Think Tanks: Untangling the Gordian Knot of Policy Research in the Western Balkans

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Summary

Think tanks represent a viable approach to improving distorted policy processes in the Western Balkans. Though no cure-all, these independent centres of knowledge are helpful agents in promoting and monitoring the needed reforms, and empowering these organizations is crucial. Think tanks, with some help, can become leaders in providing quality control over and analyzing government data, envisioning the future of their societies; providing ad hoc accurate in-depth analysis; monitoring policy implementation and educating politicians and civil servants – their future customers. The article offers recommendations to international donors and Governments how to help the development of such organizations. Supporting independent think-tanks is not a shortcut to immediate progress, but a strategic move for long-term improvement of policy processes in Western Balkans.

Key words: think-thanks, international donors, policy process, research, Western Balkans

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A certain amount of opposition is a great help to a man. Kites rise against and not with the wind. Even a headwind is better than none. No man ever worked his passage anywhere in a dead calm.

- John Neal

To win one’s joy through struggle is better than to yield to melancholy.

- Andre Gide
People in the Western Balkans\(^1\) today have many reasons to be melancholic. Their prospects for a better future—i.e. the promise of accession to the European Union—has never seemed so distant. After almost two decades of bloody conflict and painful transition, they are still stuck with the same old leaders or their direct disciples. The market economy has slowly inched forward, but the vast majority of the population is yet to see even a hint of its benefits. Beset by decrepit infrastructure and low productivity, and without a common vision, citizens’ hope for a brighter future mostly translates into long queues outside foreign embassies.

Against this backdrop, the shrinking domestic elites and their foreign supporters still devoted to liberal democracy and a market economy face no shortage of proposed solutions—the question is how to put these into practice. The incoherence and fragmentation of current policy is dramatic. The issues of proper policy solutions and legislation have been superseded. With so many laws adopted and strategies drafted, the need for a common vision and/or societal and political consensus on key issues becomes ever more pressing. With no imminent EU accession process on the horizon, efforts at building democracies in these countries are losing momentum. Dreams of joining NATO and the EU have no meaning without first defining an overarching vision that both embraces the various integration processes and remains based on endogenous drivers and goals.

Without talking about what the region’s governments should do to improve their internal mechanisms and management, external actors can take the initiative and gain a more meaningful role. Domestic progressives and their international supporters must adapt and improve their strategies. By reducing expectations for immediate impact and fostering a better vision, competent local actors can claim ownership of these processes. There are very few actors who could improve the fallible policy processes in the region. Civil society organizations—empowered from outside—have only been successful in galvanizing activist zeal around a few issues, but they have failed to become recognized governmental partners in policy processes. With no aim to replace civil society, a new

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\(^1\) Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia belong to the geo-politico construct known as the West Balkans. Croatia, although geographically part of the region enjoys different political and economic prospects than the rest of the region, and therefore is exempted from this analysis.
generation of local policy research centres is breaking new ground and growing into a promising means to address current and future policy issues.

1. Think-tanks

1.1 Think-tanks in their homeland: powerhouses

The independent policy research centres we call think-tanks are an Anglo-Saxon phenomena. Founded in places where rational thought prevails, these organizations require the same environment to operate to their fullest capacity. In the US, with its relatively open policy-making process, fragmented executive and legislative powers, weak political parties and strong political entrepreneurship, these organizations have thrived in the last 20 years. Studies have revealed five critical conditions that have allowed this blossoming to take place. First, the public has well-regulated and effective access to data concerning legislation, and a liberal tax law allows for multiple funding sources for non-profit organizations, including think-tanks. Second, the political process is open to the kind of competition that builds a ‘market of ideas’. Third, there is a firm belief that ideas, innovation and reform lead to economic development. Under such circumstances, think-tanks have come to form a specialized niche with quality human resources. Mobility between think-tanks, universities and administration makes the entire field all the more dynamic. Fourth, philanthropic resources and a culture of philanthropy provide these organizations with a degree of financial stability. Finally, there are media outlets demanding in-depth policy analysis and thus bringing the issues to a larger audience.

1.2 West Balkans think-tanks: fighting the odds

Albania and the countries created after the demise of Yugoslavia show exactly the opposite conditions. Despite adopting freedom of information acts, public access to infor-
mation is still erratic. Government data is scarce and often corrupted, as political deals tend to be made in a murky world of connections and deal making. Consultations with stakeholders are cursory at best and do not galvanize public interest. The rush to introduce, adapt or approximate EU regulation into national legislation has supplanted any urge for innovation in policy development. Good governance is a mantra repeated in every ministry, but it is hardly given a second thought in practice. Implementation is not usually the point, as administrations may not even understand the laws the legislator has passed.

With a true market for policy still a distant prospect, all the countries in the region are plagued with low human capital. The few who work in the field are professors in the morning, government consultants in the afternoon and political advisors in the evening. While some of these individuals are excellent, we can hardly talk about mobility of human resources in the region. Philanthropy is limited to the provision of social services and there is no money for research entities. Finally, few media outlets engage in any serious investigative journalism or research. The few of those who do are often confined to the liberal elites—a dwindling minority in each of these countries. In such a situation, who would believe that think-tanks could influence policy?

1.3 Think-tanks: Success stories in the neighbourhood

A quick look into the think-tank scene of the new EU member states that acceded after 2004 raises the hope that those in the Western Balkans stand a good chance of success. Romanian and Bulgarian independent policy research centres played an important role in bringing their countries into the EU. Loved or hated, these policy research centres are recognized as legitimate policy actors by both policy makers and the public. However, explaining their successful contribution to the reform processes is far from straightforward. Ivan Krastev, a reputable Bulgarian policy analyst, reveals that
there is no correlation between the success of policy reforms and the existence of a strong think-tank sector in Central and Eastern Europe. He argues convincingly that the type of the constitutional regime and type of party systems do not explain why some East European countries benefited more from think-tanks than others. Despite their different political systems, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and Slovakia were greatly assisted by the think-tank community, whereas in Estonia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic successful reforms were implemented with almost no input from such organizations. In Bulgaria and Romania, the weakness of “competitors” in the semi-developed ‘market for policy ideas’ allowed think-tanks to step in.

2. The non-competitors

Similarly to Bulgaria and Romania, government-supported research institutes, political parties, universities, consultants, the business community—all are less skilled than think tanks in tackling matters of policy in the Western Balkans. Government administrations are incompetent; policy development capacities within political parties are weak; universities are unwilling and ill-prepared to engage in applied policy research. All this means that think-tanks are in a good position to fill the gap and provide badly needed policy research.

2.1. Government research units

Research units and institutes formed integral parts of many ministries at the federal and republic level in socialist Yugoslavia. There was a strong tradition, especially in Belgrade - the capital, of internal research and counsel. During the early 1990s, these structures were either shut down or downsized. Drastic cuts in funding, the new political elites’ lack of trust in these structures, and the irrelevance of their expertise in the ‘planned economy’ left these institutes with no legitimate place in the policy process. Of the remaining institutes in Zagreb, Sarajevo and Belgrade, the handful

3 The situation in Albania was different given that it was the most closed country in Europe during the fifty years of communism.
who have had some success limit their work to the fields of economic policy, security or foreign affairs. With the support of certain ministries, the last decade saw increased capacity-building for civil servants engaged in various stages of the policy process, including analysis. These exceptions notwithstanding, there has been no effort—not even sporadically—to create comprehensive government policy research centres.

2.2. Political party think-tanks

When German and other political foundations started their activities in the Balkans there was an expectation that some political parties would emulate their more developed cousins and create partisan think-tanks. This has not been the case. Two notable exceptions are G-17 in Serbia, where a group of liberal-minded people created a research centre-political movement, and the Ohrid Institute, a relatively new think-tank created by the Macedonian right. Other attempts have never come to fruition. Political parties did not sufficiently invest in developing internal research capacities, opting instead to create “analytical units”. While these units have an important role in shaping political party positions, their analysis is mostly confined to interpreting opinion polls (which they usually commission themselves). This “analysis” usually results in pamphlets wrought with party ideology and lofty political programmes during the lead-up to elections. Often enough, political parties hire domestic or foreign experts to draft their real political programmes. In parallel, populist, anti-intellectual parties find significant support in most of these countries. Given their anti-intellectual orientation, these parties show little or no interest in investing in policy research.

2.3. University-based research centres

Universities and their few research centres produce virtually no policy advice—the only exception being the innovative alumni research centre at the University of Sarajevo.
Governments across the board give few incentives to these centres to engage in research. Every state capital has a university with an economic institute and there are a couple of multidisciplinary research institutes, but they focus on teaching graduate courses and carrying out academic research. Some of their professors sometimes work as consultants or policy analysts, but always in processes led either by the government or international organizations. Researchers interested in policy have entered the world of politics, joined think-tanks, or left the country. Given the paranoia among the political elite that state universities could become strongholds of opposition or cradles of emerging social movements, governments usually exercise their influence and power on the (nominally independent) state-financed universities. This leaves very little hope for an opening-up in the near future. Private universities, although increasing in number and attracting more students every day, are still focused on the lucrative business of offering higher education. The founders of Ri-Invest in Kosovo are among the few in the Western Balkans to have founded both a think-tank and a university under the same umbrella (though their work and management are kept separate).

2.4. The business community and consulting firms

In Western societies, the policy market would be unthinkable without an army of business lobbyists and research institutes. While advice from businesses is interest-bound, it nevertheless leads to new data and new policy alternatives. During the first years of transition in the Western Balkans, it was widely believed that businesses did not have the capacity to engage in such activities and would need to grow and consolidate first. Now, however, businessmen have learned that “non-intellectual arguments” bring immediate returns, especially when backed by subtle or not-so-subtle bribes to local policy makers. At best, they hire “experts” who sit on governmental commissions to secure the interest of a particular
business community. Instead of developing lobbying practices and a market for business-related policy advice, companies have developed strategies for giving kickbacks.

With the arrival of funds from the EU and similar contract-offering intergovernmental organizations, consulting agencies have mushroomed. They mainly serve as local partners to international organizations or foreign firms that win international contracts. These firms, like individual specialists, do not set any policy agenda on their own. They engage in specific stages of a policy cycle by drafting identification studies, providing technical analysis or by evaluating a given policy, government programme or law. Though churning out products with policy relevance, most of the specialists’ intervention to the policy processes is short-term and limited to the narrow scope of their expertise. The UNDP and the World Bank typically hire such specialists to produce a specific study they require. The European Commission has an even more elaborate apparatus to approach policy development in the region. Advocacy and distribution of findings lie almost exclusively within those institutions, leaving little space for local ownership.

3. Think-tanks in the Western Balkans: areas to intervene

While several excellent think-tanks have emerged in the Western Balkans, these organizations are yet to earn such a reputation as those in neighbouring countries. Think-tanks are not omnipotent organizations that can mitigate all the maladies of the distorted policy process in the Western Balkans. Moreover, both in size and volume of work they can only cover a few areas. Still they are an untapped resource for improving policy making on several accounts.

Reliable data. The entire region needs reliable data. Furthermore, existing data has to be objectively interpreted and checked for signs of tweaking (by politically controlled and sometimes manipulated bureaus of statistics). While think-tanks do not lead this process, by focusing on evidence-
based research and good governance they can become important gatekeepers in securing reliable data.

Vision. The Forum 2025 in Kosovo and Albania 2020 are two initiatives led by think-tanks that look beyond the current issues. Such bold and unconventional thinking should transcend the political bickering and embedded interests of the local elites with their short-term plans. Each country in the region, to some extent, needs better long-term planning and a vision for its societal development. With the increasing fatigue over European integration, the need for a new vision would inevitably grow in importance among policy makers.

Quick, ad hoc accurate analysis. In the Western Balkans, many analysts and donors alike have devised their analytical instruments to follow a heuristic model of policy making. However, most legislative steps have been achieved in discrete, often erratic steps. The entire process of initial study and consultation with stakeholders (if done at all), debate in parliament and voting on a law sometimes takes less than a month from start to finish. Such a situation requires a different approach and different analytical tools. Responding to this trend requires permanent independent research centres that are able to provide immediate analysis and advice.

Local ownership of policy processes. There is strong foreign pressure for a myriad of policy changes. However national governments tend to cold-shoulder the substance of international efforts, and are mostly only interested primarily in getting funds and scoring political points. Lamentably, international organizations and donors alike are neither consistent nor strategic in their efforts and demands. Their performance needs to be monitored in order to better inform their programmatic development. Because policy changes and reforms will remain donors’ priorities, a local critical voice is needed.

Continuous monitoring of policy implementation. This is the Achilles heel of the Western Balkans policy process. With most energy spent in putting issues on the policy agenda and adopting laws, governments – all of them coalitions – miserably fail to follow up their own legislation. Monitoring budgets and interpreting how much of the declared programmes...
and adopted laws have translated into concrete budget allocations is an area where think tanks already thrive. By forging coalitions with NGOs and receiving support from government and international donors alike, think tanks would become the main driving force in monitoring implementation of government policies.

**Grooming future ‘customers’**. There is a lot of fear of and little will amongst politicians and civil servants to engage “outsiders” in policy processes. Their many excuses for opacity notwithstanding, this group must be groomed to become future users of quality policy products—a dual process that requires simultaneously producing quality analysis and creating a culture of its use.

### 4. Western Balkans think-tanks: competitive advantages

**Fresh blood**. The region has witnessed the return of many Western-educated graduates. Equipped with rigorous academic knowledge, these young and talented people understand and utilize modern research methods; produce quality briefs, studies and reports; and complement their analysis with comprehensive communication and advocacy strategies. There is growing evidence in Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia of these people creating a new generation of think-tanks in the region. Embedded in evidence-based policy analysis, their recommendations are gaining in importance even in the declining democratic environment of the region.

**New media**. The internet has proven to be a levelling tool by providing an alternative space for debate in the rest of the world. In the Western Balkans, its influence is slowly growing and challenging conventional media. Serbia, with its vibrant blogosphere, is probably the best example of online politically engaged analysis that matches or exceeds the quality of print media. Albeit shyly new think-tankers are both supporting and making the most of this trend.

**International think-tanks as groundbreakers**. Some local politicians already follow and listen to the analysis and policy recommendations produced by international policy cen-
International voices have acted as groundbreakers by getting local politicians to pay attention to evidence-based research. Given that the internationals mainly analyze foreign policy, security issues and EU accession, they take on the role of partners rather than competitors to local centres.

‘Brussels factor’. Although the carrot of EU accession is disappearing beyond the horizon, civil society and think-tanks could still effectively use the European Commission to leverage national reforms in the region. When embedded in evidence-based policy analysis, the recommendations of the think tanks are gaining importance even in the declining democratic environment of the region.

5. WG think-tanks: their Achilles foot

Think tanks in the region are underdeveloped. Their potential is greater than what they are able to deliver now. However, their first and most important drawback is their great financial and programmatic dependence on foreign donors and international institutions. Second, their attempts to emulate their Western European peers have had limited success owing to the different policy environment in which they operate. Finally, their capacity to carry out quality research and analytical work needs to be improved.

What is the think-tanks raison d’être? Many think tanks in the region, regardless of their past achievements, leave this question unanswered. Others offer hazy answers such as “our centre exists for the benefit of the country” and for the “advancement of the policy agendas and inclusion of all stakeholders”. A far better answer would help differentiate between a public policy think tank with a clear vision and a consultancy firm, thus clarifying the blurred line which many policy makers do not draw.

Who are their primary constituencies for each and single policy product: politicians, media, other experts, public, state institutions, international donors or political parties? Think tanks in the Western Balkans face a dual reality in terms of potential clients. On the one hand, international organizations and donors understand and underwrite policy work according to certain standards. On the other hand, policy
centres have to provide their policy products to local politicians who often are neither interested nor usually qualified to understand high quality policy papers. This duality calls for centres to develop products to cater for both needs. If possible this would necessitate production of two sets of policy products with the same aim.

Undertaking policy research with in-house capacity or managing policy research and processes. This is the ongoing question of many think-tanks, given they operate in a small policy market. It is a double-edged sword. Some centres, aware of the limited expertise available in their countries on many subjects and the impossibility to hire established experts on a permanent basis, have specialized in managing policy processes.5

6. Recommendations6

There is an evident trend of think-tank consolidation in West Balkans. Those who offer relevant analysis are becoming increasingly sought after and are starting, albeit painfully slowly, to find a market for their policy ideas among the local elites. The international community, while aware of the need to develop local ownership, has failed to employ these organizations. Although no cure-all, they could help to channel better some top-down messages from the elites but also to counteract some claims of the populists in the region. Here is a non-exhaustive list of measures that could help facilitate such processes and unleash this potential.

6.1 Specific recommendations to donors financing think-tanks:

- Ensure greater ownership over the policy agenda by local think-tanks by involving them in the programmatic planning process or by awarding multi-year core and institutional grants. These grants should:
  - secure mid-term stability, ensure capacity for ad-hoc analysis and support internal capacity development
  - foster quality control
• Put a stronger emphasis on monitoring the implementation of laws and budgets rather than developing new policies
• Support transformation successfully—each underwritten policy project should contain a clear strategy for change, not only a strong research component
• Acknowledge that public policy research is pricey by Western Balkans standards (compared to supporting civil activism).

6.2 Specific recommendations to governments:

Ministry by ministry, sector by sector, governments need to engage stakeholders beyond their current one-way consultancy in policy processes. While there is no doubt that a government is held accountable for its policies, they should design policy processes as a two-way consultation process and in partnership with citizens. This would allow greater inclusion of think-tanks along with other organizations.

• Institute a mandatory cost-benefit analysis for each proposed law and a monitoring system for implementation
• Increase funds in each ministry for evidence-based research in its sector; allow for independent monitoring of awarded contracts
• Sign up to or encourage the use of available EU funds for research such as Framework Programme VII
• Send government officials to Bulgaria and Romania so they may learn from the positive experiences of working with think-tanks there
• As part of the state regulation for due policy process (already the case in all countries except Kosovo and Montenegro) introduce state funding for government research institutes.

6.3 Specific recommendations to think tanks

• Develop their own long-term vision and use international standards for quality of research
• Implement all the advice and recommendations given to government and/or other clients (being transparent, accountable etc.), i.e. practice what you preach!
• Shift from opinion-driven to evidence-based policy analysis
• Clearly make a distinction (in terms of image, as well as type of work undertaken) between being a think tank and a consultancy firm
• Develop in-house research capacity as much as the local market allows but also specialize in managing policy processes
• Make a clear distinction between activism by civil society organizations and targeted advocacy. A think tank should strive for the later.
• Network with other think tanks to build up common ground and increase legitimacy, quality control, and influence
• No matter how trivial it may sound, regional cooperation has to be the priority of these think tanks. The local policy markets are too small to provide sufficient evidence and learning examples.

7. Conclusion

Think-tanks are already helpful agents in promoting and analyzing some of the reforms, but their role and importance could be multiplied. In addition to the recommendations outlined here for governments and international donors, local think-tanks need to improve the quality of their work and devise strategies for greater impact on the policy process. International donors have tried to impose the introduction of many reforms and managed to reach the implementation phase where most of those have miserably failed. However there is a now need to review the entire system and culture of policy making in the region. Strengthening evidence-based policy research and promoting a culture of its active use is an important starting point. Some governments in the region have been using analysis by think tanks sporadically. Unfortunately, this was mainly restricted to those areas where analysis supported the government’s opinions. The governments also have to accept the more critical views that come
out of the research. Unlike campaigning NGOs, think-tanks usually engage in constructive criticism by suggesting alternative solutions. Supporting them is a means to improving policy processes in the Western Balkans that both international donors and governments cannot afford to overlook.

Reference:


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