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BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT FOREIGN POLICY THINK-TANKS IN RUSSIA

Author: Igor Okunev

Supervisor: Jacek Kucharczyk, Institute of Public Affairs

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Introduction

Ivan Tulin, a leading expert on foreign policy research in Russia, argues that the last two decades have witnessed the growth and consolidation of the community of independent foreign policy researchers and analysts¹. But at the same time other significant studies² show that foreign policy research remains mostly academic, with little interest in policy advocacy and, as a rule, politicians and public officials continue to work without significant support from independent analytical centers. Russian foreign policy is affected by the absence of independent think-tanks, which have become part and parcel of the Western policy process. At the same time, most attempts to establish such institutions in Russia have either failed or led to the establishment of analytical centers which are neither active nor influential.

The present policy brief aims to identify the barriers to the development of independent foreign policy think-tanks in Russia. The conclusions are based on the results of a series of interviews conducted by the author with the support of the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw. The interviewees included high-level officials from the Chancellery of the Prime Minister and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, heads of the leading Polish think-tanks, representatives of grant-giving organizations and specialists in the Polish third sector. The Polish experience is especially useful for Russia since it provides an opportunity to assess the situation of independent think-tanks in the context of the political changes of the last twenty years and to compare their current situation in democratic Poland and transitional (or hybrid in terms of regime) Russia.

“In the modern world, the effectiveness of public authorities depends on their ability to use professional knowledge,” said Ms. Irena Jackiewicz from the Civil Service Department of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland right at the beginning of our conversation and you could not find a better introduction to the role of analytical structures in contemporary decision-making. Advisory groups can shape foreign policy by helping set the agenda, processing information, framing alternative courses of action, preventing contradictory and non-supportive information from filtering in, interpreting incoming information for policy makers in certain ways, and serving as gatekeepers.

The participation of scientific and expert communities in foreign policy strategy planning remains mostly legally unregulated in Russia. In Paragraph 10 of the Statute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs enforced by the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, No. 271, of

1 Tulin I. (2005) *Institutional dimension of Russian international studies* // Russian international studies: new directions. Moscow: Per Se (in Russian).

2 Sungurov A. (2002) *Think-tanks and public policy centers: international and first Russian experience.*- St.Petersburg: Norma (in Russian); Belyaeva N., Zaitsev D. (2007) *Comparative analysis of Russian and foreign think-tanks.* Moscow: HSE (in Russian).

14.03.1995, it is stated that: “In order to develop evidence-based proposals for the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation may establish scientific advisory, methodological and expert advice bodies. Boards and provisions for them are approved by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Organizational and technical support activities for these councils are provided by the central apparatus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.” This formula compels Ministry officials to rely on the expertise of policy centers and advisory bodies which they have established and whose activities are organizationally, financially, and technically supported by the Ministry. By the same token, however, it does not give the Ministry enough freedom to take advantage of advice from independent policy research institutions – which would mean that in some areas the expertise could at least be commissioned on the basis of open competition, which would include independent and even foreign and international institutions.

Types of analytical structures

Foreign policy analysis is mainly conducted by the following types of agencies and institutions of different operational scale and legal basis: official structures and agencies, academic institutions, government-organized, -funded and -supported think-tanks, independent think-tanks with diversified sources of funding and international or foreign think-tanks (classification proposed by Dr. Jacek Kucharczyk, President of the Executive Board, the Institute of Public Affairs). The following table presents the leading foreign policy organizations in Russia and Poland.

Leading Foreign Policy Analytical Structures in Russia and Poland

	Russia	Poland
Official Structures	Department of Foreign Policy Planning of MFA	Department of Strategy and Foreign Policy Planning of MFA
Academic Structures	Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Diplomatic Academy, Higher School of Economics, Moscow State University, St.Petersburg State University	Warsaw University, Jagiellonian University, Warsaw School of Economics
Governmental Think-Tanks	Russian Council of Foreign Affairs, Institute of World Economy and	Polish Institute of International Affairs, Center for Eastern Studies

	International Relations, Institute of Europe, Institute of the USA and Canada, Institute of Latin America, Institute of Africa, Institute of Far East, Institute of Problems of World Security	
Nongovernmental Think-Tanks	PIR Center, Council of Foreign and Defense Policy, Institute of Contemporary Development, Academic Educational Forum on International Relations	Demos Europa, Center for International Relations, Institute of Public Affairs
International Think-Tanks	Carnegie Moscow Center	German Marshall Fund, European Council on Foreign Relations

All these types of analytical structures have their advantages and disadvantages. In order to increase the quality of policy analysis, an environment needs to be created where all these types would have a chance to compete for funding and influence. Contrarily, underdevelopment of one of these types of policy research structures could lead to a decrease in the competition of ideas and the quality of foreign policy making. The following table shows the strengths and weaknesses of each type of foreign policy analytical structure. The main variables that determine the specific nature of the type of analytical structure are: stability of funding, network of experts (including foreign ones), flexibility to provide research results on tight deadlines and with reasonable cost-effectiveness, ability to conduct broad comparative and multidisciplinary research, specialization in a particular issue on the basis of extensive experience in researching it, and - last but not least - access to classified information (linked to national security).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Foreign Policy Analytical Structures

	More stable budgeting	Better network of experts	More flexibility in deadlines and costs and expenses	Broad research agenda	Specialization in research on a particular policy issue	Access to classified information
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Official Structures	•					•
Academic Structures	•	•		•		
Governmental Think-Tanks	•		•	•		•
Nongovernmental Think-Tanks		•	•		•	
International Think-Tanks	•	•			•	

The table shows that in order to maximize the advantages of policy expertise, the state administration should provide equal opportunities to all types of analytical structures and work with all of them in foreign policy making. However, in Russia we face a lack of independent and international think-tanks, which leads to a lower quality of foreign policy research and analysis.

Barriers to independent foreign policy think-tank development

Three groups of barriers to the development of independent foreign policy think-tanks in Russia should be eliminated.

The first group is connected with the overall political situation in Russia and the specifics of the decision-making process in foreign policy in the country. The development of independent think-tanks in Russia requires the government to create a special environment that would be conducive to the competition of ideas between different analytical structures. Such an environment would be comprised of a more open decision-making process in the area of foreign affairs and a more friendly attitude of the government towards the third sector in general, providing basic conditions for the establishment of think-tanks.

While foreign policy attracts a lot of interest among Russians, the decision-making process in this field remains a mostly closed, even secret, sphere. Public opinion does not influence foreign policy and the population has to simply accept decisions coming from the MFA. This leads to a lack of scrutiny by civil society of foreign policy and makes the Ministry virtually the only stakeholder in this process. In this type of environment, where the MFA is the only buyer and consumer of policy research and analysis, it is extremely difficult to formulate an innovative approach to any

policy issue, which is precisely the role of independent think-tanks. Contrarily, in Poland, think-tanks, as Mr. Pawel Dobrowolsky, President of Civil Development Forum pointed out, can not only refer to the MFA, but also to political parties, interest groups, business and, last but not least, to public opinion. This increases competition in the sphere of foreign policy advice and makes the MFA interested in obtaining the best analysis. In response to this, the MFA is bound to develop programs of public diplomacy and create procedures of public hearings as an advisory component of foreign policy making.

Independent policy research and analysis demands more open and transparent work on the part of the MFA. It is difficult to draw any conclusions or make recommendations without full information and documentation from the Ministry website, and this can only be achieved with the help of personal contacts. In order to increase the transparency of the MFA, the Polish approach - which was described during the interview at the Polish MFA – could be recommended: publishing most Ministry documents online and also implementing a system of open tenders for advisory work and open competition for job vacancies. The last measure could also lead to a broader exchange of specialists between the MFA and think-tanks, which could make the latter more attractive to young specialists and more competitive as a result.

As was already mentioned, the creation of an environment that is conducive to the establishment of independent think-tanks implies that government policy (above all, that of the Ministry of Justice) should be more friendly towards civil society organizations. Mr. Dominik Owczarek, Institute of Public Affairs, said that in Poland, NGOs (including think-tanks) do not declare that they have any legal problems in operating – the registration and reporting procedures are relatively simple and, unlike in Russia, do not create another barrier to development. Such a friendly policy also means tax privileges or at least the absence of taxation on grants - again, unlike in Russia. Finally, the Polish experience shows that civil society, when taking its first developmental steps, needs assistance from international foundations (this idea was expressed by Nathalie Bolgert, Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe in her interview). Unfortunately, the fear of spies and unfriendly state policy prevents foreign foundations from giving broader support to the third sector in Russia.

The second group of barriers is connected with the process of cooperation between think-tanks and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is no single correct form of cooperation between the government and analytical centers. The list of such forms could include the commissioning of tasks under public procurement law, partnership agreements, establishing teams and working groups as well as different informal forms of cooperation. In Russia, we see a lack of trust between the state authorities and independent expert communities. Neither side knows how to start cooperating with

the other. This is a result of a lack of dialogue between the administration and civil society. Polish experience shows - as Adam Balcer, Demos Europea, has said - that the tool for change is increasing forms of joint decision-making, such as working groups, advisory councils, steering committees, etc. The intensity and depth of cooperation increases trust.

While it is difficult to quickly overcome the stereotypes and legacies, in order to make cooperation between the government and the expert community more open, it could be advisable to create a mediating structure between the two sides that will coordinate their cooperation. The creation of the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs could be seen as a step in this direction.

The third group comprises internal barriers to development connected with organizational structures and operations of independent think tanks. Looking at the best Polish think-tank success stories, we learn that diversification of projects and funding is essential for the stability of think-tanks. Those think-tanks that are more extensively engaged in European and international expert networks and have the reputation of having the only or the best expertise on specific issues compete better for policy influence. More attention to media coverage and branding could be another recommendation for the think-tanks that would help them to improve their position in society.

Last but not the least, most professionals in Russia are unfamiliar with the practice of drawing up policy papers, which are a special type of analytical document whose purpose is to persuade the government to change its policies and which are very popular in the West. Therefore, both government and think-tanks should develop educational programs concerning policy paper writing. In the field of foreign policy analysis, the MFA should consider implementing such types of courses in the educational program of its leading teaching and research institution – the Moscow State Institute of International Relations.

Conclusions

Russia is currently at the beginning of the process of international think-tank development, which will increase the quality of its foreign policy process. It is essential at this point to learn from the experience of Central European countries, which have overcome the barriers to cooperation with think tanks over the last twenty years. The diversification of sources of policy advice, mainly through adding new types of think-tanks – independent and international ones – to the traditional list of governmental agencies, academic institutions and governmental think-tanks, will make foreign policy analysis better, faster and cheaper.

The movement towards closer cooperation between the authorities and independent think-tanks should be initiated from both sides – the government should help through the creation of an

environment that is conducive to the competition of ideas, while the think-tanks should build their capacities and become more competitive. If this movement from both sides succeeds, we can count on qualitative change in foreign policy analysis in Russia.

Key Recommendations

- The government should make foreign policy a more open sphere of public administration and include a broader representation of civil society in the foreign policy debate, so as to make the foreign policy process more transparent and accountable.
- The government should diversify the sources of foreign policy advice, mainly through developing cooperation with independent and international think-tanks, in order to improve the quality of policy research and analysis and make its production faster and more cost-effective.
- The government should reduce unnecessary regulations for Russian NGOs (including think-tanks) and international foundations and introduce more friendly procedures in registration, taxation and reporting.
- In order to become more competitive, independent think-tanks should increase the diversification of their projects and financial resources, as well as increasing their participation in international networks and improving media coverage and branding.