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THINK TANKS IN ALBANIA: A CASE OF A FLAWED POWER-KNOWLEDGE NEXUS

ABSTRACT

Think tanks are widely considered to be an important part of political life in mature democracies (McGann, 2019). The aim of the article is to present a preliminary characterisation of the institutional landscape of think tanks in Albania, based on the results of a qualitative and quantitative study conducted at the turn of 2017. The paper starts with presenting the specific features of the Albanian think tank sector and then proceeds to identify two major, yet interlinked, challenges facing Albanian think tanks, namely: (i) the lack of any internal political and institutional market for their research products, which is evidenced by their negligible impact on the policymaking process; (ii) the dependence on financing from external donors, which seriously constricts the autonomy of Albanian think tanks in defining their research agenda. The authors propose that this analysis of Albanian think tanks will aid in understanding how the Albanian political system functions as a whole.

Introduction

There are approximately 6500 think tanks around the world, and it is widely acknowledged that nowadays they play an important role in politics (NED, 2013; Pautz, 2012). Following a widely recognised approach, proposed in the *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* (Mc Gann, 2019), think tanks can be defined as “public-policy research analysis and engagement organisations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy”. Think tanks not only seek to generate knowledge and convert research into policy; they pursue policy change, try to enhance the level of public debate on important policy issues, and can also play a role in legitimising policy (Kelstrup, 2016). Guy Lodge and Will Paxton (2017) see the unique value of think tanks in the fact that “they are in the business of trying to solve problems, not just diagnose them, and once they have a policy solution, they seek to try and get their recommendations implemented”. In addition to being research organisations, think tanks also act as political actors; they may be treated as a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus (Stone, 2007), particularly as they routinely employ people from both politics and academia. In the more direct words of Rohinton Medhora (2015), president of the Centre for International Governance Innovation, their role is “influence peddling, in the best sense of the term” (de Boer, 2015).

Think tanks use a variety of strategies to achieve their desired impact in the complex policy process, shaped by a multitude of interacting forces and actors. Some think tanks aim to achieve policy influence through behind-the-scenes engagement with high-profile policy makers; others actively engage with the media or seek to raise public awareness about policy issues by focusing on advocacy (Stone & Denham, 2004). To influence policy, official and semi-official think tanks dedicate considerable energy to serving as advisors to authorities; they present research reports, personally advise government officials on state matters and seek direct consulting opportunities on public projects (Stone, 2007). Yet, while the impact of think tanks in the public policy process has received significant attention in literature, there appears to be no common and systematic method for monitoring and evaluating the impact of think tanks (Alcazar et al., 2012).

Think tanks are products of the political contexts they operate in (Brown et al., 2014). Their internal characteristics and modes of operation are intricately

related to how the key stakeholders in the policymaking community perceive their role in the political system. Recent research on the role of think tanks in diverse political contexts suggests that think tanks in developing countries can make an important contribution to driving forward politically savvy reforms upon which effective development depends (Weidenbaum, 2010). Think tanks are embedded in their local politics and exercise a degree of legitimacy that outsiders lack, which means that they are well placed to influence change. On the other hand, developing countries' think tanks face many challenges which naturally constrain the contribution they can make (Galushko & Djordjevic, 2018). However, in most countries they either already exist or could be strengthened in several ways (Lodge & Paxton, 2017).

Nearly three decades after the fall of communism, Albanian civil society is recognised as being only moderately developed, and the Albanian political regime as “transitional or hybrid” (Freedom House, 2019), still beset with various challenges, such as an inordinately high – for a European country – level of corruption (Albania was ranked 99 among 180 countries by Transparency International in 2019). Theoretically, the establishment of a multi-party democratic regime opened up a path for the development of civil society. Legal changes allowed for the growth of civil society organisations (CSOs), including organisations that may be identified as think tanks. The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion on the role played by think tanks in Albanian politics and societal development via reference to the results of the first comprehensive study of their organisational landscape, their functions, and the constraints to their development.

1. Methodology

The functioning of think tanks in Albania had not been previously subjected to any empirically grounded scientific analysis, which defined the explorative character of this research. The detailed objectives of the research were as follows: 1) to gain an understanding of the current think tank landscape in Albania; 2) to analyse the relevance and impact of their work (examining the input and outcome of their involvement in policymaking processes, in areas such as the adoption of legislation, strategies, action plans, reform implementation, etc.); 3) to explore potential paths for integrating the results of research, conducted by the think tanks, within the domestic policymaking system.

The methodology of the research consisted of: (i) a contextual analysis of think tanks as they relate to the Albanian civil society as a whole; (ii) a preliminary

mapping of the Albanian think tank sector; (iii) a quantitative survey addressing the think tanks identified in the previous step; (iv) qualitative interviews with representatives of selected think tanks; and (v) a qualitative evaluation of the output and impact of the organisations.

In developing a list of NGOs we combined a minimalist approach, identifying a small number of think tanks that are well known and have been visible and important in creating public policy in Albania, and a maximalist approach that entailed listing a larger number of think tanks based on an inclusive understanding of the term, using official data and websites. To this end, we consulted the official list of NGOs from the Parliament of Albania as per September 2017, the list of NGOs from the Agency for the Support of Civil Society, the list detailing OSCE presence in Albania, and a list of NGOs collaborating with well-known NGOs that have been operating in Albania for many years, found on their websites. It is worth noting that Albanian law does not differentiate between the registering of a CSO/NGO, a think tank, a private foundation or a “centre”; altogether, there are circa 12,000 CSOs registered by the Tirana Court of First Instance, and 3,724 registered by the country’s tax authorities (USAID, 2017). We reviewed various current reports on civil society; conducted a review of the current legal framework covering civil society, think tanks, lobbying and advocacy; conducted a review of other related reports on evidence-based policy-making in Albania (or in the Western Balkans when resources were scarce for Albania); and we examined donors, their strategies and their current partnerships and initiatives with think tanks in Albania. In this way, we compiled a list of 50 Albanian NGOs that could be identified as think tanks.

These 50 organisations were invited to take part in a survey, and 23 of them complied. The survey was carried out with the aid of the Startquestion platform, which enables the return rate to be monitored while ensuring the anonymity of the collection process. The questionnaire included 15 closed obligatory questions and 4 questions drawn up on the basis of extensive desk research and modified after the first three face-to-face interviews. In December 2017 our researchers conducted 8 in-depth interviews with representatives of the largest Albanian think-tanks (identified as such on the basis of the survey and desk research): Albanian Institute for Political Studies (ISP); Agenda Institute (AI); Institute for Mediation and Democracy (IDM); Regional Environmental Center Country Office (REC); Albanian Center for Economic Research (ACER); Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS); Open Society foundation Albania (OSFA); Children’s Human Rights Centre of Albania (CRCA). The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic content analysis approach focused on

presenting the perspectives of the interviewees (particularly their organisational self-identification, and their perception of: their relationship with the government, their links to the political system, and the challenges and limitations they cope with, especially regarding their financial sustainability and impact).

The preliminary results of the research were first presented in an operational report “Think tanks role in Policy Development in Albania” (Sokoli & Włoch, 2017), prepared for PERFORM – a project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and carried since 2015 by an NGO Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and University of Fribourg with the aim of “strengthening the relevance of social sciences for social and political reforms” (PERFORM). The conclusions from the report were used for shaping the support policy of external benefactors for the Albanian non-governmental sector and academia.

2. The think tank landscape in Albania

“There are no pure think tanks in Albania”

Our research shows that the number of organisations that may be deemed to be think tanks in Albania is limited. The interviews proved that knowledge among the representatives of the selected organisations concerning the roles and functions of think tanks is up-to-date: when asked, they were able to offer accurate definitions of a think tank. Most of the respondents voiced the opinion that the think tank sector has grown considerably over the last decade. At the same time, they quite unanimously tended to claim that there are no “pure think tanks in Albania”, or even in the whole Balkan region.

A think tank is a machine that generates knowledge that provides policymakers and stakeholders with concrete policy alternatives regarding politics and the public good. **Albania does have think tank work and expertise in place, although it’s very limited. You won’t find a pure think tank neither in Albania nor in the Balkans.** There are some NGOs (like study centres) that pretend to be think tanks in Albania, but they are not in fact, as they do no more than 10% think tank work (R1).

A think tank is an institution that provides solid knowledge and expertise at a very higher level, the highest in the market, knowledge in a certain topic that comes from academic experts or from lengthy experience and practice. The outcome of this knowledge is to provide policy alternatives. **I don’t think we have pure think tanks in Albania,** at least not in philosophical terms; we more probably have “solution providers” (R2).

A think tank is an institute that does research and uses that to influence policy, build advocacy and effect an outcome. Think tanks bring more extensive expertise, the best in a certain field, and they are quoted regionally and are part of the international research network. **There are very few think tanks in Albania, and I would say pure think tanks don't exist in the country** (R3).

Only one respondent was confident that his organisation functioned as a pure think tank. The rest of the respondents admitted that their organisation dedicated only a part of their everyday activities to typical think-tanking (research and impact). During the interviews it was consistently indicated that the number of organisations that fully or partially function as think tanks, that is, knowledge-producing organisations impacting policymaking, does not extend to even 10 organisations. This was corroborated by the survey respondents (in an open-ended question). Most of them indicated that the number of organisations in Albania that could be regarded as think tanks is quite restricted (“very few, [but] many pretend to be a think tank”, “there are very few of them and they are not very consolidated”). A majority of the respondents agreed that the number of think tanks in the country is somewhere between 5 and 10 at the most. Only two of the respondents offered a much more optimistic estimate, with one stressing that “there are plenty of think tanks in Albania, one can hardly give a number”, and the other suggesting a number in the region of “20 to 30 think tanks”. The list of the organisations indicated as think tanks in the survey was generally consistent with the list of 8 organisations selected for the in-depth interviews.

Out of 23 organisations, 18 identified themselves as NGOs, two as university-based think tanks, and three as foundations. Almost all of the surveyed organisations identified themselves as think tanks, presumably for reasons of prestige. This self-declaration was not always corroborated by an enumeration of their functions, as some of them did not manage to produce any emblematic think tank product in 2016. In fact, a substantial number of the surveyed organisations failed to produce a single policy paper (26%) or policy brief (22%) in 2016. Only two organisations in our sample claimed that they produced more than 10 research reports in 2016. It may cautiously be assumed that for the surveyed organisations the most common activity was preparing press releases and articles, and, similarly, that most of the surveyed organisations considered writing white papers and academic articles beyond the scope of their interests.

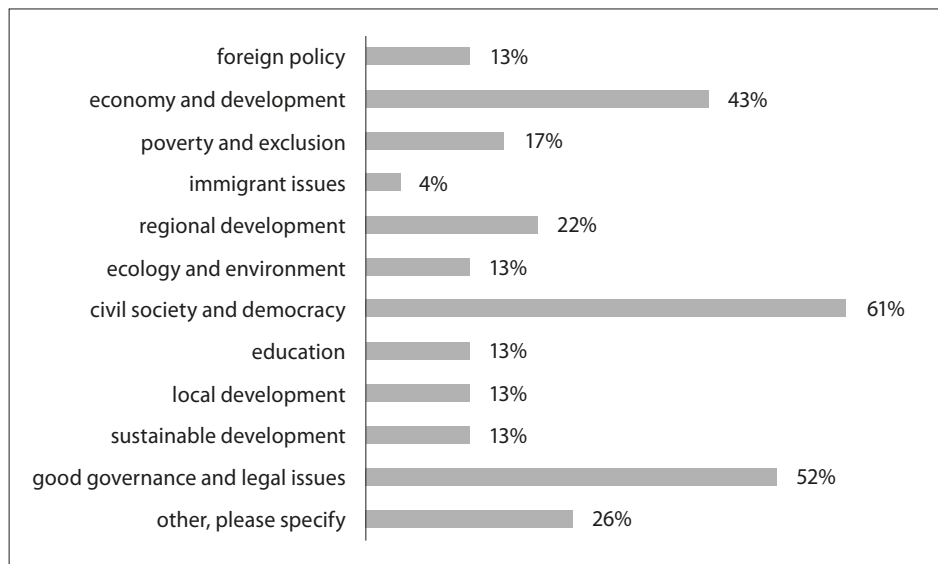
Table 1. Outputs of think tanks for 2016

How many of the following did your organisation produce in 2016?	None	1–2	3–4	5–10	More than 10	I don't know
Research reports	4%	30%	26%	26%	13%	0%
White papers	57%	22%	9%	9%	4%	0%
Policy papers	26%	26%	26%	17%	4%	0%
Policy briefs	22%	30%	17%	17%	9%	4%
Press releases	22%	9%	17%	26%	17%	9%
Press articles	9%	4%	22%	30%	30%	4%
Scientific articles (published in journals)	39%	13%	9%	17%	17%	4%

Question: How many of the following did your organisation produce in 2016? N= 23

Due to their lack of financial stability and dependency on foreign grants, most of the surveyed organisations engage in part-time think tanking rather than act as full-time think tanks. Almost one-third of their time is dedicated to projects which would not classify as traditional think tank activities. Doing research, performing analysis, preparing reports and other publications took up 40% of their time, and the remaining 29% was dedicated to networking, organizing public events for institutions and municipalities, and other forms of building impact. On the other hand, the qualitative evaluation of the output of the selected organisations proved that they have reached a very high level of professionalisation and seem well-prepared to offer high quality expertise. This is true particularly of those organisations that work in close cooperation with international networks and perform their work to international standards.

The survey result indicates that Albanian think tank organisations focus on general issues concerning political governance and the public sphere: “civil society and democracy” (61%), “good governance and legal issues” (52%), and “the economy and development” (43%). More specific social issues such as economic exclusion, education, the environment and local development were mentioned much less often.

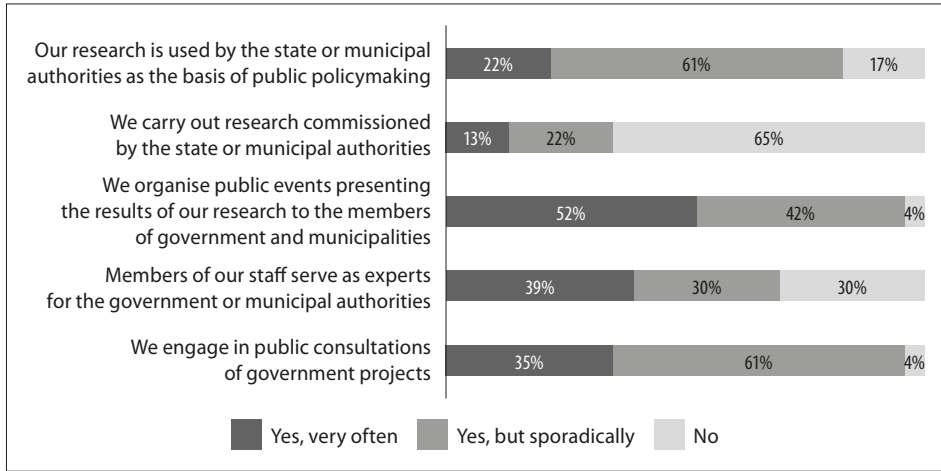
Figure 1. Main areas of expertise

Question: Indicate the main areas of expertise of your organisation (between 1 and 3); N=23. “Other” included open-ended answers such as: “culture”, “art, culture, cultural heritage”, “elections, political parties, parliament”, “EU integration and management of EU funds”, “social services, human rights, child rights”, and “women in business”.

3. Influencers without influence

Impacting policy through research is one of the essential functions of a think tank although, as already highlighted, it is difficult to track and evaluate (Weidenbaum, 2010). The surveyed organisations declared that they more or less routinely undertook the usual impact-inducing activities of a typical think tank: they engaged in public consultations and organised public events in order to present the results of their research for the authorities. Yet interestingly, one third admitted that members of their staff never serve as experts for the authorities on the local or central government level, and 15 organisations out of 23 (65%) never carried out research commissioned by the authorities. Only 5 out of the 23 organisations estimated that their output often serves as the ground for evidence-based policymaking, while 4 felt that their research was ignored.

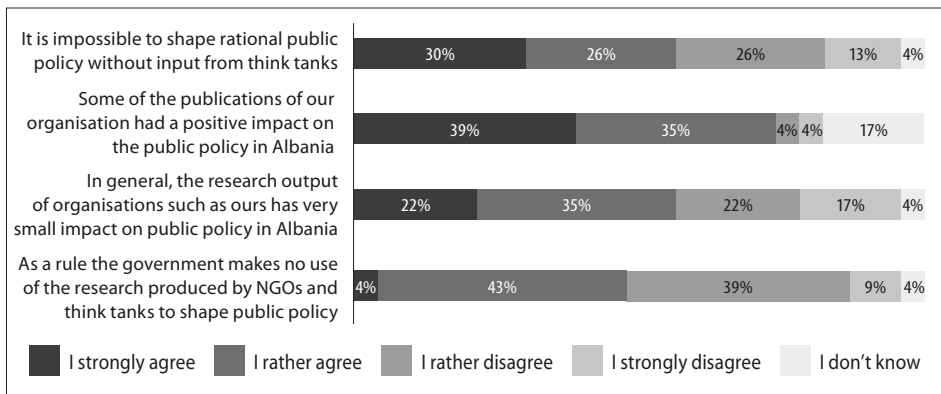
Figure 2. Think tanks and public consultations



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? N=23

Answers to these closed-ended questions confirmed that the surveyed organisations had mixed feelings as to the effectiveness of their impact on public policymaking in Albania. Admittedly, three in four (74%) saw some positive impact of their publications and 39% refuted the statement that the research output of organisations such as theirs had a very small impact on public policy in Albania. On the other hand, nearly half of them (11 out of 23) agreed that usually the government makes no use of the research produced by NGOs and think tanks as evidence-based public policy.

Figure 3. Perceptions of think tanks’ output and impact



Question: To what extent do you agree with following statements? N=23

Difficulties in attracting attention and influencing public policy were among the most often cited challenges to the development of the think tank sector in Albania in the open-ended question. The respondents emphasised “the lack of any tradition of cooperation between governmental agencies and local think tanks”, “the close-minded way of working of most of the public institutions toward think tanks”, “a lack of attention to inputs”, “a lack of structured dialogue with public institutions”, and even “the autocratic mentality of the authorities”. One respondent remarked that, in order to operate, think tanks need “a policy environment that has the public good as its ultimate beneficiary”, and pointed out that “the stronger the ties of think tanks/civil society and the public, the greater the guarantees of democracy”.

4. A deficient power–knowledge nexus

As stated before, during the interviews the representatives of selected organisations demonstrated a good understanding of the role that think tanks play in the process of shaping evidence-based public policy, built upon their own personal experience as well as their operational knowledge of the political processes in other European countries. It is worth noting that their overall views were far from idealistic: the respondents recognised the reality that the role and the level of maturity of think tanks is intricately linked to the maturity of the political system as a whole. In the Albanian context, think tanks may contribute to the growth of civil society and democracy; however, they feel that they are at constant risk of being hijacked by the political interests of various interest groups or political parties. Consequently, Albanian think tanks find themselves in quite a challenging situation in comparison to their counterparts from other European countries: they need to dramatise their “distanced” position from the authorities if they want to be recognised as legitimate producers of objective expertise in the eyes of other political and civil society actors in Albania, but at the same time they need a close relationship with the government and municipalities if they want to ensure the impact of their expertise. An important intervening variable is the fact that the Albanian political field is comparatively small, which in practice means that think tanks are often staffed by former political activists or even important former members of government. And vice versa, over the last few years there has been a growing tendency for think tank staff to find employment in the government. The more influential think tank leaders often join a government administration.

The weakness in cooperation between the government and think tanks is reinforced by a mutual distrust. A shared opinion of the representatives of the think tank sector is that their organisations' roles are limited due to inadequate demand from the side of the authorities at central and local level. Think tanks are convinced that they are well-equipped to deliver high-quality analyses, but the state does not commission research or use the research already produced by the think tanks. However, at the same time they themselves are wary of entering into cooperation with the government. Most tellingly, only one representative of a think tank presented no objections to working with the government. Predominantly, the think tank sector is convinced that in the Albanian political context the only way to maintain their independence and to safeguard the objectivity of their research is to keep their distance and not enter the political sphere. Quite often the respondents emphasised that they “never mix with the government” or take part in public tendering. In two cases the respondents bluntly stated that they never take commissions from the government, because “it comes with a price”, implying the risk of losing their independent status or their good reputation. This seriously constrains their opportunities to fulfil the typical think tank role of inspiring and supporting evidence-based public policy.

Even those respondents who did not rule out the possibility of taking commissions from the authorities in government and municipalities emphasised that, generally speaking, the aforementioned authorities are not that interested in using the expertise of think tanks. Admittedly, government officials often attend events organised by the organisations, but they do not use their expertise to shape their decision-making process.

The government lacks the culture to fund research. The government and politics in general are not open to digesting knowledge and recommendations that come from research, they don't buy it, and even when donors have paid for it, they don't use it (R8)

In Albania **it is hard to find a “buyer” for the research product**, the government doesn't need it, they will never ask for it, even if they show a kind of interest they don't use it, while donors have their requirements and the product reflects that. The government doesn't have any money for think tanks (R2).

Without funding a think tank cannot survive. The government and the parliament have to change the mentality and the working culture, research should be fundamental to their decision-making and policy (R10).

One of the respondents commented on the fact that the government uses NGOs and think tanks in a purely instrumental way, just to uphold the façade of

there being a participatory decision-making process. Even though third sector organisations take part in consultation processes, they are rarely given adequate time to offer informed views based on reliable studies.

Unfortunately, we can't only produce research; we would love to do assessments and impact assessments on laws and amendments, but that is impossible. Firstly, we lack money – donors are not interested, and the government doesn't care. They don't need assessments and impact assessments because they pass laws based on lobbying, and frequently they will ask us just so they can click the box in "an emergency status", not giving us the necessary documents to read and reflect upon, and suggest in the material they sent (R1).

We maintain good relations with government officials and invite them to our events and conferences. The main problem is that they **show interest for a moment but never do any follow up**. I would strongly recommend that the government ask and pay for quality research, it would help this country, and it would help our leaders to make the right decisions (R3).

One of the respondents suggested that the government is not making adequate use of the intellectual resources it already has, which have been paid for by external donors and could be used as a basis for evidence-based policy.

There are some government institutes that operate with public money, but their product has zero visibility, no one knows what they do and how much they can influence policy through their work (R5).

According to another respondent, this lack of demand on the part of the natural recipients of the research produced by the think tank sector seriously impinges on the quality of the research as "the motivation to produce quality is very low" (R6).

5. He who pays the piper calls the tune

The lack of interest in products of think tanks on the part of political actors and institutional decision-makers translates into a common problem for all the analysed organisations: financial instability. As one of the interviewees put it, "it is hard to survive if you produce a good study and nobody buys it". Consequently, most of the Albanian organisations that were identified as think tanks are largely dependent on external donations. All of the surveyed organisations receive grants from some kind of international organisation; 83% of them receive EU grants and 69% benefit from US grants. For nearly half of the respondent

organisations, EU funds (48%) constitute much of their income. Commissions from the government were declared to be the main source of income in only one case. Even more interestingly, most of the surveyed organisations never received any commissions from municipal authorities (87%), the central government (61%) or businesses (70%).

Table 2. Sources of budgetary income

What are the main sources of your income?	We do not receive these	This provides the majority of our budget	This adds to our budget, but is of minor importance
EU grants	17%	48%	35%
US grants	30%	39%	30%
Grants from international organisations	0%	52%	48%
Commissions from the Albanian government	61%	4%	35%
Commissions from municipal authorities	87%	4%	9%
Commissions from businesses in Albania	70%	9%	22%
Commissions from other Albanian NGOs	65%	13%	22%
Commissions from academia	87%	9%	4%
Grants from other foreign donors	13%	30%	57%

Question: What are the main sources of your budgetary income? N=23

The lack of financial sustainability (“the lack of funding”, “very limited sources of funding”) was the most frequently cited challenge for the development of think tanks in Albania. The deficiency in the power-knowledge nexus on the demand side means that, for the time being, there are virtually no other substitutes for foreign donors’ financial support, and that foreign grants will have to act as a life-support system for Albanian think tanks for the foreseeable future. Domestic funding opportunities are scarce. Admittedly, state funding

for think tanks includes contracting for service delivery and dispensing project grants through line ministries and the Agency for the Support of Civil Society (ASCS). ASCS provides grants to CSOs to fund projects focusing on the fight against corruption, citizen participation, advocacy initiatives, domestic violence, employment, etc., but the general opinion among third sector organisations is that the rules and procedures for public funding are not transparent or just.

In Albania there are no think tanks; they are hybrid institutions dependent on projects and donors. If the donors leave the country, it will be hard for these so-called think tanks to survive (R5).

Undoubtedly, the engagement of foreign organisations has been the crucial factor in building sustainable civil society and democracy in Albania. In the first stage of the development of the Albanian third sector, the somewhat paternalistic guidance of more experienced European and American institutions, including strong suggestions as to the direction and scope of research and activities, contributed to the consolidation and professionalisation of the Albanian organisations. Having said that, during the interviews most of the interviewed persons suggested that currently the limitations imposed by donors may hinder the maturation of Albanian think tanks. They voiced concerns that “donors are not interested” in funding research as such, but only do it as a means to underpin other specific activities, particularly those oriented towards social development and change.

As for the donors, they don't commission research per se, only if it can be part of a big project with the focus on community development, good governance, security issues etc. (R6)

Donors do not want to fund only research, but they fund projects where only one or two activities might be pure research that serves the ongoing project (R2).

The donors in this country and those international ones do not pay much attention to research. They will be willing to pay for a project that targets change, social change, but with no research. (R10).

The donors that fund research have their own agenda, they will pay for research, but they might not want to publish it, and the visibility of the institutions is low in that case (R5).

Consequently, it is foreign donors, not local actors, that ultimately identify research priorities, themes and scopes. A large portion of the research agenda of Albanian think tanks reflects the priorities of the foreign donors. Deprived of funding for long-term research, Albanian think tanks do not feel free to define

research priorities which would be consistent with their better knowledge of the local situation, and they have limited resources for creating their own databases or developing high quality research products. Their work is over-dependent on projects that exclude long-term planning; in principle, that means that they more usually perpetuate the status quo. Unfortunately, this erodes the credibility of think tanks in the academic community, and discourages some of the best researchers from working in policy institutes. It may be safely stated that most of our respondents came to see this situation as hindering the maturation of their organisations, as they are not allowed to define the strategic research priorities according to their superior knowledge and recognition of the development challenges in their country. One of the anonymous opinions voiced in the survey sums this up dolefully: “Albanian think tanks do not have any role. They write reports and do studies for donors, but the policy-makers don’t take it into account”.

This dependence on external funds contributes to the fact that many think tanks have long been identified with their founders or directors, people with vast international experience and networks. In the national context, this can be partly explained by the fact that over the past two decades, Albanian think tanks have mainly developed as one-person shows, with small and fast-rotating teams. Yet, dwindling donor funding in recent years has brought about a need to break away from this habit, and many leaders have seized this opportunity to the benefit of their organisations. However, transformation of the managerial culture is still nascent and this is particularly visible when we “talk about organisational development”.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study offers the first attempt at an analysis of the characteristics and the state of think tanks in Albania. It should be stressed that it only presents the perspective of one side of the policymaking system in Albania. Further research is needed to explore the viewpoint of the government, and the obstacles and limitations on their side. Nevertheless, the collected data offer several important observations:

- i) **The impact of think tanks in Albania on the style and results of public policymaking is modest or non-existent.** It may be argued that this seriously calls into question the claims of organisations that self-identify as think tanks, as they lack the most important feature of a think tank.

- ii) **The role of Albanian think tanks is severely restricted due to inadequate demand on the part of the authorities at the central and local level.** The think tanks are well-equipped to deliver high-quality analyses, but the state does not commission research or use the research already produced by the think tanks. The institutionalised cooperation channels between government and think tanks are virtually non-existent. The government very rarely engages the existing think tanks for specific policy work.
- iii) **Albanian think tanks are extremely dependent on foreign grants, and the situation will not change in the foreseeable future because of the lack of other viable sources of finance.** Domestic funding opportunities are scarce, and, as a rule, most of the think tanks are wary of bidding for contracts for service delivery and applying for grants dispensed by the governmental Agency for the Support of Civil Society (ASCS).
- iv) **A large portion of the research agenda of Albanian think tanks reflects the priorities of the foreign donors. In other words, financial dependency breeds thematic dependency amongst think tanks in Albania.** Deprived of funding for long term research, Albanian think tanks do not feel free to define their research priorities in order to leverage their better knowledge of the local situation, and they have limited resources for creating their own databases or developing high quality research products. Their work is over-dependent on projects that exclude long-term planning; in principle, this means that they more often than not perpetuate the status quo. Unfortunately, this erodes the credibility of think tanks in the academic community, and discourages some of the best researchers from working in policy institutes.

The case of the Albanian think tanks sector seems to corroborate the assumption that think tanks are products of the political context in which they operate. Their condition mirrors the challenges faced by other organisations in Albanian civil society, and is to some extent conducive to understanding the functioning of the Albanian political system as a whole. It may be averred that the Albanian government still perceive civil society organisations – and think tanks are no exception – as a threat to their grip on power. This perception is heightened by the fact that think tanks depend on external financing and, consequently, in their research often push an agenda defined by external donors or try to emulate the organisational patterns of think tanks functioning in foreign political contexts. At the same time, the government does not recognise the need to utilise

the expertise of think tanks or to contribute to their research orientation, and is not willing to commission research in order to inform evidence-based policy. Furthermore, as civil society is forcefully being divorced from politics, think tanks have no chance to play any substantial role in the process of policymaking. According to Gjergji Vurmo, one of the most vocal advocates for the development of the think tank sector in Albania and an employee of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, the prospects for Albanian think tanks are quite bleak.

We have long suffered from underdeveloped capacities, a poor culture of evidence-based policies among decision-makers, and an inconsistent approach by donors to developing think tanks as a source of independent policy alternatives. Now, we also have to deal with shrinking civic space, a controlled media, silenced or departed intelligentsia, and the rise of populism. (Vurmo, interview, 2017).

At present many think tanks are locked in a vicious circle in which they observe that civil society and its organisations are shut out of policy formulation, which creates a belief that politics is a closed process. This in turn promotes a practice of non-participation, which itself perpetuates and reinforces the closed policymaking process. Any attempt to bring think tanks into the policymaking process is likely to meet obstruction. Think tanks must be prepared to argue the case for their involvement and, if the government accepts it, to remain vigilant to ensure that ministries abide by the government's decision and do not undermine it via perfunctory and meaningless consultation services. However, there is no easy way out of this deadlock: smoothing it out requires organic, long term work with all the potentially interested actors.

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