

### 3 The point of view of recipients and observers of think tanks' work

Although the recipients of Euro-think tanks' work agree that such work is important in theory, their perception is often not very positive. A number report that think tanks' work does not add value, that the services think tanks provide lack impact and are rarely used. They are also critical of their approach, which is perceived as too technocratic, elitist and lacking transparency (3.1). This harsh verdict on the sector by some of those interviewed does not however prevent a regular dialogue with and a varied use of think tanks by their recipients (3.2.4).

In addition to describing the sector of think tanks with an interest in European matters, it is important to reach out to think tanks' "user group", i.e. those who are the supposed targets of think tanks' efforts, to understand what 'the other side' thinks. 42 qualitative interviews were conducted with E.U. and national decision-makers, as well as journalists, academics and other actors specialised in European affairs from civil society, to better understand what contribution E.U. think tanks make (we could not materially investigate the role played by think tanks beyond these expert communities). They allow the identification of general trends, which would require further, more rigorous research.

#### 3.1 DO DECISION-MAKERS, JOURNALISTS AND ACADEMICS FIND EUROPE-FOCUSED THINK TANKS USEFUL ?

The short answer to this question is "yes, but not uniformly so." The observers of the think tank market interviewed indeed made four types of remarks. All insisted on the importance of a healthy think tank sector for E.U. policy-making, while criticising their relative lack of strength and ability to provide added-value; sometimes their lack of impact and relevance; and finally an approach seen as too technocratic and elitist. Their possible contribution to helping bridge the E.U. 'democratic deficit' is considered at best uncertain.

##### THINK TANKS : SOURCES OF INNOVATIVE POLICIES AND SOUNDING BOARDS

In theory, policy-makers can use think tanks as sources of innovative policy options and as sounding boards for new approaches. In fact, the policy-makers interviewed see their work as potentially useful, and do in fact use them. Among the roles they identify, officials mention certain think tanks' ability to engage in 'blue-skies thinking', "new ways of looking at things", to provide "innovative thinking." Thinking about the medium term, for which administrations do not always have sufficient capacity, is viewed as particularly helpful. More frequently though, their main function is perceived as providers of analysis and information, of networking opportunities, as mediators between the academic and political worlds, and as "a filter and a forum for debate."<sup>103</sup> They also have a "socialisation" and a training role for

national public and elected officials, identified as particularly necessary in the E.U. field, in particular for new Member States.<sup>104</sup>

However, these two approaches are used very unevenly from one organisation and country to another. Whereas the Commission and think tanks are in fairly close contact, other institutions are much less involved, for instance the European Central Bank or even, to some extent, the European Parliament.<sup>105</sup> In countries—such as France—where independent research institutes are not yet a strong part of the policy-making community, "governments do not ask anything from think tanks, with a few exceptions," argues a respondent. In other countries though, most notably in the UK, but also in Germany (e.g. SWP), the government has developed strategic links with certain think tanks, which it uses for its own purposes, mainly to test new policy ideas at arms-length. According to the author of a French official survey of think tanks, the new E.U. Member States are starting to realise the benefit of maintaining a dialogue with think tanks. In Poland, however, Katarzyna Skorzynska, president of the Centre for International and Local Government Relations, a Polish think tank (Skorzynska, 2003) recently blamed her government "for monopolising the debate on issues related to Poland's preparations for accession, for a lack of openness manifested in [its] aversion to sharing the accession-related tasks with NGOs, think tanks, and specialised private companies (...). Making initiatives and presenting them in a convincing way on the E.U. forum is not a task that would be beyond Poland's capacities. However, it requires that the government give up its monopoly on Europe. It requires a partnership-based co-operation with independent think tanks, as well as efficient administration and diplomacy." Similarly, an Austrian research centre told us: "Even the civil servants in the ministries have the feeling that they have to compete with us. The future strategy of think tanks should be to cooperate more closely with the public administration, because think tanks can provide other means to tackle policy issues."

The first quality that decision-makers identify in Euro-think tanks they perceive as useful and influential is the quality and objectivity of their proposals, although this should not preclude them from taking where necessary a political stance. CER, for instance, widely seen as influential and useful, is systematically associated with "a Blairist approach." (See Section 4.2.1). "Creativity in the ideas proposed and how to communicate them" is also believed to be important. To develop such qualities, decision-makers and other recipients look for people with a reputation, "a diversified panel of people, a representation of different points of view," organisational independence from other parties, and finally the ability to work persistently on issues over the long term.

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The media take some copy from representatives of think tanks, in particular in the form of op-eds, but do not use them as sources of

information as often as they do with other types of experts. "Think tanks are not people you usually call up, and they're not freelancers who can write papers for you on specific topics,"

although the "more incisive ones can write features on a particular topic if they are known specialists." Journalists also perceive the value of think tanks differently. Because of the urgency of media work, journalists told us that they are very interested in analysis and research work that saves them time. In this respect, "think tanks are a real plus." Prospective thinking and conferences are not suited to the way the mass media work, although they do look for "unusual ideas." They are more appropriate for the specialist press. A French journalist commented that one-hour breakfast meetings that allow real discussions for a small number of participants, like the ones organised by the Institut de l'Europe, a quasi-think tank, are particularly useful. Another confirmed that the opportunity to meet and confront ideas outside the ring of "usual suspects" is very valuable.<sup>106</sup> Journalists all told us that they were very keen to identify experts on particular issues better for future reference. Geographical and physical proximity is a plus, as evidenced for instance by the close dialogue between the EPC and European Voice, both of which are based in the same media centre in Brussels. There seems to be little transnational consultation of think tank experts by the journalists we interviewed.

#### "USEFUL, BUT ONLY MODERATELY SO"

Overall, however, our interviews indicate that, today, think tanks with an interest in European affairs provide limited added value in the eyes of decision-makers, their primary targets. According to the journalists interviewed, they are not very visible. On the positive side, this perception reflects more the situation to date than a rejection of think tanks per se. The need and expectations of potential users of think tanks is not satisfied, they want more and better think tanks. As summarised by a high-level Commission official, "supply does not meet demand". "There are a few high quality institutes, but compared to Europe's economic and political power, think tank production is not as dense as one might hope." In fact, observers regret the relative scarcity of think tanks, "they lack leverage", "we need more think tanks and more capacity to think," in particular compared to what exists in the United States. Less positively, the respondents were also sceptical of what think tanks offer today : they argue that they provide limited added-value, that few are good and that when they are, it is thanks to individuals within think tanks, particularly gifted members who are capable of producing truly innovative ideas, not to organisations as a whole. One academic was also critical : "You know what they'll say even before you read it."<sup>107</sup>

**"You know what they'll say even before you read it."** As summarised by a particularly critical E.U. official, think tanks are "useful, but only moderately so." This official added : "They waste a lot of my time, they come to seek ideas at the Commission (...) and produce little (...). Only a handful of people really think, the rest is more compilation (...), they should be more original." Another confirmed that "there are those who keep repeating the same things, and those who try to challenge the received wisdom, but I really couldn't tell which is more important." An observer told us that she was in fact "annoyed" by the rhetoric of those who "pretend that they help bring the E.U. closer to its citizens," while receiving "so much money from E.U. institutions to feed an elite," whereas in fact "they lack creativity." Even the most

influential ones noted are "places to meet decision-makers rather than places where original, innovative ideas are created," added an academic. "Their role is interesting, but their production is weak." Some of the most prominent organisations are criticised as "fake think tanks" that do more "vulgarisation" and lobbying than produce original ideas. As a result, the Commission is perceived as dominating the intellectual production on E.U. policy matters according to another official, even though its own capacity is not adequate.

On the other hand, the journalists and decision-makers interviewed in some of the Member States, particularly the U.K. and Ireland, tended to have a more positive view of the (potential) role of think tanks in the European debate. These views are detailed in note <sup>108</sup>.

#### LIMITED IMPACT

A second prominent criticism is think tanks' current lack of impact and even relevance beyond a limited circle of people and issues. First, our interviews indicate that think tanks' audience is perhaps smaller than it should be. Nearly all potential targets told us that they are mainly passive recipients of think tank work, they rarely seek to obtain information or studies directly from think tanks, yet, the latter also reach the ears of the policy-makers we interviewed. Potentially relevant actors in the European parliament for instance commented that they were not the targets of think tank work, but that they learnt occasionally about their work through the media and then sought a copy of relevant reports themselves. Several respondents noted the very "Anglo-Saxon" bias of today's prominent think tanks, which limits their audience. Others perceive today's Euro-think tanks as "very national," with teams of researchers determined by the nationality of the organisation's home country. Finally, observers highlighted the fact that very few think tanks based in the Member States have a presence in Brussels, and vice-versa (see Section 4.2).

Furthermore, few are seen as good at communicating. One of the journalists interviewed summarised in vivid terms his colleagues' general feeling: "Most think tank people are good, but some are too technical, they use too much of the inside lingo, they're anoraks really." Another confirmed: "There is room for improvement in their communications." Again, the CER was cited by several observers as one of the few organisations that knows how to handle the media, whereas another took Notre Europe as an example of research centres that "produce high quality papers, but which we do not hear about. You really need to do public relations work." A professor noted: "In stark contrast with the CER, it's impossible to notice the French and the Germans, not to mention think tanks from other countries." More generally, both policy-makers and journalists told us that they contact think tanks or seek their publications far more often than the opposite. Most often they cite the Agence Europe bulletin as the place where they learn about events and reports.

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Again on the more critical side, some respondents attributed such limited impact to a relative lack of relevance. Several respondents

noted that independent research centres deal with matters that too often repeat themselves and are of limited interest to citizens, in particular institutional issues. This is also where

policy-makers use research institutes more frequently, rather than on issues such as the environment or transport where think tanks are relatively absent. Issues related to the Convention, for instance, received paradoxically too much attention. This dynamic leads to "repetition, lately on constitutional matters and transatlantic relations." This is perhaps most striking for those active in the European Parliament. An analyst there told us : "I do not feel that this type of reflection, with a few exceptions, is very useful for Members of the European Parliament, because MEPs' competencies tend not to be, for instance, at the level of foreign policy. In this regard, interest groups' contributions tend to be more appropriate to our work." Such views are even stronger at the national level. For example, another E.U. official argued : "German think tanks lately have been thinking mostly about two issues, the reduction of the German contribution [to the E.U. budget] and the division of competencies, for which their proposals have completely failed at the Convention, because in fact their vision is very inward-looking. It's easy to get very excited at home about a particular idea of Europe, but political concepts are affected by cultural and political contexts (...), you need to prepare the ground in other Member States, to test your ideas with European partners."

#### DEMOCRATIC PLAYERS OR TECHNOCRATIC AND ELITIST?

Some E.U. policy-makers we interviewed also blame think tanks for being too technocratic and elitist, and thereby as not helping bridge the so-called 'E.U. democratic deficit'. Even those respondents who work with E.U. research institutes, very often see think tanks as "speaking too much among themselves," as operating in closed circuits, as "too Anglo-Saxon," meaning too focused on issues defined along UK-centric terms. "They are part of the chattering classes," stated dismissively a journalist, "they do not cater for the mass circulation publication outfits, their target audience is elitist." This criticism is in fact a common theme among journalists.<sup>109</sup> Those we interviewed presented us with a range of views. Most were 'against' and some were 'for' the idea that think tanks play a role in reducing the democratic deficit.

FOR : a U.K. politician argued that think tanks were important in this respect because, by publishing material for debate on European questions, they help to meet a widespread public demand for more information on European matters (thus partly reducing voters' 'information deficit' regarding the E.U. institutions). In his view, responding to this would be a key challenge for think tanks in the future: "If think tanks really want to make an input they should be thinking about how to better inform the public [on E.U. matters]. If they have the capacity and willingness to do that, they can be major players in the democratisation of the E.U." A journalist also thought that think tanks were important because the networks which they had built up across Europe helped to connect better national researchers and policy-makers in different countries. This is improving the quality and range of the debate on pan-European themes. Think tanks are also, in his view, an essential "intellectual support framework" for the "European project", which ensure that there is at least a measure of public debate at this level, in spite of the widespread feeling of disconnection between Europe's political elites and its voters.

AGAINST : others are more sceptical about think tanks' capacities to bridge the democratic gap. An academic who specialises in E.U. politics felt that in some cases, think tanks could help by warning decision-makers of problems that could undermine the credibility of E.U. construction. However, he in fact gave a counter-example when pressed to illustrate his argument. In his view, too many think tanks focused on the economic aspects of the stability pact during the clash between France, Germany and the Commission. None of the organisations he knew had denounced the negative impact such flouting of common policies could have on the public's confidence in the E.U. construction process in the context of the Convention and enlargement negotiations. A Commission official felt that the issue of a democratic deficit should be solved first and foremost by greater involvement of regional, national parliaments and the European parliament, not think tanks. He insisted that their actions could potentially be damaging, because they contribute to shaping an image of the E.U. as distant and technocratic. Another academic believes that, because some are too dependent on contract research, certain think tanks tend to play more the role of 'spin doctors'. In his opinion, they help find and shape arguments to defend certain policies, and by doing so, sometimes "promise miracles" and in the end risk disappointing citizens yet a bit more when their inflated promises fall through.<sup>110</sup>

#### UNDERSTANDING OF THINK TANKS' CONSTRAINTS

On the other hand, our respondents acknowledged that there were systemic reasons for E.U. think tanks' relative lack of strength. It is, they realise, first a question of resources: "to make progress and be more useful, they should attract more people who can think, but it is unusual to see prominent academics or former political leaders take work inside think tanks, as is the case in the United States, and they lack the resources to attract them." "These institutes are not rich enough, they lack visibility, it is therefore very difficult to perceive their added value, it is difficult to see what they bring," without denying their usefulness. Lack of funds also means that very few national think tanks with an interest in E.U. matters can open an office in Brussels. French EU-focused think tanks for instance are judged as not very influential in Brussels, "even when they have ideas, because they lack the means to be present and to develop appropriate communications techniques."

Furthermore, "Lots of people, individually, are excellent, but there is a fundamental problem: strategic, political thinking and applied research are not sufficiently part of the academic culture," in contrast with the United States, argued another academic, "it is a question of culture more than ability." As a result, some decision-makers told us that they in fact turn sometimes to U.S. think tanks and universities.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, E.U. and national officials all felt that think tanks should not become more dependent on public funds. According to a German professor and specialist of think tanks, no funding source should indeed, ideally, represent more than 5 per cent of an independent research centre's budget.<sup>112</sup>

To be fair, the criticisms voiced also denoted, in some cases, a lack of knowledge of what independent research centres actually do. There were three specific instances when prominent and European Commission officials – who are supposed to be well informed – told us that "nothing" had been produced by think tanks on a particular topic, when in fact a paper had

recently been released on the very same issue by prominent think tanks. Do E.U. policy-makers neglect Europe-focused think tanks as a source of analysis, information and new ideas? Or do think tanks fail in their mission? We shall not attempt to resolve these sensitive questions here. Further investigations would be necessary to go beyond such anecdotal views of a reasonably representative but limited section of E.U. decision-makers. Nevertheless, to readers who feel that criticisms of elitism, lack of relevance and transparency remind them of the pot calling the kettle black, we answer that further research would probably confirm the picture which emerges here of unsatisfied expectations.

#### INCREASING INTEREST FOR THINK TANKS?

Finally, decision-makers in certain countries are waking up to the importance of think tanks, both among institutional policy-makers and more generally civil society organisations. The head of a large European international relations research centre believes that "what is new is decision-makers' desire to take part in a debate." Of course, the situation varies considerably from one country to another. A Commission civil servant told us, for instance, how German and British officials in Brussels share policy documents with think tanks much more readily than their French counterparts. Even French authorities, however, which are more generally considered somewhat less open to think tanks within the sector than other E.U. governments, are joining the trend. In this perspective, the French PermRep's recent report on French influence in think tanks dealing with European matters (Féat, 2004) is encouraging. The problem, comments an observer who knows the E.U. and the U.S. situations well, is that such interest might not be backed by ageing political leaders that have been in government for too long. In France and elsewhere where dialogue between think tanks and policy-makers is lacking, this respondent argued: "We need a complete renewal of the policy elites. In the U.S.A., decision-makers circulate much faster, unlike in France, where you've had the same politicians for forty years. We need to move faster."

Which independent policy organisations do policy-makers, journalists, academics and other observers of the E.U. decision-making process at the moment know and tend to work with? In general, they usually cited the same transnational institutes and one or two national groups closest to them. Based on our interviews, i.e. not on a systematic poll, organisations (not all in our list) that appear most frequently are, in order of decreasing frequency:<sup>113</sup> CER (UK), CEPS (Brussels), EPC (Brussels), EUISS (Paris), IFRI (France), Bertelsmann Foundation (Germany), Brookings Institution (U.S.A.), Chatham House (UK), Friends of Europe (Brussels), SIPRI (Sweden), FRS (France), TEPSA (EU), DGAP (Germany), Clingendael (Netherlands), IEP (Germany), IAI (Italy), and Eliamep (Greece).<sup>114</sup>

### 3.2 PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION : BRIDGING THE E.U. 'DEMAND DEFICIT' FOR INDEPENDENT POLICY RESEARCH

There are many possible reasons why elected and appointed officials at the national and E.U. level, as outlined in Section 1.3, should in theory work actively with Euro-think tanks. We listed three types of reasons: think tanks help formulate sound public policies; they can contribute to a healthy democratic life; and they can be a resource for Member States and E.U. institutions' international 'soft power'. While we have seen how the supply side is

somewhat insufficient with respect to these ambitious objectives, there is also the perception that decision-makers could encourage dialogue with independent research centres more actively. There are indications that in countries where demand is lacking, there is an indication that think tanks have a role to play.

To encourage this trend, we share the views of think tank specialist Martin Thunert (interview), who places the onus on think tanks and urges them to take the following steps to bridge the gap between them and decision-makers :

- Think tanks should establish themselves as essential sources of information on key topics of their choice for decision-makers, be it EU-Russian relations or E.U. climate change policies. In the future, individual think tanks should become "inescapable" references to which decision-makers around Europe know they can turn to in order to obtain up-to-date information and analysis.
- Think tanks need to work more actively through the media in order to cultivate indirect links with decision-makers. Thunert describes how German media recruit young journalists that lack expertise on many policy issues. Journalists should also know whom to call within think tanks.
- Think tanks, ideally, should have a presence in Brussels, and at least in their country's capital (many German think tanks are based outside Berlin).
- More generally, independent research centres need to think strategically about their positioning in relation to parties, political forces, and advocacy in general.

The following section continues this discussion by addressing in further detail the challenges and dilemmas which Euro-think tanks face, such as the danger of instrumentalisation by policy-makers.

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<sup>103</sup> This interest is substantiated, among other things by the fact that the European Commission, other E.U. actors, and national authorities do provide significant support, principally in the form of requests for studies, direct funding, and staff on leave. The French Permanent Representation to the E.U. conducted recently its own study of French E.U. think tanks to understand how to cooperate better with them. Anecdotally, several decision-makers told us that they might be interested to pursue a career in think tanks in the future.

<sup>104</sup> A national official told us, for instance: "We need more than ever greater information and more sophisticated tools to analyse problems." Think tanks "bring together people who need to meet." Another, in the European Parliament, described how "many members of Parliament from the new Member States would probably like to take part in these studies, many think 'where could I "think" in Brussels?' Think tanks have the potential to help integrate these new Parliamentarians."

<sup>105</sup> Certain groups try to contribute to the ECB's thinking and policy-making process, as illustrated by recent studies by the Centre for Economic Policy Research, a network of economists based in London, which regularly comments on the bank's interest rate decisions.

<sup>106</sup> Yet another journalist noted that they were a very useful source of information on recent policy developments – particularly for off-the-record briefings, and that, unlike with politicians, journalists could engage with think tanks on an "equal footing".

<sup>107</sup> This person also added that, like NGOs, think tanks tended to focus on "process over product". They were more interested in being invited along to meetings with politicians and feeling part of the 'inner circle' than in producing objective and relevant policy research, which should after all be their main function. One exception in this person's mind were the economic think tanks, whose work was often much more objective.



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<sup>108</sup> For example, Lord Grenfell, the Chair of the Lords E.U. Select Committee in the U.K. Parliament (the main Parliamentary committee scrutinizing E.U. policy), said that the think tanks which regularly give evidence to their Committee as part of an inquiry make a valuable contribution to the Committee's work. This is especially the case when they are able to provide MPs and Peers with specialist expertise on a particular E.U. issue, such as development aid, foreign policy, and economic and financial affairs, in an objective and well thought-out fashion. This process of gathering evidence is an important part of the Committee's work as it gives MPs and Peers the chance to assess the views of bodies and individuals outside Parliament and it increases the credibility of the Committee's reports. Similarly, an Irish journalist saw think tanks as a force for good for a variety of reasons. He believed that they allowed a more informed debate to take place between policy-makers and experts in a particular policy sector. In his view, such debate was no longer possible on television for example because it had become progressively "dumbed down" over the years. He also thought that think tanks helped to "sharpen and focus perceptions of an issue": even if they were not as good at developing new policy, think tanks could help focus attention on a *specific* aspect of current government policy, which might previously have been overlooked.

<sup>109</sup> Writing about think tanks, the *European Voice* (2002) once argued: "There may be an information deficit elsewhere in the European Union, but its self-styled capital enjoys something of a surplus. Indeed, the only dilemma facing Brussels' chattering classes is which think tank debate, industry reception or press conference to attend next."

<sup>110</sup> One journalist also argued that it was difficult for think tanks in Brussels to develop independent and useful viewpoints on the future of the E.U. because they were "part of a system which they are seeking to analyse and understand". In his view, those organisations which are involved in the integration process (including think tanks) are also the ones that are likely to be most supportive of this process. The challenge therefore is to find organisations that are not afraid to think differently and challenge the *status quo*. In his view this problem is compounded by the fact that one of the E.U.'s major political actors, the European Commission, is also funding many of these think tanks. For him, it was no surprise that some of the most influential think tanks were not to be found in Brussels but instead in the Member State countries, where they had greater distance from (and hence more objectivity on) E.U. matters.

<sup>111</sup> This is confirmed by, among others, a senior official in the European Commission, who reported that the contacts which he and the rest of his service had with American think tanks showed that on the other side of the Atlantic they have a "vision which is not our own, and we must be careful because if this vision is dominant it will have an influence on our way of thinking."

<sup>112</sup> An academic stressed this drawback of sponsored research: "think tanks are very interesting organisations, but when they depend too much on research contracts, the risk is that they become too "obliging" ("obligeants")."

<sup>113</sup> *Notre Europe* was purposefully excluded from this informal poll because of the clear bias generated by the fact that interviewers came from the organisation.

<sup>114</sup> Clearly, notoriety, in particular within such a limited sample, should not be confused either with credibility or influence, in particular as some of the organisations noted here were criticised by the same people who listed them. It is interesting to note though that few organisations are remembered by our respondents beyond the national organisations they work with. A more systematic analysis of existing E.U. think tanks' reputations will be provided by Professor McGann in his forthcoming survey.