

## ОБЩЕСТВО И ПОЛИТИКА SOCIETY AND POLITICS

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### The Role of Think Tanks in Shaping European Policies

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**Abstract.** *Think tanks are key players in European politics; they play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making by government and political leaders. Think tanks are independent research centers that analyze socio-economic, political and cultural issues. Such organizations conduct research and publish reports and recommendations that help the government and other stakeholders make informed decisions. This article explores the role of such organizations in shaping European policy. The novelty of the study is a comprehensive review of the theoretical approaches to assessing the performance of think tanks, the study itself is based on domestic and foreign studies, as well as sources related to the activities of think tanks. There are many think tanks in Europe that specialize in different areas such as the economy, international relations, security, the environment, etc. Expert communities work both as independent organizations funded by private donors and as part of state institutions. The role of think tanks in European politics is that they provide government and political leaders with independent and objective information that helps them make informed decisions. Expert centers also serve as a bridge between the academic community and political circles, ensuring the exchange of knowledge and experience. Think tanks also play an important role in shaping public opinion. Such organizations conduct research and publish reports that help people better understand complex issues and make informed decisions. These communities also influence the media by providing expert commentary and interviews. Some think tanks have an agenda and are able to influence government and political leaders. Think tanks may advocate for certain policy reforms or oppose certain bills. However, most think tanks try to remain independent and objective. Think tanks also play an important role in international politics. These institutions conduct research and influence decision-making at both the domestic and supranational levels. As the results of the study we can conclude that think tanks play an important role in*

*European politics by providing independent and objective information, shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making. Such organizations are an essential tool for governments and political leaders seeking to make informed and effective decisions. Their activities and the prospects for using their results in the development and implementation of various policy initiatives are assessed.*

**Keywords:** think tanks; expert groups; European Union; European policy; state

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## Роль экспертных центров в формировании Европейской политики

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**Аннотация.** *Think tanks (или «мозговые центры», экспертные сообщества, экспертные центры) являются ключевыми игроками в европейской политике, они играют важную роль в формировании общественного мнения и влияют на принятие решений правительством и политическими лидерами. Think tanks представляют собой независимые исследовательские центры, которые занимаются анализом социально-экономических, политических и культурных проблем. Подобные организации проводят исследования, публикуют отчеты и рекомендации, которые помогают правительству и другим заинтересованным сторонам принимать обоснованные решения. В данной статье исследуется роль подобных организаций в формировании европейской политики. Новизна исследования заключается в комплексном обзоре теоретических подходов к оценке деятельности think tanks, само исследование проведено на основе отечественных и зарубежных исследований, а также источников, касающихся деятельности think tanks. В Европе существует множество think tanks, которые специализируются на различных областях, таких как экономика, международные отношения, безопасность, окружающая среда и т.д. экспертные сообщества работают как независимые организации, финансируемые частными донорами, так и как часть государственных институтов. Роль think tanks в европейской политике заключается в том, что они предоставляют правительству и политическим лидерам*

независимую и объективную информацию, которая помогает им принимать обоснованные решения. Экспертные центры также служат мостом между академическим сообществом и политическими кругами, обеспечивая обмен знаниями и опытом. Think tanks также играют важную роль в формировании общественного мнения. Подобные организации проводят исследования и публикуют отчеты, которые помогают людям лучше понимать сложные проблемы и принимать информированные решения. Рассматриваемые сообщества также оказывают влияние на медиа, предоставляя экспертные комментарии и интервью. Некоторые think tanks имеют свою повестку и способны влиять на правительство и политических лидеров. Think tanks могут выступать за определенные политические реформы или против определенных законопроектов. Однако большинство think tanks стараются оставаться независимыми и объективными. Think tanks также играют важную роль в международной политике. Подобные учреждения проводят исследования и оказывают влияние на принятие решений как на внутригосударственном, так и на надгосударственном уровне. В качестве результатов исследования можно заключить, что think tanks играют важную роль в европейской политике, предоставляя независимую и объективную информацию, формируя общественное мнение и оказывая влияние на принятие решений. Подобные организации являются необходимым инструментом для правительства и политических лидеров, которые стремятся принимать обоснованные и эффективные решения. Дана оценка их деятельности и перспективы использования результатов их работе при разработке и исполнении различных политических инициатив.

**Ключевые слова:** think tanks; экспертные сообщества; Европейский союз; Европейская политика; государство

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## ***Introduction***

It is commonly known that dealing with domestic and foreign policy of a specific state requires a rather comprehensive approach, referring to a variety of mutually dependent factors of life. Thus, sometimes government leaders and authorities might make significant decisions, using the potential and data base of so-called think tanks – analytical institutions which carry out relevant research and provide reliable knowledge on such topics as foreign affairs, economics, politics, environment, etc. Most of think tanks, or previously “brain trust”, function with the aim to study a particular issue and propose possible solutions, as well as consulting different authority groups.

Many experts find the leading research centers are more or less engaged in the decision-making process as regard to the EU foreign and domestic policies. Besides, the think tanks have been always proposed such ideas as the European integration has been had.

The modern think tanks are known for the great variety of their functions and work outcome, however, the key ones are the following: innovative, communicative, representative, indicative, controlling, according to Makarychev [1].

Although there is a significant number of the research institutions which operate in France, UK, Germany, Sweden, the most recognized and high-level think tanks can be found mostly in the institutional heart of the European Union, Brussels. Among them, there are some think tanks emerged to study Europe particularly, providing research for regional authorities and governments as a whole. Those can be “the Center for European Reforms” or “the Center for European Political Studies”.

According to Kelstrup, think tanks make a special contribution to policy innovation. The author supposes that a lot of its staff, researchers and consultants, are absolutely irreplaceable members, especially when it comes to offering sustainable and future-oriented alternatives for decision-makers [2].

On top of that, one should not forget that currently think tanks are also described as an important part of civil society, while contributing a lot to the EU liberalization process itself. That is why some are convinced that think tanks might play a key role in the process of European integration, as well as the formulation of the EU policy and the promotion of democratic development too.

Based on recent events, it could be noticed that European leaders and politicians often resort to the help of numerous non-governmental institutions in order not only to consider the problem of the migration crisis from a different angle, but also to receive up-to-date information and data from various non-profit organizations, international institutions, civil societies and foundations, some of which are analytical or think tanks, better known in foreign literature as "think tanks" (literally from the English "reservoir of thought") [3].

At the same time, continuing the topic of defining think tanks, it also can be characterized as institutions (many of which operate on the basis of universities) which are engaged in the provision of analytical, predictive and consulting services and the creation of highly qualified products of mental work (analytical reports, articles, graphic materials, maps, proposals), mainly in the

field of politics or economics. Most domestic specialists distinguish university, corporate, public and private think tanks [4]. Meanwhile, a majority of its experts of these organizations are rarely members of various government circles, which reduces the possibility of direct influence on decision-making by the ruling elite.

Unlike other research institutes, think tanks are mainly focused on the practical application of research results and the dissemination and introduction of new knowledge among decision makers. In addition, their activities are interdisciplinary in nature, and the intellectual products themselves are focused on specific management decisions.

For instance, think tanks in Europe help to develop such areas of migration policy as constant remote monitoring the EU borders, cooperation with countries of origin and transit of migrants, observing migration flows and providing local social support for migrants in need in the first moments of their stay within a new country.

In addition, think tanks can work at the regional, national or international level. They also often differ in scale and specialization – from an organization of several people to an international network of branches and representative offices on different continents and from a narrowly sectoral focus to universal analytical centers whose activities cover all possible areas of social, economic, behavioral, environmental life of society [5].

According to the Cairney's work, it should be emphasized that the key consumers of the results of the activities of think tanks are decision-makers, among whom may be the heads of the largest enterprises and government organizations in the region, representatives of public organizations, business, politics. An important feature is that the created analytical materials are closed: many think tanks provide products in open access. Thus, their presence in the media and on social platforms is sometimes a mandatory task of the institute, and the experts of the largest analytical centers themselves regularly appear in the media and at open scientific conferences and summits. Therefore, reflecting on the peculiarities of the activities of modern think tanks, it is worth saying that many of them manage to significantly enrich the general information field with high-quality, deeply verified and highly professional content [6].

In addition, it cannot be said that the very way the think tanks in Europe interact with their audience is changing due to technological advances and new

communication means. Thus, as Doberstein claims, social networks are vigorously becoming another communication tool the EU think tanks can use, especially with the new aim to conduct a public survey, getting audience feedback, publishing research data and simply chatting [7].

In addition, it is worth saying that at the present stage, think tanks have received a significant spread in the USA. Thus, the University of Pennsylvania annually compiles the world ranking of analytical centers "Global Go To Think Tank Index Report". In 2016, as part of its compilation, specialists analyzed more than eight thousand analytical centers around the world. It is interesting to emphasize that currently, within the Union, there are more than 2200 such organizations, which are mainly focused on the study of regional problems related to the comprehensive EU development [8].

Although at the end of the 20th century, more than 1,200 think tanks appeared in the United States [9], American analysts suppose that the European think tanks have far less opportunities to participate in the political struggle, because of stronger and less permeable party system and solid bureaucracy [10].

In addition, not so long ago, the project of creating "real-world laboratories" gained popularity in Germany, which was proposed by professors from Baden-Württemberg. It was initiated to create real-world laboratories based especially on universities, with focused on the concept of German sustainable development. To date, the laboratories are actively distributed throughout the lands of Germany, they are "pioneers of changes" in the development policy of the whole country [11].

The major European analytical centers include, for example, the Stockholm Institute for Peace Research, the Brussels Center for European Policy Studies (Centre for European Policy Studies) and the Bruegel Center, whose members are both states and large international corporations and international economic organizations (the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). In Germany, many think tanks have associated companies with the country's largest political parties – the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (CDU), the Heinrich Bell Foundation and others. The following are also among the outstanding think tanks in Europe: the International Institute for Strategic Studies (International Institute for Strategic Studies) in London, the German Institute for International Politics and Security (Deutsches Institut für internationale Politik und

Sicherheit) and the European Union Institute for Security Studies (European Union Institute for Security Studies) in Paris. According to the University of Pennsylvania ranking, these centers have been on the list of the best in the world for several years, especially in the field of military-political and humanitarian security research [12].

However, Wardle believes that the predominance of organizations engaged in policy analysis does not necessarily lead to improved policy-making or effective use of knowledge [13]. He says that, like many other organizations and structures, think tanks face a number of internal problems too. The most serious one might be the lack of funding. Despite the fact that there are many sources of financing – the government, the EU, international foundations – competition among leading and even less popular think tanks is still substantial. Moreover, followed by the wide use of Internet resources and communication technologies accountability, participation and representation in policy research may become more pressing issues for think tank leaders.

### ***Results***

These days, without much exaggeration, it should be born in mind that the expert community and thought factories, as its elements, permanently experience a downfall state. Any expert assessment of the situation or recommendation are tools of influence on the decision-making process in the EU. Therefore, think tanks are constantly dealing with the "temptation" to become an independent expert organization, but in reality, being a lobbying structure, developing policy recommendations and reports for the government that are beneficial only for their sponsors, notes Westermeier [14].

As for the problems that the EU think tanks are dealing with, their range is quite limited. They can focus on the same issues, for example, institutional, economic, security and defense. This allows us to conclude that the activities of think tanks are aimed primarily at a narrow circle of existing decision-making participants in the EU, and not at a wide audience.

Besides, in recent years, think tanks and government agencies have faced an increasingly skeptical audience, struggling with competing fake news and facing a torrent of misinformation on social media. There is also a lack of data evidence that could show the positive impact of the work carried out by analytical centers and inability to measure the outcome in general. Of course, the

audience can compromise the think tanks' credibility, seeing them less reliable and effective.

At the same time, according to Miller and Dinan, analytical centers have huge opportunities that can challenge conventional set of beliefs, develop creative and innovative solutions to complex political problems and eradicate possible misunderstanding between politicians and the society [15].

Here will be presented several cases on think tanks' activities in European policies – both on domestic level of Sweden (as example) and EU-level.

As it happened in the end of December, 2020, the European Commission announced that nuclear and gas will be included in the taxonomy as transitional energy sources and shared a draft Complementary Delegated Act (CDA). This has led to divisions across the EU and has attracted both strong criticism from opponents of nuclear and gas and support from those who believe both are needed as transitional energy sources.

Such conclusions were brought by one of the European think tanks, Member State Expert Group on Sustainable Finance. While the Sustainable Finance Platform itself is a permanent expert group within the European Commission established under Article 20 of the Taxonomy Regulation. It helps the Commission to develop its policy on sustainable finance, including the taxonomy. The Sustainable Finance Platform has six subgroups, including the Technical Working Group that advises the European Commission on the technical screening criteria for the taxonomy.

On that occasion the Sustainable Finance Platform published its response to the proposed criteria for nuclear and gas. The report is highly skeptical of the proposed technical screening criteria and critical of the proposal to include these activities in their current form. The expert group has highlighted imprecise and inconsistent criteria and has criticized the current activities for not being in line with the objectives of the taxonomy.

The Commission highlighted the different challenges related to the transition between Member States and argues that natural gas and nuclear have a role to play in facilitating the transition to a renewable and climate-neutral future in Europe. They argue that the activities covered by the complementary delegated act would "accelerate the phasing out of more harmful sources, such as coal" and help move Europe towards a "more low-carbon and greener energy mix".



Opponents have argued that nuclear and gas should not be included in the green taxonomy, and that allowing these types of activities to be labeled "green" could lead to "green" investments and increased funding for potentially unsustainable projects.

This report recognizes that if the entire economy is to transition to climate neutrality by 2050 and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030, environmental, social, cost and livelihood issues must be taken into account, not just environmental performance. The focus on nuclear and gas as "transition activities" in the draft cooperation agreement implied that these activities would be part of a transforming energy system, not as green activities in their own right [16].

So this is a great example on how peculiar and influential think tanks may be in the policies of European Union.

Another particularly interesting topic is the interaction between state and think tanks, how the first may sponsor the activities of the latter, and how think tanks can heavily criticize state, though suggesting opinion on urgent matters. The first situation is going to be depicted below.

As Swedish government attaches great importance to analysis and research as a basis for the future design of Sweden's international aid some time ago they dispatched a specific think tank for their needs on evaluating and analyzing Sweden's international aid. The Government needs relevant, high-quality data in the form of evaluations, studies, analyses, etc. on the implementation, results and effectiveness of aid in order to make well-founded decisions and develop the management of aid. Such information may also be of interest to the Swedish Parliament, other stakeholders and the general public. It is not a single type of information that is needed, but a combination of several different types. This may involve different types of evaluations, such as process evaluations or impact evaluations. It may also involve short analyses, extensive studies or quality-assured statistics. The government may also need data for several different reasons – sometimes to develop the management of an authority in order to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively, sometimes to reconsider and reform or develop the direction of the policy. The evidence should highlight the factors that contribute to successful aid interventions, but also the factors that do not.

As Swedish government claims, such expertise in development and aid policy issues is often found at universities, among bilateral and multilateral aid

institutions, among actors and organizations and in partner countries. The results of these international analysis and evaluation activities, as well as the corresponding activities conducted in Sweden, should be made more accessible and used to a greater extent to support the Government in its governance and development of aid. There is still a need for an independent basis for the Government's positions. Experience from other policy areas shows the value of having a special forum for meetings between research and policy where a high degree of independence is combined with proximity to decision-making. The Government therefore believes that specialized committees should be established in the form of an expert group for evaluation and analysis of Sweden's international aid. The expert group's working methods should be based on experience from the Expert Group for Studies in Public Economics (ESO). Through its work, the expert group is to contribute to broadening and deepening the basis for continuous development of aid policy.

Typical task for such thin tank working for government are usually the following:

1. commission, procure or otherwise obtain evaluations, analyses and studies of aid implementation, results and effectiveness;
2. analyze and assess this material;
3. compile knowledge reviews based on relevant research, – carry out evaluations, analyses and studies of the implementation, results and effectiveness of aid under its own auspices;
4. establish and maintain contacts especially with international researchers, institutions, organizations, relevant actors in partner countries, etc.;
5. participate in or contribute to donor-wide evaluations of a strategic nature;
6. present lessons learned, draw conclusions and recommend action, so that evaluations, analyses and studies can be used to a greater extent to support the government in its management and further development of aid;
7. work actively to disseminate the results of the reports it publishes and arrange open seminars, conferences, etc.

Of course, the government of Sweden should monitor the group's activity, but this all can give us a vivid concept of the role of think tank in state's affairs [17].

But relations between state and think tanks may vary, as we may experience from the interaction between Concord Sverige and representative of state, Stefan Löfven, as they condemn the latter for mishaps in governmental actions and even make specific demands (which is typical for such groups. As they are sophisticated and try to obtain the most precise result possible, which include suggestions of ways to fix the existing problem.

As the organization analyzes Swedish policy they were able to experience a reversal in it, which is mainly manifested in the law that makes temporary residence permits the norm and has removed the right to family reunification for the vast majority of those granted protection in Sweden. In the open letter, the organization urged Sweden to work for the UN and the global community in order to:

1. Defend the right to asylum and ensure that refugees' rights are respected and comply with international human rights conventions and international humanitarian law covering all people, including migrants and internally displaced persons, regardless of their status.

2. Promote more safe and legal pathways for refugees to reach safe countries, for example by increasing the number of quota refugees, using humanitarian visas, expanding family reunification opportunities, and working to increase the mobility of migrants.

3. Ensure that all children, regardless of their status, have their rights fulfilled and access to health, education and basic social services as well as the right to their family through family reunification.

4. Ensure that women and girls, regardless of status and age, enjoy their rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, access to sexual and reproductive health services, contraception and safe abortion. Women and girls should also have the opportunity to influence and participate in local committees and councils in refugee camps and shelters where they exist.

5. Take joint and shared responsibility for ensuring the rights of refugees and providing the protection to which all asylum seekers are entitled, through a concrete plan with associated funding and follow-up mechanisms.

Though there were now specific results achieved by that particular activity, the level of openness, devotion to the goals and willingness to pursue its objectives should be perceived as major advantage of cooperation between thin tanks and state [18].

### ***Conclusion***

Considering everything mentioned above it can be argued that European analytical centers is one of the best and safest way for an NGO to function. At least it constitutes no direct provocations and since no physical actions were performed, there is less possibility of being pursued or banned, especially if you work directly with the authorities. As it is definitely lets NGOs stay within legal boundaries, at the same time making an impact. Though it also should be said that their opinion sometimes is put aside for the sake of state's own agenda or for a variety of other different reasons. Decision-making figures and institutions sometimes fairly, sometimes not, view data provided by these think tanks as something unequal to their efforts or unreliable. This may lead to a serious loss of credibility of such centers as at many times no direct implementation of their activities is being conducted.

Undeniably, the EU think tanks have the potential to serve as a constantly working reservoir for finding possible solutions and positive changes to the global community. There is why think tanks as analytical centers play a crucial role in the analysis development and promotion of political decisions, especially in times of extreme crisis and instability in Europe. However, these institutions currently function within information-rich societies where figures, statistics, and credible research can be sometimes neglected or distrusted, as well as misinformation can spread too.

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