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► **To cite this version:**

Vardan Atoyan. Armenian think tanks are facing old and new challenges. On Think Tanks, 2022.  
hal-03736869

**HAL Id: hal-03736869**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03736869v1>**

Submitted on 22 Jul 2022

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# ARMENIAN THINK TANKS ARE FACING OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

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## **ARTICLE INFO**

Author: Vardan Atoyan

Published online: July 22, 2022

Publisher: On Think Tanks

Source: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/armenian-think-tanks-are-facing-old-and-new-challenges/>

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### **Keywords:**

Think Tanks, Armenia, Public Policy,  
Research Institutions, Expert Community

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article discusses some issues and challenges, as well as recent developments in the sector of Armenian think tanks. Based on the analysis, it is proposed to form a more favorable environment, political culture and develop legal mechanisms for the development of the sphere and the disclosure of the potential of think tanks, to activate the connection between the government, the expert community and society, which can serve as an ‘Ariadne’s Thread to improve the situation for think tanks, evidence-informed policymaking, and to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy.

Four and a half years have passed since I published the article ‘[Are Armenian political elites opening up to think tanks?](#)’ on the OTT platform [2].

From a historical point of view, four years isn’t long. But in Armenia, these four years were full of dramatic and turbulent events: the change of government in spring 2018, COVID-19, the 44-day war in Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2020 and the subsequent internal political turmoil, growing external threats to Armenia’s security, the list goes on.

All this has inevitably impacted the sphere of think tanks in Armenia and its development.

An in-depth assessment of each of these factors and their impact on the country and the think tank sector is needed. As a starting point, I will simply try to outline some of the most pressing characteristics and issues, and how they are impacting the development of think tanks in Armenia.

### **State-think tank cooperation: remains weak**

In the second half of 2018, the new government closed the Noravank Foundation – a well-established government-affiliated think tank with a history of almost two decades, that had made a significant contribution to the development of Armenia’s think tank culture. The Government justified the closure as being about ‘optimisation’ of resources.

Months later, with the participation of foreign and Armenian experts and the country’s political elite, the government established the Orbeli Center. There was a large opening ceremony at which the President and Prime Minister of Armenia delivered speeches.

Many former experts from Noravank were hired and the Orbeli Center [announced](#) ambitious goals [4]. Indeed, in the first two years of activity the Center was quite active. However, the number of experts was subsequently significantly reduced. Activity gradually decreased too (evident from the frequency of website postings and updates).

Unfortunately, the tradition of forming political party affiliated think tanks has not yet been established in Armenia, which, especially for a country with a parliamentary government system, could play a significant role in developing political discourse and improving public policy. Most Armenian think tanks are independent institutions. There are some university affiliated think tanks, institutions

operating under the National Academy of Sciences. The aforementioned Orbeli Center is the only government affiliated think tank.

Similarly, the revolving door principle seen in many countries is hardly practiced in Armenia. Since the restoration of Armenia's independence three decades ago, there have been a very limited number of cases where a think tank representative or expert has been appointed to a high position in the government.

When it comes to state-think tank cooperation, I have observed no visible changes.

### **Policy influence: some good examples, but limited leverage and opportunity**

The [influence](#) of Armenian think tanks on public policy, society and decision-makers is not clear [3]. Think tanks in Armenia have traditionally had limited leverage and opportunities to convey their views and opinions to the political elite. At present, I see no tangible positive changes in this regard either.

There are some positive examples of think tanks trying to bridge this gap through different activities. A few stand out institutions include:

- [Caucasus Institute](#) – publishing regular studies of public interest.
- [Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia](#) (CRRC-Armenia) – for almost two decades it has published an annual Caucasus Barometer public opinion survey, providing information on public perceptions of social, political, and economic developments in the South Caucasus [5].
- [“Enlight” Public Research Center](#) – comprising many young analysts.

Another example is the [AMBERD](#) research centre at the Armenian State University of Economics. Since 2013, it has had institutionalised cooperation with various legislative and executive bodies. Its research products and experts have tried to contribute to public policy improvements through the development of draft laws and strategic documents.

However, it should be noted that in the AMBERD example, the initiative came mostly from the think tank – not from the state. As described above, state-think tank cooperation is weak at best. And this is a big stumbling block for effectively bridging the knowledge-policy gap, across sectors.

### **Funding: a persistent problem with high dependence on foreign funding**

According to a recent [study](#), there are currently more than 30 think tanks or similar institutions in Armenia [1]. However, many of these are not active. Few institutes have more than a dozen experts, and some only have one or two.

There are many cases in which newly established think tanks becomes inactive or cease to function after a short time.

This is often due to lack, or instability, of financial inflows.

Armenia has not developed favorable conditions and mechanisms for the financing of think tanks. The traditions of philanthropy are weak in the field and domestic research orders and the opportunities for grants are also very limited.

Under such circumstances, Armenia's primarily independent think tanks continue to be heavily dependent on foreign funding sources. This is highly undesirable in terms of financial stability, financial diversification, and the freedom to set one's research agenda. External dependence also forces the best interests of foreign donors.

We need a study of both decision maker and the public's trust in and perception of think tanks in Armenia. In addition to purely academic interest, this could help assess attitudes towards the field and work out further steps to improve it.

### **The future: with crisis comes opportunity**

The issues facing think tanks in Armenia are not limited to the above-mentioned. There are also issues in ensuring sufficient transparency, public recognition by decision-makers, insufficient use of PR tools or working with the media, and many more.

The activation and growth of the think tank sector spurred on by economic growth and democratisation in the first two decades of the 21st century has slowed down considerably.

Nevertheless, any crisis is not only a challenge but also a new opportunity.

Following the turbulent political processes of spring 2018, the new political leadership announced new

approaches to domestic and foreign policy and to various spheres of public and economic policy, as well as a new political culture and vision for the country's future.

Taking advantage of the opportunities brought on by a crisis requires professionalism and an accurate diagnosis of the situation.

While we need a more in-depth evaluation of these changes and their impact on the country and the think tank sector, in general, I have seen no positive changes over the last four years. And in some cases, problems have worsened.

It is necessary to reconsider Armenia's approach to knowledge, expertise, and think tanks.

In particular, there is a need to develop more favorable conditions, legal mechanisms, political culture and opportunities for the development of think tanks, activating dialogue and links between government, think tanks, business and society. This can become the '[Ariadne's thread](#)', to improve the situation for think tanks, evidence-informed policymaking, and to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy.

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