for the possibility for each minister, in cooperation with the Ministry to the Presidency of Government and of Finance, to issue ministerial decisions that determine those matters on which citizens could deal with one service unit.

An improvement in state-citizen relations was a constant feature of the policy on administrative modernization in the 1990s. Act 1943/91 established a complex of legal norms to improve the functional effectiveness of the public service and enhance services provided to citizens. In effect, these were normative regulations that prescribed 60 days as the maximum time for processing of citizens' affairs, while for information, certificates, supporting documents, and certifications, this time-limit was set at up to ten days (Article 5). At the same time, (Article 5, para. 7), in cases where public services do not respond to the citizens within these fixed times, the citizen has the right to ask for compensation (decided by a specific committee) ranging between 5,000 and 200,000 drachmas.

Furthermore, according to Law 1943/91, each minister, in coordination with the Ministry to the Presidency of Government and Finance through a ministerial decision, determines measures that enhance the transparency and publicity of administrative actions.

A few years later, leaders introduced new methods for citizens' communications and information. Specifically,
Article 22 of Act 2539/97 made it possible for citizens to submit some applications by telephone (Ministerial Decision no f./2912145/30.1.98) through the Telecommunications Organization of Greece. Furthermore, a series of circulars (DISKPO/F. 8/15391/22.9.99, DISKPO/F. 8/19753/24.9.99) activated Citizens' Information Bureaus in second-level local government to supply citizens with better information on the local administration.

Conclusion

The above description of the legal framework that regulates state-citizen relations gives rise to some crucial and interesting thoughts on the way these relations are structured and, more generally, on the prospects for administrative re-organization and reform in Greece.

Interest on the part of the state in the effective structuring of public administration has been constant. From 1835 onwards, no period has passed without normative regulations introduced for functional restructuring and energizing effective action by the public services. All of these have expressed the practical and moral obligation of the public administration to serve and inform citizens and to satisfy their needs by supplying services and goods citizen demand.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of administrative assessment and, more particularly, of the New Public Management, we can raise certain crucial questions. That is, what logic do these various regulations express? How are the aims they pursue described? Are these aims formulated with regulatory force? What results have been achieved? What indices exist for evaluation and assessment? Has the Greek public service learned to correct errors, as manifested by complaints, dissatisfaction, or distrust?

The reasoning about state-citizen relations in Greece revolves around three axes. In each case, the public service must set time limits for replies to citizens, utilize up-to-date technology, and discipline civil servants who perform their duties in an improper manner.

In this way, however, these relations only change procedures for the provision of the services. The relations of the public services with citizens become procedural in nature. The policies followed go no further than redesigning the procedures for information or communication, leaving the content of the services unaffected. The aim of the whole of the regulations is concerned primarily with the method, rather than the nature, of the services. A fortiori, reformers do not touch upon the question of which services are to be provided to the citizens. Such a logic of shaping the relations of the state with citizens, one that has prevailed over time, replaces objectives with procedures, and has elevated procedures into an objective.

It will be obvious that an improvement in these relations is only marginally achieved by policies of this nature. They ensure legitimacy through the reform of communication procedures and not the content of the relations. Such public policies do not touch upon the "essence" of the administration, but refer to the "appearances" of public services, converting state-citizen relations into an issue of communication. Public policies that express themselves in terms of regulation either through establishing deadlines or through setting up compensation committees do nothing to eliminate the bureaucrats' domination relationship that has developed between the public service and citizens. Such public policies fail to de-bureaucratize administrative reform, but rather recycle bureaucracy, a pathology that has had a definitive effect on state-citizens relations. Bureau-citizen relations are unequal and do not change when the improvement sought is not accompanied by a "re-foundation" of a systemic type.

The reform of state-citizen relations must follow profound structural reform in the public service and in the state. An issue of the New Public Management, structural reform models must include an extroverted orientation, by the establishment of mechanisms for the assessment of the desired results, and by de-bureaucratization policies, which express the sui-generis logic of the "dynamic conservatism of bureaucracy" (Kickert, 1993). Administration marketing fails to ensure the adjustment of public services to the needs of citizens and of society. Adjustment comes through policies involving the structural adjustment and functional modernization of the public services. The experts' report proposes decisions of this nature on the re-organization of the Greek public service, but the proposals have not been incorporated into day-to-day administrative functioning and practice.
On the contrary, as can be seen from the analysis of the statutory framework that has gone before, citizen-public service relations re-emerge as an issue from time to time, raising justified questions as to whether a new — in the literal meaning of the term — public policy of modernization will form and take root. Although measures have been taken in Greece, they do not seem to constitute the operational outcome of a strategic program of administrative reform. Such a reform is not achieved by the steady and constant repetition of regulations that do not re-determine state-citizen relations.

The restatement of these relations on a new basis requires fundamental reform. The orientation of the public service to the expectations of citizens means that public services operate as open, transparent systems in which the citizen is not treated only and exclusively as a legal subject, but as a customer. The transition from an administration of procedures to an administration of results, something that is universally desired, presupposes a "customer-centered" orientation of the public services. The New Public Management, as a model and discourse of administrative reform, is not confined to optimizing information and communication with citizens. Such an interpretation of the New Public Management is narrow. From this point of view the reform in Greece is restricted to superficial issues covering the necessity for an administrative re-foundation. However, axiomatic, reinvention of the administrative system must precede the legitimization of administration and the recovery of citizens' trust.

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References


