

The impact of think tanks could be enhanced within the current legal and institutional framework and current circumstances in Serbian society by overcoming internal organizational challenges and taking a proactive attitude towards policy-making actors.

Think tanks in Serbia: in pursuit of impact

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Think tanks¹ in Serbia are still in swaddling clothes, carrying out their activities in an underdeveloped policy-making environment. Apart from the legal and institutional framework, this environment consists of actors who basically shape the policy-making process. This process implies a partnership among its actors, i.e. decision-makers, interest groups, research community, donors and think tanks. Although the brunt of responsibility in this process lies with the decision-makers, strengthened capacities of all the other actors, their regular communication and mutual trust also contribute to better quality of policies.

Current strategic orientation of Serbian political power holders towards the European Union (EU) provides an opportunity to improve the policy-making process. In the EU accession stage, evidence-based policy review and policy selection allow Serbia to maintain its reform schedule and transpose

and apply the EU *acquis*. Moreover, policies thus designed will guarantee successful functioning within the EU institutional framework once Serbia joins the EU. Hence, the task is to create an enabling environment, i.e. legal and institutional framework, administrative capacities, procedures and cooperation of all actors and stakeholders involved.

The current legal and institutional framework for policy-making is inadequate. The legal framework blurs the difference between formulation and implementation phases of the policy cycle², i.e. preparation of strategies and use of legal drafting procedures currently prevail in this cycle, although they are merely tools of operationalisation rather than a basis for policy-making (see Picture 1 - *Model Policy Cycle*). Policies should be defined on the basis of systematic and comprehensive feasibility studies and assessment of financial grounds and impact of

different policy options. Constraints related to the institutional framework include a gap between formal competences and actual influence of institutions within the 'centre of government', as well as overlapping competences of some ministries.

The foregoing policy-making actors in Serbia lack appropriate human and financial resources and know-how required for participation in the process. This not only affects the quality of policies, but also determines the character of mutual relations of policy-making actors. For the purpose of this study, the term 'decision-makers' means: decision-makers in the public administration, i.e. those who have a mandate to make decisions, and political power holders (political parties). The public administration is characterised by a lack of institutional memory due to poor human resources management, underdeveloped system of knowledge transfer and political parties' clientelistic attitude towards the public administration.³ Given the fact that the decision-making (and policy-making) process has been shifted to political parties and to narrow intra-governmental circles,⁴ decision-makers in the public administration are insufficiently motivated to include stakeholders in the policy-making process for purposes other than giving credibility to decisions that have already been made or formally complying with prescribed procedures. With the exception of certain individuals, the research community is (self-)excluded from the process not only due to the manner of decision-making and policy-making, but also due to their own limitations that hinder their functional participation in these processes. Most representatives of the research community actually lack experience in policy-making or skills for drafting policy documents, which is why they are not motivated enough to engage in the process. The involvement of various interest groups (trade unions, business community, professional associations, etc.) is impossible to assess because the practice of cooperation⁵ with think tanks is still underdeveloped and also because of lack of

data for in-depth analyses. In the absence of well-developed practices, clear and effective procedures and institutionalised forms of cooperation among policy-making actors, the number of donors ready to invest in their capacity-building is negligible.

On the other hand, associations⁶ are trying to be involved in evidence-based policy-making. Their interest has led them to develop their own research and advocacy capacities and prompted the emergence of independent think tanks. However, internal challenges and underdeveloped relations with other actors diminish their input to quality policy-making.

This study's aim is to contribute to the improvement of the public policy-making practice in Serbia. Think tanks' capacity-building is an aspect of development of an enabling environment for policy-making in Serbia. Hence, recommendations to think tanks include ways to improve their relationship with the decision-makers, research community, stakeholders and donors alike. Things can change in practice without having to modify the legal and institutional framework if, in short term and medium term, think tanks take a proactive attitude. Although adjustments to the legal and institutional framework are preferable, they are part of long-term comprehensive changes that go beyond the limits of this study.

The first part of the study gives an overview of the current situation of think tanks in Serbia. Its findings indicate a trend, despite some deviations and different practice examples. Associations were analysed for two reasons: a) there is no study concerning the research and advocacy capacities of associations in Serbia;⁷ b) the practice of drafting and advocating evidence-based policy proposals is most dynamic among associations, as compared to other forms of research organisations in Serbia (academic, governmental or profit-making scientific and research organisations). The second part of the study analyses relations with other actors in the policy-making process. Findings were obtained by interviewing decision-makers and

representatives of think tanks in Serbia, analysing the content of think tanks' websites and using secondary data sources.

Think tanks in Serbia – the current situation

For the purpose of this study, 'think tanks' refer to associations whose core activities focus on policy research, with a view to highlighting deficiencies in the legal framework and practice, formulating proposals and recommendations, and presenting possible improvements to both decision-makers and the public.⁸ Therefore, their key characteristics are the following: they research policies, produce their own ideas and communicate/advocate them to policy-making actors.⁹ Few are those think tanks that fully meet these criteria. In most think tanks that were studied, some of the above characteristics are still under development or think tanks have a broader scope of activities or more diverse target groups (e.g. decision-makers are not their only target group, or in addition to research and advocacy, they also have activities which directly target citizens).

There are 26 active think tanks in Serbia.¹⁰ Most of them deal with topics like European integration, foreign and international relations and social policy, while the least of them deal with topics like economics or environmental protection. However, their thematic profile is not thus exhausted because they all focus on cross-sectoral topics.

Think tanks in Serbia are characterised by a frequent production of ideas, but with untapped potential to publicly advocate them. They also lack systems that would allow them to monitor and evaluate their own performance (and assess the impact on policy-making). Financial instability of think tanks due to essential focus on short-term projects is one of major generators of a paradoxical process of investing their limited resources in outsourcing rather than in their own organisational development. For instance, think tanks often employ a small number of researchers (1-3) and subsequently hire

external consultants; internal advocacy capacities are untapped although each think tank has its own 'social capital'; ideas are produced quite intensively, but without systematic monitoring or assessment of their impact on policies. This absence of impact monitoring and assessment may be described as a key characteristic of think tanks in Serbia. Most think tank interviewees confirmed that their internal performance monitoring and evaluation systems were underdeveloped.¹¹

The operation of think tanks is insufficiently transparent. Although their results are publicly available, websites of most think tanks do not publish financial statements or annual work reports.¹² In comparison to other Western Balkan countries, Serbian think tanks are the least transparent.¹³ According to an interviewee, what is questionable is not public disclosure of financial information, but potential abuse of this information in the current political context, which is plagued by prevalent distrust of some political power holders in civil society organisations (and think tanks). Despite the think tanks' best intentions, the lack of awareness and understanding, as well as prejudice when it comes to their methods of operation and spending of funds that they have raised, may be detrimental to their image. The most recent example of this is a negative report published in the „Informer“ daily newspaper with a list of think tanks and civil society organisations supported by the Open Society Foundation.¹⁴

Another characteristic of think tanks in Serbia is a lack of strategic orientation in their overall operation. Their goals are project-specific, often in line with donor priorities and expectations, or subject to the current political context. Their *ad hoc* approach to topics/areas arises from challenges in terms of financial sustainability. Furthermore, think tanks are not identified as organisational entities, so their credibility mainly depends on the integrity of their leaders and their respective relations with policy-making actors. Thus, the quality of

the ideas they produce and recognisability of values they advocate are not put at the forefront.

Insufficient transparency and lack of thematic continuity, coupled with inadequately clear articulation and communication of ideas, values, motivation, goals and interests, are essential reasons for distrust and negative image that prevail not only in the decision-makers' perception of think tanks, but also in think tanks' relationship with other actors, which narrows down significantly their potential to exert influence.

On the other hand, despite the above challenges, think tanks' input to policy-making is indisputable. These organisation have initiated a number of positive changes in the Serbian reform processes over the past two decades (such as gender mainstreaming in the security sector, civil society involvement in the EU accession negotiations, etc.). Nevertheless, the foregoing internal challenges in the current social and political environment have diminished think tanks' potential for increasing their contribution to the policy-making process in Serbia.

The relationship between policy-making actors and think tanks

Policy-making has been reduced to decision-making within the framework of political parties. Political power holders have thereby monopolised political power and destimulated stakeholders (except for some *ad hoc* individual involvement) from participating in the policy-making process. Keeping aloof from the community of experts and practitioners affects not only the quality of policies, but also mutual confidence building.

The relationship between political parties and think tanks is characterised by the absence of genuine dialogue and is based on prejudice due to the lack of information and knowledge of the evidence-based policy-making process. Political power holders are insufficiently informed about the role of think tanks in the policy-making process,

whom they fail to distinguish from other civil society organisations (CSOs).¹⁵ There is a very pronounced perception that CSOs represent someone else's interest, either local or foreign. Consequently, this prejudice applies to think tanks, as well. Some of the interviewed MPs singled out non-partisanship and impartiality as prerequisites of trustworthiness of think tanks' research results. Finally, there is suspicion as to whether think tanks possess adequate resources to participate in the policy-making process.¹⁶

Since evidence-based policy-making, accompanied by a well-argued debate among actors and stakeholders in this process, is relatively new in Serbia, a systemic approach and sufficient practice to that effect are still non-existent. Hence, political power holders still lack sufficient know-how and experience to participate in such a process. As political decision-making takes place outside the institutions, it is quite expected for think tanks to be perceived by political power holders as an unpleasant obligation unless they serve the purpose of giving credibility to decisions that have already been made or formally complying with prescribed procedures. Therefore, one may infer that cooperation between political power holders and think tanks is characterised by necessity and plagued by mutual distrust.

Think tanks receive identical treatment also from decision-makers in the public administration because the decision-making process is *de facto* extra-institutional. Higher levels of the public administration (namely state secretaries and assistant ministers) are not motivated to involve stakeholders in the policy-making process because they depend on political parties that they are affiliated with or that have supported their appointment. Hence, the need to involve think tanks or awareness of their potential contribution is very low. If the public administration is willing to involve them, then it lacks time and adequate human resources to review the results of research conducted by think tanks for policy-making purposes. On the

other hand, according to interviewees from the public administration, think tanks lack sufficient knowledge of how the public administration system really works in practice.

Think tanks maintain dynamic relations with those MPs who are open to cooperation although party discipline is a factor¹⁷ that marginalises the work of national parliament. For example, the schedule of operations of parliamentary committees, which are designed to bring together experts and interested MPs, mostly depends on who chairs the committee and is subject to political strength and experience of the MPs involved, as well as to the strength of the civil society in the area concerned and its orientation towards cooperation with parliament.¹⁸ There are other forms of cooperation with parliament, like the Economic Caucus, Green Chair, attending meetings of the parliamentary committee on EU integration (without the right to vote), etc.

There is cooperation with local decision-makers, but it is underutilised for purposes of enhancing the impact of think tanks, given limited capacities of local policy-making actors. A security think tank, which has developed successful cooperation with local beneficiaries, says that their experience cannot be generalised. Rampant political clientelism of local decision-makers towards political parties hampers greater cooperation with think tanks.

'Personalised communication' characterises think tanks' relationship with decision-makers. Despite formalised channels that are in place for establishing communication and developing cooperation (through participation in various working groups upon invitation, public debates, public hearings, etc.), informal cooperation still prevails and is based on personal contacts between decision-makers and individuals from think tanks. According to an interviewee from the public administration, the Serbian think tank scene is immature, which is why the only criterion for giving relevance to a study produced by a think tank is the reputation of its author. A political party official that was

interviewed said that he preferred informal communication. This preference was also confirmed by an interviewed representative of a think tank. The downside of this is its primary focus on personal relations rather than on public interest and good quality of policies, which is something that both sides should actually strive for. Both sides are essentially inert and quiescent in relations inherited from the times of confrontation (in the 1990s), with almost no interest in developing mutual cooperation.

The practice of cooperation with interest groups has not been sufficiently studied. This cooperation is necessary not only to enable think tanks to achieve their own goals (e.g. to increase their advocacy potential or attract prospective donors, etc.), but also to democratise the policy-making process itself. Transparency and overall stakeholder participation in this process will ensure that the public interest is achieved to the benefit of citizens. One can only make assumptions about the actual interest group impact on policy-making (e.g. the impact of Foreign Investors Council, trade unions, etc.), which leaves room for speculation in the public. Established or improved cooperation between think tanks and interest groups to that effect is a positive step because it renders the participation of interest groups much more transparent by making information on their mutual cooperation available to the public. However, the main criterion for such cooperation must be a value imperative (public interest), while transparency of think tank operation must be ensured.

Underdeveloped cooperation also characterises the relationship between the research community and think tanks. The research community lacks skills to develop and advocate policy proposals.¹⁹ Even though its research capacities exceed those of think tanks, they have not been adequately put to the purpose of policy-making. On the other hand, think tanks do not see the research community as an influential partner, except for some respectable individuals whom they occasionally hire on project basis. There are

some positive examples of institutional cooperation in the policy-making process (e.g. within the framework of the National Convention on the EU), but there is an evident need and room for stepping up this cooperation, which would build the capacities that both sides currently do not possess.

Long-term donor support for think tank capacity-building and for their continuous focus on particular topics is currently negligible. Moreover, there is a mismatch between donor expectations and the time needed to make the desired change as a result of research, policy development and advocacy. Since donor priorities are often incompatible with the needs of society, think tanks have an *ad hoc* approach to certain topics which fail to produce a long-term impact on the achievement of desired societal changes.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is necessary to keep insisting on the reform of the public policy-making process regardless of the timeframe that would enable its implementation. A comprehensive regulation of the policy-making process is necessary indeed, but it is not feasible in short term or medium term as it calls for an improved and effective legal and institutional framework and well-developed capacities of all actors in the process. A predominant role of political power holders is a challenge when it comes to improving the policy-making process. In such circumstances, a limited impact of think tanks on the policy-making process could be enhanced by overcoming internal organisational challenges and taking a proactive approach towards some policy-making actors. It is less likely that changes will be initiated by other actors in the process, which is why such initiatives remain with think tanks. The most significant effect of think tanks' proactive approach would be a well-established communication, based on trust among the actors in the policy-making process, which would automatically ensure the sustainability of this communication.

In their efforts to provide an enabling environment for increasing their impact on the quality of policy-making, think tanks should focus on the following points:

A. Changes in the internal environment (in short term) imply modifications of the internal organisation:

Think tanks need to define their strategic orientation. Identification of strategic goals of organisational development and thematic profiling are essential for successful combining of think tanks' available resources with development of new ones. The expected effect of this will be a contribution to building credibility and independence of think tanks' operation;

Think tanks need to develop an internal system of performance monitoring and evaluation and apply it in practice. Operationalisation of these internal systems, based upon fact gathering and analysis, will give them a clear picture of the influence achieved in the policy-making process. The monitoring and evaluation system could be developed as part of the organisational culture, without having to necessarily put in place new internal procedures. This would have a double effect: internally, it would allow for timely adjustments of operation and adequate organisational development; while, externally, it would provide a basis for communication and would contribute to building the think tank's image and credibility in the eyes of external actors;

Think tanks need to build their own reputation and be identified as organisational entities. Advocacy and communication strategies should be an integral part of their strategic orientation. 'Re-branding', i.e. shifting the focus of communication from individual personalities to values, policy quality and long-term organisational

goals will secure think tanks' good reputation among policy-making actors. An integral part of the re-branding exercise should be presentation of accomplishments to both policy-making actors and the public in a language that is easy to understand;

Think tanks must ensure transparency of their operation. This implies putting in place a practice of publication and regular updating of financial statements and information on current partnerships in a user-friendly and comprehensible manner. Method of operation and use of funds should be additionally clarified. Posting on the website annual statements of accounts and regular updating of information on donors, method of use and purpose of the funds, as well as information on current partnerships, will help increase think tanks' credibility among policy-making actors (primarily decision-makers and donors).

B. Changes in the external environment (in medium-term) imply think tanks' active attitude towards policy-making actors:

Political power holders (political parties) – think tanks need to develop a practice of cooperation and constructive criticism rather than confrontation with these actors. Such a practice would entail regular dissemination of information, bilateral meetings, training of membership on evidence-based policy-making, engagement in consultations prior to publication of research findings. Another mechanism would be to develop cooperation with MPs who boast many years of parliamentary experience because their influence within political parties can pave the way for mutual confidence-building. Cooperation with local decision-makers should also be taken into account because this is where untapped potential for think

tank activities actually lies. Expected effects of the proposed practice will include better information and changed perception, and will pave the way for dialogue.

Decision-makers from the public administration – think tanks need to develop or maintain and further improve current relations with these actors, but shift the focus of communication from individual personalities to organisational values and long-term goals. Apart from formal channels, the mechanism of cooperation should include regular dissemination of information, bilateral meetings, communication of policy proposals in simple formats suitable for timely processing and use, as well as being readily available for assistance or partnership in defining policies. At the same time, stepping up what is called a 'revolving door' practice would give think tanks an insight into the way of thinking and operation of the public administration system. Such an approach would allow think tanks to reach those individuals who are ready to cooperate beyond partisan interests;

Interest groups – think tanks need to examine the needs of various interest groups. Potential identification of common interests will make room for cooperation and simultaneously increase think tanks' advocacy potential. However, the main criteria for such cooperation should be acting in the public interest, while transparency of think tank operation must be ensured.

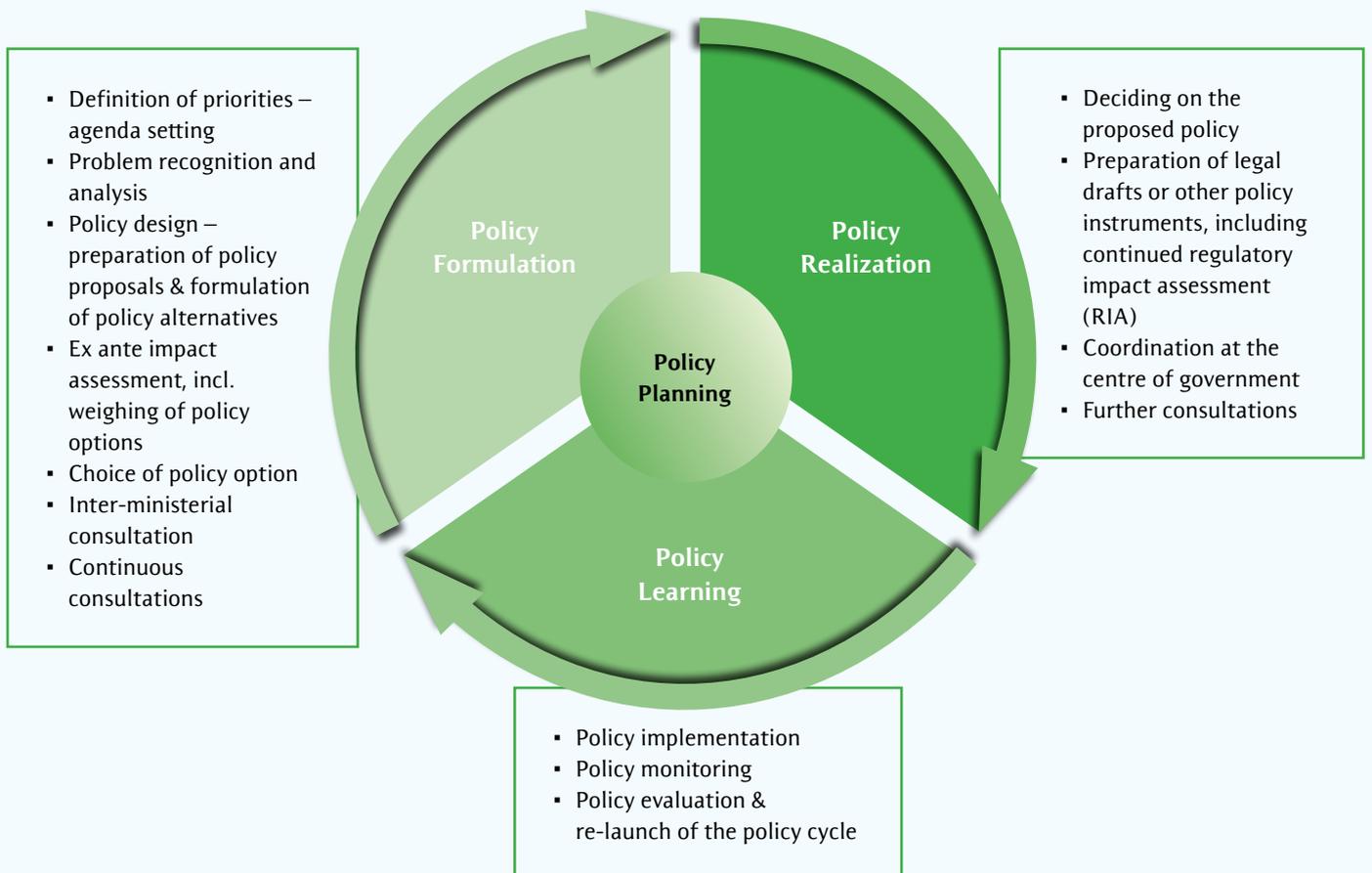
Research community – think tanks need to put in place institutionalised mechanisms of cooperation (e.g. memoranda of understanding, as a basis of development of joint activities, project-based partnerships, exchange of researchers, joint trainings, networking, etc.). The research community's

underutilised knowledge and expertise, combined with think tanks' policy drafting and advocacy skills, will guarantee greater credibility of their appearance before political power holders, decision-makers and donors alike.

Donors – think tanks need to insist on coordination in defining priorities for

effective policy interventions. Investment in institutional development through research and advocacy capacity-building is currently more necessary or at least as necessary as project financing. Donors need to be flexible in terms of expected time for the change in policies to set in as a result of research and advocacy activities.

Illustration 1. Stages of the Policy Cycle



Source: Milena Lazarević, Sena Marić, Amanda Orza, "Policy-making and EU Accession Negotiations: Getting Results for Serbia" (European Policy Centre, Belgrade, 2013), p. 15.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

- 1 Due to the lack of appropriate Serbian equivalent of the term 'think tank', the authors of the study have decided to retain the original English term in the Serbian version of the study. See for details: „Vodič kroz evropske think tank organizacije”, Belgrade, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, 2012, p. 18.
- 2 Policy cycle phases vary in relevant literature. For the purpose of this study, the *Model Policy Cycle* was taken from: Milena Lazarević, Sena Marić, Amanda Orza, „Policy-making and EU Accession Negotiations: Getting Results for Serbia”, Belgrade: European Policy Centre, 2013. See also in Eoin Young and Lisa Quinn, „Writing Effective Policy Papers: A Guide for Policy Advisers in CEE”, Belgrade: Belgrade Open School, 2004.
- 3 According to the latest EU Enlargement Strategy: „Strong political will remains essential to professionalise and depoliticise the administration and make recruitment and dismissal procedures more transparent, especially for senior management positions”. Document „EU Enlargement Strategy and Key Challenges”, Brussels: 2015, available at: http://www.seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/strategija_za_prosirenje/strategija_prosirenja_15.pdf (accessed on 28 July 2016).
- 4 Lazarević Milena, Obradović Marko, „Map of Policy Cycle at Central Government Level in Serbia”, available at: http://www.rsjp.gov.rs/malodrvo/Mapping_Report_FINAL.pdf (accessed on 29 July 2016).
- 5 For example, most interviewees from think tanks confirmed that their cooperation with interest groups was underdeveloped. However, there is an example of a think tank that brings together businesses, local self-governments and civil society organisations around joint activities towards improving the business environment in Serbia.
- 6 'Associations' within the meaning of the Serbian Law on Associations. Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 51/2009.
- 7 The most relevant study of a relationship between policy-makers and the research community in Serbia, which has been conducted so far, deals with research capacities of universities, institutes, civil society organisations, professional associations, etc. See for details: Jelena Žarković Rakić, Dejan Stanković, Igor Bandović, Mihajlo Đukić, „Implementacija naučnih rezultata u oblasti društvenih nauka u procesima kreiranja javnih politika u Srbiji”, Belgrade: Institute of Economic Sciences, *Regional Research Promotion Programme Western Balkans*.
- 8 „Think Tank – Uloga nezavisnih istraživačkih centara u razvoju javnih politika”, Podgorica: Institute Alternative, p. 10.
- 9 Indicators of fulfillment of criteria are the following: a) policy research – the think tank has its own research staff that actually does the research; b) generation of new ideas – results of these ideas belong to their authors and are practicable (in the form of policy proposals); c) communication of ideas – decision-makers are the think tank's primary target group, i.e. there is a strong advocacy component in its work.
- 10 According to the University of Pennsylvania *Global Go To Think Tank Index*, there are 24 think tanks in Serbia. However, the authors of the present study question this figure (for Serbia) for the following reasons: a) the number of think tanks listed in the *Index* (24) has not changed since 2011; b) the list is focused on those associations with research and advocacy capacities. However, among active think tanks in Serbia are governmental, academic and profit-making think tanks, so their total number is higher; c) top-ranking international think tanks on this list also include *Educational Reform Circles*, a think tank which is no longer active. See: James G. McGann, '2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report', Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, University of Pennsylvania, available at: http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=think_tanks (accessed on 20 May 2016).
- 11 This finding is supported by the interviewed MP who says that there is a practice of using results of think tanks' work, but that the practice of giving feedback on their use in the policy-making process is uncommon. The reason for this is a lack of ongoing dialogue on the topic of monitoring and evaluation of research results. Therefore, the authors of the study believe that think tanks should have a more proactive attitude towards the decision-makers.
- 12 *Transparify* (p. 12) <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52e1f399e4b06a94c0cdaa41/t/5773022de6f2e1ecf70b26d1/1467154992324/Transparify+2016+Think+Tanks+Report.pdf> (accessed on 1 September 2016).
- 13 *Ibid*, p. 11
- 14 Citation: "... it is evident that millions [of euros] are intended almost exclusively for purposes of undermining Serbia as a country and bringing American puppets to power!", /headline:/ „SOROS ALLOCATES ALMOST FOUR MILLION EUROS TO WREAK HAVOC IN SERBIA! We are publishing the list of everyone on U.S. tycoon's payroll!" /translated from Serbian into English/ (Belgrade: Informer.rs), 16 August 2016, available at: <http://www.informer.rs/print/87013/vesti/politika/87013/SOROS-HAOS-SRBIJI-DAO-SKORO-CETIRI-MILIONA-EVRA-Objavljujemo-spisak-svih-placenika-americkog-tajkuna> (accessed on 7 October 2016)

RESEARCH FORUM is a program body of the European Movement in Serbia and a functional mechanism for involvement of relevant independent experts, members and associates of EMinS into research and analyses and/or advocating alternative public policies proposals in all domains that are relevant for the process of Serbian European integration.

The goal of the Research Forum is to support EMinS's advocacy efforts and improve quality of public policies through comprehensive, multidisciplinary and well-timed policy research.

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- 15 According to the interviewed political party official.
- 16 According to interviewees from the public administration. This finding corresponds to the summary of a policy document: „Društvene nauke za dobrobit društva“ (Belgrade: Institute of Economic Sciences, Regional Research Promotion Programme Western Balkans, University of Freiburg, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), where it is stated that „it appears that authors of policy documents lack trust in research institutions' capacities and readiness to harmonise their research with the needs of public policy-making“. /translated from Serbian into English/
- 17 This refers to adoption of laws in a summary procedure.
- 18 „Ka boljim zakonima: unapređenje rada odbora Narodne skupštine Republike Srbije“, Belgrade: Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability, 2016, p. 36, available at: http://www.crta.rs/uploads/documents/2016-06-21%2010:58:38_a_52_L_rs_doc.pdf (accessed on 2 September 2016).
- 19 „Društvene nauke za dobrobit društva“, Belgrade: Institute of Economic Sciences, Regional Research Promotion Programme Western Balkans, University of Freiburg, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

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