

# MAKING PUBLIC POLICIES WORK: BETWEEN RESPONSIVENESS AND CONVERGENCE OF AGENDAS

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## Abstract

This research highlights two concepts: responsive government and policy agenda – as a result of convergence between citizens' priorities and governmental and parliamentary activity –, and tries to find evidence to prove a relationship of mutual conditioning between the two concepts.

The purpose for such a research is justified by the need for a "vision of the future", a concept devoid of academic rigor and, therefore, difficult to define, but which emphasizes, on one hand, the force of a clear strategic intent and, on the other hand, the irreplaceable role in achieving this vision of public policy to meet the legitimate expectations of citizens.

On one side, responsiveness in the context of a system can be defined as an outcome that can be achieved when institutions and institutional relationships are designed in such a way that they are cognizant and respond appropriately to the universally legitimate expectations of the citizens. On the other side, we can detect a policy agenda that represents a common place of convergence between citizens' priorities and governmental and parliamentary activity. This convergence is a guarantee that the citizens will receive appropriate and opportune responses to their demands. In other words, the convergence agenda involves the existence of a responsive government.

**Keywords:** public policies, responsive government, policy agenda, citizen expectation, convergence agenda.

## 1. The concept of responsive government

In the current turbulent and discontinuous context, governments are forced to abandon the old paradigm and to adopt strategic approaches which are able to offer them the opportunity to anticipate and respond to challenges. A real visionary and responsive government must work today for tomorrow. To win the next challenges, the government must prepare to respond to the citizens' needs and expectations. Expectations are often simply defined as individual's beliefs regarding desired outcomes. Yet, the literature suggests that the definition of expectations, and more so the concept of expectations fulfillment is far from easy to define (Thompson and Sunol, 1995; Staniszewska, 1999).

Thompson and Sunol (1995) cite four types of expectations:

- a) Ideal – similar to aspirations, desires or preferred outcomes;
- b) Predicted – realistic, practical or anticipated outcomes that result from personal experiences, reported experiences of others and sources of knowledge such as the media;
- c) Normative – expectations that are based on what should or ought to happen; and
- d) Unformed – the situation that occurs when individuals are unable or unwilling for various reasons to articulate their expectations, which may either be because they do not have expectations, have difficulty expressing their expectations or do not wish to reveal their expectations due to fear, anxiety or conforming to social norms.

A key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, as political equals (Dahl, 1972, p. 1). Maximizing social perceived welfare depends on improving distribution, as well as on increasing the average level of responsiveness.

From this perspective, the policymakers must enable themselves to “decrypt future” by interpreting the signals coming from the environment. The response of government that indicates potential problems is both highly punctuated and uncertain. In public services, “responsiveness” is a controversial concept. Democracy would seem to require administrators responsive to the popular will or at least to legislatures and elected chief executives if not directly to the people (Vigoda, 2000, p. 166).

Yet, administrators and scholars alike tend to treat responsiveness in the best case as a necessary evil that appears to compromise professional effectiveness, and in the worst case as an indicator of political expediency, if not outright corruption.

Rourke's recent assessment is illustrative: “The growing demand for responsiveness in government policy-making puts the survival of a professional outlook characterized by independence of judgment and indifference to political pressures at increasing risks.” (Rourke, 1992, p. 545).

From the systemic studies perspective, responsiveness can be defined as an outcome that can be achieved when institutions and institutional relationships are designed in such a way that they are cognizant and can respond appropriately to the universally legitimate expectations of individuals. The fundamental concern is

the quality of life improvement in society, including within this broad concept the quality of citizens-state relations.

The achievement of responsiveness in this sense is likely to re-establish the public's trust not only in particular public policies, but also more broadly in the state and system of governance. According to Ansoff and McDonnell's perspectives (1990, p. 342), responsiveness refers to a kind of government behavior; for example, whether the organization anticipates or reacts to challenges from the environment.

Based on these coordinates, the responsiveness approach is not only a technical measurement and implementation issue, but it is also a political problem where changes are connected to government activity and, in the end, to society activity. Responsiveness is a generic concept that applies to the relationship between a public service and the citizenry, and to the relationship between the state and civil society.

## **2. Public agenda**

By "public agenda" we refer to the set of policy issues that the public relates to (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, p. 250). Cobb and Elder suggest that public agenda consists of all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority (Cobb and Elder, 1972, p. 85). So, the public agenda represents a set of problems in relation to which the public participates in the community life. The two authors refer to the systemic/ informal agenda, but in terms of this work, systemic/ informal agenda and public agenda may be considered interchangeable.

In order to serve our purpose, a public policy problem is defined as a condition or situation that produces needs or dissatisfactions of the society and for which relief or redress (from government) is sought (Anderson, 2003). For example, conditions like polluted air, altered food, and over populated prisons and cities produce situations which might create potential problems for citizens, taking into consideration that their dissatisfaction and discomfort are raising. The degree of dissatisfaction or discomfort (that also involves governmental intervention) is measured by citizens through a standard or a criterion; if these two rate a situation as being inevitable or one "on" which they are directly responsible for, no governmental action will be taken, because that situation does not represent the citizens' will, so it does not find itself on the public agenda.

Seldom objective conditions are so compelling or unambiguous that they determine the policy agenda. Hence, knowing how a problem has been defined is essential to understand the process of the policy agenda emergence. A policy idea that fails to meet the feasibility criterion is unlikely to be considered a serious contender on the public agenda.

Because the public opinion has the tendency to become vague and confused when it comes to technical problems or complex solutions, we have to mention that the public agenda does not include the public policy solutions that are granted either by the political elites or by certain public segments.

We also emphasize that situations do not become problems unless they are perceived as such, expressed and brought to the attention of the authorities; this kind of action is frequently used by officials and politicians in search for problems to be solved.

More than that, a situation becomes a problem on the public agenda if it identifies itself with an area of state intervention, for which a governmental solution is possible. Regarding this, Aaron Wildavsky stated that authorities will rather ignore a problem if it is not multiplied by its solution. Hurricanes and earthquakes cannot be considered problems due to the fact they are unpredictable, but the damage that they cause does indeed represent a public policy problem and many programs have been created seeking to reduce the damaging effects of these natural phenomena (Wildavsky, 1975, pp. 134-140).

What transforms a private problem into a public one? Generally speaking the public problems are thought to be the ones that affect the lives of a substantially large number of people, while their consequences are also felt by people who are not directly involved in those issues.

Suppose a citizen is dissatisfied by the amount of money that the state taxed under a certain fiscal law. As long as that citizen acts in his own behalf, trying to find derogation from the fiscal institutions in his or her favor, than we are talking about a personal problem. But if that citizen along with other people directly or indirectly affected by the same problem try to modify the legislation, than the personal problem turns into a public matter.

The fact that a situation or a condition is perceived as a problem does not mean that it depends only on its objective dimension, but it depends also to a large extent on how people relate to that situation. If a person has a certain social standard, it is not a real problem for him to find a job, as he is not threatened by the increasing unemployment rate, he might even consider this as a necessary step in lowering inflation. But for a worker, unemployment is a threat and he will negatively react to it.

A person's perception is influenced by his or her own experiences, values and situations that involve him/her. There is not a single or valid way of defining the problem, even though many people have opinions and preferences when it comes to a certain situation.

There are frequent cases when various ways of describing a problem converge to the idea of getting the public's vote. We decide if a certain situation can or cannot be considered a public problem by looking at the terms which were used to define that problem and accept the proposed definition. More than that, the terms which were used to define it and the causes that generated it determine the emergence of certain solutions which are considered to be adequate.

In October-November 2009 we conducted a research aimed primarily at identifying the perceptions and opinions of the Romanian citizens regarding the main directions of government's activity in 2010. The methodology used in conducting this research is summarized below.

Way of interviewing: face to face interviews at the respondents' house, or by telephone, using the same questionnaire. The questions remained the same despite the interviewing manner;

Sample size: 1,154 people over 18 years old;

Representativeness of the sample and sampling procedure: probabilistic group, stratified, multi-staged. Dual frame of representation: homes with telephones connected to the main market telephone operator (representative in 761 homes) and the adult population of Romania (400 representative homes selected through the random method). Both representations have been projected according to the territorial distribution of the Romanian adult population. The assignment of the representative sample was proportional to the group size.

Stratification criteria: 8 historical regions and the urban level (8 different types of regions);

Units of selection: in the representative case of the face to face interviews, the primary units of selection were the regions. The selection of the homes in this case was made through the random method, and people were selected through the "last birthday" method. In the case of the representation sample for the telephone interview, the primary unit of selection was the home itself, and people were also selected through the "last birthday" method.

Moderation: in order to fix the unequal selection probabilities and to adjust the different types of non-answers, the final representative segment was moderated through the raking method and the moderation variables were: region, urbanism degree, sex, age, race, occupation, level of education and having a telephone subscription. The moderation algorithm used as references official statistic data especially from the last demographic census.

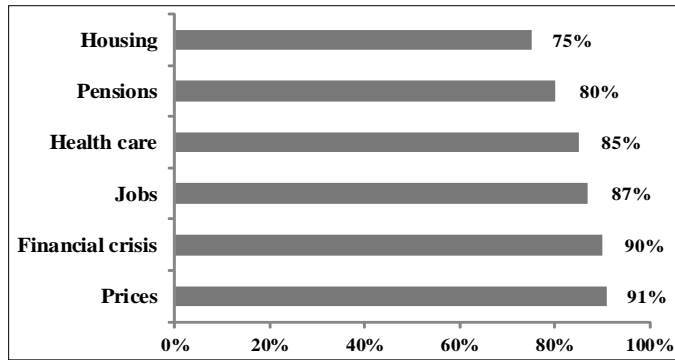
Representation: the final moderated segment is representative for the adult population of Romania, with a  $\pm 2.9\%$  error and with a 95% trust level. Besides segmentation errors, the way questions were asked and the practical difficulties when writing down field data or telephone data can also cause other errors that might alter the results of the survey.

The date of the collected information: October 2009.

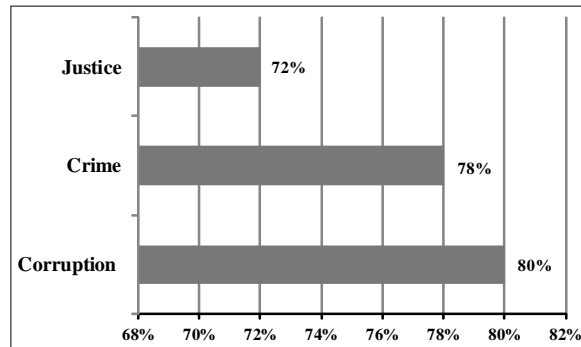
The answers to the question: "In which areas has the government taken the most measures according to your own expectations?" can be seen in the chart below. The 16 themes proposed by the questionnaire are grouped into three main groups: a) quality of life – issues relating to employment, housing, prices, pensions, financial crisis and healthcare; b) functioning of the public institutions – functioning of central and local institutions and education; and c) corruption and justice – crime, justice and corruption.

The following charts illustrate the acceptability rate of the Romanian public when it comes to the public agenda.

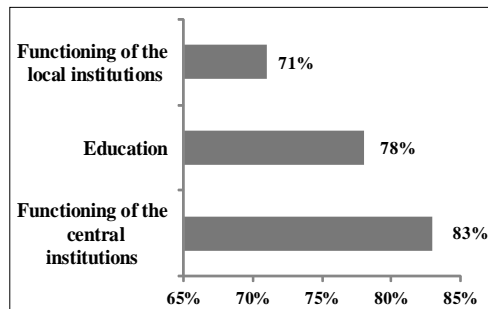
According to the results of this research, the public agenda is defined by issues related to living standards, corruption and functioning of public institutions. We can notice a quite slow dynamic of the public agenda when it comes to Romania. A powerful



**Figure 1:** Public agenda in the area of quality of life



**Figure 2:** Public agenda in the sphere of justice and corruption



**Figure 3:** Public agenda in the field of education and institutions

domination of the problems that refer to the increasing of incomes and employment rate exists in Romania. On the other hand, the problems that were generated by the important global challenges – such as terrorism, pollution, energy crisis, organized crime – are almost completely left aside.

This phenomenon happens despite the situation in which various problems continue to stay in the public's attention, the way in which they are defined along with the variation of the values and conditions that generated them. More than that, when

people's mentality evolves as a result of the changes and transformations that took place at a societal level, situations that were considered to be normal at a given time can turn into a problem. For example, domestic violence, which has been considered throughout ages a personal problem, is now treated as a felony.

For this matter we can find more explanations; starting with the fact that the only preoccupation of people is the struggle for day to day living and not taking into consideration the civic responsibility. The same explanations can be used for the lack of interest for the important global challenges (human rights, energy, terrorism, security, delinquency).

### **3. Governmental agenda**

Shifting problems from the public agenda to the governmental one is the result of a political process that also determines the adequate solutions. Is the fact that people with disabilities should have the right to proper means of transportation an issue regarding the public transportation field or an issue that is rather connected to human rights? Special means of transportation for the disabled people is a solution to the transportation issue. The human rights perspective involves equal rights for the transportation of the disabled people and also the existence of proper devices that can allow disabled people to equally use the public means of transportation.

The ideal solution would be for us to consider the connection between the public agenda and the governmental one. But we must say that, if we use the results of the previous survey presented above as a temporal method of the governmental agenda, the process of establishing a connection between the two types of agendas is altered by the existence of possible threats caused by the irregular types of questions, by the number of respondents etc. (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, p. 226).

Causality is an important aspect of a public policy problem. A situation can turn into a problem but what are the causes that generated the situation? Many issues – delinquency, poverty, inflation and pollution – have multiple causes. Inflation is characterized by a generalized growth of prices, measured by the index of commodity prices and it represents a political public problem with multiple roots: an under-production of goods and services, excessive demand of goods and services, a surplus of currency, the result of a psychological inflation (people expecting prices to rise) etc. In order to solve a problem, we should pay attention to the causes, not only to the manifestations (symptoms). However, it is not easy to identify or detect the main causes in many situations. Identifying the roots of a problem and negotiating a compromise regarding them is not an easy task for the policy makers because defining the problem turns into a problem itself.

The difficulty to set the governmental agenda is in the same time determined by the fact that the nature and purpose of many public political problems are hard to express because of their dispersed or “invisible” nature. Those who elaborate public politics do not always correctly evaluate the given situation because determining the size of the problem is often inadequate. Therefore, it becomes impossible for them to offer adequate solutions or even undertake governmental actions in order to solve the problem. In

addition to these inaccuracies, we can also mention the inadequate understanding of the causes of the phenomena.

Another aspect connected to the governmental agenda refers to its capacity of being easy to control/manipulate, as some of the problems involve a higher level of behavioral changes than others. McKelvey (1976) and Schofield (1978) showed that in absence of a majority-rule equilibrium implies that virtually any policy outcome is possible. Hence, those who control the agenda can engage in all sorts of manipulations. A monopoly agenda setter can achieve almost any outcome he wishes, providing the appropriate order of paired options considered by the voting group operating under majority rules (Schofield, 1978).

Limited resources naturally determine a space limitation as well as the governmental agenda. In the context of scarce resources, many other forces, other than the public opinion, appear and try to get their own space on the agenda, because it necessary defines the priorities within the agenda. It is not enough for a proposal to be included in the agenda, but it has to also occupy a high position on the agenda.

From our point of view, we cannot discuss in terms of responsive government without taking into account the congruence between public and government agendas. More than that, responsiveness can lack even if such a correspondence exists, due to the blocking occurred in public policy actions, either by the political system (its level of complexity can generate various blockings) or by the leaders whose opinions are different from the ones of the public.

We must raise questions of political interdependence among the nations and make some remarks on how these affect the substance and procedures of national policy making, including the agenda setting. For example, in the Romanian case, European integration has brought up on the governmental agenda many substantial issues other than those already contained by the public agenda. How must the government react? Which are the alternatives of the government?

In our opinion, a responsive government must act as to produce a favorable society climate, followed by a latter stage when the European requests become real issues on the public agenda. In fact, the demand for more transparency in public decision making, the search for new forms of accountability, and the growing reliance on persuasion rather than traditional forms of governmental coercion can be shown as related, at least in part, to economic growth and political interdependence (World Bank, 1997). In other words, we cannot speak about responsiveness and much less about democratic policies that are able to satisfy the demands of citizens in the absence of that convergence between agendas.

#### **4. Parliamentary agenda**

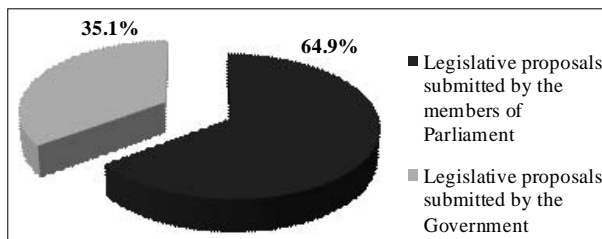
The activity referring to the parliamentary debates is one of the main components of the public politics process. According to an idealized legislative committee system model developed by Weingast and Marshall (Weingast and Marshall *apud* Majone, 2008), each congressional committee has jurisdiction over a specific subset of policy issues. Within their jurisdiction, the committee imposes the monopoly authority to bring the

alternatives to the status quo for a vote before the legislature; the committee proposal must command a majority of votes against the status quo to become a public policy.

The agenda power held by committee members implies that the success of the legislative initiative is influenced/ supported by the members of the relevant committees. Without these members, the bill will not reach the floor to be voted plenary. Thus committee veto power means that from the set of policies that command a majority against the status quo, only those that make the committee better off are possible. The authority to veto the proposals of others is a powerful tool used by committees to influence policy in their jurisdiction. Institutionalized control over the congressional agenda – over the design and selection of proposals that arise for a vote – provides durability and enforceability of bargains in a legislative setting (Majone, 2008).

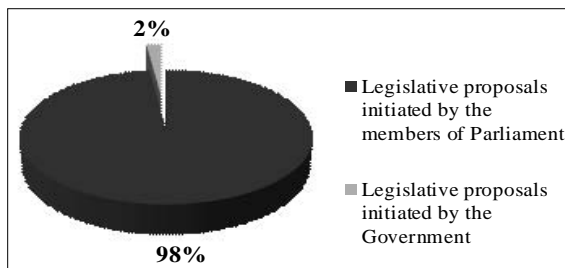
For the Romanian case we briefly present a research conducted in 2010 by the Institute for Public Policy (Institutul pentru Politici Publice) concerning the activity of the Romanian Parliament. First of all, the study captures the quantitative dimension of the Parliament activities. In the first legislative session of 2010 (February 1 to June 30) 322 regulatory projects and legislative initiatives were submitted to the Chamber of Deputies and another 422 to the Senate.

The relation between the percentage values of the projects submitted by the members of Parliament (MPs) and the Government are presented as follows. 63% of the projects were submitted by MPs and 37% of projects by Government to Chamber of Deputies. 82% of the legislative initiatives were submitted by the MPs and only 18% by Government to the Senate. The situation is reversed when we evaluate the relation between adopted and rejected projects. The percentage values are presented below.



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

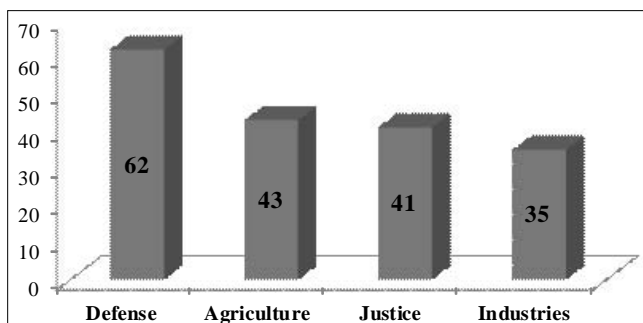
**Figure 4:** Distribution of the legislative proposals submitted (Government vs. Parliament)



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

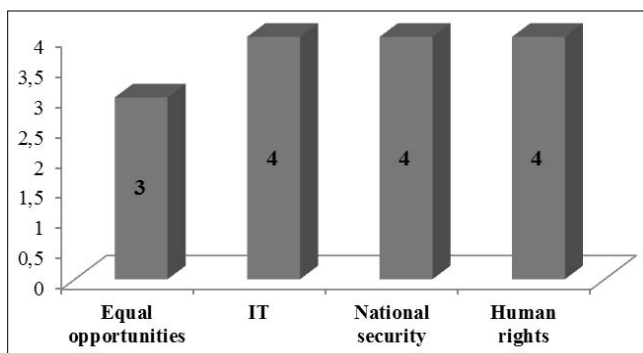
**Figure 5:** Distribution of the rejected legislative proposals (Government vs. Parliament)

The research conducted by the Public Policy Institute on priorities of legislative process has brought to attention the existence of a net difference between the agendas of both chambers of the Parliament. In the case of the Chamber of Deputies, justice represents the main area of initiative (25% of the legislative initiatives have been made in this field), and the last position, with the fewest initiatives submitted, is IT and equal opportunities. In the case of Senate, the main regulatory areas of legislative initiatives submitted were agriculture/ forestry and the last positions are represented by fields such as human rights and equal opportunities.



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

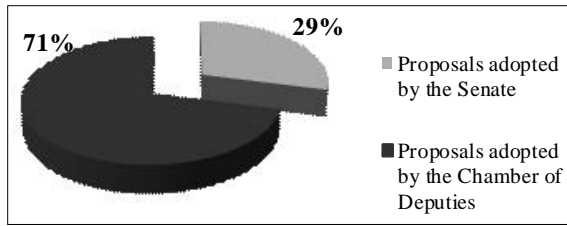
**Figure 6:** Priorities on the Senate agenda



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

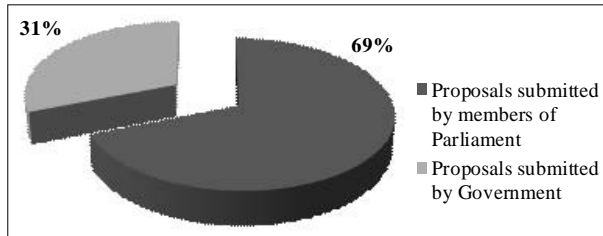
**Figure 7:** Last positions in the hierarchy of the priorities on the Senate agenda

The study showed that now more than 200 bills are on the Parliament's vote queue for over a year. The celerity of the legislative process is a very important indicator for the efficiency and effectiveness of the Parliamentary work. According to our Constitution, any legislative proposal initiated by the deputies, senators or the Government shall undergo legislation in Parliament within 90 days after registration, or 120 days for codes and laws of great complexity. According to the regulations in force, the two chambers of Parliament can decide on the proposals and/or recorded bills. In the absence of plenary debates for a large number of projects, these are adopted through the tacit adoption procedure. The distribution of these bills, both for Chamber of Deputies and the Senate is shown in Figure 8.



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

**Figure 8:** Distribution of the legislative proposals adopted by tacit procedure (Senate vs. Chamber of Deputies)



Source: Institutul pentru Politici Publice, January 2011

**Figure 9:** Distribution of legislative proposals adopted by tacit procedure (Parliament vs. Government)

The fact that most of the tacitly adopted legislative proposals have been submitted by the members of Parliament can lead us to conclude that, after the deposition of the initiatives, the MPs are less motivated in supporting their own initiatives.

Analyzing, in turn, the dimensions of parliamentary activity, we can draw some general conclusions regarding the defined issues in the monitored session. The draft legislation submitted by members of Parliament continues the unsuccessful legislative inflation phenomenon; in other words, some lawmakers initiate legislative proposals or co-sign in order to report it as parliamentary activity. When signing the proposals, they did not have any real and consistent concerns about the purpose of the legislative process regarding these initiatives. Members of Parliament belonging to the governing political parties should be consistent in cooperation with fellow parties in the executive to avoid situations when their legislative proposals are in conflict with the agreed political principles.

In terms of priorities, the less important areas for the current Parliament – as they appear depending on the purpose of regulation initiatives submitted – are equal opportunities and human rights.

### 5. Convergence agendas and the responsive government

Congruence between the public and governmental agendas is an unavoidable precondition without which responsiveness cannot occur. Public agenda is measured based on the answer to a question about “the most important problems” the nation is

facing. The measurement of the parliamentary agenda is based on hearings activity. When analyzing the activity of the Permanent Commissions of the Chamber of Deputies a significant difference between the number of hearings and the level of access to information on the outcome of the discussions in the commissions can be noted.

Thus, there is no available information for 31 of the 65 hearings of the Human Rights Commission. The Public Administration Commission also has not enough available documents (only for 4 of the 25 hearings of this session). Other similar examples are the Economic Policy Commission and the Commission for the Investigation of Abuses, Corruption and Complaints. For the February – June 2010 parliamentary session, no information are available for 20 hearings of these commissions.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Senate, information about the hearings of Permanent Commissions is not available. The presence of information available only for 5 Permanent Commissions (Foreign Policy Commission, Public Administration Commission, Environment Commission, Commission for Labor, Family and Social Protection and the Commission for Privatization and Administration of the State Assets) is rather an exception.

The research on the parliamentary activity, at least for the analyzed period, clearly reveals the nature of dysfunctions that compromise policy agenda, both in terms of its correspondence with the priorities of the other two agendas and in terms of haste in which they are debated in Parliament.

According to Jones and Baumgartner (2005), hearing activity is “the front end” component of the public policy process. Meaning that it responds more easily to changing information flow than the later policymaking process stages accomplish to do.

As a consequence, it is reasonable to expect a realistic response to the concerns of citizens in the hearings activity and this response, in our approach, cannot be expected if the answer is not given in the same year, but a year later. If hearings are scheduled a year after an increase in public attention to a topic, our approach will not count it (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, p. 255).

With this consideration, we appreciate that the concept of responsive government is viable only if the policy agenda is a result of the convergence, in real time (approximately 1 year), of other three types of agendas: public, governmental and parliamentary. Adopted standard for assessing the quality convergence of agendas is quite strict; the Parliament must take into consideration the priorities of the public agenda in real time, but no later that one year.

Furthermore, a mutual conditioning exists between the two concepts. In this sense, the existence of a policy agenda, defined as such by the result of convergence between the three agendas, provides a strong support for the responsive government to work.

In addition, achieving the policy agenda in this way represents a guarantee for democracy; issues raised by different interest groups, must be, first, put on the public agenda and only than put on the governmental and parliamentary agendas.

A special case is represented by the international organizations and public issues that these organizations try to directly promote on the governmental or parliamentary

agenda. While solving other problems than the society requires it seems to be a threat to democracy and the political analysts believe that the future capabilities of states to act will depend on their ability to auto-connect to the international context (Beck, 2004, p. 46).

From our point of view and in terms of previous statements, it is necessary that the states be concerned with the development of dynamic capabilities. Dynamic capabilities refer to the particular capacity the government possesses to shape, reshape, configure and reconfigure assets to be able to respond to a frequently changing environment. This definition is an extension in the governmental sphere of corporate dynamic capabilities definition formulated by Teece (2009, p. 89).

As with previous considerations, it results that the concept of responsive government is defined by dynamic capabilities that give the government the necessary support to anticipate both the requirements of the international organizations as well as the global challenges. In other words, the prerequisites are for, at least, the reduction of what Dahl (2002, p. 136) called "the dark side of democracy". In the current international context, the governments act in accordance with the charges of supranational structure on which the citizens have no control.

In conclusion, the responsiveness approach is a political problem where changes are connected to government and society activity. But this connection is not possible without the convergence between agendas and without compliance with the standard required for assessing the quality of convergence.

## **6. Conclusions**

This research reveals that the importance attributed to responsive government and policy agenda defined as a common place of convergence between citizens' priorities and governmental and parliamentary activity is justified, primarily, by their involving in defining a space where public policies work. Throughout this study we tried to configure the dimension of the agenda's convergence and to reveal that congruence agenda is a vehicle that leads to responsiveness. Consequently, the two concepts are inextricably linked and reinforce each other and at the same time they make public policy work.

Secondly, putting these two concepts into practice is likely to increase citizens' trust in the representative national institutions: the Government and the Parliament. Responsiveness is a generic concept that applies to the relationship between a public service and the citizenry, and to the relationship between the state and the civil society.

The fundamental concern is the improvement of the quality of life in society, included within that broad concept of quality of citizen-state relations. The achievement of responsiveness in this sense is likely to re-establish the public's trust not only in the public services but also more broadly in the system and state of governance.

It is already a known fact that in the last decade citizens' trust in these institutions is in a dramatic decline. This deep lack of trust shown by citizens is an expression of their refusal to accept public policies formulated behind closed doors, a practice where decisions are made without consulting the public.

From the perspective of focusing on Romania case, the study brought to attention the existence of major and dramatic discrepancies between the preferences of citizens and governmental parliamentary agendas. Hence, the premises of building a policy agenda as a result of convergent agendas are being undermined; responsive government is also compromised. Moreover, the public space where public policy works cannot be defined. In such circumstance, it was expected that Romanian citizens' trust in Government and Parliament to register a negative grow.

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