



Think tanks in Bulgaria Today

by *Deyan Kyuranov*

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

A project of the Centre for Liberal Strategies

**Funded by the Think Tank Fund of Open Society
Foundation**



Think Tanks in Bulgaria

Introduction

Eight think tanks were chosen for this study. The basic criterion was political importance, present or, in two cases, past. All of them are based in Sofia: no think tanks of significance have emerged in provincial Bulgaria. There are both “old” and “new”: five date from the early 1990s; the remaining three were founded in the 2000s. A question of major interest was whether there was a perceived think tank crisis: six think tanks declare that they are not in crisis and two that they are: of those, one is functioning only as a one-man show, the other has transformed itself into a university program.

1. Basic context information

Development and funding

The crisis itself is being seen as due mainly to a dramatic drop in international funding and political interest in the region; the successful remedies have been consultancy work (for the Bulgarian state and for the EU), getting an endowment, and engaging in advocacy. All three solutions are relatively recent phenomena and mark a second stage of the development of think tanks in Bulgaria, beginning in the 2000s: in the 1990s, consulting the state would have sharply raised the issue of independence; endowments were sought after, but not offered; and advocacy was the territory of civic groups, not of think tanks.

To understand the logic of this two-stage development we should make a brief overview of think tank history. Think tanks in Bulgaria didn't start as think tanks, but as pro-democratic-change NGOs. In the beginning of the 1990s there was in Bulgaria a small group of academics or ex-academics, who were pro-change, saw themselves as capable and innovative, didn't want to become party politicians and didn't want to be impeded by academic bureaucracy. It turned out that there was international donor's money for democratization work. Early attempts to find support from the local emerging business proved futile: businessmen were interested in such NGOs only as means of connection to the new political class. Besides, legitimate business at that time had little money, and the business that had amassed money quickly was shady to fully criminal. Pro-democratic NGOs as a whole managed to orient themselves in that rather new situation, and steered clear of such business. As to the state, first, at the time it had no money for democratic innovation, it was concentrating on keeping basic services

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

working, and failing in that (e.g. the country went into default at a point). Therefore the early pro-demo NGOs were funded exclusively from abroad, first from the United States and then, on a much smaller scale, Germany. As one interviewee said, “In the 1990s, [Bulgarian] democrats spoke English.”

The American state donated via the United States Information Agency (e.g. for a series of nationally representative political polls) and also via USAID; there were also programs administered by the American Embassy. Soon followed programs of the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute. Private donors were headed by George Soros, who founded and amply funded a Bulgarian branch of his *Open Society* foundations network. On a smaller scale followed the Mott foundation, the Heritage foundation etc. The German foundations that appeared were political party foundations, such as the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (liberals), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (social democrats) and, later, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Christian democrats). On a smaller scale yet operated the British Westminster Foundation and the British Council. Scandinavian human rights organizations supported human rights and ethnic reconciliation work (and so did the Americans). At a later stage, the MATRA program of the Dutch state became a long term serious donor. Other countries such as France had some small programs administered by their embassies.

In the 2000s foreign funding gradually diminished. To the extent that international donors gave grounds for their change of priorities, they referred to (a) democratization, which had apparently reached a point of no return, so Bulgarian society would continue democratically on its own, and (b), that Bulgaria was on its way to joining the European Union, so democratization processes it would naturally be supported by the Union. Both arguments were basically valid. The facts of life, such as that local private funding was still negligible, and that getting state money would cause a think tank to lose its independent behavior at least in part, could not counter another fact of life, namely that Bulgaria would continue as a democracy. True, it would probably be a democracy of lower quality without the independent work of NGOs and think tanks, but that was apparently acceptable to international donors and would have to be accepted by grantees. The Open Society Fund scaled down funding, and finally the Foundation was transformed into the Open Society Institute, which is basically a think tank, but continues to act as local redistributor of international funds in a small way. Most other US foundations have either moved out, or continue to fund, in a limited way, old local NGO and think tank partners. The EU provides funds for NGO and think tank work, but there are two basic problems with that funding. Firstly, while an average think tank project would cost from 10 to 50 thousand euros, EU average funding is in the range of 100 to 300 thousand euros. This forces think tanks to form consortiums. The result is that projects of individual think tanks that would question practices of the government, or, God forbid, the EU, tend to become streamlined and less critical at the pre-submission stage: the group acts as collective censor and suppresses anything that would diminish the

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

chance of funding. One interviewee was indignant: “What’s more, it turns out that there are NGOs [members of the consortium] that actually love to [position themselves] as “the EU voice!?” Another said: “EU [funding] encourages consultancy, not policy analysis.” The EU was accused of lacking think tank culture. “The EU is partisan and corporative. It is founded on the idea that the clerks know best and do their job.”

Secondly, the EU funds are mostly distributed via the Bulgarian government. In the early 2000s the EU was warned against such a move by Bulgarian NGOs and think tanks: they claimed that (a) being aware of the massive malpractices of governmental officials, they believe that their independence would be hampered if they are forced to apply to the Bulgarian administrators for European money; and (b) that the government would encourage the creation of a horde of “GONGOs”, which would be awarded grants without adequate monitoring of performance. The EU didn’t take heed, and both negative predictions were fulfilled with a vengeance. Some nationally important think tanks and NGOs ceased to exist; others had to be content with less innovative work in order to survive. Whether this has been a factor in the fall in the quality of Bulgarian democracy is a matter of opinion; however, that the quality has fallen is also a fact of life in the 2010s.

Areas and ideology of engagement

The work of the NGOs so funded has been described as “pro-democratic” or even more widely as “pro change”, because initially it meant engagement in all possible fields and doing all possible things. At that early stage NGOs would be traditionally criticized by donors for not being focused, and get the standard retort: “This needs to be done, and if we don’t do it, nobody will.” Until the mid-1990s that was true enough. Around that time professionalization of NGO members began, and some of the “do all” NGOs started specializing as think tanks.

NGOs-turned-think tanks in Bulgaria started on the *sous-entendu* that they understood democracy and democratization better than anyone: the state administration, the political parties and the people; and that besides understanding democratic change, they wanted it. They were also the first to engage in extensive learning about the state of Bulgarian society through a series of polls and anthropological surveys, so they were the first to base their policy suggestions on data, and not simply on ideology or hunches (as at the time operated most politicians). As behavior, that entailed having a public position on all hot political issues, plus identifying new issues and introducing them into public debate. That pattern worked effectively for most of the 1990s. As a result, it many people both in and out the think tank community would start to regard it as the ideal behavioral model for Bulgarian think tanks in general. Therefore, when a think tank would opt for less politicized work, even if that work still

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

contributed to the public good – it would be regarded by the rest of the think tank community with suspicion, if not stigmatized as a deviant by the more militant.

However, in the 2000s the “ideal think tank behavioral model”, for it was becoming progressively inadequate. We should stress that we are not speaking a change of paradigm here: to all intents and purposes the general think tank paradigm, which defines think tanks the world over, has remained, and its basic rationale still works. The changes in question have taken place at the behavioral level: some of the patterns that were no longer effective had to be replaced. Central here is the relation to the Bulgarian state. We’ll now follow this topic throughout the concrete think tank case studies, and recapitulate after.

Five of the interviewed eight think tanks shall be treated in some detail below; the remaining three, together with other, non-interviewed think tanks and relevant NGOs, will be considered briefly in a subsequent section to supply more context.

The think tanks to be reported on in detail shall be divided in two subgroups, three in one and two in the other; the reasons for that sub-grouping are given below.

2. Case studies

Group I: the evolution of non-specialized NGOs

The three think tanks considered here illustrate the structural, policy and work ethic changes that NGOs-become-think tanks underwent. The Center for the Study of Democracy changed voluntarily in the early 1990s towards more specialization; the Centre for Liberal Strategies didn’t change significantly, and appears to be compelled to change now, yet still is free to choose its exact course of its change; and there is the story of a non-specialized donor NGO, the Open Society Fund-Sofia, which in the mid-2000s was forced by its founder to stop being a donor, and has chosen to transform itself into a think tank with a donor edge.

Center for the Study of Democracy

The Center for the Study of Democracy has been the first and longest living Bulgarian NGO and think tank. CSD was founded in the end of 1989. It was the first NGO in Bulgaria to start doing political analysis, and also the first to opt out of “hot” political issues in 1992. At CSD they describe their own evolution in the following terms: “Born as a think-tank, the Center for the Study of Democracy has

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

evolved into policy development through dialogue and partnership”. It would probably be more accurate to say that it was born as a “do-all-pro-change” NGO with a think tank side.

Initially, CSD was composed of humanities graduates, most of whom were connected to the Institute for History of the Bulgarian Communist Party. These people declared a pro-democratic agenda and on its strength co-opted ex-dissidents that were dropping out of active politics in 1990 and 1991, plus some democratically minded academics and area specialists connected with the Foreign Ministry. Aggressive and effective management secured the CSD comfortable premises on a low lease from the state, as well as project money from international donors (mostly US) that was enough to keep the office and pay regular, though not high, salaries at a time of general financial crisis in the country.

Initially CSD indeed engaged in “everything”: nationally representative political polls were undertaken, analyzed and meditated; workshops and conferences were organized, on public issues central at the time, such as inter-ethnic peace, Balkan relations, privatization problems etc.; basic books in political science and economics were translated and published, etc. As a side activity, CSD organized the Bulgarian broadcasting of the Voice of America in 1991; under another name and with a changed format, this radio station still goes on and enjoys popularity. There was even a project for starting a national political newspaper: it didn’t work, showing for the first time that even in 1991 there was a limit to NGO initiatives. The think tank part of the activities went according to the formula “analysis of the political situation on the basis of rigorous research”, which was first practiced in CSD. These analyses, based on CSD-produced political polling data, gave CSD a very high profile. It should be borne in mind that until 1992 CSD was the *only* NGO in Bulgaria to be doing such things. In that period it had no serious competition from other political analysts, mostly connected to political parties and thus seen as biased.

- To remind us briefly of the situation when CSD appeared: CSD was built on the ideology that a person with academic training could find a source to finance his or her most cherished project ideas – provided they were relevant to democratization in Bulgaria. That sounds trivial today and already sounded trivial in 1993; but in 1990-1991 it was revolutionary. For academics it meant freedom from inane research topics, mutilated by fearful colleagues under the stern eye of the Party and the political police. There were two astonishing components here: first, one did not have to go through a state bureaucracy (N.B., until then the Bulgarian state, viz. the Communist Party, would be the sole instance that could finance research). And second, one did not have to choose and formulate the subject so as to fit the donor. If a donor wouldn’t support a project on its merits, one just had to keep trying until the “right” donor was found. Moreover, the fact that such donors *never* even attempted to tailor the research methods or its outcomes in any way soon dispelled the ubiquitous initial suspicions to the

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

contrary. All this made that new, think-tank and NGO research, a “field of freedom” for the ex-socialist academics.

In 1992 there was a policy crisis in CSD that evolved into an identity crisis; at the time it was referred by some as a clash between “researchers” and “bureaucrats”; maybe more accurate would be to call these groups “researchers” and “managers”. The main issue was whether the CSD should continue addressing the hot political issues of the day, or opt for a politically lower profile which would, hopefully, give it greater stability in a country of continuing political turmoil. The “managers” won the vote, and four leading researchers left CSD. Subsequently they founded NGOs of their own, and one business. While CSD had been a meeting place for capable civic-minded individuals, among its main political achievements was the monitoring of the democratization process (through the poles mentioned, and also economic studies). Also, ground-breaking work was done in the field of e the polls and their analysis in the media; also, a series of studies, conferences and publications on inter-ethnic relations, which at the time were especially precarious.

- That was before the first Yugoslav war. In Bulgaria we had reasons to expect an ethnic war in 1989-1990 and many of the early think tank research went into studying the situation, gauging the risk level and suggesting action to lower it. That special attention went on until the mid-1990s, when continuous survey results and other indicators all seemed to show that ethnic tensions in Bulgaria had subsided well below civil war level.

After 1992, CSD could be used as a case study for a think tank guided practically entirely by a managerial rationale. It should be noted that in the 1990s there was no donor pressure for think tank policy change, as there was in the 2000s: funds were ample, and on the basis of its good name, good management and acquired expertise CSD was free to evolve in practically any direction. It gradually evolved towards less politicized issues, and was apparently happy to pay for that by losing its high media profile and most of its public influence; it looked like a case of voluntary political self-marginalization. On the other hand, it developed further its good relations with international donors, while not sustaining criticism from the Bulgarian political class. At a point CSD engineered what at the time looked like a comeback into “hot” politics: it was entrusted with a momentous project of monitoring of corruption and the organized crime connected with it. It turned out that the way CSD addressed that problem was mainly to study it and publish the results; then suggest some changes in the legal frame. CSD apparently worked on the understanding that it was dealing with a problem that it could neither resolve as a result of its program; it would monitor it, which of itself is a worthwhile activity.

- That appeared strange to other contemporary think tanks, as it didn’t follow the “classical pattern” in which one chose to deal exclusively with problems that were resolvable – but the

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

actors involved didn't know the solution – however, the think tank did, suggested the solution and the problem became history! At the time it wasn't understood that the expert approach, along the problem resolution approach, could also be a legitimate think tank activity.

Currently, CSD continues its expert monitoring and legal research in fields such as corruption and organized crime; also re the treatment of immigrants and disadvantaged groups, and energy security. An achievement is the input of CSD in drafting the law that established a national Ombudsman; other legal changes to do with corruption and organized crime have been introduced. Besides, CSD acts often as facilitator and mediator: between experts and the government, between various governmental structures, between Bulgarian and EU bureaucrats. Organizationally it continues to stand very well. The CSD interviewee said that they went through a period of change and some cash problems between 2005 and 2007; but they have managed to switch “to European standards” (said the interviewee), thus from international to predominantly EU funding, and “have now much more money than in the end of the 1990s”. An interviewee from another think tank commented that “in practice they have a core fund” (without having one formally), which rings true and differentiates CSD from most other think tanks and NGOs which, even after surviving the 2006-7 NGO crisis, have been experiencing financial insecurity ever since.

It could be argued whether the price for such security and stability has been big or small, dependent on one's system of coordinates. For example, it is a fact that CSD would refrain from criticizing the Bulgarian government on issues of general interest, while giving it expert advice on concrete problems (which inevitably entails some concrete criticism, direct or indirect); it would all the more refrain from criticizing the EU government (but think tanks operating in Brussels refrain from doing that either, while also would engage in concrete criticism). An interviewee from another think tank said re CSD en passant: “They help [Bulgarian state] institutions which they should [work to] change.” This may be so, and we can consider whether “If you can't/won't change them, help them!” can be a viable think tank motto; in private life it undoubtedly can.

Centre for Liberal Strategies

The Centre for Liberal Strategies was created in 1994 as an NGO. Its core team had already been doing think tank work together since 1992 (e.g. political analysis based on polls) under the auspices of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, so as independent group it had a flying start. CLS had on its staff political scientists and macro economists, so it followed both the politics and economics of the transition. Findings were reported to the public via the media, which gave the CLS a high profile. It had good ties to the leading non-socialist politicians, and would act as an informal adviser. All this

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

made CLS probably the most successful and influential think tank of the transition period, which ended around 2000. After that CLS has continued with projects aimed at improving the quality of Bulgarian democracy, which, however, has kept deteriorating. Informal advice to leading politicians was no longer viable. Besides, for the last couple of years CLS' main public communicator and idea man, Ivan Krastev, took a job abroad. These external and internal factors combined have diminished the influence of CLS in the 2000s, despite the fact that staff members maintain a high media presence and work done continues to be of high quality. All this has put CLS on the lookout for new think tank strategies and opportunities, adequate to the Bulgarian 2010s.

CLS, unlike CSD, which started as a do-all NGO, from the beginning worked as a think tank (although it started calling itself that a bit later). However, it started as a do-all think tank. Problems were addressed in order of their appearance and political importance for the transition; such problems sprang from various political areas, and CLS would address them all in turn. To illustrate:

- A standing problem of the 1990s was whether the transition was on track, and at what social cost. So CLS designed and undertook a series of yearly sociological surveys, which combined nationally representative quantitative polls and parallel anthropological observations (an in-depth approach that nobody else attempted). The theory was that the deficiencies of both methods should cancel each other out; the theory probably worked, for the forecasts of CLS were repeatedly proved accurate.
- Based on such survey forecasts, CLS was certain that the pro-democratic opposition would lose the Presidency if it went to the election with two candidates, and that's what was happening. So CLS persuaded the opposition to organize primaries. The primaries happened, and the primaries' winner went on to win the subsequent presidential election. This had been the first, and manifestly successful, attempt to use this American invention anywhere in Europe. Since, this mechanism has been used repeatedly by the leading political parties of Bulgaria. (At CLS they believe this to have been their biggest-impact action.)
- At the end of 1997 Bulgaria really started its NATO membership procedure, and Russia tried to stop it by stopping delivery of gas to Bulgaria. Official attempts to resolve the crisis didn't work. Then CLS used its ties with a Russian think tank of similar ideology, which was influential with the Russian government, to call a conference in Sofia on Bulgarian-Russian relations. The conference was attended by the relevant decision makers from both countries, who between sessions ironed out the problem. Bulgaria went on to join NATO, and got its gas at a reasonable price.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

- CLS had repeatedly warned against the possibility of hyperinflation due to government overspending. When the hyperinflation happened end of 1996, CLS defended publicly the introduction of a Currency Board; it was introduced, and an economist from CLS served on it.
- In the spring of 2000 it became clear to CLS through its Serbian partners that the Milosevic regime was getting unstable, but everyone feared a very bloody transition. CLS organized in the summer a conference, in which the main actors of the Bulgarian and Macedonian transitions participated in person, in order to persuade the Serbs that if bloodless transitions had happened to their Balkan neighbors, it could happen to them too. Of course that conference hardly counted as factor when the Serbian transition happened bloodlessly in the autumn of 2000, but CLS were proud to have sent the right message at the right moment.
- In 2002, attempting to gauge the rational/irrational motives in voting behavior, CLS introduced the “national deliberative poll” technology (developed in the USA) on the issue of “Fighting Crime in Bulgaria”. This was the first time such a technology was used in Eastern Europe. It proved successful, and was repeated in 2007 on the issue of Roma policies. A TV version of the deliberative poll subsequently became a traditional weekly show on the Public TV National Channel.
- In 2005, CLS adapted a Dutch methodology for a pre-electoral Internet test of voter party preference, based on party positions on key issues. It worked, and has been used in all elections since. The “vote tracker” methodology was also introduced, allowing citizens to check how parties had in fact voted key issues in the incumbent Parliament. Both instruments have been meditated.

At present four of CLS’ staff also teach at Sofia University (economics, political science, sociology); there is an ex-ambassador following EU affairs and an ex-dissident following civic movements. People have come to CLS from governmental positions (like the ex-ambassador mentioned), and left CLS, for a while, to assume governmental positions or to become NGO executives. Thus, CLS can draw from a varied and up-to-date experience, which enables it to “pursue academic depth while at the same time reacting to the current problems of the political, economic and social life in Bulgaria and taking into account the context of today's global world.” To a large extent, CLS has remained a “do all” think tank. Recent activities cover an array of issues such as democratization of post-communist countries, corruption, populism, anti-Americanism and the “new world order”.

CLS works outside Bulgaria too (Russian, Serbian and Macedonian connections were already mentioned). Based on its Balkan expertise (cooperation with ex-Yugoslav NGOs and design and execution of all Balkan political surveys), CLS served as the secretariat of the International Commission on the Balkans and published its analytical report "The Balkans in Europe's future." It

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

monitored the transition process in Georgia, and has acquired substantial expertise on the strange transition in Belarus. But its most lasting foreign interest is Russia. Research is carried out, conferences made and papers and books chapters produced. For several years now CLS has engaged in facilitating understanding between Putin's Russia and the West, organizing discussions involving politicians and political analysts.

Besides producing a continuous flow of articles on Bulgarian political and economic topics, CLS members would publish more ambitious opuses. To illustrate, the latest (January 2013) is a brochure by Ivan Krastev on some fundamental problems of contemporary democracy. The most momentous has been a three volume study of pre-communist Bulgarian capitalism, based on meticulous documental research which took its author, CLS macro-economist Roumen Avramov, about 15 years to complete.

For funding, CLS relies mainly on diverse international donors, though occasionally it gets some domestic granting. Since 2006-7 its financial constraints have become chronic. So far it has never come to the point of closing down or to being forced to lay off staff, and perspectives are that it will continue to exist/subsist in the observable future. But the main problem has been that CLS can no longer be free to choose work topics on the basis of their political relevance only; a strong component of donor relevance has mixed in. CLS is endeavoring to change this state of affairs; alternatives are being weighed, e.g. whether to move from a "do all" attitude to specialization, limited to certain areas. Of such choices more below, in the "Strategies for the future" section.

The Open Society Institute

OSI-Sofia is an old NGO, but a new think tank. As a national Open Society Foundation it was established by George Soros in 1990, and for the subsequent 15 years dominated the Bulgarian donor landscape, covering any activity that would be deemed as contributing to the 'opening' of Bulgarian society. On the whole, it justified its creation: when it left off, thanks to its support there was a community of NGOs in Bulgaria where there had been virtually nothing of the sort; it co-funded new universities, gave scholarships for humanities education abroad, supported social research, human rights, ethnic studies and advocacy (e.g. through a massive Roma program), public debate and the arts. Unlike some other Soros foundations in Eurasia, it has never been connected with public scandal. It had a good image for a small part of the elite and a bad image for everybody else (being non-Bulgarian and also incomprehensible in its purpose) – but that didn't hinder its work. (To note, it has given support at some point to all of the think tanks included in this study.) In the 2000s it started a slow and reluctant transition from donor to research institute, which was complete around 2009; since, it has

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

emphasized policy analysis and effectively has become a think tank. The image problem of the Foundation has been inherited by the Institute and has made it very careful in its public activity.

- After a period of a *few months* after the fall of Bulgaria's dictator (November 1989), there was a popular consensus for "opening" of the country, and "everything Western was good, and everything American was best". After the "open" period was over, the bunker *Weltanschauung* prevalent under communism reigned again, showing that it had strong roots in a mentality that in many aspects was still traditional. Gradually communist closedness evolved into the closedness of nationalism: "everything un-Bulgarian was bad, and everything American was worst". Nationalism in Bulgaria has been on the rise since the beginning of the 2000s. NGOs and think tanks, for reasons of self-preservation if not of principle, repeatedly tried to oppose that trend (e.g. explaining their aims and achievements through the media) - and failed utterly. People didn't know what think tanks were doing and how they were financed, and when told didn't want to hear. Think tank-produced information and analysis, coming through the media, were accepted gratefully and influenced public opinion, but the credit went to the media, not to the think tanks. For academics who remained unconnected to civil society organizations, people working in such were "comprador intelligentsia"; for the public at large, simply foreign spies. And OSI was the worst of the pack: financed by an international financial mega-speculator, it acted as the spies' paymaster. Only aggressive nationalists would use such language in the national media; but most of their audience silently thinks the same.

OSI is now active in the domains of public policy and governance (home and EU). Its legal program deals with human rights (especially rights of migrants), and suggests legal changes in the framework of the penitentiary system. From the foundation days it has inherited expertise on the Roma, so it is dealing with Romany integration, higher education and related problematique. More general research and monitoring is undertaken also, e.g. of hate speech or the ranking of Bulgaria in the European Catch-up Index. Output is in the form of reports, conferences, publication of brochures and handbooks. It has know how in the field of project design and fund management, and has advised applicants and donors.

Lately, OSI is making a comeback as donor, or rather as manager of the European Economic Area grant for Bulgaria. Thus, its long experience as grant giver has been activated again. There is a program for NGO support in the following areas: democracy, human rights and good governance; social inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups; sustainable development and environment protection; and capacity building for NGOs. As evident, the aim is to cover practically the whole area of NGO activity, resembling the Soros foundation days, albeit on a smaller scale.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

OSI is the only Bulgarian think tank that has an endowment (from George Soros). It has made it financially independent of the state or the EU. In the case of OSI that independence does not as a rule entail serious political criticism of the powers to be. This is, naturally, partly due to the lack of public legitimacy mentioned above: what most think tanks experienced recently during the protests, for OSI has been a chronic problem. However, the interviewee from OSI pointed to a factor potentially nefarious for all think tanks, which has made OSI modify its publication strategy.

- According to the OSI interviewee, they feel free enough to communicate their views, but it comes at a higher price than before: there is a much higher chance that a think tank's position may evoke an adverse reaction of such magnitude as to compromise the cause itself. To illustrate: the (state) Antidiscrimination Commission published a discriminatory text; reaction on the web was so negative, that it worked to mobilize people in favor of discrimination and gave the Commission a popular bad name. "In the 90 there was a liberal structure [in Bulgarian society]: media, parties, think tanks all shared a liberal attitude. Nowadays liberalism is in a coma; liberal think tanks are therefore under pressure, their existence uncertain in the observable future." Liberalism has been replaced by all-permeating populism, which for Bulgaria means nationalism. Moreover, with the democratization of public space on the internet, it is very easy for any layman to destroy a position, which has taken a lot of expert research and analysis to produce. On the other hand, ICT, which has effectively replaced the traditional media, has compromised the classic notion that a new idea is needed in order to justify civic mobilization: "Today it is much easier to mobilize than to formulate a new idea; mobilization overtakes thinking". Besides, in the relative anonymity of cyberspace any kind of idea can appear: "You can formulate and disseminate any idea; but to *promote* an idea and *dominate* the discourse is impossible." The issue is crucial for think tanks, for if a think tank doesn't publish, it becomes meaningless: "Think tank means publication – not practice [e.g. advocacy]. OSI sees itself as a more expert or academic-type think tank, which engages in research to satisfy an informed curiosity. However, with some of their publications, the interviewee said, "We have occasionally mobilized civic activity – against us!"

The solution according to the interviewee wouldn't be to lose the courage of one's convictions – but to make the publication strategy an integral part of the project, research the communication milieu, its dynamic and conjecture, and publish only at a time and in a package that gives a reasonable chance that the publication wouldn't backfire.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

Considering this attitude and OSI's practice, It is hard to draw the line between concern for the cause and concern for a think tank's comfort, and again between the concern for comfort and self-preservation. The issue is real, it does involve all actors, be they part of the state or of civil society; OSI has formulated it clearly and has proposed a strategy, which is think tank work *par excellence*.

Group II: promoting civic participation in post-communist Bulgaria

The second group of two is a kind of "parallel biography" of two think tanks, animated by similar motives and using similar methods to promote civic participation in government: the Center for Social Practices (1994-2006), and the Institute for Public Environment Development, (2009 -). CSP didn't change and was disbanded; IPED was founded three years after CSP's demise and is currently very active and generally on the rise. This probably shows that CSP became defunct not because the civic problematic was no longer on the public agenda in the 2000s, but that CSP wasn't able to find the right approach. Apparently, it had to be significantly very different from the approaches of the 1990s.

The Center for Social Practices

CSP was founded in 1994 as an NGO by two academics, who wanted to do policy analysis, criticism, recommendations, lobbying and advocacy, centering on civic empowerment. They didn't want to relinquish teaching, either, so in 1995 their think tank was incorporated as a department in the New Bulgarian University. They have been called a "think-do-tank" by other think tank interviewees.

According to its mission, CSP would work "to stimulate the structuring of a sustainable civic society by means of finding out and implementation of mechanisms and practices for vesting power with the citizens in the decision-making processes and mechanisms; to develop educational programs, teaching and research activity." They believed that "the development of the socio-political tissue may give results only when "thinking" and "political action" form a single process. Thinking, detached from action, is the disease of Bulgarian intellectual circles; action without thinking is the disease of Bulgarian political circles. Both lead to closing and not opening of the social reality."

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

- It is noteworthy that active academics should criticize non-involvement in action as a “disease”; while it is supposed to be one of the guarantors of academic objectivity, i.e. a basic asset. CSP is advocating here a form of applied academism that more orthodox commentators wouldn’t accept as academism at all. The crux of the matter is how the notion of “problem” was understood by think tanks. In both academic and think tank work a problem is researched *lege artis scientifica*. What is different is how we identify the problem, and the difference is banal, but basic: the think tank problem must be of practical political value, and not necessarily of theoretical value; if during the problem’s treatment some theoretical innovations happen to occur, they are merely serendipitous.

CSP was aiming at a work cycle consisting of the following stages: identification of the problem in the development of the democratic agenda of Bulgaria – analysis of the problem – interference with the problem and piloting of ways for its solving with the involvement of all parties concerned – analysis of the solution of the problem – working out of recommendatory decision-making mechanisms, avoiding the occurrence of the same problem in the future – piloting of the developed mechanisms – their institutionalization – introduction of their basic elements into the legislation of the country – participation in the implementation of the said legislation in view of continuous vesting of power with the civil society.

In practice, problems arose at the stages of institutionalization, legislation and implementation, i.e. when, to resolve the problem, the think tank had to cooperate with the state. Remarkably, of these three the legislation part proved to be the easiest. A law could be initiated by CSP, and, as a rule after a prolonged struggle, voted by Parliament (e.g. the Ombudsman Law, drafted by CSP together with the Center for the Study of Democracy; also, CSP’s work for the Environmental Law). However, when it came to implementation, it wouldn’t be effective: for various reasons, (mostly for fear of losing some traditional powers), the administration would in fact sabotage its own regulations. And what’s more, CSP could not establish a working mechanism of civic control over the implementation by the state. As its founder said in the interview, CSP would propose a solution to a problem, “naturally assuming” that the democratic Bulgarian state would create democratically functioning institutions. However, it turned out that the state would create non-democratically functioning institutions. “And regarding these institutions we [as think tank] had no say.” This led to a rethinking of the work model, and a new emphasis on civic mobilization and advocacy, for short run effects, and education, for long run effect. However, after Bulgaria joined the EU, most US donors withdrew, and the EU would give project money via state channels and not care about civic empowerment. The interviewee recalled an important EU official saying re NGOs in general in 2005: “This is the kind of anarchic nonsense we have to deal with! Civil society was a mistake and we must shut it down.” According to the interviewee, there were about a score civic minded people in Bulgaria before 1989; then in the 1990s,

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

due to foreign funding, a civic community was formed; and in the 2000s, due to stoppage of funding, the civic community has become fragmented. The main reason for the fragmentation is trivial: people have to earn a living from somewhere.

In 2006 CSP closed down as think tank. Its founder continues the teaching part of the activity in the New Bulgarian University and keeps a high media profile.

The Institute for Public Environment Development

The Institute for Public Environment Development (IPED) was founded in 2009. The main point of its activity is transfer of policy messages and pressure from citizens and experts to the relevant governmental institutions. In its mission statement we find language such as “promotion of civil culture”, assertion of “democratic law and order”, “citizen control” and “citizen participation in governance”.

For IPED that means work both on the research and advocacy levels. It includes “study and investigation of processes in the public environment, and making public the state of the public environment”; “dissemination of ideas and information, building partnerships and implementing programs and projects targeting: civil society development; creating conditions to guarantee respect for the rights and legitimate interests of citizens”; “civil-society participation in government; elaboration and application of controlling and accounting instruments designed for public institutions, and implementation of new practices and models in connection with public administration”. More concretely there is “improvement of the mechanisms ensuring transparency and accountability”, and “building the capacity of public administration and improvement of governance in the public sector”

Elections are the only state institution in which the asymmetrical power relation between state and citizens is in favor of the citizens, therefore it would be logical for a group like IPED to center on them. They have indeed, and their electoral engagement has made them highly visible. Their purpose is simple: to work for *real* elections, of which the notion of fair elections is only a part.

In Bulgaria the problem with rigging the elections, i.e. bad counting or fraudulent recording of the ballots has so far been considered more of a technical than a political problem. Whatever the rigging, in the opinion of analysts it has never been of a magnitude to tip the political scales. The major political problem, that has accompanied Bulgarian democracy all along, has been the practice of pre-determining how a voter should vote. Initially, it was mostly done by the incumbent parties, which would use the state power in their disposal to coerce or lure voters. Opposition parties rectified the situation by starting simply to *buy* votes, usually for cash. Over the last 10 years this has evolved from a political joke to a major problem. The incumbent parties immediately joined in the process. The

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

problem became so huge that the legislation was amended to expressly criminalize the act of “buying or selling votes”, and now each electoral campaign is accompanied, in the media, by a campaign against that practice. Despite such efforts, it is indirectly indicated and widely believed that the practice is spreading, that it has certainly compromised a number of local elections and may be becoming a major factor in national elections too.

IPED have analyzed professionally and proposed amendments to the Electoral Code; their proposals aimed at more direct, accountable and feasible democracy, and were based, wherever relevant, on EU recommendations and good practices. They have been also very active in monitoring the elections, by training independent observers and working for more transparency of the process, involving the media. Re the media they have a two-pronged approach: one is working with the professional media, e.g. to ensure that all relevant political positions are mediated. The other is encouraging “civic journalism” through the internet. It is a way to circumvent the “censorship” practiced in the established media. (But they said: “Censorship, including self-censorship is not a problem: if you have a message, you will find a way to get it across; the problem is to formulate the message!”) Civic journalism is part of a larger project ambitiously labeled “Cyberactivism”, aimed at marrying civic energy with ICT know how. They have their site, blog and video.

All this activity is apparently directed at establishing paraelectoral civic structures, parallel to the state and the established media, at as many levels as possible: civic participation in legislation, in monitoring the elections, and in reporting on them. This may appear overambitious and/or a waste of effort; however, in context, it is relevant. It is based on a serious mistrust of the political establishment, founded not on prejudice but on experience. Party leaderships, which should supposedly represent the interests of their constituencies, and work in the interest of society as a whole, are seen by many as championing their own interest exclusively. During election campaigns that becomes manifest. Civic engagement of the IPED kind endeavors to reveal this to the electorate and thus discipline parties democratically; in this way the electorate is at least partially re-empowered and elections become *more real*.

To do that, IPED engage in research (e.g. in preparation for their legal proposals); they also produce policy papers which are distributed to all stakeholders. However, they find that in the current situation “there’s no time” for writing – and reading – in depth studies. They surmise that a think tank should be doing that, to start with, and regret that they deviate from that model, for a think tank is a very serious thing: “Think tanks are about changing reality”, the interviewee said, and that should be based on in-depth research. That makes a think tank, of necessity, “a slow-moving thing”. But the people in power don’t believe in reading in-depth studies, and society does not pressure them into effective deliberation. In their opinion, many experts have started to appear in the media not as analysts that base their conclusions on evidence, but as PR persons, promoting themselves more than their

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

positions. On the other hand, people on the web often act in a quick-and-shallow manner, and react to package rather than to substance. So, “we may be seeing the evolution of the think tank into *twit tank*”. Irony aside, they describe themselves as a “think-do-tank”. They try to think in scenarios, then broadcast these scenarios to the general public. When doing advocacy, they would go as far as engaging in litigation, if expedient.

CSP and IPED: a comparison

The Center for Social Practices functioned, as said, from 1994 to 2006, and was most influential towards the end of the 1990s. The Institute for Public Environment Development was founded in 2009 and so far has been increasing its influence with time. Both addressed the momentous issue of the cooperation of citizens and government in the interest of democracy. In the interviews their representatives gave unprompted praise to each other’s organizations. Finally, both founders were personally very active in the citizens’ protests in Bulgaria, February-March 2013. All this means that their work has been informed by the same set of political and moral values.

However, the differences are also significant; moreover, they give an insight to the changes in the think tank environment.

The work of CSP was focused on promoting and institutionalizing **new** practices: there was the tell-tale phrase “we told the government what to do”. IPED, while not averse to introducing new practices, is mainly focused on criticizing and improving **already existing** practices. For example, CSP would **introduce** the institution of Ombudsman; IPED would be focusing on **improving** the electoral legislation and practices. By and large, it has continued from the point where CSP stopped. CSP were dissatisfied with the un-democratic implementation of their pro-democratic ideas, but, as quoted from the interview, “over that we had no say”. The last point reveals two things: a dissatisfaction with their own performance, which apparently made them question the relevance of their whole approach; and a wish to separate the responsibility for promoting a (good) idea (theirs), and the responsibility for its (bad) implementation (the government’s). CSP have no such compunctions: they look at the existing institutions and find them deficient; they are not interested in the history of the deficiency, what they are interested in is correcting it to the best of their ability.

When CSP say that they gave ideas to the government, this means that they talked as a **classical think tank**, promoting their own ideas, which in the last resort are based on their view of the public good. When IPED speak to the government, they feel not so much as promoters of their own ideas, but as **representatives** of some public interest. That interest would be, as a rule, already existing in the public space, and some part of the public would be its adherents. The position of (even a self-

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

appointed) representative such people gives IPED legitimacy akin to the legitimacy of a political party and of the same order as the legitimacy of a civic pressure group or advocacy group (for the problem of legitimacy of “classical” think tanks in Bulgaria see the relevant section below). This makes a large part of their work donor-friendly, as there are tangible criteria for success or failure, coinciding with the success or failure of the cause in question. Besides, it makes necessary a constant dialogue with “the people”, hence IPED’s active presence on the internet. That also makes them donor-friendly, for hits are quantifiable.

This comparison lets us also understand an evolution in the performance of the government. It is probably essentially true that in the 1990s the government wouldn’t know what to do about a lot of things, so when think tanks talked about them, it listened. In the 2000s the government has already more or less covered the governance space, so any new idea would be coming in competition with some established practice. Therefore new policy or governance ideas are inherently critical (directly or indirectly) of the government, and to consider them on their merit the government would have first to overcome its defensive reaction to the criticism. Hence, the need for citizens’ pressure in order to make the government take the new as constructive criticism. This development comes in parallel to the one discussed when dealing with CSD, CLS and OSI: there is not so much open space for innovation in the society at large: figuratively, things have to be torn down for new ones to be installed.

To conclude: in the 2000s IPED is doing the doable in the area of civic control and initiative. Despite the general negativism of the EU towards civil society, and scarcity of US and domestic funding, it has managed to expand and increase its influence. IPED would probably never equal the influence of CSP in its prime, when CSP managed to initiate new institutions; however, it is IPED’s activity that effectively pushes the borders of civic participation and control.

3. The contemporary think tank and NGO milieu in Bulgaria

The five think tanks described in detail function in a milieu of active civic organizations. In the 1990 they were predominantly partners, in the 2000s partners and competitors. Their variety and relative big numbers in a not-too-big a country with a high rate of professional and intellectual emigration might be interpreted as an indicator for an intensity of civic activism. But probably a more realistic interpretation would be that the state institutions are not coping.

1. Think tanks

The importance of the state as reference point has prompted an interviewee to categorize think tanks just according to their relation to the state. The types were:

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

- “talking to the government” [and state institutions]
- “watchdogs” [of the government and the parties]
- “sellouts” [to the government or parties]

Think tanks reviewed below will not be grouped according to these categories, which are obviously rather subjective; yet this categorization is relevant in practical life and influences think tank behavior towards fellow organizations.

Institute for Market Economy

IME is the first, oldest and most influential economic policy think tank in Bulgaria, founded in 1993. Ever since it has acted as economic watchdog and research group, with regular presence in the national media and an impact on legislation. It has indeed, as said in its mission. elaborated and advocated market-based solutions to challenges citizens of Bulgaria and the region face in reforms, and provided “independent assessment and analysis of the government's economic policies”. Financially it has been stable, mainly due to its consulting branch, which accounts for about 60% of its revenue. (In this it is a rare case of good combination of service and watchdog tank). One of their most popular achievements is the yearly publication of an Alternative Budget of the country. IME also combats political populism by preliminary impact assessment and costs estimates.

IME has fostered or indirectly supported the emergence of other non-profit and for-profit organizations, e.g. Access to Information Programme (1996), Economic Policy Institute (1997), and Industry Watch (2003).

Institute for Regional and International Studies

The Institute for Regional and International Studies was founded in 1997. They see themselves as combined ‘advocacy oriented and education-oriented think tank’. Currently it has a staff of four researchers, and one office manager. However, even during its boom years, IRIS had the reputation of a one-man show – of its founder director, one of the most influential political analysts of the country.

IRIS has worked in the areas of Balkan, Black Sea security and Central Asia security, and also civic policies and democratization. They also engaged in advocacy and education, having been for a long time worked on transparency issues. Unlike all other think tanks included in this survey, it was registered as a for-profit NGO; that has enabled it to have a consulting branch, but they didn’t really develop it, the IRIS interviewee said. Lately they are considering re-registration as a not-for-profit NGO. (This change, relinquishing consultancy in adverse times goes against the mainstream and is

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

noteworthy.) IRIS was the only think tank to focus on foreign policy; after its demise there is no foreign policy think tank in Bulgaria. This indicates that Bulgarian think tanks are almost exclusively home centered (exceptions with a strong international side like CLS were mentioned above), and also that cooperation with the Foreign Ministry is not effective for NGOs. Said an interviewee: “It’s not that they are stupid: [for example, X (a Foreign Minister’s name was given)] is not stupid. They are self-sufficient.”

RiskMonitor

RiskMonitor was founded in 2006 by the Open Society Institutes of New York and Sofia. Now it has diversified funding. It considers organized crime and corruption as main risk factors for Bulgaria and for the Balkans. so it has developed civic expertise in these fields. RM is effectively acting as critic and partner of relevant state institutions, both in the legislative and executive. It makes use of different experts (e.g. political scientists, lawyers, ex-secret service persons), and is visible in the media. RM undertakes research and has recently published reports on topics such as “The role of Parliament in combating organized crime 2001-2011” and “Institutional policies in combating organized crime in the Balkans”; it has analyzed the electoral process in Bulgaria as risk factor in view of its deficiencies; and it has proposed a National Strategy for countering money laundering. The yearly conferences of RM have become a traditional point of idea exchange between think tankers, jurists, academics and media persons.

- RiskMonitor introduces the issue of “thematic think tanks”, as it was created and lives as one. This makes it different from the five think tanks discussed above in detail. For example, CSD also specializes in corruption and organized crime, and its media presence results almost exclusively from that, so for the general media audience may be thinking of CSD as of a thematic think tank (while we’ve seen above that this is not the case). The representative of RM argued that “the future belongs to thematic think tanks”. That argument to an extent overlaps with the arguments for specialization and expert approach in think tanks, and is directly linked to funding opportunities and modes. The issue will be discussed below, in the *Comments and queries* section.

2. Relevant NGOs

In this section the NGOs described have been picked out of several thousand active NGOs in Bulgaria for their impact on think tanks: direct, or via the political and social atmosphere in which think tanks operate.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

Probably the NGO that has had the greatest impact on the whole civic milieu in the last decade has been the Access to Information Program NGO. It has successfully promoted the right of citizens to information, fighting the “socialist times” mentality and practice of governmental institutions *not* to give unclassified information. Employing excellent professional lawyers, it has won cases in court and caused legislative amendments to be made; and it has educated citizens and civic groups nationwide. It keeps a high media profile.

The Helsinki Committee of Bulgaria is a very professional and tough Human Rights NGO, direct successor to some “informal” human rights defense groups of the last years of the dictatorship (founded in 1992). Despite the fact that they are traditionally bad communicators, they have established a serious presence in civic life. They do litigation and education in Human Rights, in Bulgaria and abroad.

The International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, founded in 1992 when, as said, inter ethnic relations in Bulgaria and the Balkans were a hot political topic, has functioned as an academic-type research body. They have suggested policies, but only sporadically. Their work has been used by politicians and think tanks for policy formulation.

The ACCESS association, founded in 1992, was influential in the NGO milieu in the 1990s, doing ethnic research and monitoring hate speech in the Balkan media, as part of the effort to alleviate tensions on the Balkans. It is one of the NGOs that were hit by the 2006-7 funding crisis and have not been active in the last few years.

The Start for Effective Civic Initiatives NGO, founded in 1995, began as a do-all civic group. It gradually specialized in minority problems, especially concerning the Roma; nowadays it is dealing with underprivileged groups in general. It engages in civic education and occasionally advocacy.

4. Main issues

Think tanks under popular attack

In February-March of 2013 there were massive street protests in Bulgaria; The most tangible effect was that the government resigned. The effects on the think tank community were not so drastic. The protests didn't change the think tank situation essentially, but (1) they dramatized all the existential questions that think tanks occasionally would ask themselves, and (2), has made it harder for think tanks to do their job, at least temporarily.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

That happened because for the first time in recent Bulgarian history the protesting citizens opposed themselves not to concrete policies, parties, or politicians, but to the “elite”, taken as a whole. It was “the elite” that had enticed them into the transition of the last quarter of a century; the elite had profited by the transition, but the people had lost. Now the elite were to be brought to account, and think tanks were prominent members of the political part of the elite, so principal targets of blame. And it’s not that the existence of think tanks is being put under question – but also their history.

We believe that this environment of turmoil has a bearing both on the topics of the discussions listed below, and on their content.

Legitimacy

It is curious that in an interview, conducted, as it happened, *before* the protests, a think tank representative bluntly said: “Think tanks are part of the elite, that’s why politicians see them as *incontournables*, and tend to overrate their importance. [Think tanks] don’t promote the public interest, but the elite’s interest. Along with all other institutions. Think tanks don’t voice the public interest, but expect the public to adopt their interest.” So we had that view represented, clearly, but by two persons only.

The majority of the interviewees were far from that clarity of expression, but were grouped around the opposite view: that think tanks acted on a notion of public interest, though it was not an easy thing to define: “Each think tank has its own definition of public good”, said one.

To refer to the public good begs the question, but if one refers to the elite, there’s no question at all: think tanks are not legitimate, period. In fact they are public liars, they tell the people that a policy proposed is in the interest of all, while in reality it’s in the interest of the elite. Whether the interest of the elite might (not) coincide with the interest of the people is an academic question; the barefaced lie of think tanks is not.

The alternative line of legitimization via the public interest runs as follows: in order to be legitimate – and ethical – a think tank must formulate for itself what the *public interest* is, tied to a given situation and moment in time; then it should analyze the situation and propose a policy that would work for the public interest so formulated. Of course, in order to PR its policy proposal, the think tank would emphasize that *science* had been in-forming all stages of the process, like the formulation of the public interest and the policy proposed. Of course, science is necessary to give one a comprehensive and coherent understanding of a situation; but think-tankers know that policy can never be the logical inference of a scientific sequence.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

- When at CLS they were designing the survey methodology mentioned above (that combined quantitative and qualitative surveys), there was an argument whether one could be “scientifically” justified give any policy recommendation on the basis of the registered data. In sociology it is a basic tenet that a “snapshot” of a society is (relatively) true today and (absolutely) untrue tomorrow, as society changes with time. And policy recommendations concern the future, which we can not scientifically extrapolate from the present. True, one can be “reasonably sure” that some factors won’t change, so the picture as whole “probably” won’t change “significantly”. In the last sentence all words in quotes belong not to science, but to intuition. I.e., to non-science.

The opposite argument, which was finally adopted, ran as follows: there is no logical way to break from that theoretical impasse. But there is a practical way: politicians make policies on grounds such as intuition, ideology and/or greed. It is much better to propose to them, in public, a policy based on science+intuition. The think tank guarantees that the science part is professional, and that ideology and greed aren’t present. Of course, a politician’s intuition may prove better than the think tank’s. This is risk a think tank is compelled to take.

However, the “public interest” itself is a notion that, in the last resort, must be defined by intuitive choices. And we have come to understand that legitimizing think tank work through the “public interest”, we are actually trying to legitimize it through “science” (as science in most contemporary societies enjoys a status of high legitimacy). However, it transpired that at crucial points the scientific method has to give way to intuition.

- The last point may elucidate the tensions, often observed, between an academic doing think tank work, and an academic doing academic work. Examining a policy proposal done by a think-tanker, the university academic would often find it “unscientific”, therefore worthless, if not nefarious. And should the university be asked to make a policy proposal, the think tanker would often find it inane: strict science does not translate into policy. The university type is great for data gathering and arranging, and for background study; he becomes unsure of himself when he should do the political analysis, and as a rule abdicates faced with political synthesis, the upshot of the whole exercise. Explaining that, an interviewee didn’t mince words: “It’s because they [academics in Bulgaria] are basically bureaucrats. To make a university (1) they get a building, (2) fill it with employees, (3) give them tasks. That should all be reversed! [starting with the academics giving themselves tasks].”

This shows that there can be no justified competition between academics and think-tankers, as they use different methods and have different intellectual agendas. Well, not all see it that way: two of the interviewees said that they had heard academics talk of think-tankers as

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

“Those guys with the big money (which rightfully should come to *us*)”. This is not far from the prevalent perception of think-tankers by “the people”, especially in the province; an interviewee said that think-tankers were mostly thought of as “Some big-cash guys in Sofia”, another: “Think tanks are perceived as commanding a certain power, therefore the attitude [of the people] to them is negative.”

This is where the logico-epistemological way of understanding of “public good” has taken us to, so far. One interviewee offered an alternative, “sociological” understanding: “Public interest is not a resultant of the vectors of all private interests put together, but comes out of a public debate in which non-market [non-economic] interest is included too. A market doesn’t guarantee freedom, as agents have no equal start.” This sounds great, but works only in the theoretically possible and practically improbable situation when that kind of public debate, N.B., involving non-economic interests, concludes with a public consensus. In case it doesn’t, and that’s what would happen at almost all times, we won’t have produced a formulation of the “public interest”.

We could summarize the outcome of this discussion as follows

- (1) The majority of Bulgarian think tanks believe that legitimacy is important, and that it should be established in a non-cynical way, via the notion of public interest.
- (2) But public interest is a notion that can’t be legitimized by science, as it is defined by science+intuition, the intuition bit being more important than the science bit. And it’s practically impossible to formulate “public interest” through public debate.
- (3) Think tank legitimacy is hard to explain to non-think-tankers. Harder still to persuade them that a think tank would adhere to its own code of behavior. Think tanks should learn to live in a milieu that would think them legitimate only at odd moments, for the wrong reasons.

Independence

Discussions showed that think tank independence was a value for all interviewees, although of different relative weight. A situation in which a think tank would be receiving a grant or doing contract work for Bulgarian state institutions or political parties would *always* raise the issue of independence.

- The omission of the issue of dependence from private foreign funds begs the question. First, something was already said about this matter already, in the “OSI” section above. Second, there is a consensus among think-tankers that they have never felt any pressure from private foreign funds in whatever form, ever.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

When CLS were establishing their funding strategies, two alternatives were discussed: whether to go for home funding and be called the lackeys of this or that political party or state institution, or go for foreign funding and be called foreign spies. The unanimous decision was to be called spies. First, because CLS knew that it wouldn't be true; and second, that the perceived position of foreign spy at the time would affect perceived objectivity of analysis less than an association with a domestic party or the state. That proved correct: CLS were in fact stigmatized as spies, and simultaneously their political analyses and advice were judged to be sound.

Bluntly put, when a think tank gets state or party money, the objectivity of its analyses and recommendations becomes suspect. That's because it is accepted that the state and the parties are constantly making political blunders, or worse, so it's the natural public duty of a think tank, when registering a blunder, to voice that to the public so the blunder be rectified. And though theoretically possible, it's hard to imagine, in the Bulgarian context, that a think tank that has entered into a business relationship shall be as critical of its counteragent, as it would be if no business relationship existed. The OSI representative concluded that ever since they got their endowment, they have felt independent and have set their own research agenda, "as all think tanks should". Interviewees were naturally aware that an endowment is probably the best solution for all, but in the circumstances it's hard to get one: only OSI has succeeded, and it came from its founder Mr. Soros.

There is a way to circumvent this problem, and it is by doing for parties – and mainly for the state – just expert-type work, especially chosen so that it doesn't require much policy recommending and practically no criticism. Such a think tank would apparently get the good of both worlds: receive state funding, and not have its critical performance under suspicion, as it is not relevant in this case. Several think tanks have opted for such arrangements. Should that become a habit, it would probably transform them gradually into expert NGOs: a think tank that steers away from policy evaluation and suggestion is an oxymoron. One interviewee said that think tank work "should not be depoliticized, but departized. Then our [think tank's] position becomes evidence-based, not ideology based, and our policy recommendations are based on fact, not on [ideological] value statements".

Interviewees were well aware of the fact that in other countries party think tanks don't have problems with independence. But there was a consensus that foreign know how in this instance was inapplicable to Bulgaria. It was noted that during the 1990s

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

the biggest parties tried to establish think tanks of their own; they went on for a few years, then were disbanded. Probably because if the party leaders wanted a PR group, they might as well make it part of the party structure; and if they wanted independent criticism, they could get it from the independent think tanks, free.

Two of the interviewees spoke of the party preferences of think tank members; they agreed that it was something that had to be accepted, for it could not be changed. “You can never be independent of your Left or Right preferences.” CLS had adhered to the formula: “We don’t hide how we vote, but we don’t let that influence our work”, and on the whole it had worked, at least for CLS. However, with the recent protests “liberalism” has become a popular swear word, so CLS, with “Liberal” even in its name, has a PR problem and probably an ideological problem too.

Survival strategies

1. The current situation: defined by the state?

The think tankers interviewed grouped around the opinion that the present situation is largely defined by the Bulgarian state, and that state is in crisis. An interviewee said that “the state has dominated the [civil society] milieu recently”; another clarified why wasn’t that good for think tanks: “First, government officials have been learning their job, largely due to European training money; but, more importantly, [even if they didn’t know it], it’s a question of the level of criticism that clerks are ready to tolerate. Moreover, civil servants don’t think there’s a need for peers to dialogize with.” Then there was the radical view that lately the “institutional fabric” in Bulgarian society was being destroyed, so if a think tank wants to talk to an institution, “it has no interlocutor”. A dominant state with simultaneously disintegrating institutional fabric is a dangerous political animal. That could explain why the OSI representative said that despite the fact that they have the money to function normally for the next 5 years, they “experience a sense of insecurity”. That led to a no less radical conclusion: “If you want something done [like pro-democratic

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

change] you can't go via the institutions: you should go via the people." For good or bad, this kind of radical advocacy was shared by nobody else of the interviewees. But it was remarked that "civil society structures in the province have deteriorated in the 2000s, especially when local newspapers were bought by international consortiums: an independent local newspaper was the natural focal point of local civic activity. Therefore, a think tank doing advocacy would find it hard to go "via local civic groups", as most of them would have ceased to exist.

2. Survival/developmental modes

It is noteworthy that one (and only) interviewee spoke with conviction that survival isn't viable, and think tanks should be ready with an *exitus* strategy. That person said: "Think tanks will die out. They can't be healthy in a non-revolutionary situation (i.e. without a strong movement in society and a major cause). Without that, they risk becoming imitation ventures." So the best thing think tanks can do today is to retreat, and "wait for the moment when they can advance again". That would be a moment of serious political cataclysm, "e.g. when the EU disintegrates".

Near the other extreme were interviewees for whom the definition of a healthy think tank is, apparently, a think tank that survives by all means in all circumstances. They ventured that a think tank could make a living, for example, by professional project writing (for clients), or organize various trainings. However, that "omnivorous" approach didn't find favor with the majority of interviewees either.

Then there were a number of proposals for activities that for a think tank make sense in themselves, plus are donor-friendly. These areas were specified:

- advocacy
- transparency
- activities that make use of ICT, e.g. blogs.

However, advocacy met with the criticism of another interviewee, who voiced a dilemma: "For a think tank, the choice is either activist or thinker". Another elaborated: "True, advocacy is sexy lately – but

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

you have a pre-set agenda, so there's no serious research stage; or at best you [as think tank] provide the basic facts for other actors' activities. Some more academism would be good for Bulgarian think tanks!" The same person contended that the combination of "classical" think tank work and paid consultancy, which several think tanks use and many regard as panacea, ends with getting the worst of both worlds. And ended with another dilemma: "A think tank must choose: to be a think tank, or a consultancy!" Linked to the project paradigm mentioned above is the idea of the "thematic think tank". This is a developmental idea that is the outcome of a combination between the more general pro-specialization and pro-expert trends. It is linked with thinking along the lines of the end of the "big narrative" think tank ideology of the 1990s, when causal relations were sought e.g. between the emergence of think tanks in CEE and liberalism. In the 2010s, it is argued, liberalism, or any kind of general ideology is neither needed nor useful as a basis to explain or justify a think tank's existence.

The main line of argument here is that "in the 1990s think tanks stood for certain *values* that are no longer put under question [in the Bulgarian society of the 2000s]". Such values would be e.g. free political expression, political dialogue, the right of a minority to be heard, constitutionalism, ethnic peace, private property, individual business initiative, etc. in that vein. However, it should be noted that one should beware of simplistic inferences here: for example, while ethnic peace is an undisputed value, ethnic tolerance is not: the propaganda of ethnic intolerance has become a common feature of the language of some political parties, including parties in Parliament, as well as most of the leading media. Still, it might be argued that such unfinished liberal work is by rights in the domain of advocacy groups, not of think tanks *stricto sensu*. Therefore, the point against the relevance of liberalism (or other ideologies) in the 2000s still remains.

The alternative proposed for or the 2000s and described by an interviewee is the "project paradigm". In that paradigm, a think tank operates on the basis of projects (the project approach), relevant to a pre-chosen subject of assumed expertise (the thematic think tank). Apparently, the theory is that the limitation to one theme is compensated by the ideologically free choice among projects relevant to that theme. Together with "expertisation", this should make a think tank more competitive in the competition-defined 2010s. (More on this in the "Comments & Queries" section below.)

There was a loose consensus on two points: first, that getting EU money is a must. The minoritarian position of dissent went as follows: "Work for the EU can transform a think tank, [almost unwittingly] into a consultancy. And independence from Bulgaria by getting EU money is not independence: it's dependence on the EU." The same person, however, ended with a sober warning: "It isn't true that think

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

tanks *must* go for changing their agenda to secure EU money. But we must understand that if the EU changes [its priorities] and we don't - we lose.”

The second point was that to get EU money one needs to construct (or enter into) consortiums. Even persons who were well aware of the dangers of a consortium (some were mentioned above) agree with that necessity.

It must be remarked that on several occasions it was clear that the interviewees, when speaking of the situation or giving suggestions, would tend to convey that what they said was “non transitive”, e.g.: “There is a financial crisis, but not for us, we were too clever and have managed to bypass it!”, or “This is a survival tool, and we have used it, but I doubt anyone else could use it, it's too tricky.” Anthropologists say that this is a typical, though of course not endemic, Bulgarian trait.

Concluding reflection on think tanks

1. Discourses inadequate and adequate

Think tanks seldom engage in self-reflection; more often it is other communities, such as academics or donors, that would reflect on them. As a result, we have three languages in which reflection on think tanks is performed: academic, donor and, “think tank” i.e. the language in which think tanks (should) reflect on themselves. The three approaches are structured around three different reflective questions:

- What is a think tank? (academic; most developed language)
- What is a successful think tank (donor; language less developed than academic)
- What is a good think tank? (think tank; inadequately developed language)

Let's start with a case in point from the Bulgarian think tank interviews. In reply to a query re the relevance of think tanks, one of our more theoretically minded interviewees said “The state will always prefer not to have any public [policy] debate.” The apparent inferences were that (a) think tanks act as participants in public policy debates, and also, if expedient, as initiators and facilitators of such debates; (b), that in doing so they would *always* be complicating the functioning of a government's and consequently would be regarded by the government with suspicion or even enmity, and (c) this basic problem with any government bears testimony that what think tanks do is relevant, so think tanks are relevant.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

This view of course invites questions, the most obvious being why the media should not be the ones to do (most of) that public debate job. So, first point: we see here a theoretically minded and intelligent person make a rather unconvincing statement (which might still be vindicated, but would need a lot of extra explanations). The second point is that there was no consensus on that generally optimistic position (if compared with the view, mentioned above, that think tanks will die out). Point three is that discussion among think tank people adhering to different positions proved difficult; time and again there was need for ad hoc makeshift definitions, then redefinitions of the terms used in those makeshift definitions, in perspective an infinite exercise. And we must bear in mind that almost all of the interviewees have been at the helm of think tanks for more than a decade, most are doctors in the humanities and keep abreast of world publications on think tanks; moreover, the person we quoted is a leading university professor of political science (as are several other interviewees as mentioned already). However, in the discussion not one used academic definitions or, indeed, even academic language when describing their think tank's practices, problems and prospects, in short, their own policy making. Plus we already saw little consensus among interviewees on an issue as important as survival strategies like consultancy and advocacy. To note, interviewees were talking to persons who they'd recognize as think tank and academic peers, so we can eliminate the supposition that they were just trying to get across to a lay audience. So we should ask ourselves two questions: (1) Why was there no consensus to start with? and (2) Why didn't interviewees use academic language as a basis on which to convey information and construct consensus?

We could of course look at these findings as an exemplification of the statement already made (see bullet in the section "Center for Social Practices") that for think tanks "a problem" is taken from "reality" and is therefore formulated in everyday life language, for fear that otherwise the think tank's policy proposals would lose practical relevance. So, it may have been that not only when doing think tank work, but even when *reflecting* on problems of think tanks, the interviewees, by "think tank inertia", were using the everyday life language that is the basis for think tank work. Thus, they would be sticking to the general think tank approach to political problems even when addressing the politics of think tanks, or reflecting on the policy problems of their own think tank. Thinking along these lines may answer both our questions. The everyday life language of think tanks is bad for reflection, as is any everyday life language; and a special "think tank language" is not developed enough to sustain complicated sequences and arrive at consensus through discussion. On the other hand, think tankers interviewed would be aware, implicitly, of the deficiencies of academic or of donor language when addressing problems of their own *raison d'être* and behavior. And a very important point: these think tankers had been talking in private, unofficially, with anonymity guaranteed. So they would prefer to stick to the clumsy everyday language of their real problem-addressing and policy making, caring more about being close to their own reality than to consensus.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

What expectations should we have for a developed “think tank” lingo? Apparently we are looking for a *hybrid language* for these “hybrid intellectuals” to communicate in. The “hybrid” part means a hybrid between rigorous academic logic (which the everyday-life language of a think tank obviously lacks, hence the lack of consensus), and a “reality content” (which in this case academic language lacks).

So far, academic language has been the main tool to be tried as public *lingua franca* for the think tank *problematique*. The main theoretical reason for this attempt is probably just academic inertia. As said, many think tankers are acting or ex-academics, so in public they would use academic language to enhance intersubjectivity. Apparently, there is the hope that the objectivity, in-built in academic language, can compensate the subjectivity (intuitively felt) that is in-built in think tanks. This academic inertia seems widely shared among think tankers. In most frequently recurring circumstances, fundamental questions re think tanks are discussed among academics, or between think tankers *and* academics; so the academic language option is practically ubiquitously accepted without question; while in a discussion *en famille*, think tankers to think tankers, the academic language was avoided with the same implicit ease with which it would have been used in a discussion with academics.

This of course shouldn't be read to mean that think tanks are not a legitimate object of academic discourse. However, with the adoption of academic discourse to think tank problems, we find ourselves right away in the classic dilemma of pure/applied science. For a purist scientist, what is a think tank is by rights the fundamental question. However, scientists realize that any rigorous definition would exclude groups that, on the basis of the intuition of the scientist or on their own self-representing intuition, or both, should also be accepted as think tanks. This has made scientists call “think tank” an “ambiguous category”; and it's clear that when science employs intuitions to arrive at ambiguities, it loses its critical potential and turns into descriptive sociology. This isn't good enough either for donors or for think tanks, as both are interested in determining *policy*, be it *re* think tanks or *of* think tanks.

Considering now the *project language* usually used for donor-think tank communication, we find it structured around the notion of success, of the organization or the project which are candidates for funding. Donors always use project language when thinking of think tanks, and think tanks use it when they choose to accept to think of themselves as donors would think of them. The formula that unites donor and grantee is “a successful think tank is a think tank that has successful projects”. Differences start from here on. A “successful project”, from the point of view of a think tank that has accepted the donor's project language, means basically *a project that has been supported*. And from the donor's viewpoint, a “successful project” is *a project in which a grantee has performed all the activities listed in the application and has paid for them without deviating from the approved budget*. All this is based on the assumption that the resultant of these activities has a positive social or political impact.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

However, that assumption is hard to verify in project language “grammar”. For the think tank, the positive impact is pre-supposed; it is assumed before implementation and may not even be mentioned in the Application, as for some donors that is not explicitly requisite. It is hard to imagine that a think tank that has implemented a project according to its proposal would, when reporting, question that project’s positive impact. Of course, theoretically nothing could prevent a think tank from doing so, but such cases are unheard of even in the gossip-prone NGO community. The position of the donor is similar: the positive effect is also pre-supposed, or the donor would not have supported the project; once the project supported, the donor monitors it at the mentioned level of activities-budget implementation; and same as for the grantee, if a project is correctly implemented, it’s a theoretical possibility and bureaucratic improbability that a donor should indulge in such self-criticism at the finish point. Besides, it is common practice for donors, with very few exceptions indeed, *not* to reveal the reasons for supporting or not supporting a particular project. Therefore, there is no live information exchange re social or political impact between donor and grantee. All this shows why neither donor nor grantee can say much about a think tank’s existential or behavioral choices as long as they are using *project language*. For a project is not a problem, its essence is that it is supposedly a *solution* to a problem; and it is as supposed solution that it is being “sold” on the project market by the think tank and “bought” by the donor. Existential and policy problems, which are posed precisely no ready solution is in sight, therefore remain out of the scope of project language.

What, then, makes a think tank so specific that it needs to develop a special language to address its own most serious policy choices? (Some of the characteristics were already discussed, so now shall be only referred to in brief.)

- (1) A think tank is an atypical object of thought, insofar as it is in the class of the most subjective objects. It is in that class because it is created by the subjective choice of its founders, and can be destroyed at any point again by the subjective choice of its members. Both academic and donor language presuppose the perpetual existence of the think tank they are interested in and tend to forget that its existence is continuously under question. However, including into the concept of a think tank, the constant **perspective of its disappearance** makes research of a think tank academically pointless, and project support bureaucratically senseless. On the other hand, when considering its fundamental problems, a think tank naturally bears in mind its birthright to suicide. Should it abandon it inadvertently or trade it “for a mess of porridge”, it would entail the loss of a fundamental choice. In a situation when a think tank is judged by its members to have started to produce “more bad than good”, it is the choice between continuing work in the hope of improving, or disbanding the group to cut the loses. Disbanding is a *rational* choice of policy (at least as rational as any policy choice), and a think tank at a crossroads should always remember that as a sensible perspective. To

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

illustrate, let's revisit an interviewee statement that "we" [think tanks in Bulgaria today] are not obliged to change in order to follow EU funding fashion, but should be clear that "if Europe changes and we don't, we lose". That person meant this as a fair warning. But a think tank is an animal "born free" that should not forfeit its moral right to lose!

- (2) Think tank legitimacy should be based on the notion of public interest. But public interest can't be defined by science alone; it is defined by science+intuition, the intuition bit being more important than the science bit.
- (3) A think tank must formulate its **research problems in vulgar language**, the language of everyday politics, and not in the theoretical language of academe or the project language of donors (both issues have been discussed already). The price for using academic language is irrelevance, and for using donor language - loss of independence.
- (4) A think tank loses its point if it doesn't **propose policies**, and that means projection into the future. Academic science shuns such "futurologisms", and rightly so. Donors would like to have an idea of the future, but their project language and approach constantly turn them away from the political sense of the developing context. To be able to propose policy, a think tank should develop its own grammar to include a future tense.
- (5) Finally, existential questions require **deontological answers**. That rules academism out, for even in the social sciences academism is about ontology. Donors have been noticed to attempt to prescribe policies to grantees, but when they do it, they don't use project language, but everyday life political language. That puts them in the same problem space with think tanks, so mutual understanding is ensured, even while agreement isn't.

2. What is a good Bulgarian think tank today?

The finding that fundamental consensus is lacking on fundamental think tank problems invites us to enumerate some basic characteristics of a good contemporary Bulgarian think tank, just as we see them.

i/ A good think tank takes the responsibility for its own legitimization by working in the public interest. To do that the think tank takes the responsibility to formulate that public interest for itself, and make it public. It may at points in time coincide with the interests of particular political actors, as the governed, the government, a party in power or in opposition, civic groups, business groups, international bodies or foreign powers. In all such cases it is the think tank's responsibility to convince the public that it is not working for that particular interest, but for the general public interest that in this

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

case is coincidental with a given particular interest. Its chances of success to convince the public are inversely proportional to the level of closeness of the society in question.

- From that point of view some dilemmas that cropped up in the interviews, such as “A think tank must choose to be activist or thinker, a combination is impossible” appear to be false dilemmas. It’s not enough for a think tank to have the courage of its convictions, it must do the necessary that its motivation is spelled out and accepted, so it should at least engage at the level zero of advocacy, i.e. advocating for itself, as it believes that what it’s doing is in the public interest. Provided a think tank does its normal work, *plus* engages in advocacy if expedient, advocacy can just strengthen its impact and increase its influence. It’s quite another matter if the objective analysis, on which a think tank’s work is based, is replaced by uncritically accepted policy ideas, which often happens to advocacies.

A discussion of another two dilemmas that are revealed as false, follows: the consultancy and expert perspectives. It should only be noted that the dangers to think tank work of quality in these two cases are much greater than with advocacy; but they are not theoretically inevitable and, in principle, a think tank may combine them with its basic work with good results. As for practice, think tanks have been known to “slide” into becoming consultancies and expert bodies, remaining think tanks only in name; after all, both are softer options than being a think tank.

ii/ A good think tank can also be a consultancy. The benefits are obvious: independence from donors in a situation of shrinking private international support. The dangers are also obvious, and the first follows from the loss of the “pure” not-for-profit status. There are of course ways to reconcile consulting activity and the not-for-profit status both on the legal and the policy level. In case that obstacle is overcome, there are the dangers of success: gradually the consultancy part of the work may become what defines the think tank, and not its work in the public interest. Consequently, the business logic of running a think tank, enticing by its relative simplicity, may prevail over the more unclear and precarious think tank logic. One of the basic think tank tenets, “the right to suicide”, for a consultancy is counter-productive: a business prides itself on its longevity. The common sense conclusion is that if a think tank wants to maintain quality, it should have its consultancy serve its think tank work, and not the other way round.

iii/ A similar logic applies to a think tank that engages in expert work; only, when the consultancy prevails, a think tank tends to become a business, while if expert engagement prevails, it tends to become an institution with employees that develop (civil) servant mentality. An evolution in that direction is especially dangerous when doing expert work for the state. In such a case, the work of an expert from a think tank is essentially indistinguishable from the work of a state employee; that fact that one is paid by a non-profit organization, and the other one by the state, becomes inconsequential. Again, the common sense conclusion is that expert work by think tanks is a possibility which should always be approached “with a grain of salt” – in fact, with a pound, if we want to give a think tank the chance to keep its quality.

Think Tanks in Bulgaria

- *The obvious question is whether a good think tank, so described, can live and prosper in today's Bulgaria. This is obviously a matter for further investigation, as the survival and development strategies that were expected to come from interviewees turned out to be predominantly contradictory.*

