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## **THINK-TANKS – THE PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION AND THE WAY TO SOLVE THEM**

**by Sergiy Gerasymchuk**

The starting point of any research aimed at the role of think tanks is the definition of think tank itself. This seems to be a challenging task due to the variety of different theoretical and practical approaches, differences in American and European (and further British and Continental) models (grounded on the fact that sometimes think tanks in the US and in the EU play different roles and have different capacities). The situation is getting even more complicated if taking into consideration Eastern European think tanks which have a different origin and also are functioning within the completely different environment if comparing to Western European and American think tanks.

However, there is a number of most popular within the academic community definitions which might be used for the purposes of this study. Among the most quoted definition there is the one suggested by UNDP which says that think tanks are the “organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies”<sup>1</sup>. Another definition is grounded on functional approach according to which think tanks are “independent institutes conducting policy research, analysis and public dialogue, or ‘think tanks’ as they are more commonly known, are one of the leading catalysts for ideas and action

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP (United Nations Development Program). 2003. Thinking the Unthinkable. Bratislava: UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

in civil societies around the world”<sup>2</sup>, educational or advisory functions – e.g. “independent (and usually private) policy research institutes containing people involved in studying a particular policy area or a broad range of policy issues, actively seeking to educate or advise policy makers and the public through a number of channels”<sup>3</sup>, whereas if taking into account the thinks tanks’ target audience “think tanks are nonprofit policy research organizations that provide analysis and expertise to influence policymakers”<sup>4</sup>.

Beside, in literature one may find some attempts of complex definitions. For example, Stephen Boucher suggests applying the following nine criteria in order to detect a think tank: [1] permanent organizations, [2] that specialize in the production of public policy solutions, [3] thanks to in-house staff dedicated to research. [4] They generate an original production of ideas, analysis and advice [5] which is meant to be communicated to policy-makers and public opinion (incidentally, think tanks should therefore have a website). [6] Such organisations are not responsible for governmental activities. [7] They seek, more generally, to maintain their research independence and not to be committed to particular interests. [8] Their main activity is neither to train nor to grant diplomas. [9] Finally, their implicit or explicit goal is to contribute to the public good, unlike purely commercial groups.<sup>5</sup>

The history of think tanks in the US and Western Europe gives an opportunity to add few more key features of think tanks in the Western world. Basically these are the institutions that are centers of research and learning but unlike colleges or universities, they have no students (but do have student research interns), do not offer courses (but do hold a lot of seminars and forums), and do not try to offer a smattering of expertise on all subjects but concentrate preeminently on key public policy issues.<sup>6</sup>

The key function of a think tank is being like “the bicycle chain” that links the policy world with the research world, applying academic rigor to contemporary policy problems.

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<sup>2</sup> Comparative Think Tanks, Politics And Public Policy, James G. McGann, with Erik C. Johnson, ISBN 1 84376 022 3, Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, Diana (2000): Think Tank Transnationalization and Non-Profit Analysis, Advice and Advocacy, Coventry, University of Warwick, Department of Politics and International Studies, ([www.csv.warwick.ac.uk](http://www.csv.warwick.ac.uk)), p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise by Andrew Rich, Cambridge University Press (April 5, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> NOTRE EUROPE, Etudes & Recherchers, Studies and Research n°35, Europe and its think tanks : a promise to be fulfilled. An analysis of think tanks specialised in European policy issues in the enlarged European Union, Directed by Stephen BOUCHER

<sup>6</sup> Wiarda, Howard J.(2008) 'The New Powerhouses: Think Tanks and Foreign Policy', American Foreign Policy Interests, 30: 2, 96.

Think tanks “help set policy agendas and bridge the gap between knowledge and power,” according to James G. McGann.<sup>7</sup>

For the sake of the fulfillment of their mission think tanks use a number of channels to make their findings public, to deliver them to the target audience of the decision makers and to convert them into the political decisions. In certain cases they refer directly to the policy-makers, but also in some cases they use media and society as the mediators and channels of influence. As correctly summarized by James G. McGann<sup>8</sup>, think tanks employ a wide range of methods to accomplish the vital goal of effectively propagating information, including:

a) Seminars, conferences and briefings: such public events usually are used to provide the think tank with an opportunity to present their research findings and also to disseminate their findings to the wider audience and by this means to shape the public opinion which further can be used as a lever of influence aimed at the decision-makers and policy makers. Moreover, public events can be used as the platform for the dialogue between the interested parties e.g. academicians, interest groups, politicians and sometimes to become an independent platform for the exchange of the opinions which cannot be delivered via official channels.

b) Publications: As a rule, the large US think tanks also operate as highly productive publishing houses, generating both traditional and, increasingly, multimedia publications. In addition to numerous print publications each American think tank today also publishes its very own high-quality journal or magazine several times a year. Some think tanks provide special information services via e-mails or twits, which comment on the day’s political and economic developments. Most think tank websites also carry speeches, commentaries by the fellows, conference reports and programs, synoptic analyses, book abstracts, biographies of their experts, information on events and, increasingly, video and audio clips, different visualizations etc.

c) The media: Journalists often profit from the expertise of think tank employees. In turn, the think tank and the expert concerned gain a wide forum for the opinion expressed – and sometimes even certain renown as a result of the direct media exposure. Think tank analysts are quoted as experts in the print media and appear on television and radio news programs as well as on talk shows. Numerous think tank experts regularly publish their work, sometimes in their very own newspaper columns, but mostly in the form of op-ed pieces. (In

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<sup>7</sup> P. W. Singer (2010) ‘Factories to Call Our Own. How to understand Washington’s ideas industry’ The Washingtonian, August issue

<sup>8</sup> James G. McGann, Think Tanks and Policy Advice in The US. [www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_7042-544-1-30.pdf](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7042-544-1-30.pdf)

other words think tanks use media for promoting themselves. However at the same time the media is using think tanks for getting the interpretations of the governmental policies and for delivering the governmental decisions to the wider audience in understandable language).

d) Relations with government agencies: In case of the US think tanks are particularly concerned with maintaining lines of communication to members of Congress and their staff, administration officials, federal judges, and representatives from state and local bodies. In turn, government officials and members of Congress are invited to speak at think tank events, which provide them with opportunities to test out political ideas or initiatives on “neutral ground” in front of an audience of experts. (This seems to be the direct and the most efficient channel of communication with the decision-makers and government. However, it should be noted that such a channel is affordable mostly for the influential think tanks with high budgets and prevalingly in the US whereas in the European Union such a pattern of communication is used seldom and foresees a number of conditions (e.g. office in Brussels is desperately needed to set the channel of influence on the European decision-makers, however very few think tanks based in the Member States have a presence in Brussels, and vice-versa<sup>9</sup>).

Resuming the abovementioned definitions and features of think tanks we may come to the conclusion that the **think tank is an independent organization, which focuses primarily on the policy research related to the public needs (mostly but not exclusively in the field of economics, international relations etc.) and by different channels (including some sort of shaping public opinion on the issue by means of public events, publications and media coverage) makes the outcomes of this research/policy oriented solution available to the policy-makers to be considered while elaborating the respective policies and further makes the assessment of this policy through the lens of its relevance to the initial public need.**

The fact that usually think tanks are mentioned within the context of their mediating role between the purely academic community and the politics might be perceived as the indicator which marks think tanks as the institutions which neither belong to the world of academia nor to the world of politics.

Think-tanks in Central Europe differ from think-tanks in the United States and Western Europe by origin, target audience and level of influence. The composition of Central

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<sup>9</sup> NOTRE EUROPE, Etudes & Recherchers, Studies and Research n°35, Europe and its think tanks : a promise to be fulfilled. An analysis of think tanks specialised in European policy issues in the enlarged European Union, Directed by Stephen BOUCHER.

European think tanks is shaped by both academia representatives and dissident leaders and to some extent this factor has an impact on its operational mode.

The principal audience for much policy advice has been the myriad international organizations and donors focused on the region. Relying on their support, think tanks in many CEE countries were enjoying significant involvement in the development of public service, democratization, and nation building.<sup>10</sup> Quite often international organizations combine the status of the consumer which shapes the demand for the research, sponsor of this research and the medium who persuades the government to implement the research findings. The historical background, specifics of functioning in post-Socialist space, target audience and key activities of the newly emerged think tanks in CEE provided them with some additional characteristics. The key particularities are the democratization component and necessity to get reintegrated into the Western world which formulate the basis for public needs as well as the involvement of third parties involved into the process of policy-making (international organization supporting the integration processes, formulating the demand for the think tanks and providing the think tanks with the additional levers of influence on the national governments).

After the mentioned amendments the definition of think tank in Central Europe will look as the following: **think tank in is an independent organization, which focuses primarily on the policy research related to the public needs (mostly but not exclusively in the field democratization, economic and market reforms, international relations etc.) and by different channels (including some sort of shaping public opinion on the issue by means of public events, publications and media coverage) makes the outcomes of this research/policy oriented solution available to the policy-makers or international organizations to be considered while elaborating the respective policies and further makes the assessment of this policy through the lens of its relevance to the initial public need.**

In other words the Western pattern of think tank while applied to Central Europe gained reformist and democratic ankles. Democratization and economic reforms have the priority in defining think tanks' mission and international organizations play both the role of the consumer of think tanks' intellectual products and the think tanks' instrument of sustainable influence on the national governments.

It is noteworthy to mention that the democratic ankle of think tanks activities in Eastern Europe also plays a significant role. Due to these similarities the definition of think

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<sup>10</sup> Goran Buldioski "Think Tanks in Central and Eastern Europe in Urgent Need of a Code of Ethics" The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law Volume 11, Issue 3, May 2009

tanks in transition and post-transitions states is also relevant for the think tanks in Eastern Europe. The key particularities are the democratization component and necessity to get reintegrated into the Western world which formulate the basis for public needs as well as the involvement of third parties involved into the process of policy-making (international organization supporting the integration processes, formulating the demand for the think tanks and providing the think tanks with the additional levers of influence on the national governments). At the same time some differences are caused by the lack of consensus of the political elites regarding the priority of reintegration into the Western world. Under such circumstances the think tanks have to rely mostly on the public opinion and the leverages provided on the international actors in their efforts to influence the state mechanisms and to create the conditions for the democratic transformations and implementation of the alternative scenarios of democratic state building.

the definition of think tank in Eastern Europe will look as the following: **think tank in Eastern Europe is an independent organization, which focuses primarily on the policy research related to the public needs (mostly but not exclusively *in the field of democratization, economic and market reforms, international relations etc.*) and by different channels (mostly by shaping public opinion on the issue by means of public events, publications and media coverage) makes the outcomes of this research/policy oriented solution available to the policy-makers *or international organizations* to be considered while elaborating the respective policies and further makes the assessment of this policy through the lens of its relevance to the initial public need.**

In other words, the Western pattern of think tank while applied to Eastern Europe gains reformist and democratic ankles (as well as in Central Europe). Moreover, think tanks in Eastern Europe are rather the opponents of state authorities and the watchdogs of the democratic development who produce alternative policies with the dominating pro-Western trend, contrary to the state institutions which are often less interested in integration into the Western world. Democratization and economic reforms have the priority in defining think tanks' mission and international organizations (like in Central Europe) play both the role of the consumer of think tanks' intellectual products and the think tanks' instrument of sustainable influence on the national governments. To some extent the mentioned facts reflect the anti-authoritarian nature of civil society in Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Goodhart, Michael(2005) 'Civil society and the problem of global democracy', *Democratization*, 12: 1, 1 — 21, p. 9.

Bearing in mind the growing trend of international turbulence and the emerging of illiberal regimes and populism growth even in the countries traditionally recognized as liberal democracies the think tanks are facing the new challenges they will have to adapt to. In this regard they can either accept the changes or to emphasize their traditional mission of democratization, economic and market reforms and preserving liberal values. Although the first option is the easier one the second will be the only possibility to preserve the true role of the think tanks and to prevent their converting into the institutions not capable to elaborate the alternative policies, limited in their capacities, expressing the low initiative and infected by the loyalist pattern of behavior.

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