

# CEP presents



Strahinja Subotić, Researcher

## #ThinkTanksMatter2020

### Setting the Ground

On 30 January 2020, the European Policy Centre – CEP hosted “**The Future of Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the Context of Democratic Crises**” conference. This two-panel event took place on the occasion of the launch of the “2019 Go To Think Tank Index Report”, published as a programme of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. For the third year in a row, CEP organised the presentation of this report in Belgrade, using this opportunity to proudly share results with panellists and guests. In this report, **CEP was ranked as the best think tank in the Western Balkans for the second year in a row**, as well as among the top ten organisations from Central and Eastern Europe. The Think for Europe Network (TEN), whose work is coordinated by CEP, made it to the list of the world’s best think tank networks (in the 35th position), also for the second consecutive year.

The first panel discussion was titled “*The Future of Think Tanks in the Context of Global Democratic Crisis*”. This panel was moderated by **Matt Dan** (former Secretary General of Bruegel), while the panel’s discussants were **Corina Stratulat** (Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre - Brussels), **Sonja Stojanović Gajić** (Member of the Executive Board at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy), **Martina Kaiser** (Global Health Advisor at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation - Berlin), and **Milena Lazarević** (Programme Director at CEP). The key question that preoccupied panellists was how to address the needs of regular citizens and how to make the work of think tanks more accessible to them.

The second panel discussion was titled “*Serbia and the Western Balkans between East and West – what role for Think Tanks?*”. The moderator of this panel was **Srđan Majstorović** (Chairman of the Governing Board at CEP) while the panellists were **Duško Lopandić** (ambassador and a member of the CEP Council), **Miroljub Labus** (independent expert, former Deputy Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and a member of the CEP Council), and **Radmila Milivojević** (independent expert and a former General Secretary of the Serbian European Integration Office - SEIO). Recognising that Serbia has historically been at the crossroads between East and West, these panellists tried to tackle the issue of the increasing presence of non-EU actors in the region in the context of the EU integration process.

Considering the valuable inputs provided by this two-panelled discussion, the following represents an analysis of the key elements discussed by the panellists regarding the role of think tanks and the challenges they are facing in a changing global environment.

### The Future of Think Tanks in the Context of Global Democratic Crisis

The overall consensus among the expert community is that the role of think tanks is very important in providing evidence-based findings and recommendations to policymakers. Yet, it appears that **think tanks are faced with a crisis of courage** at the dawn of the “post-truth” era and as “alternative facts” have become common in the Balkans as well as the West. **Think tanks should accept that there have been dramatic changes to the status quo in recent years, and should adapt accordingly.** Their theories of change and the actions that they take should therefore be characterised by a sense of increased self-reflection and willingness to improve.

Following wider global trends, working with and within institutional frameworks in Serbia is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible. State capture is largely to blame, as Serbia’s culture of dialogue has diminished over time, while there is an evident lack of substantial progress in the area of rule of law. For this reason, **think tanks need to come down from their “ivory tower”**, taking a step back from largely focusing on policymakers and elites that have little appetite for innovative ideas, and instead working towards building closer ties with regular citizens. In other words, the work of think tanks should go beyond their “comfort” zones (generally a rather narrow focus on policymakers), by bridging the gap between themselves and the “unlikely” partners.



In the era of Trumpism, Brexitism, and fear-based policy in general sense, siding with the elites often represents a “no-go” for citizens, a potential problem for the image of think tanks as well if they are too closely associated with those at the top. In order to demystify the role of think tanks, as well as to do away with increasing Euroscepticism in Serbia, **think tanks should begin to invest more effort into educating, and engaging with, domestic audiences.** Such proactive willingness to engage would include myth busting, responding to citizens’ needs and using clear and simple language.

Finally, think tanks are also obliged to improve in addressing the needs of the youth. Despite having the potential to be a key driver of change, the youth in Serbia **are often the most Eurosceptic and apolitical part of the overall population.** This negative trend often results in apathy and brain drain. Think tanks, as they have not done enough to engage the youth in an effective manner to address their needs, are also partially to blame for such a situation on the ground. Taking into account emotions as a variable could potentially be the missing piece of the puzzle. Therefore, **think tanks should, from now on, focus more on listening to their constituencies rather than simply advising policymakers.**

## Serbia and the Western Balkans between East and West – what role for Think Tanks?

After the past years of political turbulence in the EU's near surroundings, hardly anyone can disagree that the **EU has showed some signs of geopolitical weakening**, if not geopolitical incompetence. Namely, the EU has been unable to take decisive action when it comes to the frozen conflict in Eastern Europe, open conflicts in the South Mediterranean, and the refugee crisis. In the midst of such an unfavourable international context, the EU has also lost a member state (the UK).

Furthermore, the EU has witnessed major debates on what it should look like going forward, especially as it was powerless to prevent some of its member states, such as Hungary and Poland, from slipping further into illiberal democracy. In this context, the EU's most successful policy – the enlargement policy – has witnessed major setbacks after member states have continuously failed to reach unanimity in opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Due to these misgivings, **the EU risks losing its “pulling power” in the Western Balkans to other players who would gladly step in to take its place.**

Even though the roles of the United Arab Emirates and Azerbaijan have raised some eyebrows in Brussels, when analysing the role of non-EU actors in the region the “usual suspects” are China, Russia, and Turkey. The EU already has some input on the (illiberal) patterns of state behaviour and the level of potentially-malign influence of Russia and Turkey, as these two countries are far from being newcomers to the region. **What has shaken the boat in the EU in recent years is the rising impact of China in the Western Balkans**, as this newly-minted global power is further complicating the geopolitics of the region, with unclear intentions.

China's role in the region cannot be seen through a simple lens. From an economic perspective, **some have in fact welcomed China's growing economic presence in the region**, as, on the one hand, China has indeed provided some long-needed support in terms of loans for infrastructure and energy projects. This is especially true in Serbia, with whom China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership. Others, nevertheless, are ill at ease that **China's rise in the Western Balkans represents a political warning to the EU**. According to this line of thought, if the EU continues to show reluctance to invest stronger political will and to dedicate additional funds to the development of closer political and economic ties with the region, countries like China will use the opportunity to fill the vacuum and thus (un)intentionally discourage the region to further integrate with the EU.

While the EU has traditionally been the most influential economic and political player in the region and is likely to remain as such in the near future, its advantages should not be taken for granted. In the context of the region's state capture, some experts warn that there appears to be **a trend of mimicking China's system of governance by the region's political elites**. Single-party states, upheld by forms of state-led capitalism and reliant on foreign investment (all of which characterise the Chinese system), are becoming more and more

prevalent in the Western Balkans. As the average citizen cares more about their basic livelihood than about concepts such as justice and rule of law, there is a fear that lessons from the Chinese model of governance could strengthen existing elements of state capture.

In this environment, **think tanks are seen as bastions of liberal-democratic standards**. As governments often approach economic proposals from non-EU countries with little scrutiny, it is up to think tanks to critically assess the opportunities, challenges and threats deriving from increased cooperation with non-EU actors. Even though some offers can benefit the overall development of Serbia and the Western Balkans for instance, it does not mean that they should be readily accepted at the cost of transparency and rule of law. **The guiding principle should instead be a readiness to discuss offers, albeit with caution, and always with the EU accession process in mind.**

Finally, think tanks need to show self-improvement in this area, as some parts of the think tank community are not ready to impartially address issues regarding the role of non-EU actors due to the political sensitivity of the topic. Consequently, some think tanks produce reports based on unsound data and non-factual claims, thus further (un)intentionally misleading the public. For this reason, **think tanks should put aside their preconceptions and work to objectively assess the situation on the ground**. Only then will they perform with credibility in the eyes of the wider public.



## Concluding remarks

Even though think tanks have many limitations, **they have the potential to be strongholds of democratic values**. As democracy is always a “work in progress”, requiring constant evaluation, think tanks should continue to encourage political elites to make bold decisions and strike difficult compromises. Such action is necessary for the continued functionality of liberal democracies, as well as responding – despite the odds – to illiberal trends. Yet, their actions should not stop there, as **the next stage of think-tanking should be more citizen-oriented**.

## About European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Energy and Environment;
- 4) Europe&us.