



# **Think tanks in Poland**

**By Jacek Kucharczyk and Mila Mineva**

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### Introduction

The paper is based on desk research on the field of Polish think tanks and interviews with executive directors of six relevant for the frame of the study organizations. The think tanks have been selected on the basis of the fact that they represent important tendencies for the think tank community (at least in Poland). We focused our interest on the successful models of survival and adaptation selecting the think tanks founded in the 90ies; we also included in our study new influential think tanks established after the 2000 as to examine if they have developed new strategies to gain public relevance in the new situation. The other indicator for the selection was the main sources of funding for the organizations aiming to test the relation between the funding and the independence of a think tank on one hand, and, on the other, to analyze how the diminishing funding (because of the financial crises) has affected the work and institutional strategies of these organizations. Thus the selected think tanks were:

1. Two TT, founded in the 90-ies, both influential voices during the “transition” period:
  - 1.1. First one is an independent centre for policy research and analysis, established in 1995 and focused on European policy, social policy, civil society, migration and development policy as well as law and democratic institutions. The organization is funded mainly from international institutions as European Commission and Parliament, OSCE, Council of Europe and Community of Democracies, etc. (IPA)
  - 1.2. Second one is a centre for economic analysis, founded in 1991, that played important role in providing evidence-based policies mainly in the economic sphere in the early years of transition. Nowadays the think tank has shifted its attention from economic transition in Poland to the problems of European enlargement and repositioned itself as an “exporter” of the economic knowledge in the European neighbourhood. They are mainly financed by the framework programs of the EU and follow the priorities of those programs (CASE).
  
2. Four TT, founded after 2000
  - 2.1. First one is a think tank, established in 2010 to provide credible policy expertise for one of the Polish parties and funded entirely by this party (Civic Institute).
  - 2.2. The second one is a think tank registered as independent organization in 2004 focused on current internal political issues and problems of Poland’s socio-economic

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development. The institute is funded by individual and corporate donations, but still its main donor is another political party (in opposition now) (Sobieski Institute).

- 2.3. The third one, founded on 2006, is an independent international research institution which aims to provide strategic insights into key aspects of the European Union, the functioning of its institutions and policies. The think tank has multiple sources of funding, but mainly from European institutions (demosEUROPA).
- 2.4. The fourth one is a very active leftist organization, institutionalized in 2002 around one magazine. The organization has a publishing house, cultural clubhouses in Warsaw and several other cities in the country, develops its own online media, etc. The organization does not consider itself strictly as a think tank although part of its activity is to discuss public policies and to carry politically oriented research. They also have multiple sources of funding from international organizations (Political Critique).
3. One public TT – this is a think tank with state budget, specialized in foreign issues. As a president of its council serves the minister of foreign affairs, but still the organization presents itself as an independent think-tank that conducts original, policy-focused research (PISM).

All of the selected think tanks are influential and well known in the expert community, but also amongst the general public. They regularly present their views and researches in the national and international media as the media sections of their websites prove.

### 1. Description of the studied think tanks

**Institute of Public Affairs (iPA)** is an independent centre for policy research, established in 1995. Its main areas of study include domestic and European policy issues. The Institute carries out its activities via five major programmes: European Programme, Social Policy Programme, Civil Society Programme, Migration and Development Policy Programme and Law and Democratic Institutions Programme. The iPA works with key international institutions such as European Commission and Parliament as well as OSCE, Council of Europe and Community of Democracies. It is an active member of many international networks and associations, including Policy Association for an Open Society PASOS and European Partnership for Democracy. In 2008<sup>th</sup> the Institute creates annual award **Jerzy Zimowski** (who was member of the iPA's Executive Board, and served as Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs in the period 1990-1996). The award is for social, journalistic, research or other activity to help social groups which have found themselves in extraordinary circumstances, particularly migrants and refugees. For this award the Institute manages to involve funding from

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private companies and individual donations and draws the media attention. Since 2008<sup>th</sup> the Institute has a fellowship programme targeted to the young researchers aiming to prepare them to work as experts. The iPA runs also an internship programme for students.

The iPA has a team of in-house researchers/policy analysts and an extensive network of associate experts. The Institute publishes the results of its projects in research reports, policy papers and books, which are broadly disseminated among members of parliament, government officials and civil servants, academics, journalists and civil society activists. The iPA hosts annually dozens of conferences, seminars, round tables, workshops and other events with the participation of key policy and opinion makers. Experts from the Institute regularly comment on current policy issues in printed and electronic media.

**Centre for Social and Economic Research (CASE)** is an independent non-profit economic and public policy research institution founded in 1991. The centre has been focused, in the beginning, on economic policies aiming to influence economic transformation in Poland and its founding fathers were 10 economists around Balcerowicz. Scholars and researchers from CASE assisted policy-makers during the early years of transition, before turning their attention to the challenges inherent in the European Union enlargement process and then EU key policy challenges in the globalized world. The CASE is focused currently on five core thematic areas of: (1) European Neighbourhood Policy, enlargement, trade and economic integration, (2) labour markets, human capital and social policy, (3) innovation, competitiveness and entrepreneurship, (4) reforms, growth and poverty reduction in developing and transition countries, (5) macroeconomics and public finance. At the beginning the think tank had been focused on domestic economic policies, but then it broadened its expertise as to cover the European priorities. CASE has built a network of research centres and partner institutions in the post-soviet countries as to export their knowledge from the transition to the market economy. CASE has been mainly financed in its beginning from UN agencies, USAID, OSI network, Ford Foundation, but recently the European Commission provides the greatest portion of the institute's funding.

**Civic Institute** is established in 2010 as a political think-tank, serving as a research and expert centre for the Civic Platform, the ruling party in Poland now. The Institute is openly presented as "the intellectual backbone" of the Civic Platform and legally it is a party structure, entirely funded by the party. During the interview with the representative of the Institute though, he insisted on the intellectual independence of the organisation. Civic Institute produces research and expert analyses with the principal aim of fostering a more fair, democratic and sustainable world. It has played important role in the public debates on the pension reforms in Poland. Now it is engaged with the promotion of a law that will give opportunity for the parties to establish party think tanks but as independent legal entities, which is important for the future of the Institute. Enforcement of such a law

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will be an opportunity for the Institute to gain more independence, but also more funding, applying for grants to international donors.

**Sobieski Institute** is a multidisciplinary centre for analysis, legally an independent think tank since 2004. The institute defines as its mission the formulation of political ideas for Poland. On its website Sobieski is presented through its political values and views as committed to a strong, but limited state, economic freedom, independence and responsibility of the individual and social order based on natural law. Although it has no transparent connections to a single party it functions as a think tank of the Law and Justice party, providing them with analysis and expertise, consulting them on specific issues and also mediating the debate with the business. The institute is funded mainly by the Law and Justice Party, but it has also company donations and individual ones.

**DemosEUROPA**, established in 2006, is an independent international research institute, focused on the European issues. It was created as an answer to a specific political situation, during the Kaczynski's government, which they defined as divergence from Europe. Since then the institute provides a platform for public debates on European issues and seeks to formulate answers to challenges facing the EU, based on policy researches. The think tank has multiple sources of funding, mainly from international and European institutions.

**Political Critique** started as a journal, edited by a group of young intellectuals, who define themselves as "the Left voice" in the Polish public debate. The first issue of *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political Critique) was published in 2002. Since then Political Critique became a "liberal network of institutions and activists". Political Critique runs a publishing house, online daily "Dziennik Opinii" and still edits quarterly magazine *Political Critique*, which already has Ukrainian edition. The Institute has also founded cultural centres in Warsaw, Lodz, Gdansk, etc. and activists clubs in different cities in Poland and outside of it (Berlin and Kiev) aiming to empower the people through debates and public actions. The latest initiative of Political Critique is the Institute for Advanced Study that will be in charge of the research initiatives of the group. The Institute does not present itself as a think tank, although they have a publishing program for public policy readers in different fields and their activists participate in the public debate with leftist political proposals and alternatives.

**The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)** is an independent think-tank that conducts policy-focused research. PISM provides advice to all branches of government and contributes to wider debates on international relations in Europe and beyond. PISM is the only one of the studied think tanks that is publicly financed by the state budget. PISM is obliged to report its activities to the state institutions and to negotiate its agenda with them. Formally PISM is an independent institution, but with secured state funding. PISM has experts in different field of foreign policy and actively participates on the foreign policy debates. With their new director they developed new media policy and tries to be more visible in the Polish media with analysis on foreign policy

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issues. PISM also has several types of regular publications – strategic files, reports and bulletin. The Institute has a special program *PISM Academy* aimed at providing training in policy issues, diplomacy, language training. Most of the research they are doing is carried by their internal experts (most of the studied think tanks prefer to have more internal experts than to rely on external ones), but they also offer fellowships and internships to cooperate with external experts and to train students in foreign policy expertise.

### 2. Main findings

#### 2.1 The crisis or “the more competitive environment”

Our research started with the premise that there is a certain crisis of the role of think tanks at the present moment. First, the historical moment of the transition, when think tanks offered viable policy solutions to the major social changes (at least in Eastern Europe) has ended and thus the new situation poses new challenges to these independent centres to redefine their role. Second, the global financial crisis has diminished funding for these types of organizations pressing them to invent new strategies for themselves. Thus, we have started with the idea that think tanks are at the crossroad both from intellectual and financial point of view – they have to re-imagine themselves and their role on one hand and, on the other, they have to develop new strategies to secure their funding and institutional survival.

Interviews in Poland presented a different perspective from which we can analyze the contemporary situation. There is a consensus in the think tank community that nowadays the context in which they operate has changed (in comparison to the 90ies) and poses different challenges to the think tanks, but there was no organization perceiving the new situation in the terms of “crisis”, especially a “crisis of mission”. The funds are diminishing, but the crisis affected all the spheres so this is not a specific challenge to the think tank community. Plus, this situation is perceived as a temporary setback that will finish sooner or later.

The older think tanks dated the crisis back in the past when their main donors – those, on whose institutional grants they used to rely (USAID mainly) – departed from Poland. At that period they were forced to reinvent themselves in order to find new sources of funding and new mission for themselves. At that time they reoriented their agenda much more towards the EU institutions and funding programs. One of them redesigned its research programs as to adequately develop policy proposals and stimulate transformation of Polish society to converge to European norms, values and social models. The other older think tank started to export their economic knowledge and lessons learned from Polish transition to countries as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia; they reoriented their programs as to fit the priorities of the new main donors – EU institutions and framing programs. Thus they shifted their focus from the internal issues of economic changes in Poland to the problems mainly of the neighbouring countries to the EU and enlargement agenda of the Union. They are already not quite

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present in the public debate in Poland but they are influential internationally nowadays, developing educational programs in neighbouring countries. As the main lesson learned one of the respondent defines the finding that there are no technical solutions to the problems, but all policies has to be embedded in specific contexts in order to produce predictable and desirable results. As for the early days of the transition, when this centre has been one of the influential voices (being close to Balcerowicz) in the public debate, the respondent recalls the period as the time when the think tanks have been “debating the frame” of the society, while in the present situation they are mostly engaged with debating the details. The liberal values are now prevailing, in his opinion, thanks to the think tanks the liberal values became part of the frame within which all specific policies are debated.

Using different terms, but sharing this idea of the mission of the think tanks in the 90ies most of the respondents defined the past as the time of inventing the “overarching narratives”, when think tanks transferred solutions and models from the West, offering credible expertise and relevant policy proposals for the massive social change Poland has passed. Thus, think tanks have played successfully their role of the key players to voice the liberal policy proposals in the public debate in the 90ies. Being successful in implementing the liberal values, think tanks nowadays reinvented themselves for the new roles they can play in contemporary public debates. But this is not a matter of crisis, but a constant process of adjusting and responding adequately to the shifting situations. As one of the respondents defines it, think tanks are historical phenomena, they can disappear as they appeared in Poland if they cannot cope with the new terms of the debates and cannot offer new answers to the contemporary problems. The main role of the think tanks in his opinion is to name the new problems, to carry objective research and to propose sound policies addressing those problems. Thus, there is a shift from overarching narratives and setting of the frame to “dealing with specificities”. This perception leads some of the think tanks to refocus their organizations more narrowly or to the development of expertise in specific spheres, where reform policies are needed. The new role of the think tanks is to address more individual issues, to propose policies for specific problems, but this is not an easier task. Engaging with the micro-changes has to be a daily process of proposing policy relevant solutions and credible expertise to tackle them. Thus it is not so much an agenda of heroism anymore, but a matter of a daily service to society. Think tanks must act on purpose, or as projects, e.g. fulfilling single issues, being reflexive in their agenda as to predict the new developments in the society and being flexible enough to challenge the specific problems, when they appear – this is the new role that think tanks not simply have to, but already play in Poland. And it is not a matter of a strategy to cope with a crisis, but a process of a constant change of reinvention in the fluid contexts of the contemporary societies.

Some things have changed, but others seem forever – all of the studied Polish think tanks define as their main role to spread ideas for public policies, based on credible expertise and objective research. Thus almost all of the studied think tanks define their relations with the academic researchers

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as cooperation, instead of rivalry. There was only one think tank that criticized the academy and positioned itself as opposition to the academic researches accused of being not informed and politically oriented. Even they, though, have an internship program and involve students in their policy researches, especially in the field of educational reforms. All of the other think tanks cooperate with academic researchers, involving them in particular projects and developing internship programs for students. Some of the think tanks even publish results of their work in academic publications. Academics are also involved in public debates on policy issues, organized by the think tanks. Thus, there is a close cooperation as a tactics to secure the objectivity of the research done. Despite all those forms of cooperation, think tanks still prefer to develop their own internal expertise. First of all because the perspective of policy oriented research is quite different from the academic expertise and researchers at the universities cannot really offer policy proposals. They can provide relevant data and can secure the scientific standards of a study, but the political perspective is still exclusively expertise of the think tank researchers. The other reason for all the think tanks to keep up quite a big staff of experts is that they have to participate in the public space. They have to participate in media with analysis, interviews and articles almost on daily basis, thus experts have to be fully involved both in the developing of the research and in the promotion of the policy proposals of the organization.

The biggest challenge for the think tanks was the new media situation. The marketization of the traditional media and tabloidization of the press were perceived as obstacles for the think tanks to influence public debate with arguments and sound public policy ideas. One of the think tanks even developed its own online media to tackle this problem. Most of the think tanks made their efforts to voice the problems in the traditional media, no matter how difficult it is. The specific challenge is posed by the new media, where everyone can present herself as speaking from an expert point of view. The think tanks have developed strategies to be in the social media but without fostering illusions – there they can be one of the voices, but it is a matter of chance to become influential. Still the media problem is not the biggest one, because think tanks define as their main addressee the political elites, opinion leaders, experts and informed citizens, but not the public as a whole; thus the most important task in front of them is to keep their influence there. As one of the respondents said, we are now in a competitive field for trust. Think tanks, though, are aware that they have something to offer - they became the institutions who can provide bases for informed policies with their genuine agenda of developing policy oriented researches. Last, but not least the think tanks are those who can provide research on controversial issues and hopefully to help finding the informed solutions for the specific problems.

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### 2.2 The independence of think tanks – “to set your own agenda”

One of the popular accusations towards the think tanks and their researches is that they pretend to be independent but in fact they are partisans of certain ideas and policies. Our hypothesis was that, the very meaning of independent think-tank has become questionable in the new situation. In our own project we understood independency as follows:

- a. The advocacy of “non-partisan”, “cross-party issues”, such as public participation, transparency, deference to expert bodies;
- b. Funding from public sources or foreign funding.

In the case studies we aimed to unveil this concept of independency and to see how think tanks perceive it and if this idea is important in their own opinion. From the Polish case we can argue that independency of the organization is an important issue and all of the studied think tanks present themselves (on their websites) as independent and insist on this term during the interviews. Thus independency seems as the main term for such an institution to claim legitimacy. The think tanks in Poland are not centred on the idea of public participation and they do not seek legitimacy as specific representatives of citizens. Even when they are engaged with the citizens’ involvement in defining public policies they see this part of their work not as genuinely think tank’s work, but mostly part of the activist agenda they have (some of the think tanks presented themselves as think-do-tanks, so participatory issues were seen as a “do” things in their work). Most important point thus for the organizations to legitimate themselves was their independency and their ability to provide objective and credible policy research and proposals. The accusation of non-independency or even the slightest suspicion of hidden dependency has been used as a way to de-legitimate the think tanks, perceived as rivals in the field. The notion of independency, though, was different from the one we have expected.

First of all independency was slightly related to the funding. One of the think tanks stated that there are certain donors who can threaten the independency of the expertise but nevertheless the consensus was that think tanks can choose their funding and secure it from multiplicity of donors as to keep their own independency. The state budgeted think tank related its own independency with the secured budget that gives them an opportunity to develop intellectually independent expertise. Even the think tank financed entirely by the party budget defines itself as an independent centre of expertise and policy oriented research. As an independent body of research the think tank can serve properly the party needs providing its policies with evidence, objective analysis and data useful for the implementation of knowledge based public policies. Thus, all the organizations with quite different funding, presented themselves as independent as if there is something more in independency than money.

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Secondly, independency does not mean value neutrality in the opinion of the think tanks, nor the advocacy of “non-partisan” issues. They all admit and even openly declare their own positions and values. Going back in the 90ies in Poland the promotion of the liberal values has been the core agenda of the influential think tanks and they played the role of the “guardians of the liberal policies” (in Ivan Krastev’s terms). Now the context has changed but the value positioning of the think tanks is still an important part of their self-perceptions and differentiations of the field. Even some of the new think tanks narrate their beginning as an institutional answer to policies that diverge from their own values (the president of the board of one of the influential pro-european think tanks presented it as an answer to a historical need to engage with EU issues in a political situation that diverged Poland from Europe). Think tanks in Poland openly present themselves as liberal, leftist, conservative, pro-european, etc. Standing on value positions though is not an argument against independency. In a Veberian sense values are those that pose research questions and orient us towards certain problems, but still the research has to be carried objectively. So what is important for the think tanks to perceive themselves as independent is the objectivity of the research and the opportunity for them to set their own agenda (several of the interviewees defines independency in those terms). Thus the transparency of their work becomes very important. The transparency and accountability being main demand for the public institutions appear to be a regulative principle of how the think tank sphere operates in Poland. All of the researched think tanks have different kind of regular publications – newsletters, edited volumes, readers, academic publications, media articles. My impression from the field is that those publications are well known in the expert community and think tanks are rated according to their work (even representatives from opposing think tanks demonstrated that they know what their rivals/competitors do). Independency in that sense is perceived as producing a credible expertise, offering knowledge-based public policies from one’s own values stances. The evaluation of one’s work from the expert community matters because this is the authority that can acknowledge the organization’s claim of independency. I can argue that particularly this idea of independency – the ability to set your own agenda – undermines the role of the donors and strengthens the relations within the think tank community. The think tanks perceive themselves as competing voices on the market of ideas but important point here is that they operate on the same field and have this idea of expert community that gives them confidence in their work. Think tanks are doing a great job after all, said one of the interviewees, expanding the public debate with informed policy proposals.

### 2.3 Strategies and future challenges

We have already described some of the strategies developed by the think tanks to gain influence and trust within the expert community. First challenge for the first generation of think tanks was to reinvent themselves from “guardians of liberal values” to experts in more specific policies. But

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this strategy is also important for the new think tanks – most of them perceive their organizations as institutional answers to specific problems. Shortly, one of the strategies is the “specialization” of the expertise and developing specific policies, instead of overarching framing of the political situation. Specialization also affects the core work of the think tanks. Some of them described their path as starting from more activists approach and later on focusing more on the research. Paradoxically, the other strategy of success was quite the opposite – pairing the intellectual expertise with active work within the respective communities (mainly for the think-do-tanks). Even this second approach, though, is perceived as engagement with specific problems and policies, engagement “with details”. What think tanks should do, this was more or less a consensual view, is to see a problem, name it and introduce it in the public debate. Think tanks have to keep their core philosophy to spread ideas and inform the debate. From this point of view even the new media situation, with media taking the populist path, can be not a challenge, but an opportunity for the think tanks. Without targeting the mass audience, think tanks are those who can offer analysis, credible policy researches and informed proposals for those who are interested in. The think tanks are seen as the players who can work on controversial issues and hot topics, they are the experts who can explain the necessity of unpopular political decisions. They have relevant expertise also to implant new ideas for public policies.

What is important for the think tanks in the future is to keep “working on purpose”, to tackle new problems, to be flexible enough to reflect the changes of the society. Thus they have to specialize themselves on several issues, but also to play an active role in building a social consensus for the future.

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### Conclusions

Going back to the main questions of our study, we will try to answer them from the perspective of the Polish case. We have started asking if the post-communist think tanks have already outlived their usefulness. Poland is a good example of how adapting strategies of the organizations have made them relevant for the different contexts. In the beginning of the transition the newly founded think tanks were important in defining the democratic frame of the society and for the implementation of the liberal values within the society. Thus the expert voices from the NGOs were important for the construction of the new hegemonic narrative and they were the real guardians of the liberal frame of the politics. After those “heroic times” Polish think tanks have reinvented themselves as to be relevant for the new situation. Nowadays they conduct policy relevant researches for specific policies. They do not create overarching narratives, but they do identify new problems and propose viable solutions. Something else has changed also, think tank experts are not the most influential voice in the public debate, but they are important and different voices on the market of ideas. This new situation of competing policy proposals is not perceived as a crisis, but as an opportunity – think tanks prove that their expertise is relevant for implementing knowledge based policies.

Another important shift in the policy orientation of the think tanks is the shift from US to EU donors. This is not simply a story of financial adjustment, but also shows the development of a new policy perspective. Recalling the history of the post-communist think tanks, they have started with a negative attitude towards the state and proposed policies that were both market oriented and leading to the downsizing of the state. The contemporary situation is totally different at least in Poland. The think tanks, without desisting from their original liberal values, have started to work with public institutions, offering them their own expertise. Thus, think tanks are helping public institutions to be more transparent and efficient in implementing relevant policies. They are important actors in the convergence process with European societies and we can expect them to become more similar to the “western” think tanks, than to the American ones, developing more welfarist perspective.