

THE LIMITS OF PARTICIPATION: GREEK GOVERNMENT'S INTERRUPTED ATTEMPT TO GAIN TRUST

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The lack of trust in democratic institutions and in the effectiveness of governments has led Western democracies to the search of a new contract between governors and governed. The Papandreou government has followed this trend by introducing new instruments of public participation. What has been the effect of the economic crisis and of the subsequent fast policy decisions for the rescue of the Greek economy to these new instruments? No doubt it has been catastrophic

In Greece, the discussion about public participation has been rising in the last few years and it reached a peak with the establishment of the Open Governance platform by the newly elected Prime Minister in autumn of 2009 (<http://www.opengov.gr/home/>). Citizens' participation in formulation and implementation of public policy in Greece has been limited and comports with the general image of weak civil society, oversized public sector and dominant political parties. Additionally, the prevailing hierarchical administrative model has been hindering the adoption of participatory practices that better fit an administrative model based on policy networks. Nevertheless, the international trend towards broader citizens' participation and Greece's consolidation of EU membership have opened up the discussion about the importance of public participation. The current government and especially the new Prime Minister seem to have realized the importance of public participation and have been insisting in the importance of consultation before new legislation is passed.

The first step towards public participation is public communication and concerns practices of information transmission from government and public organizations to the citizens. It is directly related with the transparency of governmental actions and with the citizens' right to access public information and in particular public documents. The right to information is initially protected by the article 5^A of the Greek Constitution. The Administrative Procedural Code (Law 2690/1999) supplements the Constitution by specifying that all citizens, and not only citizens that have a specific interest, have a right to access administrative documents. The implementation of the legislation for the right to information is over-sighted by the Ombudsman who receives citizens' complaints for denial of access and by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority, when asked by a public organization or citizen in relation to a claim.

The use of consultation mechanisms in Greece has been even more sporadic but increasingly there is an agreement that they should be enhanced in order to achieve better regulation but also to improve the quality of public policy decision-making and implementation. Just after his election, in November of 2009, Prime Minister George Papandreou launched the Open Governance initiative which aims to promote the principles of transparency, consultation,

accountability and decentralization by using electronic means. The initiative, for now, is mainly based on a web site which has a dual role. First, the announcement of job opportunities in government even for high profile posts that would not normally be announced at all, because they are considered to be political and thus decided behind closed doors. Second, the provision of a platform for electronic consultation on proposed legislation before taken to Parliament. The reception of the new initiative has been hesitant because although people find it difficult to trust the government and they feel their opinion won't be heard, they do use the platform in order to apply for posts and to comment on draft laws.

The severe economic crisis that Greece has experienced since January of 2010 and the subsequent pace of the decisions taken by the government has demonstrated the limitations of this new instrument. Although the electronic platform still functions, the majority of the important decisions and political and economic reforms did not pass through the filter of consultation. Delays in the appointments of personnel in key positions, with the latest example of the appointment of Mr Spyropoulos at IKA by omitting the Open Governance tools has further weakened the electronic experiment. It is more apparent than ever that deeper and more substantial reforms are initially necessary if the trust of citizens is to be gained. Reforms that would show that values such as efficiency and meritocracy are at last consolidated by the Greek state and society.