

# Analytical communities and Think Tanks as Boosters of Democratic Development

*for The first Joint Conference organized by the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR) "Whatever Happened to North-South?", 16 -19, February 19, 2011 in Sao Paulo, Brazil, at the University of Sao Paulo.*

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In the discourse on democratic transformations political scientists pay most attention to such actors of democratizations as elites and masses; in some cases we analyze the role of civil society, political culture, religion, traditions and institutions. But what is clearly underestimated in the current studies of democratic transit and political transformations – is the role of such actors as intellectuals and analysts, think tanks, public policy centers – i.e. ‘intellectuals’.

Before we turn to the analysis of intellectual’s role in democratization we have to underline, that the problems of relations between intellectuals (scientists, analysts, and experts) and political elite (the power, the state) have significant and deep research traditions. This role was investigated by different philosophers and researchers - from Ancient Greek thinkers to modern authors. For example, we all remember, that in famous Plato's Dialogue "The State" the primary role in government of «the ideal state» was assigned to philosophers.

Looking back on the body of knowledge, devoted to ‘intellectuals-power relations’, we can identify several “research traditions”.

*“Normative” tradition* in research of the intellectuals’ role in policy making which had been based on the works of Antic thinkers, were continued in later times. Voltaire, Sen. Simon, Kont and others in their works idealized the role of intellectuals in politics and policy making, proposed to assign to scientists a dominate role in government.

Followers of *Marxism* and Marxist ideas – formed another tradition – they, instead, assigned to the intellectuals secondary role in politics and policy making, this role was mostly named as the “legitimization” function of minority’s rule,

elite's policy (Gramsci, Fuko, Manheim, Bourdieu). However, at the same time these scientists recognized heterogeneity of the intellectuals as a class, their potential for an autonomous and independent political position.

Together with this, the political role of intellectuals is not limited by the legitimization function of "ruling class" supremacy. The rising complexity of the decision making processes in modern states created demand for independent expert support for decision-making. This demand has been satisfied by new institutions of intellectual support of policy-making – think tanks. Support, an estimation of political decisions and alternatives, generating of ideas, education and elite formation became their functions.

That is why the group of scientists (M.Weber, T.Veblen, G.Galbrate, R. Dahl) suggest to study the *functions* of modern social system support that intellectuals carry out in conditions of modernization and globalization.

Because of complexity and scale of modern administrative problems the expert became an integral part of the decision making process. In differentiated social systems the policy makers need to increase the efficiency of their decisions and to maintain the social "feedback" mechanism, they involve independent analysts, including those in the institutional form - think tanks-, to estimate old political decisions and to develop completely new ones. For example, the Government decisions in the modern states, as a rule, are following the goal of satisfaction of majority's interests or certain social groups of citizens. However frequently the effect from those political decisions is shown in the course of their realization, therefore, there is a permanent demand of monitoring, assessment, correction of those decisions, as well as their analysis and estimation. In every stage of these processes think tanks are heavily engaged, conducting research and providing consultations for the decision makers. Such is the process in the modern states that the mechanism of "feedback" is carried out.

The increase of intellectuals' role and influence on modern sociopolitical processes had been indicated by the research results of the scientists considering

intellectuals and *analysts as autonomous political actors* (T.White, Ch.P.Snow, P.J. Buchanan).

In the modern state and society think tanks are built in democratic political process, they have become independent political actors, along with such institutions of civil society as NGOs and social movements, interests groups, pressure groups, trade unions, political parties and others.

It is important to mention, though, that institutions of intellectual support of policy-making had not always been the integral elements of modern democratic process. Expert institutes inherently are elements of «the authority's rule» (R.Dahl). Moreover, for a long time the idea of «the authority's rule» was opposed to democratic ideas. And in the role of authorities were philosophers (Plato) and theologians (A.Avgustin), the enlightenment monarchs (Voltaire), scientists at last (Ch.P.Snow).

Democratization has led the think tank's reorientation: from the work in the interests of the dominant political elite to supporting interests of different groups of influence (in public or someone's interests). Think tanks became the organizational form of experts' participation in the competitive pluralistic political process, getting the status of independent influential political structures. Thus, the institute of intellectual policy support that initially had been alien to ideas of democracy has been co-opted in democratic political process.

However, the degree of democratic character of think tanks may rise legitimate questions. In today's modern dynamical pluralistic society: «the power of the expert», possessing special knowledge, that is not easily obtained by the “ordinary people” and ability to influence the political process, can significantly diminish «the power of people» that does not possess expert knowledge. Thereupon the further democracy development is impossible without narrowing the “knowledge gap” between of experts and just “educated people”. This role, or even mission, think tanks of new type - advocacy tanks (ideology-oriented and

public think tanks<sup>1)</sup>) – can get which main function is education and training of citizens.

This mission is carried out by analytical communities and think tanks. They become boosters of democratic development. In the states of advanced or consolidated democracies it is possible to allocate some think tanks' activities promoting democratization in the country, and all over the world. Those functions include:

1. Political education of citizens in the spirit of democratic ideas and principles;
2. Support and training of talented youth;
3. Studying and popularization of the history of democratic ideas;
4. Formation of a public political discourse on actual sociopolitical and economic problems;
5. Support of democracy development in "the developing" countries.

What kind of practice in intellectual support of a policy and democratic transformations do analytical communities and think tanks have in the states of non-consolidated democracy? What are their functions as boosters of democratic development? What are the prospects of think tanks role as actors of the democratization?

Passing to experience of Russian think tanks' activities in promoting democratization, first of all, it is necessary to argue the weakness in resources of the Russian advocacy tanks (the partisan and civil think tanks) which in Europe bring the considerable contribution to the processes of democratic development. In many respects it is a consequence of institutional weakness of civil society structures in Russia (political parties and organized interests groups). Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> About think tanks types see: Nina Belyaeva, Dmitry Zaytsev. Think tanks and public policy centers as subjects of expert support of politics. *Politeia*. №4. 2008. Moscow. The article compares in detail two types of expert organizations – “think tanks” and public policy centers. Having thoroughly analyzed the distinctive features of the two types of structures and having pointed out separate sub-types of expert organizations, N.Belyaeva and D.Zaytsev are building a “map” of subjects of intellectual support of politics that helps to orientate oneself in the sphere of “expert services”

some Russian advocacy tanks give us examples activities in spheres of studying and popularization of history of democratic ideas (Liberal mission Foundation), formation of a public political discourse on actual sociopolitical and economic problems (INDEM Foundation), support and training for civil movements and initiatives (Interligal Foundation). However in general the Russian think tanks have considerable potential of activity diversification, making use of European think tanks' experience in spheres of democratic development support. Especially it concerns such perspective directions for our country as political education of citizens in the spirit of democratic ideas and principles, and also support of democracy development in the Union of independent states countries.

However experience of the Russian think tanks with reference to the theme of present article is interesting in other aspect: the Russian think tanks take functions of democratic institutes (like political parties, opposition, civil society, etc.) and, more can represent itself as one of the power of democratic transformations.

Specificity of the Russian think tanks is the fact that they quite often carry out not their functions. So in many respects occurred and occurs owing to weakness and inefficiency of political, including, state, institutes. In the conditions of scale state transformations when the state, especially business or structures of a civil society, were weak, think tanks carry out function, if not the power of modernization, but the developer of transformations strategy and tactics. So was in the early nineties when the expert community actively participated in the conflict of the President and the Supreme Soviet of Russia, searched for overcoming the crisis ways, developed Constitution projects (one of which was taken for a basis). Working out of bases of economic policy at various times attributed to the Institute of transitional economy, Council of defense policy, the Center of strategic development, the Institute of modern development.

Think tanks carry out the functions of political parties, aggregate interests of various social groups in specific proposals - alternatives to the state course (for example, long before acceptance and execution of national projects different think

tanks officials supported necessity of the state projects and named their concrete directions).

Promotion and discussion by expert community of political alternatives happened at various meetings, seminars, conferences – «expert platforms» where the decision makers also are invited. As an example it is possible to mention, «Club on 4th of November», on the basis of the think tanks there are also known "expert platforms", for example at Institute of modern development, the Russian public policy centre, the State university – Higher school of economics, etc.

The given platforms, as a matter of fact, substitute inefficient institutes of discussion and working out of political decisions (parliamentary hearings and testimony, work in parliamentary committees and the commissions), participation in which western think tanks is extended enough, as is the effective way of influence on a state policy. In Russia «expert platforms» become the channel, helping to inform offers of experts directly to decision makers (state officials, government).

It is necessary to notice that a number of the Russian think tanks carry out function of political opposition, moreover there are also oppositional «expert platforms» (seminars of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, «Khodorkovsky's reading», etc.) where officials from think tanks argue there independent from state positions.

We can indicate several research results.

1. Analytical communities and think tanks can be seen as boosters of democratic development in advanced democracies and in the state with non-consolidated political regimes. But these actors in some conditions can also legitimate authoritarian political tendencies and even support repressive regime. The third analytical communities' role can locate in political analysis, monitoring and assessment of public policies.

2. Analytical communities and think tanks capacity to be boosters of democratic development depend on their ability to articulate and advocate public interest. And this ability has close connection with think tanks' self-identification

as public advocacy think tanks, ability to soar under private interests (including bureaucratic interests in post-soviet states) to advocate public interests, with other stakeholders think tanks perception as working on general public nor on a interest group.

3. Advocacy think tanks and analytical community groups are a type of analytical structures that can be more effective as boosters of democratic development.

4. In the West (advanced democracy states) we can find developed sector of advocacy think tanks that provide function of boosters of democratic development on stabile long-term base. In the East (post-communist bloc countries) we have very week sector of advocacy think tanks and very changeable fickle uncertain role and influence of analytical communities and experts (from very high level of influence to very low in different periods; having just one client in certain periods, in other period working for different, even competing clients; from direct engagement in political protests - to legitimating the work of state authority).

5. We can divide factors that influence on think tanks capacity to be boosters of democratic development into two groups: internal and external. External factors are political competition and pluralism, institutionalization of political process, freedom of speech and independence of media, charity and philanthropy traditions, freedom of enterprise, strong business community and autonomous business, strong civil society, civil activism and participation in public policy, interest groups inclusion in public policy, openness and transparence of public policy etc. In non-consolidated democracies we can add such factors as lack of actors' (state officials, political parties, non-governmental structures, interest groups) competence in public policy and governance; need in large-scale social, economic and political reforms, modernization. Internal factors are analytical communities and think tanks consolidation; self-understanding as working on public interest for public good, ability to soar under private interests to advocate public interests; "PR-strategy" oriented on showing that "we are working on general public"; joint

activities with civil society, movements and organizations, union with them; keep public informed, public support.

6. The key factor for post-soviet bloc states to make think tanks boosters of democratic development is consolidation of civil society and analytical communities about common understanding of Past, Present and Future - in each particular state (where had we been?, where are we now? and where do we want to be in the nearest future?).

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