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RECOMMENDATIONS ON INCREASING INFLUENCE FOR THE RUSSIAN THINK-TANKS

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INTRODUCTION

The main characteristic of Russia's contemporary political system is the monocentric power system which is closed on the person of President Putin and concentrates all political instruments in one centre – the Kremlin.

The legislature, which served in the 1990s as a forum for debating and improving laws and basis of the new government, today is subordinated to President's will entirely. The majority of pro-presidential party in the Parliament assures the passage of all necessary laws. New law concerning transfer to proportional electoral system as well as the law that makes tougher elections for parties-participants means that chances for independent parties and a real strong opposition to be formed are significantly reduced. The regional leaders are no longer elected but appointed by the President after approval of local parliaments. "Large business" intimidated with the "YUKOS case" is afraid to play the role of independent actor (let alone the role of opposition).

Public component of the policy comes to naught – public opinion is listened to but is not taken into account while accepting this or that political decision. In the opinion of both Russian and foreign experts, the law adopted at the beginning of 2006 regulating the NGOs activity, may result in eliminating the civil society in the country. Concerning mass media, despite a variety of mass media outlets in Russia we can hardly find a number of publishers, one radio station or a website that maintain some sort of independence from the government. Moreover, the most widespread channel of mass media, the national public television, is the most accountable structure to the Presidential Administration.

Obviously in these circumstances such players in the field of public policy as think-tanks can hardly have respectable opinion in the decision-making process. These structures should conduct research in different disciplines, and then report the results to the society or to the target groups whose opinions they want to influence. The effectiveness of the decision-making process depends on the character of the dialogue between the above-mentioned actors.

COMMON POST-COMMUNIST HERITAGE IN POLAND AND RUSSIA

The foreign experience of establishing and operating think-tanks, especially in the countries of the former Communist bloc, can help answer the question why the influence of think-tanks in Russia is so limited and if there are any outlets, any chances for them to become what they should be – the

mediators between government and society, who play an important role in establishing an effective dialogue.

The transformation period from totalitarianism to democracy started in Russia only in mid-1980s when Mikhail Gorbachev made a number of steps towards liberalization (declared the freedom of speech, organized first elections) and appeared to be the most long-drawn among countries- former members of the Communist bloc. In spite of the declarations the course to democratization by the President Yeltsin in the early 1990-s, after 15 years of reforms the political system still retains different and sometimes conflicting tendencies and principles - authoritarianism, democracy, oligarchic elements.

In contrast, such countries as Hungary, Czechoslovakia (later – the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and Poland have appeared in the vanguard of the transformation. Before 1989 all these countries were members of the Communist bloc, characterized by critical lack of goods in the market, lack of the publicity in mass media, isolation from the West and constant dependence from the “elder brother” USSR. All these should lead to growing protest among the people earlier or later, and it resulted in the disintegration of the Communist system with the USSR in the centre. All the states that as a result became independent proceeded to build democratic societies with such values as freedom of person and pluralism of opinions, pluralism of parties, programs and personal choice, market economy based on competition, replacement of the vertical system of government with horizontal system featuring civil society.

For Russia with its half-ended reforms, the experience of the Central and East European (CEE) countries may be extremely important because these states have not only accumulated the successful experience and learned the lessons of postcommunist transformation but have become members of the European community after joining the European Union in 2004.

However for all their achievements of the transformation period, the Central and East European countries display a number of problems. Liberalization of national economy and opening of borders put pressure on uncompetitive sectors. A multicolored spectrum of unstable parties emerged from the once united political entities born at the times of the struggle with communism. Corruption scandals became the essential part of political life; and the ruling teams were replaced with every new elections.

Polish sociologist Pavel Kuchinsky notes that “speaking in market terms it should be said that the political product quality has reduced seriously over the last 15 years”. The last political crisis that broke out in Poland in September 2006 demonstrates that although the country has taken the place of a competent member of “New Europe“, it is at the same time unable to develop a really mature and

sustainable political system over the transformation period. And this is what unites Poland and Russia as participants of socialist sector in the past and states on the long and hard way to democracy in present.

After the Communist system fell apart these countries found themselves in a similar position – in conditions of disintegrating political and economical systems, with disconnected civil society and unclear perspectives for the future. Thus we can say that the processes and phenomena of internal politics of Poland and Russia had much in common at the “starting point”. The process of the creation and development of the NGO sector including think-tanks as part of civil society in two countries had the similar tendencies and peculiarities firstly. For example, till the present days the problems that the Polish and Russian think-tanks face have been generally the same: lack of financing, insufficiency of attention from the decision-making bodies.

PECULIARITIES OF RUSSIAN THINK-TANKS. THE WAY OF EMERGING, THE WAY OF EXISTING

The emergence of new analytical centers is always related to the significant changes in social, economical and political life which are followed inevitably with regrouping of main forces and the emergence of new players – political actors with their own interests, ambitions, aims. Analytical centers are parts of this process of realizing these interests and their research results are communicated to the target group whose opinion they want to influence.

Several periods may be identified in the history of Russia when specific kinds of think-tanks appeared.

- In the USSR the main mission of think-tanks was to serve the needs of the political elite and closed structures. A new period in development of think-tanks was related to the rise of the civil activity at the end of the 1980s when various clubs and “popular fronts” appeared. Some of them began to pose social research problems. Analytical structures, supporting civil organisations and movements, were formed as part of this wave of the civil society activity. However, these organizations suffered from lack of resources, first of all intellectual – there were very few professionals in humanities due to the emphasis on specialists in technology and natural sciences throughout the Soviet period. For that reason the few organizations that developed were restricted in the choice of their activities. The exceptions were the Fund for Legal and Political Research “Interlegal” and Saint-Petersburg Centre for Humanities and Political Studies “Strategy” which were established by the people from academic branch who possessed all needed resources – intellectual, reputational and derived from them.

- The proclaimed course to democracy created a demand for analytical structures which were capable of articulating comprehensive vision of the problems related to the democratic transition and defense of civil rights. At the beginning of the 1990s, in the period of the “dual power” shared by two centers, the Supreme Council of the USSR (the symbol of the old Soviet power) and the Government of the Russian Federation (new democratic center) new analytical centers began to emerge around them. They served or they were closely connected with the representatives of higher political elite mostly and were called VIP-centers. “Strategy” belongs to this group, concerning the main problems of social and political life which have a long-term impact on the Russia’s development.

There were also think-tanks whose founders used these structures for the further boost in their political influence and status. We can recall here the Gaidar Institute, Yavlinski Center, which had direct or indirect access to presidential and governmental structures through the personal connections of their founders.

- However, in the mid-1990s when politics and economy achieved some stability, gradual decrease of interest in think-tanks as consultants of reform was observed. However, only few think-tanks focused their research on the assistance to the development of truly open and public policy. Instead, many of them were busy with entrepreneurial activity in the field of political consulting refusing to discuss in principle the consequences of some political measures to the country (for example application of certain “humanitarian technologies” for elections and re-elections of mayors and governors). The presidential elections in 1996 were the bloom of the of political consultants’ era when the President Boris Yeltsin was re-elected only due to huge efforts of political consultants.

- But such approach turned out to be very limited. The consequences of the economic crisis of 1998 that are felt by a broad section of the Russia society until the present revealed the necessity of making weighted, well-considered political decisions. The crisis also ushered gradual removal from the understanding policy as politics (the struggle for power) to policy in the meaning of the process of preparing, adopting and realizing political decisions aimed to solve civil problems. Upon reflection, the effectiveness of such decisions depends directly on character of interaction between main civil and political actors.

So, what is the way of interaction between government and think-tanks?

THINK-TANKS AND GOVERNMENT. POLISH EXPERIENCE. RUSSIAN REALITY

The variety of think-tanks represented in Poland allows to make more or less objective analysis of difference in the activities of these structures in Poland and Russia. All of them are different in origins

(private, established by parliament act, founded by experts), in positioning themselves at the public policy stage (some are think-tanks partly, others struggle for this status thoroughly), in finding financial sources at least (governmental budget, funding of founders, grants, commercial activities). But they seemed to be similar in the way they are going on. They differ in mission, objects and resources but methods and target groups are almost the same. Most of the think-tanks work with governmental bodies (native or foreign), with media (as target group or use it as an instrument), try to involve professional community (more or less), those who are interested in commercial activity. And talking about instruments – they use quite usual methods – conferences, seminars, expertise, analyses, publications etc.

But their vision of current situation, estimation of environment, changes and challenges are analogous. Typical problems are lack of funding, their dependence (more or less) from the “big policy” – the political and economical course that Poland is following now.

Here it is interesting to reveal that generally, Polish think-tanks have similar problems that Russian ones do. However, a question arises: why the methods used by polish think-tanks are analogous to the methods Russians use but the effect of influence on decision-making process is cardinally contrary (taking into account the lack of finance, absence of attention from the state, low level of civil society – the problems that are typical for Russian think-tanks too)? *Why in case of other things being equal the Polish think-tanks have an influence on the policy-making process while the Russian ones do not?*

The answer lies in the environment in which the Russian and Polish think-tanks exist, act and achieve their goals.

There are some specific characteristics in the political environment in which think-tanks emerged, exist and act that separates Poland from Russia:

- In Poland there were adopted and used the methods, sources and experience of developed market economies.
- Wide public support – the mentality of CEE countries was less influenced by the “imitative socialism” as Russian one.
- Such countries as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary did not follow on the whole the concept of “the third way” that was so popular in Russia. The concept was understood in these states clearly to be just an utopia.

So, what factors of the political environment influence the activity of the Russian think-tanks? First of all, it is the general character of decision-making process and policy process.

Consensus on policy objectives

There are factors of political environment that affects on think-tanks' activity. In Poland and Russia they differ cardinally. In spite of the common features of history and the declared objective of transition from authoritarianism to democracy – Poland and Russia followed different ways in achieving this goal. Poland chose the way of consensus involving all key players of political life; Russia has retained the tendency to authoritarianism, which remains masked with different terms and programs.

Concerning Poland, two aspects dating back to the nation's history and relevant for the present days should be evident: the strength of the Catholic religious life and determined national spirit that have aided the Poles through the centuries in their confrontations with the Russians and Germans. During the whole period of socialist system the Soviet dominance was challenged a number of times and the opposition was either put down by force or attempts were made to "buy" it with reforms. Every new outbreak of opposition (in 1956, 1970 or 1980-1981) gained ground for the "opposition" civil society which was actively supported by the Catholic Church. When the "Solidarity" trade union emerged in 1980, the Polish Catholic patriotism revealed itself as a platform which was able to unite almost the entire society. Thus we can see that through the history among political bodies and nongovernmental sectors there was formed some kind of a habit to act, to come forward together in the crucial moments for their country. It explains the origins of the way of decision-making process when authorities and society have the same vision of the problems and hence, accept the decision based on consensus.

Unfortunately, the same conclusion cannot be made about Russia. At the beginning of the transition to democracy there was a lack of consensus in the Russian political life in many of the main issues – the basis of economy, the territorial question and the agenda of political reforms. The history of the last 15 years has demonstrated the spontaneous, often unpredictable character of Russian state policy. After the fall of the communism the cardinal changes took place in the political realm. When viewed from the outside, the Russian power system seemed to become closer to the western democracies. But the absence of long-term strategy is a serious problem that distinguishes Russia from the western types of democracy. It arises from the absence of consensus within the society or the political elite. Many problems of Russia could have been solved if the political elite came to compromise on any of the questions; however, there has been no compromise. This explains the changeable character of Russian policy depending on the person who is in the office of the President.

In contrast to Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, the Russian democrats failed to draw wide public support from either the elites or the public. As a result, since the early 1990s, broad sectors of society (for example the Communist Party that formed the strongest opposition force with significant support) refused to recognize the result of the democratic elections (proclaimed by President Yeltsin), questioning its validity. The subsequent reforms carried out by Yeltsin and his team were also considered undemocratic because these measures were taken without any consultations with his political opponents.

Participation of the civil society in decision-making process

The level of civil society in the country represents another feature that affects the level of activity of think-tanks. Nowadays the Russian authorities remain unaccountable to the society.

There exists a various manner of decision-making when the government listens to the public opinion and then acts on its own will. This is illustrated by the manner in which the reform concerning the conversion of social benefits into money was launched at the beginning of 2005, resulting in demonstrations and protests of those parts of society “whom it was intended for”. In reality this reform brought about more disadvantages than benefits for a lot of people. Maybe the program of reform would not have failed if it had been worked out taking into account the opinion of experts and those part of people who were to be affected.

The monopoly of the ruling clique on decision making has serious consequences. The latest examples break out nowadays in the Russia’s regions where the plan of integration of regions is actively implemented in spite of public opinion polls showing that most of the local people are against the union with another region. Moreover, regions with diametrically opposed economic profiles (region-donor and region-recipient) were to be joined. The idea may not be so bad but it is carried out without taking into account opinions other than those of the federal government.

The above example illustrates the tendency in the Russian policy to act first, to face awful results and then to reflect why this happened, and who is guilty. This may explain why the Russian government continues to misunderstand the mission of think-tanks, which is one of the barriers to the impact that Russian think-tanks could have on policymaking.

Such kind of relations between government and society has been formed historically. It is a result of the past mentality, political behavior and traditions, evident in the inclination to patron-client relations in the society as well as in the ruling class. Despite the changes of the top members of government, the habits remain the same and the Russian authorities try to maintain monopoly on

political resources. What has changed is the number of participants – business-structures, security agencies, influential regional leaders emerged on the political stage over the last 15 years.

Involvement of think-tanks and experts

As a result of the misunderstanding of the role of civic organizations in general, think-tanks particularly, among the state officials and the members of the public, think-tanks are not considered politically important. That also explains their relatively low status as experts, as indispensable members of civil and policy process.

In these circumstances (especially since the financial crisis) the government has paid attention to “in-the-house advisors” - think-tanks that developed under the governmental structures – President Administration, Ministry of economy, etc. The authorities in time realized that the scale and importance of reforms could be larger than they could imagine and recognized the barriers such as lack of information, professional vision of the problem and sometimes absence of strategy. In those cases the government appeals to “external” experts – analytical structures, or think-tanks. This process has created demand for the services of a number of think-tanks. However, not all the Russian think-tanks were able to adapt to changing environment as some of them used to work “on governmental salary” (were financed from the state) and could not find alternative sources of funding since the collapse of the USSR. Others concentrated on their own survival taking orders from very different clients. So opposite to Central Europe where think-tanks became a “collective advisor” of reforms during transition, in Russia the think-tank community became fragmented, which led to disunity and lack of ties among the think-tanks, further limiting their influence on the public.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent developments and prospects for the future

We can conclude that there are some reasons for the lower impact of the Russian think-tanks compared to the Polish counterparts. The specificity of the activity of Russian think-tanks and their low influence on decision-making process depends on a range of factors enumerated below.

1. **Absence of consensus between different forces that are involved in the policy making in general and between analytical centres and government in particular.** The breakdown of the

USSR and the disintegration of its economic and political system has meant a change to the old system of relations between analytical institutions and governmental structures. Appearance of a multi-party system with political and ideological pluralism allowed think-tanks to work with different actors, to select the fields of research (internal or external policy, economy, civil society, sociology etc.) and choose the way of acting. On the other hand, the policy makers who came to power tried to achieve their plans first of all, making decisions without taking into account the opinions of other stakeholders.

2. Lack of understanding of the mission of think-tanks, their role in the society life in the public at large. Mentality based on paternalistic attitude of Russian people to government may be attributed to the Soviet heritage as well as to the low level of political culture and indifferent attitude to policy-making among wide groups of people. At the same time, Russian think-tanks paid little attention to their educational function, consisting of the transfer of knowledge from policy-making bodies to the civil society. They never articulated to the people answers to the questions who they were, what they were for or who needed them.

3. The environment in which think-tanks act has a serious impact on their activity. Unpredictable changes in the Russian politics and economy during the transformation period in Russia (the Transition of the 1990s) turned out to be hard times for think-tanks. It was a period of sharp decrease of state funding of science (especially humanities) and think-tanks had to find not only sources for financial survival but to redefine their mission and their position in society. Policy-making became more sustainable and more or less predictable only recently as violence ceased to be the main political instrument in consolidation of society. Elections formally play a role as the society's instrument in controlling government (but the abolition of the regional leaders' election has weakened this feature). The state role in the private sector has been reduced but the Russian authorities still are unable to fulfill their direct social obligations (payment of salaries and pension in time, providing political rights and security functions).

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, based on the above, some recommendations may be proposed to different actors involved in the policy making process in order to base future decisions on a more thorough analysis and on the consideration of interests of the main affected groups.

1. Recommendation to the Russian government

Think-tanks, which are the structures mediating in the dialogue between society and government, can be developed not only through initiatives of NGO leaders or experts – political scientists, but may emerge thanks to the activity of the state. One such government-based mediator is the Ombudsman Institute that on the basis of citizens complaints and appeals suggests to executive and representative branches of government, different variants of solving problems. Such attempts have been made from time to time in different regions (in Russia it is known as Institute of Deputy on the Human Rights). If the initiative becomes permanent and required by law to be established in every region it will allow not only to solve many existing problems effectively, it will also increase the authorities' prestige which the present powers need so much now.

2. Recommendations to Russian NGOs and local communities

Nowadays the authority is less concentrated in the regions than it may appear. There are political centers, other than the federal centre, that can, and already do take part, in the political process. This process is more developed on the regional level, where the number of real authors increases. The integration of nongovernmental organisations - advocacy, ecological, etc. may result in the formation of harmonious and strong system of self-government. Although its characteristics appear now here or there but the emergence of such a system all over Russia is likely to be a long process. So the think-tanks that work in regions and with regions should concentrate their activities on the realizing of this objective and shift from purely academic research to the more active participation in the social and political life. Besides, NGOs should expand their functions to protection and representation of the certain civil interests in addition to conducting their analytical research. As a result, the functions of NGOs and think-tanks will be closely intertwined, which will allow them to fulfil more effectively the mission of education and communication aimed at the society.

3. Recommendations to Russian think-tanks

Russian think-tanks should re-focus now from the advice to the central government that does not listen to them toward the formation of a platform with the civil society which would be able not only to control the government but articulate its demands clearly and evaluate the responses of the state and thus be positioned to work out common strategies and take part in decision-making alongside the governmental structures.

Further, Russian think-tanks need to define their main vector of activity: whether they are primarily consultants to the government, or whether they choose the educational function as their priority and

focus on the society. So in order to fulfill their mission effectively think-tanks need to articulate the answers on the questions: who are we? What are we for? Who needs us? What can we do for achieving our goals? And to transfer it to the public.

Russian think-tanks should also develop the links among each other and set up regional departments in order to form “informed public” not only in the large cities but all across the country. Otherwise, the reforms will fail again and again without receiving wide public support or understanding of their purpose.

And finally – think-tanks need to gain experience of effective fundraising, public relations work and self-positioning. Those will help them to shift their preoccupation from day-to-day problems to socially relevant issues.