



**Think Tanks at a Crossroad: Shifting Paradigms and Policy
Dilemmas in Southern and Eastern Europe.**

The Experience of Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain

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**A Comparative Paper for the “Think Tanks at a Cross-Road:
Shifting Paradigms and Policy Dilemmas in Southern and Eastern
Europe”**

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Introduction

Have the post-communist think tanks already outlived their usefulness? Is the historical episode during which they provided vigorous and viable policy solutions to important societal challenges over, condemning them to the dustbin of history? Are they to become victim of the popular revolt against the orthodoxy of transition and “neoliberalism”? Have they proven incapable of redirecting their way of thinking and modes of acting in a manner enabling them to contribute productively in the present times of economic and intellectual crisis? Finally, are the post-communist think tanks agents of policy innovation or guardians of the intellectual status quo?

These questions became relevant for many Central and East European countries towards the end of the first decade of the new century, and these were the questions that motivated the Centre for Liberal Strategies, Sofia, to embark on a comparative study of developments in the think tank community in Europe. Think tanks have been among America’s most successful exports to post-communist Europe. Independent, non-governmental funded research institutes are generally not typical for continental Europe. Think tanks in Eastern Europe have been created copying American models and to a great extent they started with American funding. Against the background of generally weak civil societies, they have been able to establish themselves as centers of policy expertise. They have managed to accumulate research capacity and an ability to reach significant audiences and to influence policy decisions. Their main contribution has been in the field of policy transfer: think tanks have been able to help transplant norms, institutions and practices in East European context. The major

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role played by think tanks in the time of transition has been multi-faceted: ensuring policy continuity, coalition-building, compensating for the ill-financed research and education, socializing political elites and encouraging academic researchers to enter the societal debates.

Despite these achievements, in many countries of the region there are currently calls to reexamine the role of think tanks. More and more voices claim that their moment has passed. The general re-evaluation of the transition experience and the almost total rejection of the elites of transition leads to a wave of criticism to the work of liberal NGOs and think tanks all over Central Europe. There are three major lines of criticism.

First, think tanks are criticized for being simply instruments of foreign influences. According to this viewpoint, they have uncritically supported Washington's and Brussels agendas and acted as guardians of some, as defined by the critics, policy orthodoxy. The accusation is that think tanks, following the agendas of their donors, remained insensitive to the social costs the implementation of this orthodoxy has imposed on their own societies. Selling the transition as a win-win game they tend to ignore the negative effects of the advocated reforms thus contributing to the deformation of the polities. On such grounds, both the intellectual quality of the work of think tanks, and their political integrity has been openly questioned. This reference point for criticism of think tanks finds a natural ally in the rise of political populism, which generally attacks the authority of expert bodies, as well as all forms of authority not directly derived from the will of the people.

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The second line of criticism views think tanks' influence as a transitional phenomenon. In this view the think tanks played a positive role in the period of transition but their importance in the post-transition period is doomed to decline. In the days of transition the think tanks benefited from access to Western funding and expertise, the weak and underfunded research bodies in the local universities, political parties and ministries. But with the very success of this transition, the argument goes, think tanks are losing relevance. The critics point out that in these changed circumstances the fact that they are inferior to the academia in the seriousness of their research and to governmental research units in the ability to influence the policy process become crucial. The critics also point out that the change of the media environment – the decline of the importance of mainstream printed media – is another factor for the declining relevance of think tanks by drying one of their most productive channels for influencing public policy debates.

The third and in a way most challenging criticism to the work of think tanks claims that the problems they face relate to the substance of their agenda. More specifically, it is the tensions between democracy and liberalism, between democracy and the market that cause a crisis of the role of think tanks. On this view, think tanks have religiously believed that democracy, liberalism and market go together, but life in the different countries in the region has reached a point where trade-offs between these three values have to be contemplated. In such a situation, think tanks are inevitably disingenuous in both their analyses and policy proposals. When advocating fiscal rules think tanks argue that this decision will not reduce citizens' rights to decide, but

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according to the critics this is a false pretense. Similarly, when think tanks advocate more public participation they argue that people's participation will lead by necessity to a responsible decision. But, according to this group of critics, they ignore the possibility that the market friendly policies may subvert democracy or that democratization of the policy process can lead to economic disaster. So, there is a need of a new type of policy actors, the argument goes, who do not fear to attack openly democracy or the market while the post-communist think tanks are not well-positioned to perform this role.

In our research we have tested the coherence and soundness of these criticisms. We have further explored the choices and dilemmas think tanks face in their attempt to retain popular legitimacy, intellectual credibility and policy influence.

We have designed our research in a way that compares the experiences of the think tanks in three different East European countries - Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland -that are known for active independent policy research but which differ in size and reform trajectories. We have also included South European countries - Spain and Greece - that are at the center of the current political and economic crisis in the EU in order to juxtapose the experience of post-communist think tanks with their experience. We are particularly interested how the protest movements that emerge in these countries view the value of the expertise coming from the think tank community. Finally, we have included in the research the special category of Brussels-based think tanks that are EU-oriented and largely work out of the context of national politics.

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In each of the six research settings, we have examined the work of at least five prominent, established think tanks, which have left a mark in political life: in the cases of Bulgaria, Spain, Slovakia and Poland, we have examined more than five think tanks. In all institutions, we have based our analysis on desktop research and in-depth structured interviews with think tanks' representatives.

1. Definitional debates

Think tanks are the product of the blurring of disciplinary and institutional boundaries. In this sense, the ambition to come up with an analytically sharp concept is doomed from the very beginning. All existing definitions either describe think tanks as *hybrids* (e.g. universities without students, vehicles of political entrepreneurs, intellectual pressure groups, etc.) or they try to distinguish them from other organizations by insisting on their relative autonomy from the state, political parties, consultancy firms, the media, and pressure groups). Neo-Marxists have proposed to define think tanks through their functional usefulness as part of the super-structure, designed to strengthen a dominant ideology (allegedly neo-liberal). However, both the organizational approach, and the functional definitional approach, are too narrow, and fail to capture the huge variety of think tanks that emerged. Even if one focuses, as we have, on specific regions, the variety of organizations which could be reasonably described as think tanks, and which identify themselves as such, is great. For instance, in the parliamentary elections of 2013 one of the think tanks that we have studied in Bulgaria ran a candidate list. If such hybridization is taken as

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ground for disqualifying certain organizations as “think tanks”, the risk is to omit one of the most stable features of think tanks: their protean nature, enabling flexibility and adaptability to novel circumstances.

Tom Medvetz has proposed a more promising approach to the understanding of the phenomenon by trying to define the social space within which think tanks emerge, as the space (if any) between political parties, universities, the business, and the media. Understood from this perspective, think tanks could be seen as hybrid forms, which have sprung due to the gradual disintegration of the boundaries between each of these four spheres in contemporary complex societies. The reason for the emergence of think tanks is not so much their own strength, conceptual coherence or organizational efficiency, but the impossibility of other sectors (universities, political parties, etc.) to defend their own independent sphere. Thus, the character of the US party system, which by comparative standards is rather weak and internally incoherent, could be one of the reasons why think tanks are much more abundant in that country. In contrast, the strength of the German party system puts the emphasis on party-related think tanks (the famous German foundations), and shrinks the space for “independent” think tanks.

Yet, despite their protean nature, think tanks do seem to have a common functional core, which could be used for definitional purposes. No matter what their specific institutional form is, they are used to articulate (*potentially*) *representative ideas*: ideas which at the very least could gain popularity among large groups of people. From this functional perspective think tanks are meant to strengthen the two main

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sources of contemporary politics: *representation* and *expertise*. They claim to be able to rationalize the political process by bringing more knowledge into it, while at the same time they claim to improve the *substantive representation* of groups by articulating their interests and preferences. It is important to stress that in order to have a think tank we need to have both claims at the same time – *expertise and representativeness, the ability to speak on behalf of large groups of people, often the public as a whole*. If one of these claims is not present, the chance is that we face a different type of organization. Thus, if the claim to expertise is dropped, there could be *advocacy* NGOs, pressure groups, watchdog organizations, etc., which cannot be meaningfully described as “think tanks”. On the other hand, if the claim of representativeness is dropped, the organization could easily become a service provider, a consultancy whose main purpose is to utilize its expertise in a specific sphere.

Two caveats are necessary. First, think tanks may put an emphasis more on their expertise than on their representativeness, or vice versa. Actually, they could even shift this emphasis with the changes of political and social circumstances. In short, there is no necessity of fine balance between their two core functions, but at all times they should not abandon their claim to both, and their capacity to make such credible claims.

Secondly, it is obvious that there is a close link between the functions of think tanks and the production of ideologies. Ideologies are sets of coherent popular ideas which could mobilize large groups of people. Indeed, as far as think tanks make a claim of

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representativeness, they are bound to operate with (potentially) popular ideas. But the concept of ideology is laden with many meanings which may in fact obfuscate reality rather than help explain it. First, there is the Marxist suspicion that ideology is “false consciousness” – the creation of perverted but popular pictures of reality whose main purpose is to justify the existing “capitalist system of domination”. From this perspective, there could be only one type of legitimate ideological institutions – those, that are anticapitalist in their nature. Indeed, the communist parties themselves and their ideological units claimed to be such legitimate institutions. In contrast, think tanks appear to be the “enemy” from this perspective, because often they do not share the revolutionary zeal of radicals.

This picture seems to be itself too ideological and biased in favour of specific world-views, however. From what we have encountered, nothing prevents an organization eligible to be a think tank from leaning more to leftist and even anti-capitalist rhetoric. They may call themselves differently, because in many languages the word “think tank” is hardly translatable. But still, they do perform the same functions, and do have the two claims to *expertize* and *representativeness*. In many countries there are new-leftist groups which operate organizations of this type – Poland is a case in point. In fact the advent of both Syriza and Podemos are linked to the mushrooming of idea-creating organizations which can meaningfully be called “think tanks” of the new left. So, hiding behind labels might have its political rationale, but it does not really matter whether you are called an “institute”, “laboratory”, “social centre” etc.

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for definitional purpose as long as you make the two claims of expertise and representativeness.

Further, ideology implies a high degree of coherence among all ideas behind which a think tank stands. This high degree of coherence is often not in place, however. First, it is quite common that think tanks may have niche identities, that they specialize in a narrow field without making positions in other fields. Many of the think tanks that we have examined focus on economic issues or foreign affairs – the two primary candidates. Other popular niches are the fight against corruption, judicial reform, electoral reform, etc. Only a handful of institutions may pretend to be the so-called all-purpose think tanks, which focus more largely on the political process. But even these may not be strongly affiliated with a specific political ideology. As a rule, such think tanks are branded “liberal”, and some have even had the ingenuity to put the word in its name. But the meaning of the branding is little more than an indication of commitment to liberal democracy – the overarching framework of politics in established contemporary democracies. Indeed, sometimes “liberal” may mean economic liberalism (and political neo-liberalism), but, as a rule, organizations which pick up this root fast become niche economic think-tanks and lose their all-purpose character.

This discussion comes to show that “think tanks” are not by definition tied to a specific, coherent and detailed ideology. Organizations which could meaningfully be described as think tanks could find themselves on the left, and on the right. One should not be misled by their specific labels, and by the battle of labels. The left has

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attempted to tie the concept of think tank to neoliberalism and this may be a clever political strategy. It has no analytical or definitional value, however.

2. A typology of think tanks on the basis of their genealogy

In the case of Southern and Eastern Europe that we have studied, think tanks have strikingly different genealogies due to the different balance between the state, the market, the media and the political parties at the time of their emergence. With the risk of simplification, below we outline a Western and an Eastern model of a social space, within which think tanks have emerged.

2.1 The Western (South European) Model

In Greece and Spain, think tanks developed as a post-transitional phenomenon, as an instrument designed to strengthen and entrench the emerging new political consensus. This consensus was essentially pro-European, welfarist, and liberal, especially in the social meaning of this concept. Thus, the major exemplary think tanks that have sprung in these two countries – such as ELIAMEP and CIDOB - are primarily engaged in European affairs, and propose policies in line with the generally European (welfarist) model of economic development of the 1970s and 1980s. More importantly, these are organizations which do not see themselves as opposed to the state, and their primary concern for independence is not vis-à-vis the state. In fact,

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neither in Greece nor in Spain are think tanks particularly concerned about possible dependencies as a result of substantial state funding.

It is quite normal in these countries think tanks to receive considerable state grants, including institutional grants, which account for the better part of their funding. Appointments, and even some times the setting of policy agenda is supervised by public boards, on which representatives of state bodies sit. None of these mechanisms is deemed a defect in their independence, however. On the contrary, the *public* character of the funding, and also the participation of public authorities in boards of think tanks seems to lend them further legitimacy and indeed authority in the eyes of the public. One of the explanations for this phenomenon, encountered during our research, was the very character of the transition process in these two countries, which took place in the seventies and the eighties: this was a transition, in which the citizens were actually reclaiming and democratizing the state. The democratic state created a feeling of ownership over it in the citizens: while the authoritarian state was alienated from the people, the democratic state and the *public* institutions restored the belief that state power is an instrument of the people. Further, the transitions in Southern Europe in no way involved any significant ideas of dismantling or downsizing state structures: on the contrary, the whole issue was how to ensure democratic control over these structures.

Think tanks have sprung out of this type of political consensus in Spain and Greece, and to a large extent they have proven instrumental in its entrenchment in society. This genealogical explanation should be distinguished from the Neo-Marxist

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assertion that think tanks always promote *hegemonic* discourses and stifle “genuine” political debates and discussions. After all, one could hardly doubt that the political consensus of post-transitional Greece and Spain has been highly beneficial for these two countries, and that there have been good grounds for its widespread social acceptance: both of these countries have experienced unprecedented economic growth, and have caught up with the more developed European countries in many areas. In this sense, think tanks have by and large promoted policies and political ideas, which have been in the public interest, something, which has resulted in their significant prestige in society.

Further, in both Greece and Spain there have been stable and established political systems, with voters generally choosing between the same centre-left or centre-right political parties for decades (the picture has started to change in both countries only after the 2008 crisis, an issue which will be discussed in the next sections). The theory of Richard Katz and Peter Mair about the cartelization of party life was very much applicable to these two political systems. The stability of the party system, and its general insulation from intense competition from outsiders has determined the possibility for political parties to monopolize political discourse, especially as much as *domestic* politics is concerned. In such circumstances, think tanks have been able to establish themselves in less politicized areas, intensive of expertise, such as foreign/European affairs and economics. In this sense, the primary focus of these think tanks is not internal political competition (they are not so much involved in it), but the facilitation of foreign policy and the elaboration of expertise-intensive

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economic policy on issues which are not in the focus of heated domestic political campaigns.

As far as the universities in both countries are generally trusted and highly regarded by the public, and as far as the main form of legitimation of the think tanks is through their expertise and competence, think tanks cooperate quite a lot with the academia. Some of them serve as clearing houses for academic research, and virtually all of them commission research to be carried out by academics. Overall, think tanks and universities are not seen as competitors to one another.

Finally, think tanks in both countries could hardly be seen as speakers on behalf of civil society. Their advocacy work is confined mostly to interaction with policy makers, or takes place through the media. In any event, think tanks do not have a strong claim to represent in some special way the public interests, or to voice the concerns of civil society. Other NGOs and groups, such as interest groups and trade unions, as of course the political parties, are the primary representative bodies, and in no way think tanks are seen (or present themselves) as competitors to them.

Thus, think tanks in Southern Europe (and Greece and Spain in particular), have emerged within a relatively constrained space, since the party systems, the (public) universities, and the groups of interest representation have been well established, generously publicly funded, and highly regarded by the citizens. In such circumstances, successful think tanks have adopted *niche strategies*, mostly expertise-centred and driven strategies finding issues which are not of primary domestic political concern (generally monopolized by the parties), issues which do not

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antagonize them with the universities, and such in which the opposition from interest representing groups will be small. It is no surprise that foreign/European affairs have become the dominant niche for the development of think tanks in both of the countries. A close second favourite is the economic area, which probably needs further explanation, but generally the reason for that was the strong trend since the 1980s of depoliticizing economic policy and its delegation to “expert” and “independent” bodies, such as independent central banks, for instance.

Overall, think tanks in both countries have managed to secure a prestigious space in political life, but interestingly, this space - by its generally constrained character - limits the influence they may have on key questions of domestic politics. Think tanks have been generally accepted, and accumulated significant public trust and prestige, but for that they have been forced to specialize in relatively narrow niches of generally depoliticized nature, in which opposition from political parties and other interest groups is bound to be low.

2.2 The Eastern Model

Think tanks in Central Eastern Europe have emerged during the 1990s as part of the transition process to democracy and market economy. It is worth stressing from the outset the differences in the context between the 1980s in Southern Europe and the 1990s in Eastern Europe. The most notable difference was the public attitude towards the state: the question was no longer just the democratic responsiveness and

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accountability of state bodies, but also the downsizing of the state and even the dismantling of certain structures. Civil society needed to be liberated from some of the state structures: there was a necessity to reduce the state in order to create space for new, independent activities. Thus, think tanks in Eastern Europe have emerged as part of the programme of creating independent civil society organizations, meant to structure an amorphous civil society. Their independence was conceived as independence primarily *from* the state. Thus, in Eastern Europe, the Anglo-Saxon understanding of independence became dominant, but not so much because of the strength of civil society *per se*, or its genuine ability to articulate interests and positions, but due to the fear of the omnipotent totalitarian state, which was seen as the main cause for the general weakness of civil society. In any event, the result was a different perception of the legitimate relationship between the state and think tanks. Thus, state funding was seen as an obstacle to independence, which made foreign (sometimes public) funding as the only feasible alternative (due to the lack of charity traditions, private funding could not sustain a vibrant civil society sector). The availability of significant foreign funding in the first two decades after the transition made many think tanks in the region consciously avoid domestic sources: the diversification of foreign funding was seen as the best guarantee of independence.

Similarly, the Eastern European transition was very much influenced by small-state neo-liberal policies of small state, rather than welfarism. This shift was felt not only in countries, as the USA and the UK in the 1980s, but in continental Europe as well: the EU has become much more concerned about economic efficiency, fiscal prudence

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and discipline as well, which has been shown in the pre-accession negotiations with the Eastern European countries. This policy shift has also contributed to the general distrust of the (large) state, and to the desire to prioritize viable institutions *independent of the state*.

Secondly, and more importantly, think tanks in the region have emerged against the background of generally weak and volatile party systems. Major parties, which had emerged in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia, have already disappeared. Voters often change their preferences, and in a few cases completely new parties have been able to win parliamentary elections. Further, public trust in the representative bodies of democracy – parties and parliaments – has been rather low in Eastern Europe (and lower than in established western democracies). This low trust in *public* institutions has affected such bodies as universities and trade unions. The dominance which the corruption discourse gained in the 1990s throughout the region further undermined trust not only in public bodies, but in all forms of interest representation. Ideals of NGOs working in the public interest emerged, as an alternative to the traditional forms of interest representation. Generally, this situation led to a rather stark opposition between the state and civil society, as think tanks were seen and claimed to be on the side of civil society.

Therefore, it is important to note that the social space in which think tanks in Eastern Europe emerged was less constrained than that in Greece and Spain. Generally, think tanks faced much weaker opposition from political parties (which often they simply outlived), public universities (which were underfunded, and could not attract the

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same quality of researchers), and other interest representing groups like trade unions and pressure groups (which were either seen as relics of the totalitarian state, or an offspring of corrupted new oligarchs). In such circumstances, in contrast to Spain and Greece, think tanks could claim a more central and more influential role in *domestic* politics. Of course, they were not direct competitors of political parties, universities or interest representation groups, but still the empty spaces which all of these left, created possibilities for think tank interference in really politicized areas. Thus, interestingly, the primary think tanks which have emerged in the region have not been highly specialized organizations pursuing niche strategies, as the discussion on Greece and Spain has showed. There have been examples of successful think tanks focused broadly on domestic politics, such as IVO in Slovakia, the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland, the Centre for Liberal Strategies and the Center for the Study of Democracy in Bulgaria. There have been spectacular cases in which think tanks have been able to have a considerable impact on domestic politics, by either serving as advisors to specific parties, or by proposing solutions to heated problems of party politics. The active engagement of specific members of the think tank community in politics has been a much more widespread phenomenon in the Eastern model, rather than in Spain and Greece. Again, as the conceptual framework adopted in this paper suggests, this does not indicate any significant strength of the think tank community in the region *per se*, but the relative weakness of the other constraining forces, which would normally make it much more difficult for think tanks to establish their autonomy vis-à-vis them.

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2.3 Brussels-based think tanks

In order to test better our hypotheses, we have elaborated a contrasting case study – the think tanks based in Brussels dealing with EU matters. Their genealogy is different both from the Western and the Eastern models described above, as far as these have emerged largely as an offspring of inter-institutional EU politics. As such, they generally do not face constraints from political parties and are definitely not in the business of representing civil society at the EU level. Their primary targets of interaction are the institutions, and to a lesser degree pressure groups and interest groups at the EU level. Thus, in order to ensure their independence they diversify funding from both of these sources (institutional EU funding, and private sector funding). In terms of function, they primarily cater for the EU Commission and are instrumental in testing and sounding ideas, which for various political considerations may not come out from the Commission itself.

This case study confirms the importance of the institutional and social space within which think tanks emerge. Much of their role, influence and identity are a function of existing or non-existing constraining factors. The table below sums up the main findings so far:

Table1: Genealogy of think tanks: constraining background factors, independence, role, and influence

	Western Model	Eastern Model	Brussels-based Model
Ideological background at time of emergence	Welfarist, pro-European	Liberal (with distinctive neoliberal overtones), small state, pro-European	Pro-European, other nuances being irrelevant
Party systems	Stable party systems of entrenched, cartelized nature	Unstable party systems, volatile voters	Almost non-existent EU level party life
Universities	Well-funded and generally respected (public) universities	Underfunded universities with lower level of trust in them	Well-funded and generally respected universities
Media	Generally pluralistic environment with high levels of independence	Problems with both independence and pluralism	Pluralistic and independent
Interest representation structures: trade unions, pressure groups	Established and trusted trade unions and pressure groups	Delegitimized trade unions and pressure groups	European lobbyists, strong corporate interest representation at EU level
Funding	Predominantly state	Predominantly foreign	Mixed public and private
Independence	Independence through the state	Independence from the state	Relative independence from private interests and EU institutions
Role	Emphasis on expertise provision in depoliticized areas and on issues of less intense domestic political confrontation	Emphasis on civil society representation; public interest representation; advocacy; advisers of political parties; even direct participants in the political process	Instrumental to EU institutions as expertise providers, but also as outlets of policies which could not officially be initiated by the EU (for political reasons)
Influence	Influence in specific depoliticized niches, such as foreign affairs	More broader influence, including in domestic politics and intra-party competition	Influence of more general nature regarding EU institutions primarily

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The table illustrates the thesis that the lesser constraints think tanks face from other established actors limiting their social space (such as political parties, universities, interest groups, etc.) the more expansive their role and the scope of their influence becomes. Of course, this does not mean that they could become or have become effective substitutes or competitors of any of these actors: it just means that they could perform or try to perform some of their functions, and could take upon themselves some of their organizational traits. Therefore, defining think tanks solely on the basis of organizational features and functions is bound to be a futile exercise – they could acquire strikingly different features and functions depending on the institutional and ideological context in which they emerge and function. Their salient feature is that they base their authority on the quality of their ideas – be these ideas of expert nature, or reflecting broad societal consensus on specific issues. They produce or at least step on policy relevant research, and in this way claim to rationalize the political process. To this claim we now turn with a specific focus on the impact of important recent developments, as the rise of populism since the 2000s and the financial crisis, which started in 2008.

3. Think Tanks and Thinking: Populism, Financial Crisis or a Crisis of Ideas?

Diane Stone is probably right to attack the “myth”, according to which think tanks are about thinking and ideas. It is true that often they borrow, recycle or even take ideas out of the dustbins of intellectual history. Not always do the research standards of

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think tanks live up to strict academic standards. In this sense, one should be careful when taking the “thinking” element in the title of these organizations at face value. But be this as it may, the authority and legitimacy of think tanks is essentially linked to specific political ideals, ideas or policies. If this element is missing, think tanks become a completely vacuous category of little analytical value. In order to be thinking, think tanks need not be the inventors or creators of a specific policy; they even need not be the best available experts in the field on it. They need to be sufficiently acquainted with the idea, however, and they should be ready to publicly defend it, promote it, develop it further, etc. Thus, the life of a think tank seems intrinsically tied to the social life of the ideas it stands for publicly: the amount of actual, creative thinking in the whole process may not be very high, but the essential link with a set of ideas seems to be a condition *sine qua non*.

As the discussion up to now has shown, think tanks are genealogically linked with certain sets of ideas. These may not form complete and comprehensive ideologies, but still they usually are distinctive enough. Thus, it was argued that think tanks in Spain and Greece are generally more welfarist, reflecting a much higher level of trust in public institutions and the state. In contrast, in Slovakia it was difficult to find a think tank which is neither liberal nor neoliberal. In both settings, think tanks have participated in the lifespan of specific popular ideas: some of them have anticipated their popularity and advocated them before consensus has emerged; others have been instrumental in the strengthening on newly emerging consensus; and many have

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become defenders of ideas whose popularity has started to diminish, or is under attack.

In this section we examine the impact of the rise of populism and the financial crisis of 2008 and the protest waves of 2011-2014 on the ideas think tanks in Southern and Eastern Europe stand for.

3.1 The financial crisis and the Western (South European) Model

The financial crisis, which started in 2008, has had considerable impact on think tanks in Greece and Spain. Most obviously, since these think tanks rely extensively on public funding, the austerity measures have led to certain reductions in their funding as well. But this is hardly the most important development: virtually all of the think tanks we have interviewed report that they manage to preserve stability and are viable in the present situation. The crisis has had an impact on the space within which they operate, since there have been important changes in the set of constraining factors. The crisis has had an impact on the ideological social background as well.

As to the latter, the debates about austerity have questioned the broadly based welfarist consensus in both countries. The first dilemma which emerges for think tanks is whether to defend the values of the welfare state of the European type, as it was constructed in Greece and Spain after WWII and especially since the 1980s, or whether to revise the model in line with the need for austerity measures and the

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restoration of financial discipline. Most of the think tanks we have interviewed have chosen so far to defend the welfarist model. Most importantly, there is no visible change in the predominant position of think tanks vis-à-vis the state: it is still viewed as a trusted, efficient, by far the most important instrument of public policy. Even conservative think tanks have not adopted a neo-liberal ideological language, promoting the virtues of a small, minimal state, less involved in economic and social matters, and extolling the libertarian ideals of self-organization of civil society.

While in terms of welfarism and the role of the state there are no visible difference in comparison to the pre-crisis period, in terms to the pro-European stance there is another important dilemma for think tanks, and their position here is more ambiguous. The question is not that they have become anti-European, or Euroskeptical: virtually all major think tanks support the EU and Spanish/Greek membership in it, as well as the membership of both countries in the Eurozone. What is new is that there is no single vision on how to best promote these goals. Paradoxically, the pressure for austerity, as far as it comes from Brussels and Germany, could also be seen as a European political position, and think tanks in both countries have been put in the situation to make a choice: whether to support this type of European policies, or to oppose them, providing arguments for less financially restrictive, but still common European response to the financial crisis. And while most of the interviewed think tanks have chosen the second option, some interviewees in Greece have actually defended the cogency of the current European austerity based approach: their argument is that austerity measures have not been effective in Greece because the

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national government has not implemented them fully and appropriately. In any event, these debates raise an important question for the stance of think tanks in the European periphery: what is the meaning of being pro-European in the present circumstances? Is it to side with Brussels and the austerity-based approach advocated by Germany? Thus far, the preferred approach seems to be to argue for renegotiation of this approach at the European level, but this is a position which is not easily understood by domestic publics: after all, “yes to Europe, but no to austerity” is a complex and nuanced position, which may not be easy to convey to a public running out of patience.

Interestingly, the crisis has given an opportunity to think tanks in Greece and Spain to get out of their reserved niches of foreign policy and specialized economic knowledge, and have greater impact on highly contested *domestic* political issues. In fact, as respondents in Spain have noted, European affairs have become essentially domestic in the course of the crisis: most of the key questions of Spanish politics are to be resolved in the EU arena. In this sense, the relevance of the expertise of think tanks in both countries has increased. Further, comparative projects about the impact of similar austerity measures in other parts of the continent (and Eastern Europe in particular) have become particularly relevant and timely, and the think tanks in both countries are well prepared to carry them out.

In terms of the existing constraints on the available space for think tanks, the crisis has brought some changes in the standing of political parties, especially in Greece. While trade unions remain strong in both settings, the Greek party system has gone

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through a serious crisis and has experienced the emergence of new radical right and populist left parties. The traditional left-right distinction and the stability of the two-party system of the last three decades have by and large disappeared. On the one hand, this creates more space for think tanks, since the monopolization of domestic political issues by the political parties has decreased. On the other hand, however, the established think tanks are increasingly seen as part of the old status quo, as a by-product of the two-party consensus between the traditional left and the right. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the think tank community in Greece is very small: there are actually probably only two established think tanks (one in the field of foreign and European matters, and one in the field of economics). Thus, what could be expected is also the emergence of new players within the think tank community itself. Together with a certain refocusing towards domestic issues by the currently existing think tanks, this will be a response to the availability of more space created by the crisis within the party system.

3.2 Populism, the financial crisis and the Eastern Model

Think tanks in Eastern Europe have been impacted more by the rise of the populist parties and players in the beginning of the new century rather than by the financial crisis per se. Interestingly, especially in Greece the financial crisis has brought populist players on the political scene; in Eastern Europe populists were already on the scene even before the crisis. The impact of both developments has led to a certain change in the ideological background in Eastern Europe, however. Throughout the

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1990s a broad-based political consensus emerged along the following lines: pro-Europeanism (membership in NATO and EU), democracy and human rights, and fiscal and financial discipline in order to become members of the EU currency zone. Virtually all major Eastern European think tanks have been instrumental in the establishment and defence of this type of consensus. In the mid of the first decade of the 2000s, the political consensus started to unravel, and new, populist players emerged, who started to challenge some of its elements (especially the pro-European stance, as well as the protection of certain minority rights).

Think tanks in the region had developed two types of responses to crises in liberal democracy: more participation of people in politics, and more constitutional constraints on power (in terms of establishing of powerful independent bodies like courts, independent banks, media regulators, etc.) These responses fall broadly into two paradigms. The first one is the democratization paradigm that claims that *participation of the people in an open and transparent political process* is highly desirable and critical for getting results. In advocating *public participation* think tanks often felt obliged to promote instruments of direct democracy, popular initiatives, referenda, deliberation-stimulating exercises and to adhere to the wisdom of the crowd. The central rationale of this paradigm is to ensure that the sovereign – the people – have greater control over their representatives and agents; that the will of the people is faithfully translated into authoritative decisions, or, where this is not possible, the decision-making process should be at least sufficiently transparent and

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open to public scrutiny. At the heart of this paradigm is the understanding that a good policy is the policy society can agree on.

The second paradigm is *expert delegation*: according to it *the limitation of arbitrary state power by transferring policy-making in the hands of expert-based and independent institutions is highly desirable*. *Expert delegation* means that bodies like constitutional courts, independent central banks, currency boards, fiscal councils, and various independent regulatory bodies designed to de-politicize decision-making and to increase its expert character have also been at the fore front of the activities of think tanks. For example, in terms of transparency, independent anticorruption agencies – which are by definition composed of experts – have become rather fashionable in Europe over the last decade, with the help of leading think tanks in the area. Think tanks have been also enthusiastic supporters of judicial review and judicial autonomy, as well as of politically independent decision-making and deregulation in the economy. It is clear that the *expert delegation* paradigm is in some conflict with the *public participation* one, since the former diminishes the space for involvement of the people in the exercise of authority. Despite this tension, however, for the recent decades it has been a key belief in the policy-making community that the two paradigms could be optimized simultaneously, that they ultimately reinforce each other.

The rise of populism in Eastern Europe has put both paradigms to the test. It has become apparent that the objectives of popular participation, adherence to the will of the people, and expertise-based decision making cannot always be pursued

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simultaneously. Populist outbursts which challenge the authority of autonomous institutions illustrate the clash between the will of the people and delegation to expert bodies: increased public participation in politics may bring to power populist governments which in turn might try to dismantle institutions designed to strengthen independent expert-based decision making. Fidesz's government in Hungary and Kaczynski's government in Poland are examples of such developments.

On the other hand, transfer of policy decision-making away from bodies directly accountable to the citizens into the hands of experts is one of the fundamental factors behind the growing disappointment with democratic politics throughout Europe, aptly termed democratic deficit, which creates a strong disincentive for citizens to actively participate in the public arena.

The main consequence of these developments has been the shrinking of the space for general-purpose think tanks focused on domestic politics. There is increasing pressure on the think tanks in the region to choose between one of the paradigms, and to abandon the ambition to pursue them simultaneously.

On the one hand, think tanks could choose to "specialize" in policy solutions pushing for more direct involvement of the people in politics. In our selection of cases, there are examples of think tanks specializing in the electoral process, ensuring its transparency and representativeness. More interestingly, some of the think tanks have developed specific ideologies of adherence to the will of the people, as the main source of justification. Poland is probably the leader in this regard where new radical left think tanks have emerged (*Krytyka Polityczna and others*): these think tanks

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openly advocate the dismantling of constitutional constraints on the power of the people, the abolition of the “hegemonic” liberal-democratic model, etc. In Bulgaria, theoretically less ambitious leftist think tanks have emerged, arguing essentially for the extended uses of instruments of direct democracy, recall of elected MPs, introduction of imperative mandate, etc.

Paradoxically, this type of response to the rise of populism runs the risk of *fueling further populist trends*. First, it may lead to increased tolerance to increasingly radical, dangerous, or simply unrealistic policies. Secondly, it could focus political debates excessively on the personal integrity of candidates in elections, the fight against organized crime and corruption, or even to the fanning of open or subdued nationalist causes through means of direct democracy (EU experience with direct democracy, for instance, seems to suggest that the instrument is most effective in mobilizing nationalistic sentiments, as the referenda on the Constitutional treaty in 2005 demonstrated).

On the other hand, think tanks are under increasing pressure to “specialize” in the other paradigm: the delegation to experts, and the creation of independent bodies of power. A considerable majority of the think tanks in the region have actually chosen this strategy. This is especially evident in the case of economic think tanks, which have acquired even stronger neo-liberal overtones. Paradoxically, these economic think tanks have gained in visibility since the rise of populism and the financial crisis, probably because of the simple and easy to be understood character of their message: they are the major guardians of economic rationality against populist excess.

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However, there is a considerable popular backlash against them as well, as the public increasingly perceives them as guardians of a problematic status quo. More importantly, the negative attitudes towards such think tanks are easily transferred to the whole think tank sector, since the more nuanced messages on economic issues are normally lost in public debates.

The general danger, however, is that if think tanks commit themselves entirely to depoliticizing decision making, by advocating expert-based institutions (courts, agencies, fiscal councils, etc.), they again *contribute to the erosion of trust in democratically elected institutions*. Ultimately, the whole idea of public democratic government is being eroded, and is supplanted by elitist visions of government by experts or automatic procedures and they contradict their self-assumed role of spokesperson for civil society. Think tanks, in this sense, risk either endorsing irresponsible populism or the discrediting of political democracy. It is no surprise that in this situation their legitimacy is called into question.

Thus, the ideological changes that populism and the financial crisis have brought in the region had two major consequences for think tanks. On the one hand, the space for general-purpose, all-encompassing think tanks has shrunk, and there has been increased pressure for “specialization” along the lines of one of the two above-described paradigms. If general-purpose think tanks as IVO in Slovakia and CLS in Bulgaria have been the core-cases of think tanks of the first two decades, “specialized bodies” in anticorruption, organized crime, economics, direct democracy, etc. are the dominant model of the contemporary period. A good example is the Center for the

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Study of Democracy in Bulgaria, which started as a general-purpose think tank but is currently specialized in the areas of anticorruption and law enforcement. It is not the case that the general-purpose think tanks have disappeared – the case of the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland is a good example of successful adaptation to the new realities. But still specialization along the lines described above is a very discernible phenomenon.

The second major consequence is that specialization *per se* does little to stem the populist trends in the political process, and indeed sometimes runs the risk of fanning them additionally (as in the case of think tanks engaging in radical democracy policies, and the neo-liberal economic think tanks, which present a suitable target for populists.)

In terms of constraints on the space available for political actors, the rise of populist players in the region has been the most obvious change. Political parties have remained generally unstable and volatility of voting persists, but generally the party systems have been transformed by accommodating strong populist players, some of which have shown considerable resilience (Fidesz, PiS, Smer-SD, and GERB and Ataka, for instance). Populists have thus become a permanent feature in the political landscape. This has had considerable implications for think tanks in the region. First, their role as advisers to political parties, as arbiters and mediators in intra-party politics has been visibly reduced and confined to only a section of the political spectrum (the so-called traditional liberal parties). Further, the role of think tanks as speakers of civil society as a whole (something typical of the 1990s) has been largely

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compromised as well: today they are often seen as part of a (problematic) political establishment.

This shrinking of the space for think tank activity has been accompanied with the creation of new opportunities, however. Specialized think tanks have received increased opportunities to influence public policy directly through cooperation with specialized, independent parts of the administration. For instance, a think tank specializing in law enforcement or anti-corruption working with agencies of the internal ministry, independent anti-corruption commissions, etc. Further, think tanks could try to tap populist attitudes and rationalize them by means of radical democracy ideologies, or by means of advocating extensive use of instruments of direct democracy, recalls of MPs, citizens councils, etc. Few think tanks have taken up this route, examples coming mainly from Poland and to a certain extent Bulgaria.

3.3 Developments in the Brussels Bubble

In comparison to developments in Southern and Eastern Europe, the financial crisis has had a much smaller impact on Brussels-based think tanks, which have proven to be very well insulated to processes taking place in the periphery of the EU. If there have been changes at all, they are to be found in two directions. First, the economic issues have clearly taken centre-stage in terms of research interests and projects. The prominence of economic think tanks such as Bruegel has only increased. Secondly, the usefulness of Brussels-based think tanks for the EU Commission and other bodies

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has only increased since they have become important means of publicizing politically relevant research as a response to rising criticisms against Brussels from populist parties in the member states, and from peripheral governments suffering from austerity backlashes. Brussels-based think tanks are also instrumental for putting more pressure against the governments in Germany and other creditor states to ease austerity or to agree to transfers to the periphery under one form or another. The “non-political” expertise of economic think tanks is particularly useful in such circumstances. Together with experts on independent bodies, such as the European Central Bank (for instance), they form the necessary “epistemic communities” attempting to determine the course of public policy in key areas.

Interestingly, the dilemmas applicable to think tanks in Southern and Eastern Europe are hardly applicable to their Brussels-based brethren: becoming speakers for civil society or endorsing measures of direct (not to speak of radical) democracy remain outlandish options for these bodies. A very telling example is the citizen initiative to introduce EU regulation on the media, which despite its “citizen” character remains driven by and known mostly to networks of experts.

The table below sums up the impact of rising populism and the financial crisis on the think tank communities in the three different settings, which are in the focus of the present study.

Table 2: The Impact of the Financial Crisis and Populism on the Three Models

	Western Model	Eastern Model	Brussels-based Model
Ideological background at time of emergence	Welfarism remains dominant, especially as regards trust in the capacity of the state, but problematization of pro-Europeanism. Austerity as a challenge both to welfarism and the pro-Europeanism of think tanks	Liberal values remain dominant but increasingly radical-left and radical-democratic think tanks emerge. Specialization either in democratic participation, or legitimation through expert knowledge.	No change
Party systems	The Greek and the Spanish case demonstrate that the stability of the party system has suffered	Instability and voter volatility persists, although some populist parties have shown considerable resilience and have made significant inroads	No change, but more pressure from rising nationalists and populists in the Member States on the EU as a whole
Universities	Austerity leads to underfunding	Underfunding continues, although in some cases (as Poland) positive developments are also visible	No change
Media	Difficulties in the public (electronic) media due to underfunding	Decreased pluralism due to withdrawal of investment from some countries	No change
Interest representation structures: trade unions, pressure groups	Trade unions important players in the public protests against austerity	No visible change	No change
Funding	Reduced state funding	Reduced foreign funding	No change
Independence of think tanks	No visible change	Less concerns about independence from the state	No change
Role	Expertise providers in depoliticized areas but more spaces for think tank interference on domestic, politicized matters	General-purpose think tanks under pressure; specialization as either expertise providers or enhancers of public representation; less room for advocacy and think tanks acting as speakers of civil society	Increased focus on economic issues
Influence	Traditional niches of influence questioned since foreign and especially European matters have become domestic policy due to the crisis. This opens avenues for influence in new areas, but also raises questions about their influence in their traditional niches	Less influence on intra-party competition; opportunities for more influence directly in the administration and expert, independent bodies	Influence of more general nature regarding EU institutions primarily

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4. Think tanks and mass protests

Another major challenge to the work of think tanks in the studied countries have been the waves of significant public protests in at least three of them – Bulgaria, Greece and Spain. Waves of public protests, starting from the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring have happened in a number of countries and continents – from Brazil, through Europe to Thailand. It is difficult to generalize about the causes of this phenomenon, since protests have had a different outlook and ideology depending on the context. In the set of countries under review here, the multi-faceted nature of the protests as a phenomenon is also visible.

The Spanish case, as the case in many other countries from the EU Southern periphery (Greece, Portugal, Italy) features a very strong leftist, anti-austerity element. In this case the influence of economic considerations is by far the strongest: there, the protesters have a clear stance against certain policies, which they see as “imposed” on their countries by the EU, the IMF and other international organizations.

The Bulgarian case partly overlapped with the Southern European model, especially during the so-called February protests of 2013, but it has a different cause as well – the public reaction against wide-spread corruption and the capture of the government by powerful economic groups. As a result, the government appears unable to deliver policies in the public interest in the eyes of many people who took to the streets two times in 2013 against two different governments. Overall, the protests were motivated by a desire to reclaim the government, to reduce the influence of special, “oligarchic”

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interests on it.

If there is one generalization to be made with considerable certainty, this is that in all cases people went to the streets with the understanding that *they* act as the *sovereign*. No matter what the number of protesters actually was, they all claimed to express and represent the wishes and the positions of the people as a whole. They claimed to be the true, authentic voice of the political community. This is a central feature for the understanding of the events. These were not issue-protests focused on specific, concrete policies. It is true that in all cases protests are triggered by a specific issue – be it the price of electricity or the appointment of a notorious person as an important public official (Bulgaria); an association treaty with the EU (Ukraine); suspicions of electoral fraud (Russia); construction works in a public park (Turkey); austerity policies (Spain). But these policies were only the starting point. They became the pretext for a much more significant claim that the protesters made: that the democratically elected authorities in their respective countries have failed to perform their duties properly, have lost legitimacy, and should be replaced by others.

Established think tanks both in Western European and Eastern European context were caught largely unprepared by these waves of public protest. In both cases think tanks had to face a challenge against deeply entrenched assumptions in their work:

4.1. Protest signaled the declining importance of elections in democratic politics

The first conclusion that could be drawn on the basis of protest experience is that people continue to see elections as important, but less and less meaningful and

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efficient instrument for the change of public policy. Protesting empowers and voting frustrates because today voting for the government is simply no longer a guarantee that things will change. Elections are losing their dominant central role in democratic politics firstly, because citizens do not believe any more that it is governments that govern and because they do not know whom to blame for their misfortunes. The more transparent societies become, the more difficult it is for citizens to decide where to direct their anger.

Think tanks in the two settings were rather surprised by this implication of the public protests: they had been accustomed to frame every political question in a question about *party politics*. Protests had a very strong anti-party element to them, which made think tanks to look either irrelevant or even protectors of a problematic partisan status quo.

In the Bulgarian case there was a curious and telling moment in the spring of 2013 when Boyko Borissov's GERB government resigned under some public pressure. For a brief moment in time there was a power vacuum, an escalation of anti-party sentiments, calls for radical transformation of the system of government. In this power vacuum, party leaders did not want to risk further unpopularity and had largely withdrawn from the public sphere: in these circumstances the only speakers in favour of the constitutional system of government and party democracy remained think tanks, NGOs, and parts of their networks. Respectively, this was a time when these organizations accumulated considerable amounts of unpopularity (helped by tabloid and populist media).

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4.2. Protests indicated that people will assert their sovereignty as the power to refuse.

Protests show that people step into the limelight very often only to reject certain policies or debunk particular politicians. The new democracy, that is emerging is a democracy of rejection. And indeed, in most of our cases studies protesters do not have developed sets of alternative ideas, they do not stay behind specific developed ideologies. This is often used by governments in the handling of the protests – they accuse the protesters of having no positive alternative. Although this is often a fact, it does not diminish the corrective role of public protest – it indicates that the representative structures of democracy have deviated rather drastically either from foundational political and constitutional rules, or that they have not defended adequately what is seen as the public interest.

Think tanks had a problem with this “negative” value of public protests, however. Think tanks are in the business of offering positive solutions, policies and ideas. When it comes to simple and outright rejection without offering a positive alternative, think tanks are at a disadvantage in comparison to other organizations such as advocacy groups, civic associations, etc. Therefore, in many of these protests think tanks found themselves on the side of their critics as lacking a positive alternative. Or even when they sided politically with the protesters, they tried to translate their claims in the language of representative democracy – into sets of demands for a change of a specific government, the establishment of a new party, reforms in specific fields, etc. In a sense, think tanks attempted to play a role of “rationalization” and

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“posititivation” of public energy. Even when successful in doing so, they risked to be seen as protectors of a problematic status quo.

4.3. The reasons for protests are not only economical. These reasons are the fears of the middle part of society (the “squeezed middle class” included)

While anti-austerity sentiments were at the fore front in Spain, Greece and other countries, there were countries in which economic considerations were not exclusive or dominant. In Russia, Turkey and Bulgaria protests emerged because of problems of authoritarian tendencies, endemic corruption, electoral fraud. These problems emerged against the background of strong economic performance as in the case of Turkey, or rising oil prices as in the case of Russia. Generally, it will be a mistake to hypothesize that recent protests have been organized and carried out by the socially most vulnerable groups of society. Very often these protests are actually driven by the anxieties of the middle classes or at least the median voters in society. This was definitely the case of Bulgaria’s protests (especially those in the summer of 2013), but also those in Spain leading to the Podemos movement. Probably it will not be too speculative to hypothesize that the vulnerable middle sections of European societies are now much more often voting their fears and frustrations. In the cases we have studied these fears have been connected with the austerity in the Southern periphery, and corruption in South-Eastern Europe. Elsewhere, the fears are fueled by authoritarian tendencies and rights abuse, as in Turkey and Russia. But there are other fears of the squeezed middle of society – like immigrants, for instance – which can

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also mobilize large masses of people.

Think tanks have failed to anticipate the outbursts of such public fears in both settings – in the West, in Greece and Spain, and in the East – Bulgaria. Think tanks had spent a lot of time and energy in the analysis of the impact of such fears on the party system. The concept of “populism” has become the most obvious theoretical product of these efforts. In essence, “populist” parties thrive on such public fears and their ascendancy is to a large degree explained by the escalation of such fears. Yet, the surprising fact was that, at least in the beginning, public protests had a universal anti-party element and they were directed against populist parties themselves. A special case in point is Bulgaria, where outbursts of public anger were directed against parties which have been classified as populist as Ataka and GERB, for instance.

4.4. Mass protests are not an NGO revolution.

In some respects, commentators are right when they define the NGOs – the civil society sector – as the driver and beneficiary of the protest waves. Many of the protest activists were socialized in the NGO community, and their stress on transparency and control comes straight from the NGO playbook. Yet the age of protest also may mark the twilight of the NGOs, which may become the period’s big losers. The anti-institutional message of the protests drives the younger generation toward Internet-centered activism and distracts them from thinking organizationally.

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Moreover, since many governments doubt the spontaneous nature of the protests and are constantly seeking out their alleged masterminds, NGOs are an easy culprit. Not surprisingly, in numerous cases the protests have inspired governments to introduce harsh new restrictions on NGOs. Furthermore, the protests have forced NGOs to define themselves in a more open political way, which undermines in the eyes of the public their claim to independence. And in general, NGOs are very poor substitutes for *representative structures* such as political parties. Forced by the events to position themselves in an openly political way they are easily exposed as non-representative, essentially expertise-based entities, as they are by definition. So, NGOs can turn to be the biggest losers of the “protest mania”.

Think tanks were affected by this dynamic as well. They faced the following unpleasant dilemma. Either they were seen as protectors of the status quo against people’s unrest, or as partisan organizers of public protests in cases when they sided with the protester. Both scenarios took the think tanks out of their comfort zone and made them risk either irrelevance or excessive politicization. In both cases, their claims to expertise and representativeness were seriously questioned.

Table 3: The Impact of the Waves of Public Protest on the Three Models

	Western Model	Eastern Model	Brussels-based Model
Ideological background at time of emergence	The Welfarism of established think tanks is eclipsed by more radical leftist groups as Podemos and Syriza. Think tanks appear ideologically to be in the pro-European, austerity camp despite rhetorical efforts to combat this phenomenon. Loss of identity.	Many think tanks have preserved their liberal outlook which, although protests have made them appear more partisan. New-left, radical left think tanks have emerged trying to tap the popular energy.	No change
Party systems	Further loss of trust in political parties.	Further loss of trust in political parties.	No change, but more pressure from rising nationalists and populists in the Member States on the EU as a whole
Universities	Politicization of universities, involvement in protests.	Politicization of universities, involvement in protests.	No change
Media	Heavy political use of social networks, blogs, new type of Internet based media	Heavy political use of social networks, blogs, new type of Internet based media	No visible change
Interest representation structures: trade unions, pressure groups	Trade unions lose ground to new leftist formations such as Syriza and Podemos.	Trade unions become politicized during protests as either protectors of the status quo, or parts of the protest movement.	No change
Funding	No change	No change	No change
Independence	No visible change, but seen progressively as part of a corrupt party-centred establishment	Seen either as protectors of the status quo or as politicized actors, organizers of protests	No change
Role	Claims to expertise and representativeness questioned	Claims to expertise and representativeness questioned	Increased focus on economic issues
Influence	Decreased influence of the established think tanks – fears of irrelevance	Increased influence but questions about sustainability (due to politicization)	Influence of more general nature regarding EU institutions primarily

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Conclusions

The research presented in this paper defends the view that think tanks emerge and evolve in specific social spaces constrained by the influence of other actors and factors such as the general ideological background, the party system, business and the groups of interest representation, the academic community, and the media. In terms of organization and functions, think tanks by definition are hybrids of all of these actors, and they try to copy some of their features, as well as to perform some of their functions. Depending on the strength of each of these fields, think tanks can make inroads in them to a different degree. The case studies of Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as the Brussels-based think tanks, have demonstrated the rather different forms which these bodies may take, due to the differences in the discussed background factors.

It is an essential feature of think tanks that they are identified with sets of ideas and an area of expertise and thinking. Although this does not mean that they always excel in creative thinking, think tanks must at least make a plausible claim that they are capable of doing. If thinking is taken away from them, the whole concept risks remaining vacuous. Therefore, much of the paper was devoted to the *intellectual* changes which the rise of populism and the financial crisis of 2008 have brought in different think tank communities. It was argued that there have been consequential developments both in Southern and in Eastern Europe. In the South, the space in which think tanks develop has been transformed as to open more opportunities for think tank activities in *domestic politics*. Foreign/European affairs are no longer a

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safe niche for think tanks (it has been politicized), but simultaneously, the political parties have started to lose their monopolistic grip on highly politicized issues, which opens new spaces for think tank creativity. And indeed, when compared to the landscape of Eastern Europe, the think tank community of Southern Europe (especially in Greece) does not seem internally pluralistic and diverse enough. This means that one could expect a certain redefinition of the priorities of established think tanks and the emergence of novel players.

In Eastern Europe, rising populism and the financial crisis have created problems of identity of established general-purpose think tanks, and have shrunk the space for specific think tank activities, as mediation in intra-party politics, speaking on behalf of civil society as a whole, etc. Simultaneously, more spaces have been open in terms of providing expertise to independent expertise based bodies (central banks, anticorruption commission, courts, etc.), and also to the tapping of positive populist energies in the line of direct and radical democracy. The advent of the new media and the political use of social networks presents a unique chance for think tanks to get their message across: these developments lower the cost of dissemination of ideas and information and a well-connected think tank with an extensive network of followers could expect a serious impact for their proposals.

In both settings, there have been noticeable changes in the general ideological background. In the South, the austerity debate has put to the test the general welfarist predispositions of think tanks, and has questioned their understanding of the meaning of Europeanization. In the East, the traditional liberal consensus of the transition

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period has been disintegrated: what remains now is a radical populist/democratic ideology on the one hand, and neo-liberal/economic technocratic residual liberalism on the other. In such a predicament, general-purpose liberal think tanks are understandably squeezed between unattractive to their taste alternatives.

Most generally, think tanks have proven surprisingly resilient. Some of our interviewees have declined to talk of crisis at all. Others have acknowledged temporary financial problems, but have mentioned also inciting sets of new opportunities. Further, there are country differences: think tanks in Slovakia are much more pessimistic than the ones in Poland, for instance, while Bulgaria is somewhere in the middle between the two. Overall, there have been at least three different strategies, which think tanks have adopted in the current situation. The first two strategies are strategies of specialization and these have been the favourites in Eastern Europe: think tanks increasingly focus either on participatory instruments or on delegation-to-experts instruments in their activities. Economic think tanks generally rely much more heavily on the delegation-to-experts paradigm, while think tanks specialized in the political process tend to be more focused on participatory policies, direct democracy, deliberation, radical democracy (and even protest). If we are right in our findings, there will be some pressure for further specialization in the think tank community along these lines. The third possible strategy to adopt is to retain a more general profile or to expand the areas of their competence. This strategy is more advisable, as it seems, for the South European cases (especially Greece), where think tanks have been focused in narrowly defined niches.

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Coming back to the questions with which this paper started, it is obvious that think tanks are far from becoming irrelevant (be this in Southern or in Eastern Europe). What we have encountered, however, are important changes in the character of their involvement in the political processes. These changes are driven mostly by developments affecting key elements of representative democracy, such as political parties, interest group representation, etc. Somewhat paradoxically, the changes in the South and the East are bringing think tanks in these two European regions closer together. It is probably too early to speak of convergence, but the differences both in terms of ideology and in terms of organizational set up have become much less pronounced. Still, many Eastern European think tanks could just envy the generous institutional (public) funding that their counterparts in the West have; similarly, western think tanks could possibly be amazed by the level of engagement and probably even influence of Eastern European think tanks in domestic (intra-party) politics and on issues of considerable political confrontation. Yet, both types of think tanks have very much to learn from each other – in fact much more than from Brussels-based think tanks, which operate within markedly different sets of constraints.

It is of special importance that during the last several years new think tanks have emerged: cases from Poland and Bulgaria come to mind. These developments are indicative of the vitality of the think tank sector. The main conclusion that we would like to draw on the basis of our research, however, is that the most important questions regarding think tanks do not concern their organizational features and capacity. Much of the attention to think tanks thus far, including the attention by the

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donors, has been focused on trainings and institutional capacity creation. The role and influence of think tanks in society could hardly be understood in terms of their financing, organizational robustness, and on their capacity to survive. Our findings demonstrate that different forms of financing, and different organizational structures in terms of financing could produce salient results. Similarly, well-endowed and institutionally very sophisticated actors could have relatively limited impact, confined to narrowly defined niches. Thus, of primary importance is the capacity of think tanks to reflect critically on their ideological environment, to interact with political parties, universities, and the media, to be sensitive of deficiencies in the functioning of the major structures of liberal democracy, and to be bold enough to secure a certain degree of autonomy from these actors.

Thus, think tanks, and their role and relevance, should not be assessed primarily on the basis of their institutional capacity and resilience, but on the basis of their intellectual output, not only in terms of elaboration of specific policies, but in terms of interaction with their specific environment, and on the basis of their capacity to compensate for deficiencies and weaknesses of the major bodies of power and the intellectual authorities in liberal democracy. Our subsequent research will be focused on the possibilities for such type of substantive assessment which will hopefully help think tanks choose in a more informed way among the different options they face. Our comparative review of different experiences could hopefully serve as an invitation to a broader discussion of these issues in the think tank community.

