

Think tanks: A cornerstone of democracy

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Introduction

The role that think tanks play in pushing for democratic change and consolidating democratic practices has taken on increasing importance as the complexities of democratic development are better understood. From Central Europe to Eurasia, the phenomenal growth of civil society actors determined to shape and monitor their states' transformations has created a new market of ideas and policy processes designed to influence and hopefully improve the lives of their fellow citizens. Given the political space, think tanks can provide the independent, core research needed for states to transform and transition into democratic societies.

Think tanks can provide a critical balance to governmental authority even in the direst political and economic situations. For example, the development of the G17 group of reform-minded economists in Serbia was instrumental to the eventual grand coalition of reform-minded politicians and civic action groups that united in toppling the Milosevic regime in 2000. Critical was G17's ability to expand national discourse to focus on the systematic democratic reforms necessary to put the country on an alternative path towards reengagement with the International Community and eventual integration into the European Union (EU).

Parallel to the reemergence of civil society in the former Communist countries, Freedom House has worked closely with policy research and advocacy organizations to support policy-oriented civic activism. Through grants and technical assistance to conduct original studies and advocacy programs on a range of political and economic issues, Freedom House has supported the development of politically independent, academically sound, and publicly appealing policy institutions that could flourish from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea and from the Moravian Hills to the easternmost reaches of Central Asia. Similar to G17 in Serbia, a number of Freedom House think-tank partners have played critical roles in most states of this region.

Given the unique role of think tanks in propelling democratic development in the region, Freedom House is pleased to offer a new reference guide for democracy-focused think tanks, *Think Tanks in Central Europe and Eurasia*, the third edition of its *Think Tank Directory* series. This edition is published under the auspices of Freedom House's Regional Networking Project for Central and Eastern Europe with the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The third edition of the directory is not simply an updated version of previous editions but the product of an eighteen-month effort to broaden regional coverage while redefining thematic focus. The directory's geographic scope has been expanded to include all 27 states of the former Soviet bloc countries of Europe and Eurasia¹, which, with a few exceptions, are served by the Regional Networking Project. The directory's inclusion criteria were redefined to focus on those organizations that aim explicitly at strengthening democratic governance in their country. To complement

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the focus on democracy-oriented think tanks throughout the region, an essay by the French think tank Notre Europe takes a closer look at how think tanks in the more consolidated democratic states noted in the directory are taking up the challenge of engaging in the policy process both on the domestic and EU levels.

Defining think tank (and other methodological considerations)

Defining what is meant by the term think tank, or public policy institute, is one of the most debated issues in contemporary literature². There are two common elements in most definitions: that think tanks are active in policy debate, and that they sustain some level of autonomy from the state. In the introductory chapter of their book *Think Tanks and Civil Societies in a Time of Change*, James McGann and Kent Weaver contrast the Anglo-American and the so-called middle course definition. According to the Anglo-American approach, “[think tanks] are policy research organizations that are independent of government and universities and operate on a not-for-profit basis.” And not surprisingly, most active groups of this variety are found primarily in the United States and Great Britain (McGann and Weaver 2000, p. 4). In Central Europe and Eurasia, think tanks are commonly described by the middle course definition as “policy research organizations that have significant autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties” (McGann and Weaver 2000, p. 5).

The current edition of the *Think Tank Directory* uses this middle course definition with a number of additional criteria:

- 1) Legal status: The legal status was examined in order to make sure that *truly independent* organizations are included. One key criterion is the ability to set a research agenda without undue outside pressure. The editors gave preference to registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations as well as commercial entities, while carefully studying the background of governmental institutes, taking into account the political environment of the given country.
- 2) Key activities: In order to be eligible for inclusion, a substantial amount of an organization’s activity had to be directed towards research and advocacy or other types of outreach activities.
- 3) Target audience: In order for think tanks to enter the policy discourse, they should wisely identify their target audience. In most cases, policy institutes featured in this directory are communicating in two directions: with government and academia, and those who form the policy making community and, at the same time, with the wider public, such as civil society, media, and business organizations who may be direct winners or losers as a result of the adopted policies.

¹ Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro and Kosovo, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan. The editors were unable to find independent policy institutes in Turkmenistan.

² Even within the same publication, one finds different definitions for think tank (see, for example: McGann and Weaver 2000, pp. 4-5 and pp. 103-104, Stone et al. 1998, pp. 2-6, Struyk 1999, pp. 17-21). (What are different definitions? It would be interesting to know.)

4) Research interests: The editors followed the standardized set of indicators used in Freedom House's annually published *Nations in Transit* assessment of governance issues. The selected organizations' work in the social sciences (primarily political science, sociology) and their aspirations (mission, organizational goals, fields of interest) manifest their common desire to consolidate democratic institutions and behaviors in their own country and beyond.

The fourth point of the above criteria has two important overtones that amend McGann and Weaver's middle course definition and make the current publication unique. First, by significantly decreasing and specializing the focus of research interests for inclusion in the directory, we came to a definition of what can be called "democracy think tanks." The basic goal of the institutions in this book is to democratize—that is, open up—the space within the policymaking arena of their respective countries or, in some cases, even beyond. Accordingly, the current edition of the directory is not representative of all types of public policy institutes in the region; hence, the subtitle of the current edition alters from its predecessors in that it is *A Selective Directory*.

To summarize, for the third edition of Freedom House's *Think Tank Directory*, the editors devised the following working definition of "democracy think tanks" for final selection:

Independent, nongovernmental organizations that conduct public policy research and perform public outreach with the aim to advance democratic development (i.e., national democratic governance, electoral process, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, independent media) in their domestic environment and beyond by facilitating increased policy dialogue within their own community, academia, civil society and counterparts in government, media, and businesses.

The editorial team included Freedom House Europe staff and consultants in conjunction with staff and consultants of Transitions Online (TOL), an Internet-based journal covering 28 post-Communist countries. The editors developed a 25-point questionnaire for data collection and distributed it in several waves during 2005 to a comprehensive list of over 450 organizations across the region. This was often followed up by telephone to either encourage the completion of the questionnaire or to clarify information received. Selection for inclusion entailed the formulation of a standardized appraisal template as well as periodic editorial meetings. In addition, for data verification, the editors conducted a broad range of consultations with in-country specialists from USAID, representatives of governmental and international organizations, Freedom House field offices, TOL correspondents, and other country experts

Using the above definition and guidelines, the editors chose to establish two levels of inclusion in the final directory. There are 129 institutions that were selected for *full inclusion*, featuring organizational details analogous to the Second Edition's content. More than 100 additional think tanks are listed under *other contacts*, highlighting only their basic contact information.

Two levels of inclusion became necessary partly due to the response rate of the think tanks. Of the over 450 institutions contacted, 200 completed and returned the questionnaire. Accordingly, those who did not respond to the questionnaire but were considered to meet the selection criteria through desk research and previous inclusion were included among *other contacts*. The editors used this wider criteria to also list key economic policy-oriented institutions of a given country that otherwise would fall outside the current edition's redefined scope. Given that economic think tanks formed the vast body of previous editions of Freedom House's *Think Tank Directory* and are the focus of analysis of many other publications concentrating on policy institutes, the current directory's editorial decision to list economic think tanks in a secondary manner should allow students of public policy institutions to continue their comparative and trend analysis, at least on a basic level.³

It should also be noted that the editors' ability to gather data was geographically unequal. Despite efforts to contact the widest set of organizations for possible inclusion, a few of the countries demonstrated the apparent lack of such institutions. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the editors were unable to identify institutions for full inclusion, and only one from Uzbekistan met the wider criteria, which can be explained by the almost total lack of pluralism of ideas in these two countries. Similarly, the political environment prevented the editors from publishing the full details of many Belarusian policy institutes. Russia is also an apparent outlier, from where— despite the editors' relentless attempts to persuade Russian think tanks to take part in the survey— Freedom House received the lowest response rate.

Elsewhere (in other parts of Central Asia and in Croatia), independent policy institutes are still more the exception than the rule. And in the Czech Republic, since the first edition of the *Think Tank Directory*, the number of policy institutes that the editors were able to identify has steadily decreased. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but it would be useful, for example, to analyze whether the decline in policy institutes correlates with the overall decline of the financial sustainability of the Czech nongovernmental sector as described in USAID's *2005 NGO Sustainability Index*.⁴

In contrast, some countries seem overrepresented by the large number of featured organizations, but taking a closer look at these countries clarifies the puzzle. Since the beginning of the post-Communist transition in Bulgaria, there has been a large number of independent institutions, which Ivan Krastev (2000b) attributes to the sudden lack of state support for academic research entities at the dawn of that country's systemic changes. In Hungary, where the national Academy of Science alone operates over 30 research institutes, many profit-oriented think tanks respond to a market demand, and within the last few years, legislation has paved the way for the establishment of German-type party think tanks, elevating the battlefield of political ideologies to a higher level. Institutes listed under Serbia and Montenegro hail from all corners of Serbia and Montenegro, with Kosovo think tanks listed sep-

³ A large body of data is available on economic think tanks worldwide. Up-to-date in-depth information can, for instance, be found in the Atlas Foundation's publications.

⁴ http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/

arately at the end. (This grouping reflects the status of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro during 2005 and does not constitute a political position on the status of Kosovo.) In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the many years of international encouragement—most prominently from USAID—finally appears to have borne fruit in the emergence of a cadre of recently established policy-oriented groups.

Main findings

The *Think Tank Directory's* findings show major discrepancies in the number and strength of think tanks among the countries of Central and Southeast Europe and Eurasia. The majority of the directory's indicators suggest major disparities across the studied geographical region: a genuinely "Europeanized" Central Europe, a Southeast Europe that relentlessly catches up with its Northern neighbors, and the stalled region of the former Soviet Union. The subsequent paragraphs specify these regional discrepancies among the eight EU member states of the region, Southeast Europe (the countries of the Balkans), and the Former Soviet Union (Mongolia included for geopolitical considerations) in more detail, followed by a section of reflections on potential future trends.

Orientation of interest

In general, the debate among authors who study the role of think tanks in the policymaking arena relates more to the question of "how" they promote their ideas than "what" breed of policies they actually stand for (James 2000, Kimball 2000, Manaev 2000, Stone et al. 1998, Struyk 1999). But it is commonly agreed among these observers that the overarching policy paradigm of the 1990s was predominated by the ideas of "the Washington consensus," which introduced a variety of anti-Keynesian, neoliberal policies. The "half-way reforms" that Charles Maier described in his influential article on the economic policies of the Communist regimes of the 1970s and '80s (Maier 1991) have been sublimated – thanks in large part to the considerable work of the region's think tanks – and replaced by aggressive marketization. Alongside on the political level, the democratization of political systems resulted in the triumph of liberal democracy. The establishment of a variety of political parties and civil society organizations meant that societies are keen to re-conquer the policymaking arena.

For example, the Notre Europe essay notes the preeminence of the 1990s policy reforms and future trends in the evolution of Central Europe's think tanks. Both this essay and directory findings suggest that the transition paradigm has concluded in Central Europe and has been replaced by a European-Union based policy focus. A closer look at the names of the organizations, their mission, and the areas of expertise they claim mirrors this trend. Central European think tanks are becoming more and more specialized in area studies, while their counterparts in Southeast Europe and Eurasia, on the one hand, are still striving to compel the consolidation of their countries' democratic gains or halt any backsliding tendencies and, on the other, have become less convinced of the success of market reforms.

The key words think tanks use in their name or mission statement best describe their identity. Judging by their names, the geographic expansion of the

Think Tank Directory generated a modest increase in public policy institutions with democratic and reformist desires. When also looking at mission statements, the data suggest that the “newcomer” countries are striving hard for democracy: the increase in the survey’s geographic scope, the resulting increase in the number of think tanks, and the parallel reduction in the emphasis on economic think tanks have produced a considerable increase in democracy think tanks compared with the last edition.

Based on their stated mission only four out of ten policy institutes in the former Soviet Union, in 2005, evince a democracy orientation, only slightly behind Southeast European think tanks, which are the most eager to push their societies towards further democratization and reforms. Considering that most policy institutes in these two regions receive funding from foreign sources, in absence of wider analysis, it remains a question whether the leaders of Southeast European and Eurasian think tanks were simply responding to their donors’ funding policies or are genuine flag-bearers of democratic ideals.

In terms of the professional capacities of Central European and Eurasian think tanks, by far the most commonly cited areas of expertise reflect the democratic governance indicators of Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit*. Public policy institutions in the region are professional democracy advocates; they claim general knowledge on democratic development and particular skills in human rights, gender and minority studies, party systems and elections, local governance, anticorruption and government transparency, judicial reforms, and civilian control of armed and security forces.

Southeast European organizations and those of the FSU are more inclined to name democratic development among their primary areas of expertise, while Central Europeans more specifically describe capacities. Many groups cite expertise in the human services, such as health, education, culture, social safety policy, public administration, community governance and human development, which are crucially important fields that the original prescription of market liberalization often impacted deeply—at least in the short term—in a negative direction. Forward thinking is a chief value and characteristic of any successful think tank, and the list of areas of expertise demonstrates that regional policy institutes passed the test of speaking up on previously exceptional policy matters, such as Islamic culture and politics or the status of the disabled.

Volume and source of revenues⁵

The average annual income of a think tank in the “transitional space” is approximately €250,000. Southeast European policy institutes are the nearest to this

⁵ The editorial team paid considerable attention to generating data on the financial standing of the included institutions. However, due to the earlier explanation that the ability to engage with think tanks varied significantly across the surveyed geographic region and because the editors placed high importance on confidentiality for business or security reasons, only basic financial information is published and only of those think tanks that provided data. For example, in Belarus, government authorities have long stigmatized think tanks as “Western agents” (Manaev 2000, p. 70); therefore, the editors did not request financial information from the think tanks contacted in Belarus.

average with the exception of Bulgarian groups, whose average income is over €450,500 per year—the third highest among all 27 states. On average, the EU member states were able to obtain by far the most revenues in 2004; Hungary, with its many profit-oriented institutes, peaked above the entire former Soviet bloc with an annual average of more than €700,000. And think tanks of the Baltic states received only slightly less than the Southeast European average. The states of the former Soviet Union did not reach the €150,000 annual average; in half of those countries, think tanks survived on less than €100,000 in 2004.

Think tanks of the entire region are still generally dependent on funding from international sources with only EU member states consistently able to raise approximately half of their annual revenues from the home country. For example, Southeast European think tanks are closer to the overall average with approximately 70 percent of annual income originating from international sources. In the former Soviet Union, only Russian institutions included in the book claim to have received the majority (76 percent) of their funding from Russian domestic sources.

Staff composition

Human resources are the most precious (but financially costly) asset of every think tank, given that their competitive advantage rests in the ability to develop cutting-edge information and ideas not available elsewhere to influence policy-makers and generate public understanding and support. Continuing therefore the tradition of past *Think Tank Directories*, the editors were interested in examining the composition of paid full-time staff and part-time, contractual or unpaid contributors to the work of think tanks because it suggests a degree of institutionalization, long-term engagement, a crystallized research agenda, and overall sustainability.

Interestingly, data on structural organization has very little regional difference. There is great variety among the number of full-time paid colleagues working on research programs or providing administrative assistance, ranging from no full-time employees to more than 40 full-time staff. In almost every think tank operation, one finds a wide network of part-time associates and volunteers, but think tanks in Southeast Europe and the former Soviet Union are more likely to rely on such staff than in Central Europe, which may suggest both positive and negative implications. Relying on unpaid expert or unskilled volunteer staff, for example, may have impact on the quality of policy research and advice, but it may also indicate the ability to attract a broad community that is interested in and agrees with the work think tanks undertake or the ideals they promote.

The way forward...

...in Central Europe

Central European think tanks could be in the most difficult position given the absence of foreign funding and the obvious overarching theoretical paradigm. However, as the article by Notre Europe scholars underlines, they have successfully integrated into Europe-wide networks and debates yet see themselves more as expert advisors to government-devised policies than advocating for their own

solutions when compared to Western European colleagues. Following the European Union's internal debates, the EU's role in the new geopolitical order, and engaging with their counterparts in the East, they are now in the best position to advocate for specific European policies. In the arena of the EU's ever-shaping foreign policy, for example, many groups in Poland and Slovakia (and in the soon-to-accede Bulgaria and Romania) are already taking an active role in working with counterparts in the FSU.

The *Think Tank Directory's* data confirms that Central European policy institutes are responding effectively to the need to stay relevant and attentive to newly emerging domestic matters as well. There are signs that Central European think tanks will be the leading advocates of further embedding principles of pluralism in the political culture, much like Hungarian party think tanks are already doing. However, the recent political turbulence in a handful of Central European states could pose a challenge for politically engaged organizations to continue the policy dialogue in a way that both stays above the divided political landscape and serves to engage increasingly politically apathetic citizens.

...in Southeast Europe

European integration and related policy development dominates the region, and if current predictions prove correct, Southeast European think tanks will have ample room and opportunity to inform these processes. By 2006, policy institutes have proliferated in Macedonia, Albania, and even in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but primarily Serbian and Montenegrin and Kosovar think tanks now face the most imperative role in helping their societies in state building and reaching European standards. The question remains whether the Kosovo status talks can be constructively influenced by democracy think tanks, but the Freedom House-supported project on trade and visa regimes by the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) and the Serbian European Movement at least suggests that researchers can provide constructive, practical policy recommendations even at a time of high political tension.

Bulgaria and Romania, with a clear European perspective, house policy institutes capable of influencing areas where essential policy reforms are expected, filling in where neoliberal reforms left a vacuum. Think tanks in Southeast Europe should continue to stay in the forefront to pull the region out of the "inflexibility trap," as researchers (CLS and IME 2003) described the Balkan democracy crises in 2003. In order to do so, Southeast European policy institutes should continue to take the lead in reaching out to a wide strata of the society through research-based advocacy programs involving and training civic activists and citizens groups spread across the Balkans (Evenson and Kourylev 2005). Hardest to accomplish, Southeast European policy institutes should take active measures to decrease foreign support and should study the success of their Central European counterparts in attaining revenues from domestic sources. Theoretically, this may result in hybrid-type institutions that are common in Central Europe (particularly in Hungary). For example, a number of institutions specializing in opinion polling in Croatia and BiH (not covered in this directory) may become more active on the NGO side of their work in advocating publicly for policies devised from their own research.

In Croatia, where the *Think Tank Directory* suggests a less open policy process, academic institutes were, in fact, much less a victim of financial or political pandemonium and involved in the process on an ad hoc basis. Since the country appears to be next in line for European Union accession, it is but one further step for these institutions to build on wider civic support and activism and become the principal advocates for reform toward the eagerly anticipated EU membership.

...in the FSU

Striking cleavages are observable within the region of the former Soviet Union. In Russia, those organizations that participated in Freedom House's study suggest a development path much closer to their Central European counterparts in terms of specialization on issues and their ability to attract domestic support. Taking into account public attitudes about democratic principles, market liberalization in the country, and considering that a number of institutes are close to the Kremlin, policymaking in Russia appears to be witnessing the revival of scientific socialism. This trend appears to be based largely on the empirical observation of social-economic events, while putting little emphasis on ideals, democratic or otherwise. The constricting political space in Russia, most recently demonstrated with the passage of the NGO law, suggests that vibrant, independent research on democracy-related practices and policies will continue to be in poor demand in Russia.

The *Think Tank Directory* suggests two black holes of analytical thinking in the former Soviet Union. However, these require different lenses to assess. Although the political regime in Belarus threatens severe retaliation for concealing alternative information that questions the validity of officially available data, let alone freely advocating for an overarching shift in national developments, the country houses a broad array of policy-oriented groups that operate informally or in semi-official settings. These groups could form the base of a new cadre of reformists if their research capacities were sharpened and there was broader civic activism behind the offered alternatives. Indeed, for sustaining the latest blossoming of public policy research, international recognition and support will continue to be indispensable.

Similar to Belarus, in Central Asia the political climate is not conducive to independent thinking; think tanks are not in the position to openly promote alternative (let alone democratic) ideas. Central Asian think tanks undoubtedly are the most deprived of the entire region based on all indicators (number of organizations, average annual income, paid staff, etc.) of the *Think Tank Directory*. Expert institutions that do exist are created by presidential decrees, but those strive not to instigate public discussion on issues considered to be strictly technical. While the relative international importance of these states grew immensely in past years due to Central Asia's substantial energy resources, the societies forming these states received much less attention and support from the same international players. To be sure, some of the think tanks that exist in this region are able to operate only thanks to international support, but particularly those countries that are most dependent on the region's energy resources should boost their assistance to the creation of independent policy centers.

In contrast to Central Asia, organizations in the Southern Caucasus, though financially weak, are more numerous and actively promote democratic ideals and the reform process. They remain relevant players in solving the most pressing issues of the region. While Central Asia and Southern Caucasus generally lack an open policy landscape, certain fields are more approachable to think-tank voices in the latter region. For example, as the Southern Caucasus struggles with frozen conflicts, this dynamic is reflected in the specialization of think tanks. Every fourth institution in this region would claim expertise in conflict mediation. Emblematic democracy-oriented policy institutions in Georgia (and similarly in Ukraine) have already contributed remarkably to influencing the public discourse since their democratic changes in 2003 and 2004. The level of specialization and outright aspiration for reform offers optimism that similar groups in Armenia and Azerbaijan could also democratize the policymaking process in their respective countries.

In the absence of a clear roadmap for reform and Euro-Atlantic integration, think tanks in Eurasia require close attention and assistance to successfully engage in offering an alternative path for their countries. For example, one should not forget Mongolia. Despite the political turmoil in early 2006, think tanks are in a unique position there to push the completion of the transition project, which can in turn inspire other countries of Far East Asia. And in other corners of Eurasia, the democratic aspirations and the prevalent activism attested by the voluntary contribution to think tanks creates an opportunity that, if more deeply professionalized, could prominently spearhead future achievements in the reform process. Recall how the Serbian think tanks grew stronger in the run up to their "transition tipping point" (Freedom House 2003) in 2000.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of democratization, and the role of think tanks in this process, is not an exact science. However, some basic environmental considerations and organizational attributes can be analyzed to suggest an organization's chances of flourishing and pushing forward democratic ideals. Lively policy discourse requires a certain open political space that think tanks themselves cannot create. Yet they are in the best position to become the strongest proponents and instigators of broad-based coalitions urging policy reforms or shifts in the overall direction of governance. The more think tanks can thrive, the more pluralistic a country's policymaking arena becomes, which by itself can be interpreted as an attribute of the level of democratization. And the fact that in many corners of the former Soviet Union, the culture of independent policy alternatives generated by think tanks has not been able to take root underlines the continued need to support holistic approaches aimed at improving democratic governance standards, including the push for policy considerations debated among the widest blend of stakeholders.

A vision for the future and the ability to attract the wider public are the characteristics that distinguish think tanks from other scientific research centers and promise the best chances for their long-term sustainability. The evolution of Central and Southeast European think tanks confirms that such forward thinking puts them on the front line of research-based advocacy coalitions, endorsing democratic

breakthroughs, consolidating early democratic gains, and navigating complex policy settings. The visionary potential of think tanks is indispensable not only to inform and marshal public support, but also to attract domestic financial revenues. Keeping far-sighted ideals in mind and specializing on crucial issues of the day ensure the relevance of think tanks and make them capable of continuing to exert influence on upcoming policy discourses.

The lesson Southeast European think tanks learned from Central European counterparts—and what their colleagues in the former Soviet Union appear to be following—reminds us that democratic ideas often spread and develop through regional transfers. Therefore, supporting think tanks in their efforts to take on a portion of this task remains a necessary ingredient for the complex process of democratization ahead.

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