

Ideas, Influence and Transparency - What Could Think Tanks Learn and Contribute?

Summary and key conclusions

"How do you change the world? Well, there are the obvious routes, such as seizing power, being monstrously rich or slogging through the electoral process. And there are short-cuts, such as terrorism... or forming a think tank."

Steve Waters, "Dangerous Minds", November 10, 2004, *The Guardian*

All think tanks try to have an input in the policy process. While they have not been under the spotlight, they are increasingly visible, and the legitimacy of their input into policy-making may be questioned in the future, as indicated by Steve Waters' recent article. This is particularly the case for 'Euro-think tanks', as EU politics, fairly or unfairly, are perceived as too technocratic, even elitist, and insufficiently transparent.

On Thursday 20 and Friday 21 October 2005, members of the European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) met with representatives of the European institutions, the public affairs community and the media to learn, and contribute (Annex 1 provides a list of participants). This was the first of a series of EPIN Think Tanks Taskforce meetings.

- ▶ **Think tanks and transparency**
- ▶ **Summary of discussions**

► Think tanks and transparency

Citizens are critical of their national and EU elected representatives. There is increasing scepticism towards European integration. **Euro-think tanks** are perceived as an integral part of the EU policy-making machine, but few are transparent about their activities:

- **How they are funded**
- **How their budget is used**
- What **contacts** they have with policy-makers
- Where their **researchers** come from

With the rise of 'advocacy tanks' that promote an ideological agenda, there is also the danger that think tanks will be rejected as the extension of special interests that seek less visible means of influence¹. This is not helped by the difficulty to define what constitutes a think tank, and by some think tanks' tendency to inflate their ability to influence the policy-making process. The think tank "concept", which many covet today because of the alleged prestige it carries, therefore risks being increasingly associated with notions of behind-the-scenes influence.

Meanwhile, the wider EU community has tried to tackle the issue of transparency in various ways. The **European Commission has long sought to improve the transparency of its own policy-making processes**, including contacts with outside organisations. Commissioner Kallas recently launched the Transparency Initiative which aims "to look at how we can make Europe to speak for itself through greater openness and more effective tools"².

Pressure groups and the media have taken action to improve their own practices. The Society of European Affairs Practitioners, the European Public Affairs Consultancies Association, the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation have all adopted codes of conduct which core objective is to promote greater transparency of lobbying activities³. The International Federation of Journalists introduced a new code of conduct that requires greater "internal and external transparency over media activity" and promotes "editorial quality"⁴.

In this perspective, the taskforce was aimed at answering **three core questions**:

- What are the needs for transparency of EU think tanks?
- What can be learnt from other sectors?
- Should rules, codes, or other efforts be envisaged for EU think tanks?

► Summary of discussions

Commissioner Siim Kallas, responsible for audit, administration, and anti-fraud policies, initiated the discussion on Thursday 20 October by summarizing the Commission's general efforts to increase the transparency of the allocation of funds and access of lobbyists to the EU legislative process⁵. He believes that "there is no big difference between think tanks and other NGOs" with respect to transparency. He admits that the **issue is fraught with difficulties**:

- How do you define organizations governed by a particular code?
- What information should be shared publicly?
- Rules, as shown by the U.S. examples, always have loopholes.
- Those consulted by the Commission may not necessarily be representative.
- Tendering regulation has become too constraining, yet the Commission is criticized, no matter how small the level of error in the allocation of subsidies.

On Friday 21 October, **Roger Chorus**, President of the Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP) explained that **SEAP's Code has made a difference through three key elements**:

1. Misbehavior is publicized through **sanctions**.
2. **Seminars** are organized on a regular basis for members to acquaint themselves with its provisions.
3. The code has been **widely advertised** so that "the rest of the world knows what to expect from members of SEAP".

The specificity of the code adopted by the **International Federation of Journalists** (IFJ), explained **Marc Gruber**, is that it addresses **not just ethics, but also quality issues**. A code is also important, he stressed, in order to avoid having a code imposed on the profession by public authorities.

Michael Shackleton, Director of the European Parliament's DG Information gave a perspective from the European Parliament. End of 2007, videos of all public meetings of the EP will be available on-line. It is "a victory of the idea that citizens have a right to know", he believes. It will **increase the number of organizations seeking to influence the work of Parliament**. "Transparency, he warned, does not make life make necessarily easier. Think about the implications."

The ensuing discussion followed the three questions outlined above.

1. What are the needs for transparency of EU think tanks?

Observers of the sector highlighted the outside world's expectations towards think tanks: they should generate "unexpected" thinking, "foster **public debate** on certain issues", "circulate useful ideas", be "**independent from lobbyists**", and at least "**explain their credentials**".

The key issue indeed is not so much advocating a particular policy or ideology as to allowing users of think tanks' work to "**know where things are coming from**".

The first step think tanks could take is helping **clarify the notion**. "Most are self-proclaimed", unlike in the United States which has a clear provision in its tax code. Other actors should understand that think tanks, by nature, seek to **work for the public interest**. Whatever their understanding of the public interest, they do not have commercial interests. "They pretend to represent the public to some extent, this **raises the bar of responsibility**" argues a representative of the sector.

Although think tanks do not seek to amend particular pieces of legislation, or, normally, to represent private interests, they should also be transparent about **who is funding** them. Funding is the key transparency issue, as it affects think tanks' ability to think independently if strings are attached to specific funds. Some organisations are over-dependent on a small number of donors. How can they protect themselves from outside influence? Certain think tanks have refused certain types of funding in the past (e.g. the Edmund Burke Stifting in the Netherlands that refused project funding by Pfizer). A particular concern is the growing share of funding by large corporations. Should think tanks "refuse to have corporate funders sitting on their board"?

Issues of **internal governance** are also crucial. Think tanks need to set up the right internal structures and procedures, and the sector needs to have mechanisms to ensure the implementation of its standards (a poll on a particular code of conduct in the private sector showed that most employees had never heard of it).

2. What can be learnt from other sectors?

Self-regulation is important. Codes of conduct not only help avoid external regulation, they set a "**benchmark for decent behaviour**".

Making the code is more important than having the code, it "focuses members' mind" and "helps explain where you are different". Drafting a code however is fairly non-controversial, "it is when you develop 'case law' that things become more difficult."

Any step taken (code or otherwise) should be **succinct**, provide clear **guidelines** for action, and be followed over the **long term** (e.g. SEAP's training seminars and IFJ's "journalists at your service" programme). It should be **flexible** and take **cultural differences** into account.

Commission services should also be more transparent about which input they have received when drafting legislation.

Effectiveness requires a **regular examination and update** of the measures taken; **costs** of management should be kept low; the standards should be voluntary, but provide an **incentive** (a "desire to be seen to adhere, or a cost of not being in the network); **backing** by public authorities is useful; **compliance** should be reviewed regularly; the **monitoring should be independent** ("we can't be judging ourselves").

3. Should rules, codes, or other efforts be envisaged for EU think tanks?

Four possible steps were mentioned:

- A **code** of conduct, which was perceived as probably too cumbersome;
- A **database** of think tanks similar to guidestar.com which provide key facts about all U.S. charities;
- **Guidelines** on ethics and professional standards, "which could be very useful for the members", encouraging think tanks to disclose sources of funding; the allocation of funds; to provide an annual report.
- Defining the **requirements for joining EPIN**, "an admissions policy" with criteria and procedures. This would be similar to PASOS's charter, which includes rights and obligations. It is viewed as "a useful first step", but would require a secretariat, or a "recruitment sub-committee".

It was argued that:

- "We can't be too 'forceful', but if the sector does anything, it has to have some sort of **effectiveness**."
- A **gradual process** could start with guidelines.

Note: the "Think Tank Taskforce"

Members of the EPIN network feel that issues faced by think tanks and similar organizations dedicated to independent research on EU affairs should be addressed collectively (e.g. funding, definition, transparency...)⁶. The purpose of the taskforce is to discuss these issues together, to gather outside views (thereby also exposing members of the network to other types of organizations), and, where appropriate, to decide joint action on the issue. Further taskforce meetings may be organized in the future following meetings of the network.

Annex 1 – List of participants

EPIN members present at the meeting:

Julia de Clerck-Sachsse, CEPS
Marco Incerti, CEPS
Sebastian Kurpas, CEPS
Justus Schönlau, EP and CEPS
Stephen Boucher, Notre Europe
Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, Notre Europe
Sami Andoura, IRRI-KIIB (Belgium)
Darina Kadunkova, EIB (Bulgaria)
David Kral, Europeum (Czech Republic)
Anna de Klaumann, DIIS (Denmark)
Catarina Sorensen, DIIS (Denmark)
Oana Mocanu, EIR (Romania)
Iona Muresan, EIR (Romania)
José Ignacio Torreblanca, Real Instituto Elcano (Spain)
Göran von Sydow, SIEPS (Sweden)
Josefin Almer, SIEPS (Sweden)
Irena Brinar, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)
Ben Crum, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Also present:

Peter Wellemann, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
Vera Budway, PASOS
Erik Wesselius, Corporate Europe Observatory
Mark Grüber, International Federation of Journalists
Simon Wilson, European Social Platform
Nicolas Veron, Bruegel
Rune Rasmussen, Transparency International
John Houston, European Public Affairs Consultancies Association
Rogier Chorus, Society of European Affairs Professionals
Michael Shackleton, General Secretariat of the European Parliament
Timothy Beyer-Helm, European Ideas Network/EPP-ED Group

¹ As indicated by a recent survey conducted by the Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) on (rightwing) think tanks, there is an increasing number of pseudo-think tanks which, rather than doing research, are in fact lobbying on behalf of large corporations that provide up to 95% of their funding. CEO (www.corporateeurope.org) is an Amsterdam-based research and campaign group. It recently published “Covert industry funding fuels the expansion of radical rightwing EU think tanks” and “Transparency unthinkable? Financial secrecy common among EU think tanks”.

² http://europa.eu.int/comm/commission_barroso/kallas/transparency_en.htm

³ Which can be found at www.seap.be, www.epaca.org, and www.alter-eu.org

⁴ www.ifj.org

⁵ Commissioner Siim Kallas’ speech can be found at

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/05/628&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr>

⁶ This first ‘Think Tank Taskforce’ meeting was suggested by Notre Europe as a follow up to its 2004 report on think tanks in Europe, which raised a number of questions for the community, which, Notre Europe felt, would better be addressed collectively within the EPIN network.