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**Dorota Dakowska**

## **THINK TANKS**

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Also sometimes called “laboratories of ideas,” think tanks have attracted a growing attention from scholars as they are increasingly visible in the public space. They have often been studied within a national framework, without a single universal definition. The term tends to be used to describe formally autonomous organizations that produce political expertise, particularly in the field of public policy, aimed at policy-makers and at the general public (Stone, 1996). Studies on think tanks have emphasized their role as disseminators who “move ideas into politics” (Stone, 1996, p. 1). However, their relations with public authorities, with the academic field and with the media (including the European media) vary and deserve analysis on a case-by-case basis. The same applies to the uses of the term “think tank”, which involve strategies of positioning and of legitimization.

When it comes to European think tanks, adopting a narrow definition means leaving out several organizations that could be considered as part of this category due to their practices. On the other hand, opting for a broad definition would entail extending the category with virtually no bounds. The study of European think tanks indeed raises two main issues: that of the definition of a think tank, and that of the perimeter of what is considered “European”. Three main options to address these issues can be identified. Under a restrictive definition, a European think tank is a Brussels-based analysis centre working almost exclusively on EU policy. A broader definition would include research organizations that work for the most part on European matters without being necessarily based in Brussels. Using an extensive definition, any think tank operating in a European country may be considered as a European think tank.

Listings of European think tanks include organisations from all three categories – especially from the first and second. These listings, which contain between a few dozen and several hundred names, include both research organizations specialized in the analysis of EU public policy that have sometimes been active for decades and more or less long-standing national or European foundations that often have ties with a political movement. Although they claim to be independent, these bodies are sometimes funded by public money, like research laboratories affiliated to higher education and research institutions.

Studies on European think tanks have included in this category analysis and consulting centres that are internal organizations of public institutions, such as the Group of Policy Advisers (GPA), which in 2006 became the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), a department of the European Commission working under the direct authority of the President whose priority is “connecting Commission policy-makers with those parts of society that can fruitfully contribute to the development of policies of the Commission”.

Three categories of Brussels-based think tanks have been singled out (Ullrich, 2004). The first is composed of organizations that generate ideas such as the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), created in 1983; the second includes policy-oriented groups such as the European Policy Centre (EPC) launched in 1997; and the third is made up of bodies

concerned with furthering debate, such as Friends of Europe, which exists since 1999. It can be argued, however, that these classifications might be overly rigid and detrimental to a clear view of the sector. Indeed, some groups are positioned at the intersection of several categories: in 2013, 37% of the budget of the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) came from projects funded by the European Commission, and the think tank's production could in some cases have contributed to shaping the orientation of EU public policies. Another problem lies in the fact that it is very difficult to say if and to what extent the reports and recommendations produced by think tanks are actually taken into account by policy-makers.

In line with the increasing popularity of international quantification and comparison, international rankings have been developed to evaluate the influence of think tanks like the annual Global Go-To Think Tanks Report published by the University of Pennsylvania. They contribute to promoting think tanks and strengthening a general public awareness of their value. According to the Global Go-To Think Tanks Report, several Brussels-based groups rank among the top 20 most influent non-US think tanks worldwide in 2012: Bruegel, which is specialized in the analysis of UE economic policies (2<sup>nd</sup>), the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), but also the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), the French *Institut français des relations internationales* (IFRI), as well as the Adenauer and Ebert German political foundations. The report is based on the opinions given by experts, journalists, think tank leaders and academics. Among the think tanks based in EU member countries that work for the most part on EU policies and are influent in the media, one can mention the UK-based European Policy Forum and Centre for European Reform and the German *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP) and *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* (DGAP), which are known for their analyses on international issues. Some of these organizations owe their visibility to the notoriety and political and social capital of their founders, like Jacques Delors, the former President of the European Commission, who founded *Notre Europe* in 1996, or Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who launched Atomium Culture in 2009.

As in the US, European think tanks are situated in an “interstitial field” (Medvetz, 2012) between academia, politics, the market and the media. Far from remaining only independent centres that propose analysis and forecasts, they employ staffers who have, for the most part, high academic qualifications – often PhDs and past work experience in different sectors. Some of them go on to pursue an academic or institutional career (at national or EU level), or even undertake a political career. The trajectory of Sylvie Goulard exemplifies this track: a graduate of the Institute of Political Science (Sciences Po) of Paris and of the French National Administration School (ENA) she worked successively in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the CERI research team of Sciences Po before being elected as MEP in 2009 under the banner of the centrist party MoDem. Likewise, the sociologist Lena Kolarska-Bobinska, who was trained in Poland and the US, worked originally in the Polish Academy of Sciences as the director of a major centre for public opinion analysis and then in 1997 as the director of one of the most prominent Polish think tanks, the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP); in 2009, she was elected as MEP and in 2013 appointed as Minister of Higher Education and Research. Conversely, many members and former members of EU institutions seek to increase their notoriety by joining think tanks. Examples include Friends of Europe, which is led by the former Vice President of the Commission Etienne Davignon, and whose Praesidium includes personalities such as Pat Cox, Jean-Luc Dehaene, Giuliano Amato (both former Vice Presidents of the Convention on the Future of Europe), Pascal Lamy, Michel Barnier and Mario Monti. The presence of former leaders of the Commission and of the European

Parliament shows that it is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between the institutional space and the think tanks.

Through their positioning as centres of expertise on EU-related issues, think tanks serve first and foremost their own cause and that of their founders. Having become essential auxiliaries of the EU's political space, they can be described as European entrepreneurs, as their analyses, their syntheses, their reform proposals and their dissemination of institutional messages all contribute to the social construction of the European agenda.

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**Related entries:** Commissioners (EU), European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), Expert groups, Independence, Journalists, Lobbyists, Political advisers, Political foundations, Professionals of Europe, Researchers

**Index rerum:** Circulation of actors, Consulting, Expertise

**Index of names:** AMATO Giuliano, COX Pat, BARNIER Michel, DAVIGNON Etienne, DEHAENE Jean-Luc, DELORS Jacques, GISCARD D'ESTAING Valéry, GOULARD Sylvie, KOLARSKA-BOBINSKA Lena, LAMY Pascal, MONTI Mario

## WEBSITES

<http://gotothinktank.com/rankings/>

<http://www.rpfFrance.eu/Annuaire-des-think-tanks-et.html>