



The Bulgarian School of Politics Will Work for an Effective Citizen Participation in Public Policy Development

Who represents the citizens in public advisory boards in Bulgaria? How these boards account to the people? And what rules should be followed by them in order to be transparent and to work effectively? Models for effective public councils, that can be implemented in our country will be developed by the Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza".

In the next 18 months, the team of the School will work on the project "Models and Good Practices for Legitimate Civil Representation" financed by the NGO Programme under the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2009-2014. The project was presented at a press conference today, February 27th (Thursday), at 13.00 pm at the Bulgarian Press Club. It was attended by the Executive Director of the Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza" Irina Alexieva, the Program Director Daniela Simeonova and the Programme Coordinator Mariana Petrova.

The project aims to facilitate the dialogue and interaction between decision-makers, civil society organizations and other stakeholders by offering best practices and models for effective functioning of consultative bodies in which civil representation is legitimate.

"If we want to change our country and to have a working institutional environment, we should have mechanisms for wiser decisions that are made under transparent procedures, clear rules and in a more effective and cheap way," said the Executive Director of the BSoP Irina Alexieva.

The Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza" will use international experience in order to derive effective public council's models. The team of the School will conduct a study on European practices for development and operation of advisory bodies. Ten countries will be selected based on several criteria - Member States and Non- Member States of the EU, new and old members of the EU, countries with different geographical location on the north-south axis. We will look at the scope of the advisory boards, functioning mechanisms, mechanisms for selection of representatives from civil society, mechanisms for accountability and transparency, Internet forms of civil advice. A second study will follow the existing public councils in Bulgaria through an analysis of the legal framework and in-depth interviews with board members. On the basis of both analyzes a database and a manual of best practices will be created. During a roundtable the advisory bodies that can be implemented in Bulgaria will be discussed with all stakeholders.

Currently, there are 75 advisory councils, which must advise the executive power in formulating and implementing policies in Bulgaria. According to the Portal for Advisory Councils to the Council of Ministers (<http://saveti.government.bg>) 35 advisory councils are established by law, 21 by decree and 18 with "other". In 2013 only 4 of them held a meeting. Only 3 bodies have a program for 2014. Another problem is that often the legal basis entitles the Minister himself to choose to members of the councils, which puts into question the impartiality of the bodies. For example the Law on Small and Medium Enterprises provides the establishment of an advisory board,

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giving the right to the Minister of Economy and Energy to appoint its members. The Minister of Economy and Energy is also able to choose the associations in the field of consumer protection, which can enter the national council for consumer protection. The Law on Employment Promotion mentions the development of a national advisory council on vocational training for the workforce, in which NGOs to participate together with the national representative organizations of employers and workers. However, it does not regulate the way it happens.

In comparison, our initial studies for the Netherlands show that there are 18 councils that cover all social, political and economic spheres. The permanent members are between 9 and 15. Each of the councils has associated specialists on specific issues. The activities are fully transparent. There is a centralized website for all the councils. Separately each board has a personal website in English and Dutch where all the information is uploaded. Moreover, reports that affect other countries are published in third languages. The practice in the UK is completely different. There are over 300 different types of councils, some of which are advisory. The vast majority of their members are appointed by competitions. At the moment, until March 15th, in order to improve their function, the Government has initiated a study on citizens' satisfaction with the work of the councils.

The existence of consultative bodies is a guarantee that the solutions concerning important issues are transparent and stable, as in their preparation participate all stakeholders. This contributes to strengthening civil society development and implementation of the principles of democratic governance and public control over public policies.

For More Information:

Daniela Simeonova
Program Director
Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitry Panitza"
tel. 0892 205 964
e-mail: dsimeonova@schoolofpolitics.org

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