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## Time of Crisis, Time for Think Tanks

### Setting the Ground

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught the world unprepared, think tanks included. Besides producing evidence-based analyses of the current events, think tanks utilise their expertise and experience to foresee potential challenges that lie ahead. Yet, this crisis has proven that even think tanks, a beacon of forward-looking thinking, have failed to anticipate the outbreak of the pandemic, as well as the immediate magnitude of its consequences. Such observation, which brings to light the existing deficiencies of think tanks, should be viewed in the light of self-evaluation, with the greater purpose to usher the path for their further improvement and evolution. Self-awareness and self-improvement of this kind become all the more important considering that the democratic norms continue to erode under the pressure of political, economic, and social impact of the pandemic.

With this context in mind and in order to better understand the challenges the think tank community has faced throughout the pandemic, while finding ways to self-improve, the European Policy Centre (CEP), on 29 January 2021, hosted a [conference](#) under the name *“Times of Crisis, Time for Think Tanks: case of the Western Balkans”*. It was moderated by Sena Marić, Programme Manager and Senior Researcher at CEP, while the discussants were Milena Lazarević, Programme Director at CEP, Simonida Kacarska, Director of the European Policy Institute (EPI) from North Macedonia, Milena Muk, Programme Director at the Institute Alternative from Montenegro, and Milan Antonijević, Executive Director at the Open Society Foundation in Serbia. The key questions that dominated the discussion were what the key challenges were think tanks faced during the pandemic, and how these organisations can position themselves in a post-pandemic world.

The event took place on the occasion of the launch of the [“2020 Go To Think Tank Index Report”](#), published as a programme of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania. In this report, CEP was ranked as the best think tank in the Western Balkans for the third year in a row, jumping from ninth to seventh place in terms of ranking of organisations from Central and Eastern Europe. On top of that, CEP was, for the first time, featured on the Report’s list of “2020 Best New Idea or Paradigm Developed by a Think Tank”, where it ranked as the 24th best think tank in the entire world. Meanwhile, as CEP has a strong regional focus, it is praiseworthy that the Think for Europe Network (TEN), whose work is coordinated by CEP, maintained its 34th position for the third consecutive year in terms of world’s best think tank networks. Finally, considering that the pandemic became an overarching point of analysis for CEP during 2020, the fact that it made it on a list with regards “2020 Best Policy and Institutional Response to COVID-19” reaffirmed the quality and timeliness of its work. Considering the changing and more difficult working environment in 2020, these are formidable achievements for a think tank from the Western Balkans.

### Retaining the Essence of Think Tanking...

While the quality of democracy worldwide has been [eroding](#) throughout the past years, the outbreak of the pandemic has multiplied many of the negative aspects which have accompanied globalisation, such as the spread of fake news, hate speech, intolerance, and conspiracy theories. In that regard, think tanks have, willingly or not, gained “a duty” to counter the proliferation of these phenomena, particularly as these organisations have traditionally been one of the key advocates of multilateralism. In fact, while instigating debates through various types of events and advocating for comprehensive approaches, think tanks both preach and practice multilateral cooperation. This is in their essence. Only by cooperating and coordinating their activities and research efforts can they jointly exert pressure and urge decision-makers to tackle challenges that are of common concern. Without doing so, think tanks would cease to be “thinking” organisations, and would instead turn into passive observers with limited reach and audience.

Meanwhile, in the context of the Western Balkans region, think tanks ought not to neglect their other key priority – hearing and conveying the voice of their citizens. By doing so, the multi-layered approach to the existing reality can solve the ever-complex problems with which the local citizens are faced with – inadequate pace of EU-related reforms, slow and inefficient public administration, environmental neglect, the spread of fake news and disinformation, etc. This gains even greater importance in the world of COVID-19, as it became clear that the pandemic has created a greater distance between citizens and their governments. As crises amplify the lack of communication, think tanks have the potential to bridge the gap by using methods of citizen consultation and deliberation.

The key ingredient behind think tanks’ ability and willingness to interconnect between themselves, but also with citizens, is vision. Without it, no effort would be sufficient to simultaneously produce a sustainable and effective network of think tanks. In that regard, TEN can be taken as an example *par excellence* of a joint regional network that has worked remarkably well. Ever since 2013 when it was founded, it has illustrated that think tanks can go much further the mere work on securing individual projects so they can continue to function on a daily basis. They have done so by abiding by the principle “one for all, all for one”, that is, only together can the Western Balkans truly progress towards the EU. With this motto as the driving engine, members of this network have worked on bypassing the political, economic, and social hurdles inherited from the unfavourable local context in the Western Balkans. By developing common methodologies, having a unified comparative approach in analysis and by exerting pressure on the governments on the region with a single voice, this Network has shown that working together does pay-off.

### ...while Finding New Strategies

The relationship between policymakers and think tankers should be, at least in theory, a mutually beneficial relationship, with a high potential to produce concrete benefits for the citizens. However, in practice, such idealised picture is rarely seen. In that regard, realities on the ground show that governments are typically reluctant to welcome input from the “nongovernmental” arena such as the civil society. For this reason, instead of synchronicity, think tanks are usually faced with a difficult and thorny path of trying to make their voice heard when it comes to providing input into policymaking. That is why they need to continue exploring new strategies to extend their reach and impact.

Despite its terrible effect on public health, the pandemic has nevertheless opened a window of opportunity for think tanks to provide prompt and quick proposals. One thing that might be changing the long-existing lack of synchronicity between think tanks and governments, is the fact that the pandemic has shown that with facts and adequately formulated policies can one fight the consequences of the virus. In Serbia, such practice was showcased when the Government became more open to accepting insights from think tanks, particularly when it came to CEP’s recommendations on how to counter the economic repercussions of the pandemic. Such move by the Government was indeed a positive step in slightly increasing the access to policymaking to the think tank community.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to argue that the Government in Serbia has adopted a renewed and all-round approach to cooperation with think tanks. The key issue which remains is that the policymakers neglect think tanks’ input with regard to the rule of law. In that regard, think tanks have repeatedly signalled that Serbia has continuously shown no progress with regard the reforms on the rule of law and freedom of expression. The same critical stance applies to most of the Western Balkans as well. To make the matters worse, focus on humanitarian and emergency responses, particularly via lockdowns, tended to create a situation when good governance took the backseat. Montenegro’s Prime Minister went as far to [argue](#), at the outbreak of the pandemic, that “it was not the time for legal nuances”. This created and still creates a huge potential for corruption, which further increases the importance of think tanks’ monitoring role.

Yet, what makes it particularly difficult for think tanks to fulfil its roles are governments’ efforts to undermine the legitimacy of these organisations in the eyes of the public. This particularly becomes prominent once think tanks raise their voices with regard to the lack of progress in the rule of law area. In such cases, policymakers continue casting a shadow of doubt on think tanks’ work by making public allegations that these organisations only represent the will of their donors, and not of the people. In fact, more offer than ever before, the governments, and particularly those run by populists, continue to insist that think tanks have no legitimacy whatsoever, while adding that only the top-down approach could work to fulfil the wishes of the local population. As a contrast to this claim, think tanks should develop a strong argument, louder than ever before, that it is the facts that give them legitimacy. By possessing knowledge, expertise, and the ability to listen, but also act upon addressing the existing challenges, think tanks use evidence-based advocacy to promote the cause they are

fighting for. On top of that, governments, whether they realise that or not, are in desperate need of facts. Therefore, think tanks should remain loud in order to continue fighting for their space in media, public sphere, and policymaking.

Think tanks also need to develop new ways of tackling the increasingly visible and damaging phenomenon of [GONGOs](#) – quasi-independent and government-sponsored non-governmental organisations. In fact, the creation and rise in number of GONGOs showcases that governments are proactively thinking on how to come up and utilise new and nonviolent methods to limit the impact and reach of think tanks. By pretending to be independent, these organisations have the sole purpose on crowding the think tank market, overtake financial support from potential donors, and minimise the space for the genuine and long-standing think tanks whose findings often go against the interests of the ruling political elites. Although think tanks have publicly voiced their concerns regarding this phenomenon, for now, the trend of GONGOs seems to be difficult to reverse.

Another issue that precedes the pandemic, but was drastically exacerbated during this crisis, is the phenomenon of [fake news](#). It represents a type of tabloid journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional print and broadcast news media or online social media. The rise of such phenomenon makes it more difficult for citizens to separate truth from lies, particularly when the governments play a role in providing a preferential treatment to propaganda over facts, and bias over objective assessment. Considering that such hurdles are becoming increasingly large, think tanks need to start finding new strategies which would allow them to not only to maintain credibility in the eyes of the public, but to also better persuade the government officials to take into account inputs provided to them.

However, not everything is bleak. Namely, the pandemic has shown that efforts to further digitalise all areas of life is of paramount importance. The same has applied to think tanks and their modality of work. Even though the think tank community has traditionally preferred live contact with peers (both domestically and abroad), considering such format as a better way of formally and informally exchanging experience and information, the pandemic made them change their fora. Nevertheless, the sudden necessity to turn live discussions into online ones has not hindered the work of think tanks. Moreover, in some aspects such change made their work ever more cost-effective than it was before. Working in the virtual world became “a new now”. The faster and better think tanks realised that, the more effective they were. In that regard, it is necessary for think tanks, even after the pandemic is over, to keep some of the gained experience in terms of digitalisation. The think tanks’ mission continues, just with new means.

### Way Forward

As renowned academics Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have famously pointed out, the civil society represents **one of the key arenas** without which no democracy can consolidate. In times of crisis, the same line of argument applies – no effective solution can come without think tanks, that is, organisations which can bridge the gap between the local population and their governments, all while providing evidence-based policy solutions. Although different think tanks may have diverse singular interests, what usually binds them together and typically represents a common denominator is their focus on promoting, developing, and protecting democratic consolidation, rule of law, human rights, freedom of expression, and finally, citizens’ right to know.

While continuously and simultaneously working to fulfil these duties, think tanks must act as megaphones with regards giving the voice to the local population to uncover their grievances. In order to maintain such valuable role, think tanks not only need to continue fighting for their own space, but they need to be more honest with themselves. Although these organisations may develop and solidify their long-term approach to conducting their work, the pandemic should be taken as a lesson which demonstrates a necessity for the willingness to adapt to the ever-changing environment. Only by constantly self-evaluating can they work on developing strategic foresight which could help them anticipate and early identify “black swans” such as the pandemic.



## 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.