

Reviews

Stanislav Konečný – Bruno Konečný: Open Communal Policy. Theory and Practice.

Bratislava: Mayor 2009, 291 p.

S. Konečný and B. Konečný released this publication prior to the 6th communal elections in Slovakia, at a time when it was possible or even necessary to analyse knowledge and experience gained from the 20-year-long work of the institution of local self-government and the shaping of communal policy in Slovakia. Following changes brought about by the dissolution of the so-called National Committees at the local and regional level, when local self-government had only started to form itself, we observe that even though this was a renaissance of self-governance in Slovakia, most of our contemporaries had not experienced this type of self-rule. Thus, this provided only formal conditions for the use of self-governing principles. Reading this publication now, we can already compare both the character and quality of communal policy in Slovakia with this publication as our guide. It may be called an encyclopaedia of communal policy, a monograph which goes far beyond the issue of communal policy and fills a blind spot in the social sciences, and not just in Slovakia. As the authors say, their aim is to fill this blind spot, broaden the horizons of theoreticians and "...motivate them to study less traditional approaches to the issue: political philosophers should view the status of municipality not just through the prism of a liberally seen free citizen, but discover and re-discover angles of conservative philosophy followed by philosophical corporativism and communitarianism; lawyers should not regard local self-governance from the view of positive law only, but also from natural law; economists should search for inspirations for non-standard economic theories also beyond the limits of neo-classical and neo-Keynesian economics and see the community also through social networks generating social capital in them etc." (p.15) The authors also extend this ambitious aim to other potential readers such as players from the practical field of communal policy (mayors of towns and villages, local and regional deputies) and of course to every participative citizen, who "...would like to have his/her village be a place where he/she wants to live and to make something for it at the same time". (p. 16)

The monograph is a synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge of the workings of public administration and communal policy as an open system. The book is of an interdisciplinary character (economists, sociologists, ethnographers, lawyers....). It is 291 pages long with five chapters and a rich

list of Slovak and foreign literature on the issue of public administration (17 pages) concluded by an English and German summary. Biographical data testify to the high qualification of the authors, who both show rich practical experience and theoretical background. This all has logically resulted in a monograph of this type. Thus, if S. Konečný observes that communal policy is an expression of all relevant interests of the settlement community in an ideal case, then this observation reflects his long practical experience in this field. (p. 22)

As early as the introductory chapter called *Three terminological notes instead of an introduction*, the authors search for a universal theoretical frame of communal policy which would offer a more general understanding and a definition of the variety of communal policy systems. These are an expression of the variety of settlement structures not only in Slovakia, but also in Europe. Terminological notes refer to the understanding of the terms 1. *commune – commúnio*, 2. *communal – of community – municipal – of place – local*, 3. *policy – public policy – communal policy*. As a result, stress is put on the social dimension of the municipality, which connects the social, territorial, and economic integrity of a settlement community (p. 20). In conclusion, they describe their understanding of open communal policy in general. They observe that open communal policy has been shaped under the influence of endogenous and exogenous factors and of public policy players. (p. 30)

The second chapter, *Contexts of communal policy*, deals with national, state, and communal “interests.” Here the authors speculate about their mutual borders: “Do communal interests have the character of public interests, or are they just a strange sort of group interest, or even just an aggregate of individual interests? How do individual interests become communal, public interests?” (p. 32). The term “public interest” can be interpreted in many ways. In order to analyse the term, the authors have selected characteristics with distinctive social and spatial characteristics. However, they observe that this term has not been defined in a sufficient manner and is considered a so-called vague legal term in our legislation. Thus, the authors reach the point where they have to come up with a working definition of the term “communal policy” and a list of characteristic features distinguishing this type of policy from a policy on a regional or national level. For the most part, these are the common settlement needs and interests of the settlement community, the legal personality of the settlement community, the legal framework for its scope of authority, different ways of performing this authority, the independence of elections for institutions, and the elections of representatives which are independent from the state administration. Based on these features, the authors define “communal policy” as follows:

1. practical activities of municipalities that the community uses through direct and participative democracy to perform public interests and how the community participates in the interests of the society (region...)
2. a theoretical reflection of this practical activity compared to other social systems and a theoretical reflection of the settlement's development processes (p. 40)

In addition, this chapter deals with settlement processes in history, the establishment of towns and villages and how this is linked to communal policy in Slovakia in a global and European context. Further sections of this chapter add to the encyclopaedic character of the monograph. However, these are analyses of communal policy and various forms of public administration and self-governance.

The multidisciplinary character of communal policy as the main postulate of both authors is proven again in the third chapter entitled *Theoretical basis for communal policy*. Here, the authors analyse the philosophical (contractualism, liberalism, conservatism, corporativism, communitarianism, and socialism), legal, economic, politological and sociological bases of communal policy. From a sociological point of view, the authors classify communal policy into a sociology of settlements, or rather a spatially-orientated sociology (sociology of town, rural sociology, sociology of urbanism and architecture) or a sociology of living and living environment (p. 109). The authors treat the issue of communal policy as part of sociological theories of I. A. Bláha. In addition, they analyse the contributions of widely known classical sociological theoreticians such as F. Tönnies and his two types of social gathering, E. Durkheim (mechanical as opposed to organic solidarity), G. Simmel (division of labour and money flow as signs of a city, social geometry), M. Weber (the importance of the administrative autonomy of medieval European towns), T. Parsons (local communities based on diffuse solidarity), the Chicago school and other authors. As far as Czech and Slovak sociology is concerned, the authors analyse works by J. Musil, I. Kusý, D. Petříková, J. Pašiak, P. Gajdoš and Z. Kusá with a focus on social networks.

In the fourth chapter, *Content of communal policy – three identities*, the authors define the internal composition of communal policy. “The municipality, in its three basic dimensions – spatial, economic, and social – can be a unique and unmistakable entity only if it is unmistakable from a spatial, economic, and social point of view. The building of these three dimensions makes the main content of the communal policy work: every municipality is an unmistakable spatial, economic, and social entity. Each of these dimensions as well as their synergic unit represent a distinctive value, the development of which adds sense to communal policy.” (p. 177)

The spatial identity of communal policy is an expression of a territorial principle based on the idea of municipalities, which had been shaped into cadastral units as territorial and administrative units of public administration. However, there is a social aspect to a space linked to social phenomena and processes, which form the specific character of the environment. The spatial identity of communal policy means that “people occupying and living together in one territory identify themselves with the territory and use it in their everyday lives...it is the social networks of people living together in one territory which make it their own ‘land’ rather than just a cadastral unit” (p. 179-180).

The social identity of communal policy is based on citizens of that particular municipality and its demographic characteristics, which form an elementary data base of the social dimension. By means of social interactions and social networks, citizens occupying the territory create a settlement community, which is characterized by some of the following features: common territory, social networks, and a sense of communality and cohesion (p. 187). An important feature of settlement community is a shared interest in the community as such. If we understand settlement community, which forms the basis of the social identity of community, this way, then various sociological phenomena and processes can be studied, such as civic participation, neighbourhood, social networks, civic society players, and the participation of citizens in communal policy and in the shaping of conditions in the settlement.

The economic identity of communal policy is formed by the economic and technical potential of the territory, which mainly consists of: municipal property, the municipal budget, the working potential of the territory, and its economic base.

The fifth chapter, *Communal administration*, focuses on the more general issue of linkages between settlement structure and communal administration. Here, the size of the municipality plays a key role. The authors base their thoughts on the development of settlement structure in Europe. This structure is the result of feudal development based on agriculture and its transition to a more settled way of life and living. However, the development of settlements in Europe was rather specific. Its progress depended on social and economic development as well as on geographic parameters, which had influenced the formation of settlement networks in individual countries. The character of public administration and communal policy is greatly influenced by the size of the municipality. Size, however, is a relative term in individual countries. As far as size is concerned, Slovakia is very much differentiated (tables 227-230). The peculiarity of settlement structure in Slovakia is the large number of small settlements and their concentration in several regions of Slovakia. Further sections of this chapter deal with the issue of settlement structure, its

fragmentation and integration, but also with methods for how to deal with the fragmented settlement structure that a large number of small villages presents: amalgamation (an administrative merger of municipalities resulting in the formation of new administrative municipalities, such as in Sweden or Belgium), municipalisation (individual villages retain their own identity features, e.g. Denmark), a two-level local administration (Germany), or differentiation by types (the Czech Republic). The authors think that an efficient way of dealing with the issue of arrangement and of the performance of communal administration is an approach different from the previous ones, namely intercommunal cooperation and its various forms, which have been developing in Slovakia with success.

The monograph concludes with a definition of communal policy, which is understood as "...the expression of the municipal community's interests, linked by a number of internal networks of various sorts of relationships. We have selected just two types of relationships of particular importance, namely (p. 256):

1. the community type of relationship – basic, natural, spontaneous, and based on togetherness (in the country, relationships between neighbours and in towns and cities, between colleagues and friends); these are mainly informal relationships, which may also result in formal structures as an expression of civic society
2. the communal type, based on the coordination of human activities. Participation in this type of relationship is instrumental and is based on economic and spatial identity, on property ownership within the estates of that municipality, domicile, voting rights etc. Nevertheless, both types are interlinked and are open both from the outside as well as from the inside.

In short, this publication is a well-planned work with encyclopaedic character, which clarifies, explains, and analyses the issue of communal policy in a broader European context and from various multidisciplinary viewpoints.

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