

THINK TANKS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

From the Soviet legacy to the European acquis

Since the early 1990s, think tanks dedicated to researching and disseminating policy solutions that aim to contribute to the policy-making process have played a critical role in Central Europe. They have helped the region's governments stay on the transition path to democratic values, from the Washington consensus to common European standards. By developing common practices in the fields of democratic governance, local administration, economic and social reforms, their ambition has been to act as watch-dogs of democratic reforms and to raise public awareness.

Full EU membership of Central European states opens up new challenges and opportunities for the region's think tanks, both in terms of policy agenda and geographic area. Advocating for on-going reforms and new political realities, think tanks will continue to play a vital role in the spread of contemporary models of good governance, provided they address their own weaknesses and limits, and other constraints in their operating environment. They will face greater competition as a result of EU enlargement, which they need to turn into an advantage. Moreover, think tanks no longer focus only on their national governments, but also on other European Union Member States and EU institutions, whose policies have a direct or indirect impact on national politics.

What Central European think tanks have emerged since 1990 and what conditions do they face? How has their country's accession to the European Union affected their development? What strategies can they adopt to keep fulfilling their tasks successfully? This paper seeks to address these three questions based on *Notre Europe's* empirical research and its experience of 'Euro-think tanks' in the 25 EU Member States (Notre Europe, 2004).

Great Expectations: The Think Tank Landscape in Central Europe (1990 – 2000)

Much has been written about think tanks. The notion, however, remains difficult to define. According to many, think tanks are permanent organizations that specialize in the production of public policy solutions, thanks to in-house researchers. They generate an original production of policy-relevant ideas, analysis and advice, aimed at strengthening the decision-making capacity of governments in any relevant policy issue. They communicate their findings to public opinion in order to contribute to a lively public debate. Their high-quality research and analysis is aimed at shaping policies. Independent research organizations therefore act as alternative centres of policy making. Their – implicit or explicit – goal is to act in the public interest by stimulating the flow of ideas. In these various capacities, think tanks' potential contribution in countries where democracy is recent is obvious.

A new political and economic climate

The think tank phenomenon, which came to prominence in the United States in the second half of the 20th century, is recent in Europe, where the vast majority of existing research centres were created after 1980. Independent policy research organisations in Central Europe are even more recent, as the entities responsible for conducting policy studies under the Communist regimes were not free to define their research agenda. Therefore, the number of independent, policy-oriented research institutes soared in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Almost inexistent at the end of the 1980s, over a hundred think tanks appeared in the following decade.

The need for such organizations was indeed dire. A radically new climate allowed the rise of a community of policy experts able to criticize implemented public policies. The economic integration with the West required new types of expertise and analysis which advisers to the former governments could not supply. These newcomers to Central European politics therefore came across as a radical alternative to former government research units. Their small, flexible structures contrasted with the heavy, hierarchical, conformist State research units. Their dissident and predominantly liberal agenda – 31 of the 101 institutes listed by *Freedom House* in 1999 used words such as “free market”, “liberal”, “democratic”, “civic”, and “reform” in their title - was a complete revolution over their Marxist forebears (Freedom House, 1999). By their very nature, these new policy research centres immediately came to symbolize to regime change to greater democracy.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Washington consensus that professed privatisation, limited State intervention in the market, support for private initiatives, and anti-inflationary measures became the dominant policy paradigm for economic management in 1990-1991. The world was convinced that the Washington consensus was the appropriate prescription for poor countries. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank – the two principal funders of the region’s reconstruction – considered it as the only legitimate and workable policy to make the region prosperous. Massively funded by Western donors (USAID, the British Know-How Fund, the European Union’s Phare program, and private, mostly American and German foundations, to name but a few of them) during the first transition decade, post-communist think tanks acted as advocates of the Washington consensus. Western foundations, having recognized that many new policy analysts lacked theoretical, managerial and professional skills to influence national policy processes successfully, began directing funding towards the education of this emerging policy elite. Western assistance has proven very fruitful for the think tanks that benefited from such support, as they have become highly professional and influential in the policy process. This is the case for instance for the Albanian Center for Economic research (Tirana, Albania), the Institute for a Market Economy (Sofia, Bulgaria), the Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia, Bulgaria), the Lithuanian Free Market Institute (Vilnius, Lithuania), and the Center for Economic Development (Bratislava, Slovakia). Organisations such as the Gdansk Institute for Market Economics in Poland, the Lithuanian Free Market Institute in Lithuania, the Foundation for Market Economy in Hungary, and others were responsible for preserving the liberal consensus and pushing for market solutions, in order to compensate for the weakness of pressure for further reforms from local business representatives. By acting as guardians of the liberal orthodoxy, many think tanks became part of the policy establishment, and were adopted as the West’s favourite partners.

However, it is not so much the strength of the independent research centres but the weakness of other players in the field of post-communist policy making that conditioned the emergence of Central European think tanks, and turned them into accountable policy actors. The newly elected governments did not trust the administration they inherited and its irrelevant research teams. Political parties had limited capacity to develop new policies. They were focused mainly on national infrastructure issues and were influenced by an anti-intellectual bias typical of post-communist parties. As a result, parties acted more like clients than rivals of think tanks, which helped the latter maintain their monopoly over policy research. In the world of academia, the best scholars had avoided policy-oriented research in communist times. Many remained unwilling to get involved in the world of policy-making during the first wave of reforms. This kept universities and their research departments away from the policy advice scene. More than

possible competitors, they became a valuable resource for think tanks. Moreover, academic budgets had been cut drastically in the first years of the transition, and academic researchers often lacked the communication skills that think tanks emphasize. As for private business, it did not have the capacity to enter the field of research, nor, perhaps, the motivation. These various factors enabled the think tank community to influence new legislation and government decisions.

A constraining operating environment

What determines a successful relationship between think tanks and governments in periods of transition? At first glance, there is no correlation between the size of the think tank community and the success of reforms and the quality of democracy in post-communist countries. Indeed, think tanks in Albania and Bulgaria are much stronger than in Estonia or the Czech Republic, yet the latter enjoy greater economic prosperity than the former (Ivan Krastev, 2000). The adopted policy package itself is not a key factor either, nor, for that matter, think tanks' specific recommendations. The shock therapy had its success story (Poland), as did the evolutionary approach (Hungary and Slovenia).

Why think tanks flourished and developed fruitful relations with governments in some countries more than others cannot be explained by the type of constitutional regime considered either. Very different regimes have proved equally hospitable for independent policy advice. In countries with weak democratic traditions and institutions, some think tanks however faced the open reluctance of politically insecure governments to accept external policy input. Political parties and parliamentary committees often seek experts with views similar to their own however, rather than think tanks, however competent, that contradict their views. Local decision-makers also became accustomed to receiving foreign advice, because of the massive foreign assistance provided after 1991 by Western institutions. A surprisingly large number of national officials from government offices have attended short courses abroad: by the end of 1996, USAID's principal training programme alone had sent 8,600 public officials from the region to the United States for study visits and training (Struyk, 1999). For instance, it appeared lately that the former Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller supports only American think tanks, since he just went for a four-month work contract at the Woodrow Wilson Center. They did not cultivate indigenous thinking cells that could perform the same tasks as foreign consultants. The political environment also shaped policy makers' receptiveness towards external advice. Where party discipline is strong, for instance in parliamentary systems, party members look more to their leaders to define their positions rather than seeking to determine their own positions independently. One solution the new generation of analysts found to overcome this problem was to nurture their personal and informal links with the new officials. A number of think tank leaders have been appointed to high-level government positions, and others have been retained as informal advisors to heads of government, ministers and other high-level officials (Johnson, 1996).

The common feature of successful countries is in fact the consistency of policy implementation. Policy consensus and professional policy deliberation, on which such consistency is founded, were thus key to success. This is where think tanks played a decisive role, by strengthening a common discourse.

Overall however, think tanks in the region are not perceived to have had as much impact on policy-making as they claim. Although most think tank leaders feel they have some influence over policy-making, interviews with policy-makers conducted by Struyk (1999) show a far more complex story. In Armenia, policy-makers are very negative about think tanks. In Bulgaria and Hungary, they appear more neutral. Russian policy-makers are somewhat positive. There are several possible explanations for this disconnect, including the lack of exposure to think tanks, problems of quality, and possible underreporting by the policy-makers. The director of a Polish

think tank explains: "Politicians willingly employ the fruits of our work, but they do not quote us as their sources." Decision makers in some countries are more 'think tank-friendly' than in others, but in any case, think tanks' input is not regarded as contributing significantly to policy-making. "Given the absence of independent research institutes under communism, think tanks face the formidable task of teaching government who they are and how they can help (...) Every time an official joins the government, a new effort must be made to educate him about the benefits of using research produced by think tanks" reports Johnson (1996).

Ideas proposed by think tanks seem to be more welcome in the fields of foreign and monetary policy than in local governance or privatisation affairs, for the inherited corrupted environment was blocking any outside influence over issues related to the redistribution of wealth at the beginning of the transition process. Among Central European think tanks surveyed by Notre Europe (2004), only one out of five declares to have regular meetings with decision-makers, and the great majority admits having difficulties in its direct contacts with public authorities. As mentioned above, officials are more willing to recognize the influence of think tanks' leaders than the influence of research itself. As a result, they view think tanks mainly as communicators, or useful extensions to government press offices (Krastev, 2000).

The limits of Central European think tanks

Apart from the lack of regular, formal contacts with decision-makers, the ability of think tanks to convey their message to the public at large is one of their most difficult challenges. Mustering support and mobilizing public opinion is a difficult task in Central Europe considering people's relative lack of political activism and sense of personal empowerment.

Like other think tanks around the world, they also face the issue of funding. Indeed, the philanthropic community is still underdeveloped in Central Europe. Because of public budget constraints, foreign assistance remains a primary source of funds for think tanks that have to compete for funding from the same European and American grant-making organisations. However, the impending withdrawal of this substantial foreign assistance that has started moving eastwards to other former Soviet countries has left think tanks looking for more stable sources of income. Furthermore, Central European think tanks have not yet used fully the vast array of EU subsidies and grants, as they are still discovering the complex mechanisms and networks for obtaining such funds.

As a result, Central Europe's think tanks are often small. Of the 101 think tanks surveyed by *Freedom House* in 1999, only 68 had annual budgets higher than US\$ 50 000. Even if they employ around 1000 researchers on a full time basis, less than 50 only could hire more than five in-house researchers¹. These organisational issues often imply that the staff of research centres devotes a substantial amount of their time and energy to fundraising and management duties. This limits their ability to conduct research, and often hampers its quality. In fact, less than a third of think tanks devote more than 50% of their time to policy research.

Budgets constraints also have limited Central European think tanks' ability to hire high-level researchers, who require wages proportional to their level of training. Indeed, staff recruitment is crucially important for a think tank's credibility, and therefore influence. However, Kimball (2000) reports how university-educated researchers in the region often lack practical training in policy relevant research and analysis, and need to be guided towards politically feasible solutions. They

¹ Big organisations like the Institute of World Economics in Hungary have 31 researchers whereas smaller entities such as the Adam Smith Research Center in Poland have only 4.

tend to produce lengthy research reports, directed at identifying trends, rather than short, policy-oriented and problem-solving papers.

While they make clear statements about their missions, areas of research and targeted publics, the shortage in funds also prevents most think tanks from adhering to a clear research strategy. Short or medium term contracts for specified research topic limit their ability to define their agenda freely. The priorities of Western funders predominate. The race for funding forces them to apply for types of funding that are not in line with their identity.

Overall, the 1990s were a time of great opportunities and huge constraints. While local research institutes have achieved their goal of promoting the liberal policy paradigm and keeping it in place, life has proved difficult for Central European think tanks. In the meantime, new challenges have emerged. Their operating environment has become more and more competitive. Political parties and governmental agencies have increasingly closed the door to outside policy advice, favouring in-house governmental research - which capacity has also improved - providing relevant advice in the fields of policy implementation, in which think tanks often lacked information. Although the think tank community has considerably developed in the first ten years of transition, its ability to influence governments on a day-to-day basis has therefore decreased. With the economic transition process nearing completion, the impending accession to the European Union, and the increasing effects of globalisation, post-communist think tanks at the dawn of the 21st century were forced to reshape their mindset, agenda, and practices.

New Challenges: Globalisation and Accession to the European Union

EU enlargement and globalisation dramatically broadened think tanks' horizons. Focused initially on the implementation of the Washington consensus, they have had to widen the scope of their activities and interests over the past few years. The failure of the transition decade to provide sustainable economic growth and good standards of living for most Central European countries generated mistrust toward the policy ideas promoted by the international financial institutions, and a desire for alternative policies. Similarly, the world suddenly discovered with the Asian and Russian financial crises in 1997-98, that what is best for one country or one region may not necessarily work elsewhere. This put an end to the Washington consensus and its uniform policy solutions. The benefits of more varied and innovative policy approaches then became obvious to think tanks. They were forced to redefine their fields of research, and to adapt their applied methodologies.

Today's Central European think tanks in the European Union

The first major new task for Central European think tanks arose with their accession to the European Union: preparing their countries to assimilate the European political, legal and economic *acquis*, and leading them to a successful integration. A close look at independent policy units that follow closely EU affairs or specialize in this field in the eight central European countries that joined the EU in 2004 underlines the change in focus. Among the 35 think tanks that follow EU matters more or less closely in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, 37 % were for instance created between 1995 and 1998, just as accession negotiations were starting.

Two major types of organizations operate in the region: academic think tanks that are closely associated with a university, and advocacy tanks that have developed spontaneously in the post-communist system and usually work under contract. They developed three major orientations: among the latter, some have tended to lean toward a particular political party or politician over the past few years. The Public Policy Institute in Hungary for instance was commissioned by the Alliance of Free Democrats to design their foreign economic policy. Others can be legislation-oriented think tanks benefiting from the donors' interest in producing new legislation. Despite their attempt to keep a neutral profile, their drafts usually have little to no chance of ever becoming law (Institute Latvia was asked to draft a company solvency law to obtain an IMF loan conditioned on the existence of such a law). Finally, media-oriented think tanks base their influence on their popularity in the media and seek to become autonomous centres of expertise. The Ukrainian Centre for Independent Political Research for example has been producing its own half-hour political talk show for television. They are very flexible in their research agenda, but often specialize more in high-quality journalism than in rigorous policy research.

All wish to increase awareness and involvement of citizens (28,2%), to promote better policy making and the general interest (19,6%), to provide support specifically for policy makers (17,4%), to support EU integration (8,7%), and to provide services to other communities (6,5%) (Notre Europe, 2004). Interestingly, EU integration is only ranked fourth on their priority list. This can be explained in part by the fact that countries such as Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia do not yet have a single EU-specific think tank. In comparison, EU-oriented think tanks in the former EU 15 are less involved in increasing citizens' awareness (18,3%), but more in encouraging EU integration (14,5%) and promoting better policy making (24,5%). In the same manner, while 17,4% of Central European think tanks seek to provide support specifically to policy makers, only 20% declare organizing meetings with policy makers on a more or less regular basis, and none of them attends parliamentary committee hearings. Instead, they massively organize conferences (71%), seminars (58%), public lectures and meetings (47%), and pursue consultancy activities (27%) (Notre Europe, 2004). Access to policy makers is clearly still an issue.

The areas of research which EU-oriented Central European think tanks declare focusing on are enlargement (more than 50%), their country's role or interests within the community (45%), economic, financial and monetary policies (42%), external relations and trade policies (27%), security and defence (17%), social policies (15%), and development and human resources policies (10%). It is interesting to note that some key questions such as constitutional affairs or environmental policies, though addressed by former EU 15 think tanks, are largely absent in the East. On the other hand, Central European think tanks address issues of culture, education, cohesion and regional affairs more readily than their West European counterparts. However, there seems to be a relative congruence of efforts both in terms of scope of research and in the approach taken by think tanks in Western and Central Europe.

The challenges of EU enlargement

Although the period leading up to accession affected think tanks' development considerably, enlargement itself did not affect Central European think tanks overnight, as the process had been on the agenda for a while. Their financial situation remains relatively unchanged, because they had benefited from EU financial assistance before enlargement and community subsidies are not considered yet as an important source of funding.

EU membership is however gradually affecting their operating environment. Now that accession is a reality, independent research institutes are focusing more and more on practical matters of

integration within the EU. From the point of view of Western research centres, the arrival of ten new members means “increased competition on the funding market of the European Commission”. New think tanks from Central Europe are perceived as “smaller”, “more flexible”, having “greater specialisation on certain issues”, and mostly working on “short-term projects.” As institutional think tanks are also emerging, “reduced public financing is leading to greater competition for contract research from governmental agencies. Policy-makers prefer shorter studies, which are not funded as well, and they often create commissions to conduct studies instead of commissioning a research think tank.” (Notre Europe, 2004)

A specific challenge at the European level is the difficulty to have sufficient resources to remain relevant in the context of an ever-growing European Union. Opening an office in Brussels may thus be of great help to stay up to date, credible, influent, and proactive. Unfortunately, no Central European research centre has yet opened an office in Belgium, whereas some Western think tanks are expanding beyond their national borders. This increases the competition over limited resources, audiences, and ideas.

Overall, enlargement clearly forces the region’s research community to improve its research methodologies, to define more precisely its areas of specialization, and to improve its organisation, fundraising, and communication strategies, in order to make a difference in the – some believe overcrowded – public policy market.

The perceived value of think tanks in European policy making

Observers of Central Europe insist on the importance of a healthy think tank sector for democratic policy-making, but criticize their relative lack of strength and ability to provide added-value.

On the positive side, Central European policy-makers usually see think tanks’ work as potentially useful, and do in fact use them. Think tanks are gaining legitimacy as a result of the quality of their work. In more advanced countries such as Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic, the most developed independent research units are being called upon to work with ministries and other governing officials. Thinking about the medium-long 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.” They also have a “socializing” and a training role for national public and elected officials. This is seen as particularly useful for politicians in the new Member States that discover E.U. affairs. The new E.U. Member States are starting to realise the benefits of maintaining a dialogue with think tanks.

Even more so that in the rest of Europe however, decision-makers are sceptical of think tanks’ added-value. They are less open to external, independent advice. In Poland, Katarzyna Skorzynska, president of the Centre for International and Local Government Relations, recently criticized 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”, adding that the government should “give up its monopoly on Europe. [This] requires a partnership-based co-operation with independent think tanks, as well as efficient administration and diplomacy.”

Nevertheless, Central European think tanks have made impressive progress in attracting media attention and thus gaining wider recognition from the public in recent years. Many think tanks in

the region have very good contacts with media organizations, and their staff regularly appear on television and are often quoted in the press. However, think tank representatives that seize all possible opportunities to appear in the media in a bid to increase their organisation's visibility and credibility are often accused of discussing issues in which they lack solid expertise. They give the impression that they attempt "to educate the public right after they have educated themselves" (Krastev, 2000).

Most Members of the European Parliament declare that they do not read the publications that they receive from think tanks, because of their propensity to write extensive and detailed accounts of a problem rather than proposing concrete and feasible solutions. Some respondents even attributed such limited impact to a relative lack of relevance: dealing with matters that too often repeat themselves, particularly in foreign relations (27%) and economic and monetary policies (43%), independent research centres that overall reach MEPs more easily than other political actors in the region, offer them expertise that is of limited value, because it is not related to their competencies.

Several differences can be identified within Europe, in particular a clear trend in the former 15 E.U. member countries to develop more advocacy tanks than in the 10 new E.U. entrants. In the former member countries, think tanks seek to support the decision making process in a proactive and innovative way, through advocating specific policies or encouraging specific approaches for a particular issue. Central European think tanks on the other hand seem to be more involved in informative activities or in providing practical assistance (for instance the Center for Public Policy – Providus in Latvia). Independent research teams in Central Europe, because they are faced with the multiple challenges of the European integration, are also more inclined to provide decision makers with basic expertise and assistance, therefore acting as advisers or assistants rather than advocates for policy innovation. Finally, the range of issues covered varies according to geographic location. Central European think tanks in Poland – such as the Institute of Public Affairs – and in the Baltic States – like the Baltic International Center for Economic Policy Studies in Latvia – are, legitimately, more concerned with so-called "Russian studies" or "Baltic studies" and the "Northern Dimension". They often work in close partnership with sister organizations located in Finland, Sweden, and Russia.

How could think tanks adapt further to their evolving operating environment? In the EU, perhaps more than in other regions, think tanks are facing a number of strategic dilemmas, which will shape their future efficiency and credibility.

Strategic choices

Think tanks in Central Europe are considering – or should perhaps consider - specific strategies to prepare for the future. They would benefit from encouraging greater dialogue with policy makers, from greater networking and cooperation with other similar organizations, and from greater specialization. They also should secure their independence and overcome their major problem – funding – through deliberate and strategic fundraising. Finally, developing media strategies and marketing tools would give them access to a broader audience.

Integrating think tanks in the policy-making process

While the sector's ambitious objectives are not yet fully met, decision-makers in the region could also encourage greater dialogue with independent research centres. Countries where demand is lacking are realizing that think tanks have a role to play. To bridge the gap with decision-makers, think tanks should establish themselves as essential sources of information on key topics. In the future, individual think tanks should become "inescapable" references to which decision-makers in Central Europe turn to for up-to-date information and analysis. The Sobieski Institute in Poland sets the example. "We created this think tank for we came to realize that there would soon be a demand for electoral programme proposals coming from the pro-right wing community," explains Pawel Szalamacha, co-founder of the institute. Ideally, Central European think tanks should have a presence in Brussels, where non yet has an office. More generally, independent research centres need to think strategically about their positioning in relation to parties, political forces, and advocacy in general.

Indeed, think tanks should be more clearly identified with a research topic or a cause. Promoting a clearer line of thought may attract funding from sympathetic financiers, attention from the media. It may even help gain access to policy makers. The tension between techniques of influence and intellectual rigour and credibility is however difficult to handle. Today, think tanks around Europe are hesitating between the traditional academic model of research and the realities of a sector where advocacy is gaining ground. They have to find a way to synthesize these differing aspirations, since advocacy and influence appear to be contradictory with organisational independence. A clear independent status would however give Central European tanks greater opportunity to shift from their role of paradigm keepers and advisers, to a role of consensus builders and advocates. Independence is also a question of money.

Gaining greater independence through appropriate funding strategies

The key factor of independence for nearly all think tanks is the diversity, balance and permanence of sources of funding. Finding a niche market, through specialized activities or topics is a key strategy for many. Several institutes, such as the Lithuanian Regional Research Institute highlight the need for long-term funding that protects think tanks against the constant race for new funding. The ideal mix of funding sources varies according to think tanks' specific arrangements (For example the financial chart of the Center for Social and Economic Research in Warsaw states that 44% of its funding originates from foundations, 41% from Polish sponsors and grants, 12% from international organisations, and 3% from the national government). Interestingly, some think tanks argue that strong links with public authorities in fact protect them against the need to seek corporate funding and helps guarantee their independence. Also revealing of this ambiguous relation to funding, a few contract research outfits, such as MESA 10 in Slovakia, the Institute of Labour and Social research in Lithuania and the Institute for World Economics in Hungary, to name but a few, seek to develop separate consulting activities that help finance research activities.

Thus, think tanks need to develop their funding base beyond traditional sources, with a proactive strategy. Few players on the market have overcome their cultural reluctance to engage in this type of activity and have begun such a process, by appointing a development *cum* fundraising manager from the private sector (as the Lithuanian Free Market Institute has done), by developing a marketing strategy, and by approaching the private sector systematically for donations rather than

project work (which the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland has started doing). This is in the interest of the sector as a whole, which is relatively unknown beyond limited policy making communities.

Engaging further with target audiences

As mentioned earlier, think tanks in most Central European countries have relatively good connections with the media. TV networks actively seek the participation of institute leaders in TV programmes. The press often requests newspaper and magazine articles. However, some local think tanks remain largely passive towards the media, waiting for opportunities rather than creating them by issuing press releases, holding press conferences and angling for spots on TV talk shows. There are exceptions however. The Lithuanian Free Market Institute tried to understand how much the public is affected by its activities and ideas. For the first time ever in Europe, it tried to evaluate in October 2003 its reputation and the impact of its work within Lithuania by launching a survey of a representative cross-section of the population.

Newspaper readership is slightly higher in Eastern Europe than in the West (Struyk, 1999). Hence, newspapers may well be the favoured medium for think tanks in communicating with the public at large. Few Central European think tanks however develop proactive public relations strategies to mobilize a generally unwilling public. Furthermore, the extensive use of the 24/7 media and the Internet enable research institutes to reach a larger, more diverse audience and disseminate their publications more cheaply. The case of “policy.lv”, an ‘on-line-only’ think tank, is interesting in this respect. “Largest on-line policy resource and virtual debate place in Latvia,” the website is seen as a “meeting place for a virtual public policy community composed of researchers, analysts, decision makers, journalists, NGOs and everyone concerned about Latvia’s development.”

Finally, improving their communication and marketing strategies, writing shorter, hard-hitting policy briefs aimed at members of parliament and senior member of governments, developing regular and good relations with the Brussels-based media and decision-making circles, and approaching policy makers more systematically when they release a policy-relevant study would also increase the institutes’ visibility.

Networking and sharing knowledge more widely

Networking can be very beneficial to think tanks, in particular in Central Europe, where they are often small, flexible, and willing to adopt winning managerial and research practices from abroad. As the solution to most problems faced by Central European countries often lies beyond the realm of national governments, transnational partnerships help gain influence across borders. Joint papers co-signed by a region’s most influential institutes have a greater chance of being read. Cooperation with well-respected and visible partners is more likely to overcome indifference and neglect from governments. Networking allows to share knowledge in any significant field for research institutes, to train analysts, and to improve the quality of their output through work with institutes of different levels of development. Also, countries in transition share a common agenda. The work of Polish and Hungarian think tanks for instance can be very useful to those in Bulgaria and Romania. A common policy heritage creates considerable potential for sharing policy solutions.

In this perspective, think tanks in Central Europe should specialize more to avoid overlapping areas of research, and to complement one another's research. The general perception is that greater specialization is a logical strategy. It is already happening because of funding difficulties. A well-defined focus on a specific policy agenda allows better institutional branding. Indeed, both journalists and decision-makers welcome think tanks that have a clear agenda. A high-level Commission official argues for instance: "A think tank cannot specialise in everything. They should specialise more, they tend to be too scattered. A think tank should have some clear focus to be credible, and to be a little bit original in the long run." Establishing themselves as regional specialists that provide EU officials with local knowledge could for example grant Central European think tanks a precious added-value regarding specific issues of importance such as further EU enlargement, Common Foreign Security Policy, or anti-corruption studies. Cultivating their perceived strengths will also allow potential funders to target their support more precisely. As mentioned before, more attention should be paid to issues that are somewhat overlooked, such as environment and transport policies.

Conclusion

Think tanks have become an essential feature in post-communist countries. They have recently entered a process of re-inventing themselves. The end of old paradigms and their accession to the European Union opens a world of new opportunities for them. The integration agenda speeds up the legislative process and leaves little time available for enlightened policy debates. East European countries have been adopting lately much more new legislations than their West European peers. Although the policy environment in Central Europe is not particularly favourable to policy deliberations, think tanks have at present a chance to focus on reforming the policy process rather than arguing for the best policy. The prospect for institutional survival for think tanks depends heavily on their substantive focus as well as on national political environments. Unlike think tanks that focus on economic issues that can develop consulting activities, or single-issue organisations that can build a strong constituency, think tanks that embrace a broader agenda of democratic transformation will have difficulties finding support. The greatest challenge for these institutes remains to find a niche in the marketplace. Think tanks that focus on specific issues such as the environment, the reform of public administration, or international relations have developed in each country in the region. They attract experts in their particular field and often have very strong links with similar think tanks throughout the region, Western Europe, and with the United-States. Close relations with particular committees and individual members in parliament provide these organisations with substantial influence in the policy process. While they have been successfully assisting their governments in the integration process, further hindsight is however needed to assess the real impact of think tanks' work on European policy issues in the region.

Think tanks in Central Europe face many of the same challenges as others around the world. Despite the numerous difficulties specific to the region, their capacity to adapt to changing conditions is impressive. We are witnessing today the development of hybrid organizations that were modelled after those in the United States and Western Europe, but that fit the culture of the region. The current changes in their environment may cause some casualties in the next few years,

but many in the sector are confident that, eventually, Central European think tanks will emerge stronger. After all, are these not the organisations that specialize in analysing trends and drawing lessons for the future?

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