



Think Tanks: The Case for Adaptability

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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 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, contributing to media pluralism.

On the basis of quite extensive research, we argue that think tanks have not outlived their usefulness and purpose, that they have sufficient resources to adapt to new realities. Of course, as far as CLS – the organizer of the project – is a think tank, there

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is an irreducible sense of a conflict of interest in making such an optimistic statement. Yet, we do have arguments for it, which could be grouped in three major categories: ideology, funding and organization, and the media.

1. Ideology

Preserving non-dogmatic character is a key recipe for successful adaptation to new realities. Of course, this does not mean that think tanks need to change their political identity, to switch sides, as it were. What we have seen both in the Eastern and the Southern parts of Europe is critical reflection and attempts by think tanks to adapt to new developments in their immediate environment.

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 to *representativeness*, they are bound to operate with (potentially) popular ideas.

Recommendation 1: *It is essential that think tanks preserve their claim to representativeness through ideas. Their job is to generate, to introduce to the public sphere ideas, which can claim wide support. Adaptability cannot be at the expense of abandoning of this essential feature of the work of think tanks.*

Think tanks 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 two major claims to *expertize* and *representativeness (through ideas, not votes or numbers)*. 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

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

***Recommendation 2:** Think tanks should not fear politicization. Having an ideological political profile does not necessarily undermine their claim to expertise. It depends how they present themselves in public, and to what extent they have a real contribution to the battle of ideas. If they are seen as mouthpieces of specific political actors, as recyclers of party platforms – this will be really damaging to their legitimacy. But politicization per se is not responsible for that: on the contrary, politicization can boost the claim to representativeness that they make.*

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

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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 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.

***Recommendation 3:** Think tanks should be experimental. They operated on the edges of settled ideologies and doctrines, and their job is to invigorate them and to prevent them from becoming sterile or even counterproductive dogmas. So, the task of think tanks is not to look for admirable theoretical sophistication or ideological coherence, but to be on the lookout for new ideas, which may not necessarily fit within established wisdom. Think tanks have an institutional advantage vis-à-vis other structures – such as universities, political parties, or media – which are much more influenced by disciplined programing and the search for internal coherence.*

The table below summarizes the changes in the environment in which think tanks operate due to the financial crisis (in the Eurozone) since 2008 and the parallel rise of populism.

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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On the basis of this table, several recommendations could be drawn:

Recommendation 4: *Think tanks should reexamine the link between their core ideology – be it left or right – and the issue of European integration. In Western Europe it has for a long time been assumed that welfarism and enhanced EU integration go hand in hand. In contrast, in Eastern Europe strongly pro-European political views are to be found in the liberal and centre-right part of the political spectrum. Both of these assumptions have been challenged by recent developments, possibly for different reasons. The bottom-line is that there is a need for looking into these issues afresh. Think tanks – even if they are domestically focused – need to clarify their views on this matter and to abandon much of the inherited wisdom.*

Recommendation 5: *Political parties have proven to be the weakest link not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the West. The assumption that with the passage of time Eastern European party systems will stabilize and will start to resemble the German party system from the 1960s, 70s and 80s seems to be unfounded. On the contrary – established party systems in the West – as in Greece and Spain – seem to undergo serious transformations. Think tanks, therefore, should not work with dogmatic concepts of party and party systems. This is an area, where they could benefit from their flexibility and from their experimentalism.*

Recommendation 6: *Flexibility and adaptability mean that think tanks should carefully follow the political process in their countries. There are moments of serious societal politicization. In order to remain in the public focus in such moments think tanks need to stress more on their function of “representation of ideas”. In times of reduced societal mobilization think tanks may rather stress more on their „expertize providing” function. Sometimes, in times of high politicization of society think tanks may opt for withdrawing in a narrower niche of „expertize provision”. This is a survival strategy, whose cost is less visibility and possibly less influence in the public*

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sphere. This strategy may also fuel accusation of illegitimacy based – it may appear to some that think tanks “conspire” behind the back of the people with political elites and lobby for ideas, which lack popular backing. In general, think tanks need to know the pros and cons of these alternative strategies in order to make a useful contribution to the political process.

Mass protests, which erupted in many countries of Europe and elsewhere, give us a good illustration of the challenges which massive social politicization presents for the work of think tanks. In at least three of the countries studied by us – Bulgaria, Greece and Spain – there have been such protests.

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” 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*.

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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:

***Recommendation 7:** Protest signaled the declining importance of elections in democratic politics. Think tanks should be aware of this development which is grounded on wide spread public attitudes that elections change people, but not policy. In such a context, think tanks, as far as they have influence on policy making, may be seen as illegitimate sponsors of ideas behind the back of the people. This is a serious challenge to the legitimacy of think tanks, which should be addressed by them responsibly. This means that they need to operate under enhanced transparency conditions. They need to be ready to explain the nature and character of their work, to disclose their relationships with political players, etc. Arguably, this decreases the influence of think tanks as possible mediators between political actors, as coordinators of social and political groups. But such disclosure – which is increasingly necessary – may alleviate and even dispel often fantastical public*

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suspicious and conspiratorial claims.

One of the conclusions 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 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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Recommendation 8: Protests indicated that people will assert their sovereignty as the power to refuse. Think tanks should be aware of this general negativity of public energy – one grave mistake, which could be made, is to assume that protests come with a new, positive model for governance. Thus far, evidence has not supported such a claim.

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

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

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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 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.

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Recommendation 9: Although public protests have a very strong anti-party sentiment, they should not be mistaken for an NGO revolution. In fact, all sorts of mediators between the people and political power – including think tanks and NGOs – are called into question by such protests. Think tanks should be aware of that and act accordingly, without excessive optimism for their potential role.

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. 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.

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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On the basis of this table, one further recommendation could be made:

Recommendation 10: *Massive social politicization is an opportunity for think tanks to reexamine their role, prospects and strategies. It is not the case that the protest waves are a death bell for think tanks, as some may think. Politicization is an environment in which these organizations may thrive: it is up to them to design a socially responsible, effective strategy of success.*

2. Organization, funding and independence

Recommendation 11: *There is no single model of organizing or funding a think tank, which would deliver maximum degree of independence. Think tanks can be relatively independent both publicly or privately funded.*

Our research shows that successful independent think tanks could be established under various forms of organization and funding. The issue of public or private sources of funding is not decisive, and this is a myth which should be dispelled. Think tanks bear the primary burden of dispelling this myth – it is also in their interest to do so.

Ultimately, what guarantees independence is the substance of ideas. If think tanks are able to produce ideas, capable of attracting public attention, and if they have a relatively consistent track-record, they may have a claim to independence regardless of the character of their funding.

Of course, diversification of sources, the avoidance of funders with bad reputation and so on are also important. But in a political context the issue of funding is always going to be exploited for partisan purposes. Think tanks need to learn to live with this fact.

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information on their funding, but they must be prepared that their opponents will continue to make allegation of illegitimacy no matter what the source of funding is.

Thus, if money comes from the state, the allegations will be of illegitimate links with governments; if they come from public actors – that they lobby for specific private interests, and so on.

Recommendation 13: *Funding from foreign sources will be increasingly politicized. Think tanks need to take these events seriously into account. This does not mean that foreign funding becomes illegitimate, but that they need political arguments in its defence. Essentially, this is a clash between two visions of democracy – one more supra-national, and one – essentially confined in the framework of the nation. Think tanks need to make this choice, and be consistent and responsible in its defence. They also have an obligation to explain this choice to the public.*

3. Think tanks and the media: new media and social network

This is possibly the most exciting development over the recent years, which is extremely important for think tanks as hybrids between expertize providers and representatives of ideas. The new media and social networks lower the cost of dissemination of ideas, as well as the cost of coordination of social efforts. This is an opportunity for think tanks which should be exploited as much as possible.

Recommendation 14: *Hybrid media are well suited for hybrid organizations as think tanks. They may use the social networks, blogging, etc. not only to extend their outreach, but also to experiment with new forms of social and political organization. Traditional political parties are in many places in crisis. New, more flexible means of communication with the electorate emerge in mass protests and social movements. Think tanks should be on the cutting edge of this “technology” if they want to increase their impact (or at least preserve their influence.*

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This is not a call for having facebook pages or twitter accounts, but to think more carefully into the systemic implications for think tank work from these novel developments. One area which is extremely productive is the interaction between new and traditional forms of media. Think tank blogs or facebook and twitter accounts have already become a source often cited by traditional newspapers, radio and television. This presents an opportunity for think tanks to become media outlets on their own, to strengthen the mediatic part in their nature.

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Conclusions

Our research is an argument in favour of 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 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.

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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 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

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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.

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.

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.