

On Greek public administration

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The stagnation of reforms and the problematic implementation of austerity measures in Greece revealed a rather painful reality. The Greek government apparatus is not operating properly. Thus, the country is facing a double problem; the political system is reluctant to assume the cost of radical reform while public administration is incapable of implementing and monitoring the necessary policies. However, aphorisms on the backwardness of the Greek public sector need to give their place in a systematic analysis of the process which led to the current situation. The major manifestations of public sector inefficiency – overreliance to a legalistic paradigm of action, absence of standardisation in administrative procedures, inability to set, monitor and evaluate the implementation of specific policies – did not occur overnight. They are the outcomes of the gradual domination of an autonomous state apparatus by heavily politicised practices which eventually came to substitute core bureaucratic operations. As such they deserve further consideration.

In this post, I concentrate in one of the root causes for the misalignment between policy making and implementation in Greece: the absence of administrative elite in the Greek public sector. The roots of this phenomenon can be traced in early 1980s. The newly elected socialist government embarked on the project of controlling an administrative apparatus dominated for several decades by the Right-wing political parties. It was a logical course of action for a left party that assumed power just few years after its creation. They were arguably fears, at the time, that the implementation of PASOK's socialist agenda would be resisted and essentially abandoned. However, the government's approach for securing collaboration from public administration had severe repercussions to the administrative echelon and subsequently to the efficient operation of Greek public bureaucracy. The administrative reform introduced in the government's first-term abolished the rank of ministry directors' as permanent civil servants. The logic behind it was to tame possible disobedience. Its consequences, however, thirty years on, amount to a disjoined and malfunctioning public administration.

Why is this so? The Greek state apparatus is missing an administrative elite, formed by civil servants, that will ensure bureaucracy's autonomy from political pursuits, promote the organization of its operations and secure continuity despite changes in government. These problems are particularly evident in central government. Top-level bureaucrats have been supplanted by politically appointed advisors. As a result, strategic decisions for government policies were assigned to political personnel with limited experience on each ministry's inner working. This situation creates a number of obstacles to the efficient operation of any public organisation. Most crucially, however, the delegation of strategic decisions to political personnel has severe repercussions on accountability and the involvement of civil servants in the policy making process.

Accountability for the design of specific policies cannot occur when there are no paper trails for strategic decisions. Advisors are not obliged to maintain records of their communications with the ministers. If they do, these are considered personal records. It is not therefore uncommon after every cabinet reshuffle or change in government, new ministers and their teams to encounter empty offices with no records on the activities of their predecessors. Therefore, each ministry's information infrastructure is severely crippled by the inability to preserve crucial information on each policy project. In several occasions, there is no knowledge on why specific decisions were made and on the base of which data. Moreover, it is not uncommon for unfinished projects to start anew after changes in the ministry's leadership since there is little information left on their status.

Then, there is the degree of involvement of public servants in the decision-making process. It is at each minister's discretion to involve permanent personnel in the drafting of policies by means of reports, memos or other written proposals. However, this discretionary involvement of public servants in the design of policies deprives political personnel from insights gained from people who work on the day-to-day implementation of government policies. It

also leads to severe flaws in the design of various policies since political advisors lack deep knowledge of the workings of public administration and more often than not base their decisions on estimations not always realistic. At the end, public servants are left with grapevine information, fragmented understanding of the policy making process and the implementation of the final outcome in the form of laws and decrees which reveal little of the actual objectives of each policy.

There are several political benefits from this situation: (1) there is no audit trail that could attribute accountability when policies fail, (2) new ministers can overturn the work of their predecessors on the pretext that there are no records, (3) public servants remain hostages to a highly politicised environment since legalism cannot set specific appraisal criteria. However, such practices essentially deprive public organisations from their memory and hinder continuity. Yet, administrative work is about the management of information and when there is no continuity and the only thing available is formalized information (i.e. laws) than it is to be expected that public administration becomes a rigid, legalistic and profoundly inefficient environment.

Thus, a change in administrative operations thirty years ago eventually disintegrated a critical component of government apparatus. Its preservation must be attributed to the growing intertwinement of public administration with political party mechanisms. An administrative apparatus with no memory of its actions is easier to be dominated by political parties. However, what was lost in the process is the ability of each ministry to operate efficiently deploying the full potential of its personnel and deliver value-adding services to the citizens. Moreover, this disjointment between political and permanent personnel has impoverished the administrative apparatus of central government by fragmenting its information infrastructure and deskilling its personnel. This is why in times of crisis, the state machine cannot deliver nor can easily reshape itself in order to facilitate reform.