

Good governance – A European standard that goes deeper

Prof. Dr. Eckart D. Stratenschulte

Good governance is generally understood as a bundle of measures intended to improve state administration. That sounds important, but also technical, and like it involves rules, structures and regulations. Yet, good governance is much more than that. It is a cornerstone for the European way of life.



The European idea of man assumes that people are free to make decisions for their lives – and therefore also needs the freedom to do just that, and to shape its own personal idea of living. That is important to us. It is the foundation of the European quality of life. Nobody wants to have others dictate their life to them. Each person has their own ideas of how they want to live it. That even applies when flowery dreams fail to come to fruition, and some of our ambitions remain unfulfilled. The fact that things do not always go our way makes it even more necessary that we have the freedom to try again.

There is a saying that “You make your own luck”. To a degree, that holds true. However, if there are no tools or resources to make anything, luck also falls by the wayside. The framework conditions we find ourselves in are just as decisive for the way we arrange our lives, as our individual willingness and skills. These framework conditions are created by the state. (The fact that the countries of the European Union have surrendered some of the state’s competences to the EU cannot change this; it only means that the EU also shares this responsibility.)

The state is the organisational form of the citizens. It is not an end in itself, but provides the framework for the protection and free development of the members of society. In order to perform its tasks, the state is assigned power by the citizens, and financed by them through taxes and duties. It must use the power and money of the citizens to create the framework for individual models of living: effectively, efficiently and impartially. To keep with luck-making: The workshop should be well-equipped and functional, and each individual should be able to find a place to hone their skills. This is the remit of good governance – which assumes that the state is not the citizens’ master, but their servant. The state owns the workshop; it doesn’t micromanage it, but rather acts as a caretaker. And this caretaker needs rules and structures to perform his tasks well.

The objective of good governance is to employ societal resources such that the greatest positive effect possible is achieved for the greatest number of people possible, all of whom have equal rights. Specifically, this means: State administration should function in a way that benefits citizens in equal measure, i.e. that the maximum benefit is achieved at the lowest possible cost.

It may still seem appropriate to pay the advisor at the building authority a little extra “allowance” to accelerate the building application, so you can build a factory and create jobs. Or to simply hand over a “fine” to the police officer that stops you on the road, because you have violated some traffic regulation.

That would settle the matter for you, the police officer saves administrative expenses, and the state can pay the officers lower salaries, since they would be part-financed by “private income”.

If only it were this easy. If even one person gains an advantage through bribery (whether money, other tangible or even intangible goods), there will be another person who is disadvantaged for lack of access to such resource. There is no such thing as ‘neutral’ corruption. There is no advantage without disadvantage. There are no mountains without valleys.

Corruption is often described as a victimless crime, because both sides benefit, the person offering the bribe and the person accepting it. The conclusion is incorrect. The bill is picked up by society in general, i.e. those deprived of a service, because someone else has acquired it first – for example, an important operation in hospital or a university place for their daughter.

Corruption causes financial damage for society, and it also damages its morals and attacks the underlying values of the European states which came together in the Council of Europe to agree the European Convention on Human Rights. In the European canon of values, we assume that humans are of equal importance, that they are treated equally, and that they must be provided with equal opportunities for self-realisation. If this is not the case, Europe is standing on shifting ground.

It is precisely these basic values and rights that make life in Europe worth living; that set us apart from other societies. Each act of corruption is therefore an attack of our way of life, it undermines the foundation we stand on.

Now, freedom also involves responsibility. Each of us must take responsibility for their actions. There is no freedom without responsibility; but no responsibility without freedom, either.

And that means: The state must protect our freedom; it must only limit it where this freedom is at risk through other threats, or where other people’s freedom is affected. If citizens are to appreciate and accept that, state administration needs fairness and transparency. Citizens have the right – and even the obligation – to control the state and its agents. It is therefore important that accountability exists in state conduct, and that this is visible. If it appears like nobody is responsible, nobody can be held accountable, either. And if a person cannot be held accountable, they will tend to act irresponsibly.

This is why good governance is far more than a method for efficiency improvement. Of course, efficiency is important – it is crucial for ensuring that the state’s permanently scarce financial and human resources are employed with economic reason. Yet, efficiency alone is not enough. Even bad things can be managed efficiently. While efficiency means doing things right, effectiveness means doing the right thing. That is what counts. Effectiveness comes before efficiency.

The right things have already been mentioned: Protecting the citizens from external and internal (including social and environmental) threats while simultaneously safeguarding maximum freedom and opportunity for self-realisation. That precisely is the European model of living. Good governance is the instrument that can make this concept come true.

The European continent faces tremendous challenges this century that could be labelled as ‘globalisation’. With or without the European Union – if Europe wants to survive, if it wants to secure its material and intellectual quality of life, it must work well. That involves many things: The European states must closely cooperate, peace must be secured or restored in our part of the world, and we also need administrations that act effectively, efficiently, transparently and impartially. If we fail on these, the European way of life is heading for a dead end.

Prof. Eckart D. Stratenschulte

Prof. Eckart D. Stratenschulte is a Member of the Board of the foundation 'Deutsche Nationalstiftung', and Lecturer in Political Science at the Free University of Berlin. Until July 2017, he was Director of Studies of the European Academy Berlin.

© European Academy Berlin, August 2017
This paper reflects the opinion of the author.

Contact

European Academy Berlin
46/48 Bismarckallee
14193 Berlin, Germany
+49 30 895951 0
eab@eab-berlin.eu
<http://www.eab-berlin.eu>