SOME MUSINGS ON DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT POLICY MAKING AND THINK TANKING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE*

Goran BULDIOSKI,
Program Director, Think Tank Fund,
Open Society Institute (Budapest)

How many swallows are needed to bring spring
…and how many independent policy centers a country needs.

One swallow does not bring spring – is a common saying in my native Macedonia. Using the symbolism of these migrant birds portending spring, people point at particular, often isolated or pre-matured, efforts of individuals or groups. Skeptics, as people very often are in the Europe's south, usually imply that those efforts are destined to failure despite the positive intentions of their initiators. People, policy makers including, exercising their "common wisdom" unfortunately do not go further and ask "how many swallows would actually bring spring"?

In the following text, I attempt, using the same symbols, to make a parallel between swallows bringing spring and independent think tanks galvanizing inclusive policy-making. These are brief reflections to broader issues of think tanking (and policy-making) as they stand in the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe today – some 15 years after the creation of the first independent think tanks.

Role of think tanks in Eastern Europe

In the beginning of the 1990s, policy research was far from being unknown in the region. On the contrary, each of the post-communist countries boasted big and influential research institutes under the auspices of different Ministries, state Universities, Military and Security organs. Yet, when they appeared, independent policy think tanks were a novelty throughout the entire region. Optimists applauded to the creation of the new organizations as they marked departure from the dogmatic and state controlled institutes. Others supported the idea because of the promise to include stakeholders, to provide accurate and relevant statistical data, and finally to offer realistic interpretation that would enable policy makers to base their decisions on sound advices. For some key opinion makers in the region, the emergence of credible policy research and advice meant resurrection or creation of political debate based on facts and policy alternatives rather than revolving about individuals. In some countries these centers were among the few credible sources of impartial surveys and statistics.

Nevertheless, there were a great number of pessimists and skeptics. They saw the intellectual elite creating new heavens for their own well-being. Others

* The opinions and views expressed herein are solely those of the author. They do not represent those of the Think Tank Fund and any other network program of the Open Society Institute.

Goran Buldioski manages the regional Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Institute. The Fund, based in Budapest, provides core and institutional support to think tanks in South East Europe, Moldova, Ukraine and South Caucasus. The Fund has recently launched a special support for Open Society New Response Policy Projects in the ten CEE countries that are EU members. More information about the fund at *http://www.soros.org/initiatives/hrggp/think*

criticized the "Americans" for exporting their own model and finding another way to influence the politics in fragile democracies. The third group protested that the state lost its apparatus to perform credible and relevant research and saw a risk in outsourcing these activities to non-profit organizations. Some of the later looked for examples in Western European countries. Following these examples they suggested similar models that link the think tanking with political parties rather then developing and nurturing independent policy research centers. Finally, there were people with more entrepreneurial spirit, who were neither optimists nor pessimist. They simply saw a great need for policy analysis and creation[1]. Instead of opening market-oriented consultancies, they opened NGOs because they were the right vehicle for declaring neutrality against the partisan politics and for attracting the myriad of donors arriving in their countries.

Manifold circumstances shaped the developments of think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe in the past decade and a half[2]. Low demand and small size of the market for "policy research", development of civil society, the dilemma to develop policy alternative or to manage policy processes, working with international organizations and donors, maturity (or immaturity) of policy makers to render and understand quality policy advice, criticizing and/or cooperating with the government are only few of the most important circumstances.

The initial low demand and the small size of the policy markets (at least in most of the countries) was one of the decisive factors for how think tanks have developed. Organizations that initially focused on one theme and deepened their expertise on one subject very quickly faced some paramount sustainability problems[3]. Pressed by lack of work and limited funding, many of these institutes diversified their portfolio; some of them stayed focused on one area but traded it for their independence by becoming dependent on political parties, ministries or individual politicians. Hence, in most CEE countries we find today a steady number of independent multi prong centers and few specialized one-theme policy institutes. The later most often have direct links or function under the auspices of governmental or political party structure.

The non-profit economic think tanks were special phenomena that did not follow this pattern. Using the booming markets, interest in their policy products and unquestionable and generous support of donors, economic think tanks mushroomed and thrived throughout the entire region. Their competitive advantage was based on the consensus built about the necessity of economic development and the imminent need to improve regulation and infrastructure to facilitate this development. Today, the most developed think tanks in the region, with one or two exceptions have strong economic units. Of course, few of those centers turned into consultancies, almost a regular challenge and occurrence with the independent economic think tanks.

Many think tanks immediately engaged in the development of civil society in their countries. Some of them became the most qualified and loudest voice to promote civil society and open society values. Lead by eminent intellectuals these think tanks at the beginning were heard and listened by policy makers. This feeling of belonging to the civil society sector shaped the set of values on which these think tanks were created. Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria provide a numerous of fine examples of such think tanks. In the three countries mentioned above, one can freely claim that these think tanks have been the critical thinkers and conveyers of public debate that prevailed even in the most difficult moments and led these countries to EU membership. Today, they all have a very solid unit for political analysis and solid advocacy arm.

Gaining credibility and respect in the intellectual community and with policy makers was one of the most challenging tasks for newly created policy centers. In CEE, becoming "an expert" is a very tiresome and challenging task. Many young researchers and centers they created became modern Sisyphus-es in their attempts to become recognized as credible experts on a given subject. Another idiosyncrasy is that the process of "losing an expert status" is equally slow. Throughout the regions, there are many "experts – usual suspects" in a number of disciplines who are consulted due to their status and past achievements. Unfortunately, for some of them their reputation and status is the only credible thing left, because they have not updated themselves and are far from the modern thinkers one would expect policy analysts to be. This is another difficulty for the second wave of policy makers emerging in the last 5-6 years to step in the limelight more prominently. But it is happening. The experts and the dissidents of the 1990s, those who did not refresh their ideas in the past 10 years, are slowly being replaced. New centers emerged in Moldova, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Romania and several other countries. They nurture bolder, more innovative and more pragmatic approach to policy research.

Confronted with the difficulty to be recognized as experts and the small size of policy markets, independent think tanks were faced with the choice either to continue the strive to be recognized as experts in given subjects or to become experts of policy processes. Some centers realizing the limited expertise available in their countries on many subjects and impossibility to hire the well-known experts on permanent basis specialized in managing policy processes. The later development has brought one more advantage – increase of the efficiency of this work and optimization of use of domestic expertise. In other words, by proper managing entire policy cycles, these centers succeeded to squeeze the best and most constructive knowledge from individual experts, mediate it with the policy makers and finally instigate policy changes.

Working with international organizations and donors was another decisive factor that shaped the development of

[1] Policy process – a process of policy (policies) development, which covers six stages starting from problem formulation and till implemetation of political decision and problem solving.

[2] Some of these challenges and experiences are documented in Thinking the Unthinkable: From Thought to Policy. The role of think tanks in shaping government strategy. Experiences from Central and Eastern Europe, UNDP Publication ISBN 92-1-126156-2.

[3] Most often single-issue think tanks address the following subjects: education, health issues, environment, foreign policy and security issues.

policy centers. *First*, the policy centers automatically have to apply higher standards for their policy work than the local ones. *Second*, they had to provide policy products for seasoned policy makers who would not take any advice or policy paper. A lot of local researchers and policy analysts coupled up with foreign policy centers and learned higher standards for research and organization of the policy process. The country membership in different international organizations such as Council of Europe, OSCE, NATO, European Union, the World Trade Organization gave ample opportunities for development of independent policy centers. Most of them snatched these opportunity and became leading experts in explaining / analyzing these membership processes. On the other hand, in less developed democracies, the "international community" became the first and unfortunately the only recipient of the policy advice given by think tanks. In the positive case scenario, the internationals have further channeled these advices to the national government and policy makers. In the negative case, great numbers of studies, books and surveys have been shelved in the numerous offices of international organizations and embassies throughout the region.

Immaturity of policy makers and their low ability to render and understand quality policy advice is the last condition that shaped the still shapes policy making in the entire region. This is stark difference with the think tank scenes in developed democracies, where evidence based research and ongoing dialogue between the different stakeholders in political, social and economic processes are standard. This condition forces policy centers to be educators of the civil servants and high-ranking officials in parallel to engendering policy products.

I can continue this list of different factors and patterns of development of the policy institutes in the region, well beyond the scope of this article. Undoubtedly, independent think tanks have become important players in many policy areas in Central and Eastern Europe. They have become credible collaborators of international organizations and slowly but surely are becoming an indispensable adviser to policy makers. Regardless of their type, the independent policy centers have promoted a participatory and open policy process, crucial for development of accountable and transparent governing. This is more the case in the new EU members and is becoming a pattern in countries that have only one alternative – membership in European Union.

Role of independent think tanks in the former USSR countries

It is much more difficult to pitch the role and assess the importance of think tanks in the countries of the former Soviet Union[4]. *First*, these countries do not have single path for their future development, influenced by the western world and Russian Federation simultaneously. *Second*, the local well-entrenched political elites have little incentives or pressure to open the policy processes. There is also limited independence of media and open space for policy discussions, which hinders the work of think tanks that need these spaces to stimulate public debate. Public is also not the most active and easiest to be involved in such processes. Finally, given that most of their funds still come from western donors or international organizations think tanks are at risk to be labeled as "western agents".

It is to think tanks to discover the fine balance of staying relevant and useful in these conditions. While there is no recipe how one can achieve this, **the existing think tank in the east, Ukraine included, are the best instrument for promotion of participative policy-making.** In my opinion, the promotional role is most important because it paves the road for the entire sector to finds its place in the policy processes. The promotion of the participatory process includes not only education of the public but adequate training for civil servants and politicians. More these people understand the policy processes, more open they will be to participate in one. Second, equally important role, is **producing and sharing know how**. The think tanks provide data, analysis and policy alternatives as no one else in these countries. These organizations should keep this feature and further develop their intrinsic thematic expertise. Third and final role of the think task is to be **training ground for new graduates**. These organizations are best placed to breed new generations of policy makers, analysts and thinkers.

Scrutinizing Ukrainian policy reality, there is an evident need to support more teams of young researchers. This capacity building could take place within the existing think tanks, but also out of them. At the expense of initial beginner's mistakes, young and talented researchers should be encouraged to think and suggest policy alternatives in different ways than their older colleagues. The capacity building activities in South East Europe of European Stability Initiative[5] offer one example of less conventional program that rendered great results.

The main challenges faced by think tanks in the countries of Eastern Europe

What is the raison d'etre of a think tank? Who are its primary constituencies: politicians, media, other experts, public, state institutions, international donors or political parties?

Many think tanks, regardless of the millions they turn over or pars achievements, leave these questions unanswered. In addition, they are not trivial. "Benefit for the country" and "balance of all stakeholders" are possible rushed answers. It is crucially important for a think tank to take time regularly and clearly answer these questions. A cursory search of the web sites of the different think tanks in the region reveals interesting observations. How many of them include vision where they would like to see their countries 10 years from now? How many have clear vision where they would like their center to be in five years from now? How many of them do studies that are outside the donor's priorities?

As a representative of a donor agency, I frequently confront the following questions "What do you want? Which themes should we work on to please you and get funding?" Whenever I hear these questions, I cannot help asking myself if there is any difference between a public policy center without vision and agenda, and a consultancy firm.

[4] Hereinafter observations are provided with respect to the former USSR countries, based on the experience of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Think tanks in Russian Federation, Belarus and independent countries in Central Asia are not part of the discussion in this text.

[5] For more detailed information see www.esiweb.org

Independence of think tanks.

Think tanks can be non-partisan, but they cannot be apolitical. This definitely makes it prone to attacks of love and hate by political parties, Government, state institutions and others who would be praised/criticized for some policies. The independence of think tanks turns to be art of survival and preservation of identity. Luckily, there are a still a great number of active donors, government sources, public, media, individuals and other potential "clients" ready to pay for policy products. Even in their best days, think tanks should preserve balance between funds and influences they receive. The clearer their own agenda is, the easier it will be to resist unwanted influences.

Policy process: Behind closed doors or open to public – and how it affects the image of think tanks

Policy makers still keep some policies and their development behind closed doors far away from public eye. Some key-experts and think tanks have access to these processes and top politicians very often consult them. While this practice is not necessarily wrong, the think tanks should reflect about their overall image. Does the rest of the work, which by default should be open to and for the benefit of the public, suffer? Does this proximity to some politicians jeopardize the overall image of the think tank? Is the main influence of a think tank limited to influencing political advisers or top politicians? If not, what is the qualitative difference of the policy advice produced by a think tank and those whispered in a politician's ear?

Managing policy research and processes or doing policy research with in-house capacity

This is the ongoing doubt of many think tanks, especially those who operate is small policy market. It is two-edge sword. On one hand, think tanks cannot develop in-house expertise for many subjects as quickly as the market demands, while they can successfully manage different outside experts. On the other hand, those think tanks that have in-house expertise are more appreciated and respected in the region. Some try to balance these two functions and in some areas are providers of top policy research and advice, while in others just conveyers and managers of policy processes.

Differences within the region

Throughout the region, there are stark differences in the political realities and the environment the think tanks operate.

(*a*) **New EU member states**: in these countries, the main challenge is staying relevant in the national context of policy making. EU funds are welcome and accessible but still not relevant for issues of short-term national interest. The independent policy centers along with university research teams get involved into challenging research on issues related to the agenda. They however while being preoccupied with EU related work become distant from their national public. In other words, they pay a certain price for securing their financial stability with EU funding and partly loosing the relevance in their own country.

(*b*) **Western Balkans**: EU Candidate's member countries and those who signed Stabilization and Association Agreement with EU have clear overarching policy framework: the EU accession. In this process, the policy centers have plenty opportunities to engage in the vast work preceding the accession. They however have to make themselves heard among many voices. Their policy advice moreover should be on the cutting edge and stick out. The national policy centers very often compete with other national and international think tanks who pronounce themselves on the same issues. Given the (partly) technical nature of the accession process, not becoming part of the hordes of consultants is another challenge for independent public policy centers.

(*c*) **Former Soviet Union**: for different reasons, the active centers work in tougher conditions where the space for inclusive policy making is shrinking by the hour. In some countries, the policy research tries to feed in and spice up the internal debates between the fractions or interest groups in the ruling political party and business elite. In others, the centers attempt to be constructive partner to the government neglecting the numerous deficiencies in how government deals with policy process.

Ukraine is a special example. The political struggle is so big that it consumes most of the space for policy making. When there is a battle without scruples, it is hard for an independent policy center to make itself heard by promoting evidence based research and facts. It is sufficiently strenuous to juggle between different political options and yet to be taken as a constructive partner.

The number of swallows is not always a decisive factor

So how many think tanks are necessary for having a healthy policy scene and participative policy making? "How many swallows bring spring?" It is not only how many. It is more how much impact they will be able to make. Romania and Bulgaria offer a good example for those looking for a starting point. The independent policy centers in these two countries were substantial and credible stakeholders on the road to EU accession. These examples are far from prescriptions for ready-made solutions. They just offer an idea how to build up a meaningful think tank scene. The sorts of questions I raise in this text have to be answered by every think tank separately. Their leaders need to be aware not only about the environment in which they operate, but also about the existing alternatives and positive examples in other countries.

I expect think tanks to approach to their development in a similar fashion as they (should) approach policy research. On the road of their internal development and sustainability, they should be (*a*) evidence based, (*b*) participative including their stakeholders, (*c*) aware of different alternatives, (*d*) clear about the cost-effectiveness of each alternative and (*e*) courageous in their decisions.

Should they develop according to these lines, it is likely the governments will be left with two choices: (1) to acknowledge them as credible partners or (2) recognize them as serious opponents. Either of the two will "bring the spring" and galvanize inclusive policy making. Groups with such "recognition" will be neither isolated nor pre-matured. The efforts of these individuals and groups will yield positive results. Eventually, the number of swallows is not always a decisive factor. ■