

Challenging Organisations and Society

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On the Move: Patterns, Power, Politics

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email: m.spindler@cos-journal.com

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Doris Dialer and Gerda Füricht-Fiegl

EU Think Tanks in the Back Seat? Perspectives for the 21st Century

Abstract

Our central argument was that EU think tanks' evolution has resulted in an interconnected hybrid EU think tank sphere, built on a common need for access to the political elite, to financial resources, and to media attention. We substantiated our claim by taking a closer look at three dominant Brussels-based EU think tanks. Hence we proved that their activities are driven by the logics of the market or more precisely the 'art' of responsiveness to political demand and the ability to sell ideas. In this struggle for economic survival a tendency for enhanced competition but also cooperation can be recognised in approaching the target audience. EU think tanks tend to please politicians and EU stakeholders by giving intellectual feed to pre-existing concepts. You hardly find any EU-sceptic think tanks around Brussels. Yet, without producing innovative ideas, they only act as a driving force behind already established political debate. We argued that meeting the challenges of 21st century requires updating think tanks' logic from an obsolete "EU operating" system focused entirely on corporate and institutional elites to a future orientated "EU shaping" system that emphasises creative and innovative thinking beyond existing institutional and financial frameworks.

Keywords: EU think tanks, interest groups, EU lobbying, EU funding, EU institutions, EU policy debate, EU research

1. Introduction

European society is facing unprecedented challenges these days, coping with high levels of debt and unemployment rates. In institutional terms, the ongoing crisis made obvious that EU leadership structures and decision-making processes have reached their limits in tackling current problems. Hence, EU

think tanks might give advice fulfilling their role as critics, analysts, advisors, problem solvers and most notably as communicators.

Generally, think tanks have played an important role since the beginning of European integration. The whole European 'project' was founded upon the ideas of so-called early *think tankers* like Jean Monnet or Robert Schuman. While the history of think tanks in Europe spans, at most, only the last 30 to 40 years, the US and the UK have been home to the think tank 'industry' for more than 100 years. According to the "2013 Global Go To Think Tank Index" (McGann 2014) more than 60 % of the world's 6,826 think tanks are based in Europe (1,818) and North America (1,984). Within the EU those countries with the largest numbers of think tanks are the UK (287), Germany (194) and France (177).

Amongst the 52 think tanks located in Belgium most are Brussels-based EU think tanks. Even though some interesting research on the organisational sub-category EU think tanks (Sherrington 2000, Boucher 2004, Missiroli and Ioannides 2012) had been undertaken, scholars have not delved more deeply into the institutional conditions of this specific type of hybrid organisations. This paper attempts to fill at least some parts of this research gap. Based on a topological approach we shall refer to the three most established Brussels-based EU think tanks. Thus, we are posing a series of basic questions about their performance, financial pack-up and modes of influence. What are EU think tanks actually doing? Is there a tendency for more professionalization and cooperation? To put the central question in other terms: are EU think tanks a driving force behind political debate and citizens' dialogue or are they just reacting to "idea" demands and giving intellectual feed for pre-existing notions?

Our central argument is that the interconnected hybrid EU think tank sphere tries to drive into the future, getting stuck in institutional frameworks and financial dependencies of the past. "Thinking" is supposed to create EU's future. Yet, outmoded think tanks patterns have produced mainstream thought. The authors argue that EU think tanks are walking in the shoes of

EU institutions, governments, influential interest groups and big companies. We will unpack this central message as follows: after setting the theoretical approach and solving the definition dilemma we will take a closer investigation of three Brussels based EU think tanks. Finally, we will substantiate our central claim with a comparative analysis and try answering the following question: How can think tanks become part of Europe's future rather than holding on to the EU story of the past?

2. Who are they?

Before proceeding further, it is of course important to clarify the status of these hybrid 'creatures'. In contemporary discourse, the term 'think tank' generally refers to a non-profit, non-partisan institution engaged in research and analysis on one or several policies (Abelson 2014, 127). Scholars have constructed various types or typologies of think tanks, mainly differentiating between academic, also defined as 'universities without students', advisory and advocate think tanks (McGann 2007, Boucher 2004, 2-4). Firstly, Brussels has a diverse array of think tank hybrids that combine at least two of the above mentioned organisational types. Secondly, there is no such thing as a common European legal status for them. In Belgium, for instance, they are *Associations Sans But Lucrative* (non-profit organisations), whereas in Germany and Austria you have a strong tradition of party-affiliated foundations. Thirdly, an important condition for EU think tank development and survival is the presence of EU funds and a financially strong membership structure.

Thomas Medvetz (2012) argues that think tanks are best analysed as hybrid organisations, embedded in a four-cornered space of driving forces divided internally by the logics of academia, politics, economy, and the media. A key implication of this approach is that EU think tanks in Brussels can be ascertained largely from their relationships to these anchoring fields. They are strongly related to the EU's institutional core system, the Commission, the Parliament, the Council, and of course the member states. The use of

Medvetz's topological model in combination with MacGann's typological approach allows us to depict hybridity as the norm rather than the exception.

To understand how think tanks work they have to be considered as part of an intellectual ecology (Mulgan 2006, 148). More precisely, EU legislators incorporate input from an outside *quasi* academic source, and by doing so elevate the quality of their legislative output. By looking at how EU think tanks present themselves to their main publics the authors' central argument will be that they must actively pronounce their independence in a sense of cognitive autonomy by aligning themselves with the university world. Yet, they signal their dependency on different kinds of clients: first, political clients (especially the Commission, MEPs, and governments); second, economic clients (corporate members and wealthy donors); and third, media clients (journalists and media organs).

Seen from a rather realistic approach the success of EU think tanks depends mainly on the 'art' of responsiveness to political and economic demand and the ability to sell ideas. By doing so, they are competing on the ground with consultancies, law firms, NGOs and corporate lobbyists. As a consequence, recent debate has centred mostly on whether EU think tanks are a kind of "lobbyists" and should sign up to the non-mandatory "Transparency Register"¹. By registering, they agree to make public details on their activities, staff data as well as financial figures. On 13 April 2014, 6,518 interest groups were registered, whereas 335 think tanks were listed in the subcategory "Think Tanks and Research Institutions".

3. Three Players on the Ground

Most of the EU-specific think tanks only emerged in the 1980s as the power of the European Community grew. Hence, the largest growth of EU think tanks took place in the 1990s, a period of major institutional and political reform, and a decade of two treaties, 'Maastricht' and 'Amsterdam' (Boucher 2004).

1 www.ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister

As already mentioned, EU think tanks can be grouped according to topographical as well as typological characteristics. In organisational terms, they are settled around centralised EU power seeking for influence and money. Besides, the most obvious criteria at hand are the different policy and research areas following the three main distinctions, namely single-issue, multi-issue, or distinctive (McGann and Sabatini 2011, 89). The choice for analysing three different Brussels based EU think tanks has the advantage of offering a clear oversight of the dependency problem as well as the lack of creative thinking.

3.1 The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)²

Established in 1983 with the marketing slogan “Thinking ahead for Europe”, CEPS has a strong in-house research capacity and an extensive network of partner institutes. Generally it can be described as not only the oldest but also the most renowned multi-issue EU think tank covering a huge range of heterogeneous policy fields, e.g. economic policy, energy and climate change, EU foreign policy, politics and institutions, regulatory affairs and trade policy. CEPS does seminars, workshops, lunchtime meetings as well as in-house conferences. In summer 2013, for instance, CEPS established a high-level group on institutional reform which was comprised of current and former MEPs, Commissioners, members of NPs and governments. Yet, it has to be doubted whether politicians and former Commissioners are the right persons to bring in fresh thought for the EU’s future institutional setting.

CEPS boasts an international research staff of more than 30 people drawn from 18 different countries and a membership base of more than 120 institutional (e.g. US Chamber of Commerce and European Chemical Industry) and over 130 corporate members (e.g. Nestlé, Toyota and Goldman Sachs). Membership fees are rather high and guarantee original insight and commentary, first copies of innovative publications and priority invitations to a broad

2 www.ceps.eu; Missiroli and Ioannides 2012, 15

range of stakeholder events. Yet, financial dependencies and interconnections with the business world are quite obvious.

<i>Total revenue (2013)</i> ³	€ 7,600,000
EU research funding (48%)	€ 3,648,000
Membership fees	€ 1,976,000
Private organisations	€ 1,520,000

3.2 Bruegel⁴

Bruegel, a rather young single-issue EU think tank, was established in 2005 as a Franco-German initiative. It commits itself to “contribute to European and global economic policy-making through open, fact-based and policy-relevant research, analysis and debate”. Bruegel is dealing with EU macroeconomics, finance and financial regulations, global economics and global governance, competition, innovation and sustainable growth. It has strong academic affiliations and a large number of resident, non-resident and visiting scholars as well as research assistants and fellows.

Bruegel is well known for its relations with the US and prominent donors like *Morgan Stanley*, *Google* and *IBM* from overseas. According to the “2013 Global Go To think Tank Index” Bruegel was ranked in second place after the Brookings Institution in the category “Top International Economic Policy Think Tanks” (McGann 2014, 65). The yearly membership fee of state members or governments amounts to +/- €50,000. It goes without saying that especially state members want something in exchange for their money.

³ Numbers from 2012 are not available

⁴ www.bruegel.org

<i>Total revenue (2012)</i>	€ 3,831,000
State members (52%)	€ 2,018,200
Corporate members	€ 1,014,600
Institutional members	€ 225,000

3.3 Friends of Europe⁵

Since 1999 Friends of Europe (FoF) has been a key player in the following policy areas: Global Europe, Greening Europe, Future of Europe, Competitive Europe and Life Quality Europa. Its major initiatives include the online Debating Europe platform, the Europe-China forum and the Development Policy Forum. It co-operates intensively with its sister think tank Security & Defence Agenda, Gallup and the Columbia University. It has a presidium board of high-ranking trustees⁶ from the political sphere but almost no academic staff. It is multi-issue and distinctive given its strong focus on events. During events members are given maximum visibility and opportunities to expand and build contact. Thus, FoF offers rather a networking platform for business, academia and politics than university affiliated expertise.

Friends of Europe is co-founder and co-publisher of the quarterly published *Europe's World*, a Europe-wide independent policy journal. It has quite prominent media partners, e.g. Financial Times and *euronews*.

⁵ www.friendsofeurope.org

⁶ E.g. Javier Solana, former Mr. CFSP or Pascal Lamy, WTO Director General and former EU Commissioner for Trade

<i>Total revenue (2012)</i>	€ 2,197,387
EU and IOs (IMF, World Bank, etc.)	€ 489,283
Membership fees (other)	€ 309,225
Corporate sector (46.3 %)	€ 1,016,837
Private non-corporate	€ 382,042

4. Different, but...

At first glance, the analysed three EU think tanks seem quite similar in its purpose, membership structure, general performance, and academic affiliation. All three are established as not-for-profit organisations under Belgian law. A more intense look reveals that especially in terms of research issues, academic staff and funding, there are major differences. The various sources of funding can be roughly categorised into four pillars: membership fees (corporate or institutional), co-financed joint activities, operating grant and EU funding. CEPS is by far the most academia affiliated EU think tank with over 48% of its budget made up by EU research funding. In 2013 CEPS was granted €200,000 out of the Europe for *Citizens Programme*⁷ run by the EU Commission. In comparison to CEPS more than half of Bruegel's budget comes from governments and state membership fees.

All three analysed EU think tanks have developed certain modes of intellectual production distinct from academia. For example, Bruegel and CEPS write short “policy briefs”, “backgrounder reports”, or “issue briefs” which are defined by their brevity, accessibility, and utility to journalists and politicians. Bruegel is well known for its media connections to the US and its prominent sponsors. Hence, it is a good example for the predominance of economic and

7 www.ec.europa.eu/citizenship

government interests within the younger generation of Brussels-based EU think tanks.

In contrast to the other, Friends of Europe (FoF) focuses strongly focusses on designing and hosting public key events in Brussels, e.g. the annual “State of Europe VIP roundtable” or the “Development Policy Forum”. It is well known for its quarterly published *Europe’s World*, a Europe-wide independent policy journal. The biggest part of its revenue comes from the corporate sector (46.3%). In 2013 FoF was allocated €125,817 from the Commission’s Europe for *Citizens Programme*.

The authors conclude that the growth of EU think tanks after the 1990s together with the ongoing crisis increased the competition for funding, public awareness, media coverage, and political attention. Yet, to focus only on this competition would be to miss the concurrent ‘need’ for collaboration and pooling of resources as well as expertise. Numerous are the many short-term partnerships among EU think tanks through jointly organised conferences, symposia and publications. For example, in January 2014 for the fifth consecutive year, the Brussels Think Tank Dialogue took place. No fewer than ten leading EU think tanks including CEPS, Friends of Europe and Bruegel have joined forces.

5. Towards Future Tanks

Looking back over the past years of EU integration and looking ahead at the more and more complicated and cross-linked conflicts, the saying of Albert Einstein comes into mind: “We cannot solve problems by using the same level of thinking we used when we created them.” As problem solvers, idea producers and solution finders, EU think tanks have the potential to stimulate debate about the future leadership and institutional shape of the EU. Yet, the main conclusion of this paper is that the growing subordination of knowledge to political and economic demand undermines the value of EU think tanks’ expertise.

EU think tanks are on the one hand very much *en vogue* but on the other hand they suffer from funding constraints, hence the need for specialisation. All three analysed EU think tanks, in fact, rely heavily on short-term donations, corporate and institutional membership fees and must therefore align their work with the market principle of funding. They are organised around centralised EU power, respectively Brussels and therefore lack to give rise to creative relationships among government, business and civil society.

The structures of yesterday's thought manifest in the structures of today's EU think tanks. EU think tanks try to drive into the future but get stuck in institutional frameworks of the past. Thinking is sensing and actualising emerging future possibilities instead of being locked into old tracks of operating. Hence we conclude that EU think tanks have to shift the dependency out of which they operate and reinvent themselves. They have to regain power over the way they are thinking, leaning into and presenting an emerging future (Scharmer und Kaufer 2013).

The organisational strength of these hybrid entities lies in the ability to work together and develop ideas and recommendations. By bridging the academic and policy-making world, think tanks perform a unique role for EU policy-makers and EU citizens. Yet, membership seems not to be open to "normal" EU citizens. Especially board members are mainly recruited from the economic or political elite. The creative and "normal" EU citizen's world is totally missing. Everything is still interlinked with old power structures.

Finally, the authors would like to draw attention to the fourth anchoring field of EU think tanks' activities, the media. In academic and popular discourse, the power of media in globalised societies is often discussed with the notion of "mediatisation". In our case this suggests, for example, that national media institutions are increasingly influential because they dictate the way issues are framed for public discussions on the national level. Consequently, EU think tank actors have to communicate via national media channels or social media tools to reach a wider public. Yet, neither a European public sphere exists nor do we have sufficient European media channels spreading the news in

different languages. Thus EU think tanks' output is dominated by an elitist discourse mainly held in English.

In a nutshell, it has to be argued that neither purely typological nor topological definitions can avoid creating the impression that EU think tanks need a total makeover. Thinking creates the world. Yet, outmoded think tanks patterns have produced mainstream thought. If think tanks want to find solutions for EU's problems, they need to update the thinking that underlies them; they need to update their own *logic* and *thought*. What the European project really needs are future tanks!

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