

TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN GREECE: A MINI-QUALITATIVE SURVEY

Catherine C. Valvi*

Department of Business Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece

e-mail: valvikaterina@gmail.com

Constantinos C. Frangos

Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

e-mail: C.C.Frangos@gmail.com

Christos C. Frangos

Department of Business Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece

e-mail: cfragos@teiath.gr

Abstract

In 1997, a reform in the local government of Greece took place (Law 2539/1997 "I. Kapodistrias"). However, this reform did not manage to fulfil its original ambitions. We sought to report possible reasons for this using a qualitative research method. We used an in-depth structured interview of 6 questions, concerning the problems of the reform and possible points for improvement. Our interviewees were the Mayor of the Municipality of Thera, Aggelos Roussos, and the President of the Community of Oia, George Chalaris.

The results of our interview can be summarised in the following statements:

a. The reform in local government was something very important and necessary. It allowed doing many large-scale works (e.g. roads).

b. Its big disadvantage was that it did not manage to enforce local government essentially. For most decisions today (e.g. hiring personnel), a ministerial sign is required.

c. The new reform under consideration by the Greek Government (Kapodistrias II) is a revolutionary thought. It gives more importance to local government and decentralisation and should not be hampered by political fear of loss of power.

In conclusion, both local government officers, share the same opinion that a more realistic meaning to local government and decentralisation must be given.

Περίληψη

Ο νόμος 2539/1997 «Ι. Καποδίστριας» ψηφίστηκε το 1997 και αφορούσε τη διοικητική μεταρρύθμιση της τοπικής αυτοδιοίκησης στην Ελλάδα. Παρ' όλες τις αρχικές φιλοδοξίες του προγράμματος, δεν κατάφερε να τις εκπληρώσει εξ' ολοκλήρου. Σκοπός της παρούσας έρευνας ήταν να εντοπίσουμε πιθανούς λόγους γι' αυτό χρησιμοποιώντας ποιοτική μεθοδολογία. Χρησιμοποιήσαμε ερωτηματολόγια 6 ερωτήσεων σε δομημένες «εις βάθος» συνεντεύξεις προ τους: Δήμαρχος Θήρας, Άγγελος Ρούσσος, και Κοινοτάρχης Οίας, Γεώργιος Χάλαρης.

Τα αποτελέσματα της έρευνά μας μπορούν να συνοψισθούν στις παρακάτω απόψεις:

Α. Η διοικητική μεταρρύθμιση της τοπικής αυτοδιοίκησης ήταν σημαντική και απαραίτητη. Επέτρεψε τη διενέργεια πολλών μεγάλων έργων (π.χ. ύδρευση, αυτοκινητόδρομοι).

Β. Το μεγάλο του μειονέκτημα αφορά την έλλειψη ουσίας στη λέξη «αυτοδιοίκηση». Για όλες τις αποφάσεις της τοπικής αυτοδιοίκησης (π.χ. πρόσληψη προσωπικού) απαιτείται υπουργική έγκριση, υποβαθμίζοντας το ρόλο της αυτοδιοίκησης.

Γ. Ο προαναγγελθείς «Ι. Καποδίστριας II» είναι μια επαναστατική μεταρρύθμιση. Δίνει περισσότερη σημασία στη λέξη «αυτοδιοίκηση» και ευνοεί την περαιτέρω αποκέντρωση. Εντούτοις, δεν πρέπει να καταπολεμείται από παραδοσιακές πολιτικές δυνάμεις.

Συμπερασματικά, οι δύο διοικητικοί ηγέτες της τοπικής αυτοδιοίκησης της Νήσου Θήρας, υποστηρίζουν ότι πρέπει να γίνει μια πιο ουσιαστική εφαρμογή στην αυτοδιοίκηση, που θα ευνοεί την αποκέντρωση.

Key words: local government, self-government, Thera, Greece, modernization

* We thank Vassilis N. Kefis (Department of Business Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece, e-mail: vassiliskefis@yahoo.gr) for assisting us during the writing of this paper.

1. Introduction

The law 2539/1997 “I. Kapodistrias” was voted in 1997 and concerned the administrative reform of local government in Greece (Spanou, 2008). Under the plan for reconstruction of primary government organization, specific targets and principles had been chosen and adopted that should govern the new legal regime and a particular time schedule was set for the execution of the reform plan (up to 2001 it should have been fully applied, with a possibility of extension) as well a special budget along with the analogous funding sources. Despite the initial aspirations of the program, it failed to meet up to its goals (Chrysanthaki, 1998).

A key point of criticism for the reform “I. Kapodistrias” referred to the fact that it was not accompanied by a radical change in the political and administrative system of the new enlarged municipalities, so that the elected political actors would obtain the executive and programmatic role in their operation (ILG, 2008). Hence, municipalities were deprived by the elements which, together with the necessary staff services, would assist them to shift towards strong planning and promotion of local development. Additionally, the way in which the political and administrative system of the new enlarged municipality was conceived, resulted in the reduction of accessibility of citizens to decision-making (Chondroleou et al., 2005; Hlepas, 1999).

Moreover, it was noted that Kapodistrian Municipalities were created without ensuring the structures and procedures for internal decentralization. The provision of the law for the creation of “Local Councils” remained unfruitful: they remained inert bodies without powers and resources, without a local action plan, with no real institutional function, that, even at this level, would be able to ensure the participation and expression of citizens. If we add to these characteristics, deficit maturity, a sense of regionalism/localism and narrow-minded political perceptions on behalf of many elected actors of the Kapodistrian Municipalities; who failed to overcome the logic of the “Superiority of Municipalities”, which conceives Municipalities as politically stronger (because of many voters) and marginalizes smaller communities of the Kapodistrian Law, both administratively and in the activities of the larger Municipality. The few exceptions confirm the rule (Makridimitris & Hlepas, 1997).

Thus, the plan of “Kapodistrian Municipalities”, without actually succeeding in the objectives it put, led to a reaction from the citizens of the former municipalities and communities, who suddenly felt that the umbilical cord that joined them – albeit rudimentary – with the State was cut off; that now there was no possibility of collective expression and participation, without a proper representation of their village or town. For this reason, a new reform effort is being formulated for the near future, law “I. Kapodistrias II”. However, recent publications in the newspapers, discuss the “hang” of “I. Kapodistrias II” indefinitely and perhaps abolition of this legislative reform (Siakaris, 2008). Reasons causing the suspension of this reform are mentioned to be the global economic crisis and the current social crisis in Greece (Aegean times, 2008; Chatziioannidou, 2008; Rousos, 2008).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to identify possible reasons for the unfulfilled aspects of the law 2539/1997 “I. Kapodistrias”, using qualitative methodology.

2. Methods

In order to determine factors leading to the improvement of local government we used a 6-questions structured questionnaire, during in-depth interviews with the Mayor of Thera (Santorini), Angelos Roussos, and the President of the Community Oia, George Halaris. WE selected these two local elites, because they belong to a common geographical region (Thera) but have under their jurisdiction the two different forms of primary government defined by the reform law 2539/1997 “I. Kapodistrias”: the Municipality of Thera and the Community of Oia. Because of the upcoming “I. Kapodistrias II”, personal conversations with several residents of Thera suggested that there was a difference in views by the two local elites of the island concerning the reform law of 1997 as well as the new reform under plan. A reason proposed was the redistribution of power caused by these reforms among local elites as well as the opportunities to pursue managerial positions. As a result, we believe it was interesting to examine the differences and similarities of their views, in order to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the administrative reform of 1997.

The questions addressed to the local elites referred to law “I. Kapodistrias” and the impending “I. Kapodistrias II”. The questions were the same for the Mayor and the President of the Community, so as to allow comparison of their responses (Kefis, 1998; Frangos, 2005; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Kvale, 2006). The interview questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions for the two administrative leaders of Thera.

Questions
1. What do you know about the law “I. Kapodistrias”?
2. How did the state support the Kapodistrian Municipality of Thera/ and the community of Oia?
3. Do you think that there should be some administrative changes in the law “I. Kapodistrias”?
4. As an administrative leader (the Mayor – the President of the Community), what do you think are the benefits and what the drawbacks of this legislation?
5. We are currently giving out questionnaires on a similar topic with our interview. If it turns out that people are not aware of the benefits of the Kapodistrian Municipality/ Community, why do you think this happens? How can we reverse the ignorance of the inhabitants of the island?
6. What is your opinion on roomers concerning “I. Kapodistrias II”? Do you believe that a new administration reform in the island’s local government will contribute to its development?

3. Results

The results obtained from the answers of the Mayor of Thera and the President of the Community of Oia are:

a) The two local representatives know that the law was formulated in order to integrate former Municipalities and Communities in to new larger Municipalities. Particularly, they say:

Mayor: The meaning of the law “I. Kapodistrias” is the upgrading of primary and secondary local government; it is a law which Greece required, because there were too many small communities and municipalities. Through this law, municipalities and communities were integrated into new local governments.

President of the Community: The law “I. Kapodistrias” is a matter of public offer towards the citizen. In practice, it was proven very difficult to be firmly applied. It was a very innovative movement in self-government.

b) The Mayor stressed that there wasn’t strong support from the state to the Kapodistrian Municipality of Thera saying that

During the two 4-year tenures that I am a Mayor, there was not some particular support; we had the same with whatever the law provides for all local self-governments,

The President of the Community shares similar view and says

The support of the state was to upgrade the educational level of employees. That means hiring more technical and administrative officials, either of Highest Education (AEI) or Technological (TEI). Of course, this was not accomplished to a large extent, because unfortunately, with the way the system worked, everyone became interested in returning quickly to municipalities near to their first home, on the ground of family or friend reasons. Particularly in peripheral regions. As a result, where there many employees even more went. So again the local authorities were left without the appropriate scientific personnel. The original goal was not completely achieved!

c) The Mayor argues that there must be some administrative changes in the Law “I. Kapodistrias” and especially points out the need to modernize the Municipal and Communal Code because there is no self-government in essence. More specifically he states

The code should be modernized. We cannot call ourselves Self-government Authorities if we do not have the opportunity to self-govern ourselves. Self-government is a misinterpreted word; in fact we are not those who are managing municipalities. Others are managing... The General Secretaries of Ministries, the Region Office, and the Commissioner of the Court of Audit are in fact really in charge. Thus, there is no self-government in effect. The Municipal and Communal Code should be voted and modernized; hence, truly creating self-governments.

The President of the Community mentions the importance of the role of the elected local elite, who should possess a sense of responsibility rather than a leisure attitude and indifference. The President of the Community says

Men are rewarded for their work and not passive inactivity. Unfortunately, we can observe from this, that the act of offering is in a crisis. Indifference and passivity are rewarded.

Because of this indifference, the President of the Community states that there was not a proper application of the Law “I. Kapodistrias”, mentioning that not only is the Central Government responsible for this situation, but also the mentality that prevails in Greece.

d) Both the Mayor, Angelos Roussos, and the President of the Community, George Halaris, argued that the law “I. Kapodistrias” has only advantages. Specifically, the mayor emphasizes that thanks to this law major projects were conducted on the island and supports this opinion by saying that:

The law “I. Kapodistrias” does not have disadvantages, only benefits. You see, in Thera there were 14 fragmented communities and no large project, no great expenditure and no great projection of the island could be made, because who would take the responsibility of the costs. Nothing in fact could be done, just an administration-management existed.

On the other hand, the President of the Community underlines the importance of the Law “I. Kapodistrias” and how much it helped Therasia (an island much separated from the other islands of the Cyclades), to absorb a big amount of the money; hence, causing Therasia to rise from the position of the most undermined community in Greece to a stronger and more functional self-government unit. The President of the Community says

The Community of Oia joined with the island Therasia. The island Therasia was the most deprived community in Greece, the most isolated part of the country and the community of Oia was the most famous and publicized, possibly, island in the world. This assembly [of Oia with Therasia] was therefore my own personal bet to prove that the elected local elite can rest the weaknesses and rigidities of the system, if he wants; and I believe that this was accomplished, because the former community and now community district of Therasia, absorbed most of the money among all the small islands of the country from the 3rd Community Support Framework. So, this shows how a weaker region was aided by a stronger and more functional unit level, thanks to the law “I. Kapodistrias”.

e) The Mayor argues that the citizens of the island do not know what the law “I. Kapodistrias” is about, because there is misinformation. More specifically, he states:

There is misinformation, because the presidents of the former communities misinformed the society (eg they used to say that we will lose our community, the municipality and our secretary, and all these along with complaints and disputes); it was in their interest of saying so.

Instead, the President of the Community emphasizes the need to improve the mentality of self-government, from the central ministries to the municipal and communal departments. Further he states:

The idea behind self-government was that it believed that the citizen, the Greek person requires from his local representatives to evidently resolve the problems that, unfortunately, the central government cannot. Hence, self-governors have agreed many times on a new administrative reform (and not only on the new law “I. Kapodistrias II”), going one step ahead of the central government; which means that when we speak of a proper administrative reform, decisions that should be taken at local level, cannot be obtained centrally.

f) Finally, regarding the law “I. Kapodistrias II”, both local leaders believe that an administrative re-transformation of the island can contribute to its development. The Mayor says:

I think that is a great reform tool, “I. Kapodistrias II” should not be hampered, and, I repeat, more jurisdictions should be given, more financial incentives to municipalities and, above all, the element of true self-governance.

The President of the Community points out that “I. Kapodistrias II” is a promising suggestion, because it introduces a more substantial sense of self-government, with more authorities in local government. More specifically he states:

The law “I. Kapodistrias II” has a new mentality. It is what we demand today, after we decided to ask how to change the mentality by which the system works until now... When we speak of a proper administrative reform, decisions that should be taken at local level, cannot be obtained centrally.

4. Discussion

From the interviews with the Mayor of Thera and the President of the Community of Oia, we can draw the following main conclusions (Table 2).

Table 2. Basic concepts obtained from our interviews with the local elite.

Mayor of Thera, Angelos Roussos	President of the Community, George Halaris
<i>1. The law "I. Kapodistrias" refers to the unification of communities, Greece needed it and the second law "I. Kaopdistrias" is necessary</i>	<i>1. The law "I. Kapodistrias" concerned the assembly of communities, with the goal of upgrading its scientific personnel, but the original objective was not achieved</i>
<i>2. The Municipality of Thera did not have the expected financial support from the law "I. Kapodistrias"</i>	<i>2. The law "I. Kapodistrias" allowed major projects (like water supply). It helped especially Oia and Therasia</i>
<i>3. The law "I. Kapodistrias" did not have disadvantages, only benefits. There were major projects executed through the law "I. Kapodistrias"</i>	<i>3. The elected local leader must be interested in offering services with a sense of responsibility, without inaction and indifference</i>
<i>4. The word self-government is not applied essentially because central command headquarters are in charge. Self-government should be applied more meaningfully and effectively</i>	<i>4. Self-government is not fully expressed, compare to what it means. Many local authorities requires higher ministerial approval</i>
<i>5. The presidents of the former communities misinformed citizens about the law "I. Kapodistrias"</i>	<i>5. The mentality of self-government must be improved; from central ministries to the municipal and communal districts</i>
<i>6. The law "I. Kapodistrias II" is a great reform tool</i>	<i>6. The law "I. Kapodistrias II" is promising, because it introduces a more substantial meaning to self-government, and grants local government authorities with more powers</i>

It is worth commenting our findings in relation to our other papers. Chondroleou et al. (2005) indicate that the present Constitution of Greece (1975/1986/2001, article 102) protects the jurisdiction of local governments and creates the environment that allows their smooth and progressive development. The reform of 1997 "I. Kapodistrias" promised decentralization and greater control over decisions for local authorities. In practice, however, only political leadership has not been diminished at the local level; essential social and economic decisions concerning the management of local authorities require central approval. Our findings are in agreement with the lack of essential local *self-government*. However, this observed suspension of applying *self-government* thoroughly possibly has an explanation: local elites of local self-governments are described as been able to build relatively strong political powers in their jurisdiction, thus promoting the development of clientelistic relationships and corruption (Gkekas, 2000; Hlepas, 2000; Mavrogordatos, 1998; Spanou, 1996). The presence of clientelistic relationships are also noted by Valvi (2009). The role (or the absent) of honesty among local elites is essential in this discussion. Local elites appear to be honest only when they this honesty is not followed by any political or other casualty. For an interesting discussion on honesty among local leaders, see de Vries (2000). Thus, the non-entire implementation of "I. Kapodistrias", and the suspension of "I. Kapodistrias II" for the present (Rousos, 2008), possibly prevent corruption at the local level of self-government. However, the development of clientelistic relations at the central level is not prevented (Spanou, 2008).

The importance of decentralization to local government is also discussed by de Vries (2000). He argues that decentralization of public administration depends on the size of the country and the satisfaction of citizens from the existing legislative structure. In small countries, decentralization reforms are not necessary to be carried out so rigorously as in larger ones. Greece might possibly be adequate in accomplishing decentralization on a smaller scale, since it is a small country compared to other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain etc. This is in contrast with the desire of the local elites of Thera, who indicated that more effective implementation of self-government should be set. There is a question concerning these statements: Who wants more power: central or local authorities? This question appears often in discussions of decentralization; the final formulation of an administrative reform, however, is determined by the collision of desire for political power and resistance to the redistribution of them from both sides (de Vries, 2000; 2002). Finally, de Vries (2002) suggests that the answer to the debate on the true reason of decentralization is more likely to be found on the ground of providing solutions to the social problems of citizens, rather than shifting responsibility and redistributing authorities at the various levels of public administration.

Conclusion

We conducted a qualitative survey among the local elites of the island Thera, Greece. The main result is their desire for essential implementation of local self-government. Although this view appears more democratic and effective for local governments, we are sceptical for its entire implementation, because strong clientelistic relationships have been reported to develop at the local level (Spanou, 1996). The complete control by central agencies or the observed “ping-pong” phenomenon of shifting responsibility between various administration levels is no the solution; on the contrary, the creation of an administrative structure that will provide solutions to citizens’ problems appears to be more rational.

References

- Aegean Times. (2008). Aim: Kapodistrias II must be enforced in 2014. *Aegean Times*, 10 April 2008. Available at: <http://www.aegeantimes.gr/article.asp?id=23349&type=29>
- Chatziioannidou E. (2008). Oncoming end for the programme “I. Kapodistrias II”. *Kathimerini*, 12 November 2008, p. 8.
- Chondroleou G, Elcock H, Liddle J, Oikonomopoulos I. (2005). A comparison of local management of regeneration in England and Greece. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. **18**(2), pp. 114-127.
- Chrysanthaki C. (1998). *A statutory reform of first degree local government. The programme “Ioannis Kapodistrias”*. Athens: Sakkoulas.
- de Vries MS. (2000). The rise and fall of decentralization: A comparative analysis of arguments and practices in European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. **38**, pp. 193-224.
- de Vries MS. (2002). Can you Afford Honesty? A Comparative Analysis of Ethos and Ethics in Local Government. *Administration & Society*, vol. **34**(3), pp. 309-334.
- Frangos CC. (2004). *Market Research Methodology and Data Analysis with use of the Statistical Package SPSS FOR WINDOWS*. Athens: INTERBOOKS.
- Gkekas R. (2000). The new type of relationships between central and local government authorities. *Greek Political Science Review*, issue 15, pp. 54-71.
- Hlepas N-K. (1999). *Local Administration in Greece: The Dialectical Antagonism between Decentralisation and Local Government*. Sakkoulas, Athens.
- Hlepas N-K. (2000). Local government and field administration: restructuring and old rivalry? *Greek Political Science Review*, issue 15, pp. 36-53.
- ILG (Institute of Local Government). (2008). *The system of management of first degree local governments, Intermediate Plan*. Athens.
- Kefis VN. (1998). Management of Public Enterprises and Organizations. INTERBOOKS, Athens.
- Kvale S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. **12**, pp. 480-500.
- Liamputtong P, Ezzy D. (2005). *Qualitative research methods, 2nd Edition*. Oxford University Press, Victoria, Australia.
- Makridimitris A, Hlepas N-K. (1997). A discussion on the problems of unifying local self-governments and the Programme “I. Kapodistrias”. *Administration Information*, issue 9, pp. 101-114.
- Mavrogordatos G. (1998). *Between Pitiokampti and Prokrousti: Pressure Groups in Modern Greece*, 2nd ed. Odysseas, Athens.
- Rousos S. (2008). Kapodistrias II: Some first thoughts... *Indy.gr*. 19 February 2008. Available from: <http://indy.gr/analysis/kapodistrias-ii-merikes-prtes-skepseis>.
- Siakaris N. (2008). KAPODISTRIAS II and the Administration “Reform”. 16 April 2008. Available from: <http://www.ioannina-synergasia.gr>.
- Spanou C. (1996). Penelope's suitors: Administrative modernisation and party competition in Greece. *West European Politics*, vol. **19**(1), pp. 97-124.
- Spanou C. (2008). State reform in Greece: responding to old and new challenges. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. **21**(2), pp. 150-173.
- Valvi CC. (2009). *A sampling survey of the degree of satisfaction from the services provided by the Municipality of Thera and the Community of Oia-Therasia. The first conclusions from the law “Ioannis Kapodistrias”*. Diplomatic dissertation, Department of business administration, TEI of Athens, Athens.