



Weekly Briefing

Lithuania Social briefing:


Lithuania's think-tanks find their way on the global map of the public policy think-tank organizations

Linas Eriksonas

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

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On 19 November the latest Lithuania's Municipality Performance Index was released (the 7th since its first edition in 2011) showing the relative ranking of 60 municipalities in the country according to the extent to which local governments across 56 regional and 6 city regions create favourable living conditions, promote freedom of thought, encourage investments, and foster good governance. The methodology comprises 65 indicators and, as stated in the published report, "its evaluation criteria are based on the underlying values of freedom of choice, private ownership and initiative, free enterprise, efficient use of public resources, and transparent and accountable governance" (Lietuvos laisvosios rinkos institutas, "Lietuvos savivaldybių indeksas 2017", http://files.lrinka.lt/Savivaldybiu_indeksas_2017/Lietuvos.savivaldybiu.indeksas.2017.pdf).

One would expect that a study including such a comprehensive and detailed analysis evaluating the impact of economic and social policies of local governments would be prepared by and/or on behalf of the Government or a certain governmental agency. Yet the initiative and the execution of this annual survey belongs to a think-tank *Lietuvos laisvosios rinkos institutas* (Lithuanian Free Market Institute), a private public entity, which has been defining the public governance in Lithuania for more than two decades. Below is a brief analysis of the public policy think-tanks in Lithuania trying to explain their nature within a wider context of the role of the think-tank organizations and the challenges they face.

Think-tanks are generically understood as organizations that follow and analyse public policies and seek to shape the formation of specific policies through the promotion of a certain set of ideas. However, the exact definition of the term "think-tank" is far from clear. The term has been continuously reassessed and the consensus on its normative meaning has never been reached among the academics and the practitioners. In one of the later attempts to reconsider the wide-spread phenomenon of the think-tank Thomas Medvetz in his book *Think Tanks in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) has stated clearly that "there are no substantive properties shared by all members of the think tank category as the term is currently used in political discourse". Instead he proposed (influenced by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu) to define think-tanks by their position in the social structure in relation to four fields of power, namely, 1) in relation to the academic field (by looking at the credibility of a think tank and the

involvement of academics in it), 2) in relation to the media (by looking at the public exposure of a think tank), 3) in relation to the political power (by assessing the engagement of political actors within a think-tank) and 4) in relation to the business sector (by estimating the access of a particular organization to institutional and financial resources and donors). Hence, by measuring a think-tank in position to the individual sources of power one can define the level of relevance of such organization for a particular policy field. Since power is being constituted in relation to a certain subject and is relational by default, hence, a think-tank cannot be defined in fixed terms and could only be assessed within the different power relations as relevant to a particular agenda it has been pursuing.

According to the annual survey of think-tanks which has been carried out by James G. McGann as part of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania since 2008 (initially established in 1989 at the Foreign Policy Research Institute dedicated “to bringing the insights of scholarship to bear on the development of policies that advance U.S. national interests”), Lithuania has a well-established track record of think-tank activities. The 2017 edition of „Global Go To Think Tank Index Report “indicates that the country has 19 organizations carrying out such activities (which make up ca. 6 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants). To compare, 42 think-tanks are listed under Hungary (ca. 5 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants), 54 are listed under Romania (ca. 3 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants). The leaders, according to this report, are Estonia having 17 think-tanks (13 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants), Slovenia with 9 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants and Macedonia - 8 think-tanks per 1 million inhabitants.

In the global ranking of one hundred seventy-five think-tanks (which is led by Chatham House in the United Kingdom, the French Institute of International Relations and Brussels-based Bruegel), Lithuania’s most prominent think-tank the Lithuanian Free Market Institute is ranked as 137. In the regional ranking of the ninety Central and Eastern European (CEE) think-tanks (topped by the Center of Social and Economic Research in Warsaw, the Carnegie Moscow Centre and the Polish Institute of International Affairs) the Lithuanian Free Market Institute is ranked as 12. Two other entries from Lithuania (the public entities the Centre for Geopolitical Study and the Eastern Europe Studies Center are ranked 28 and 72 respectively). Among one hundred thirty-five ranked think-tanks in the field of foreign policy and international affairs two Lithuanian organizations are listed, namely: the Lithuanian Free Market Institute (ranked as 110) and the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University (ranked as 123).

As a rule, the most developed think-tanks are mostly working on the policy agendas which are concerned with the national security issues, the political

economy and/or the specific economic policies as those are of a major national importance and have a broader support base or the network which could provide access to the multiple sources of power and thus ensure the consensus needed to sustain a think tank on a longer run.

According to the above conceptual framework of the think-tank as a set of institutionally-embedded activities run in relation to power, only two institutions (as ranked above) fully qualify as organizations pursuing think-tank activities, namely, the Lithuanian Free Market Institute and the Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations. Both have been setup during the first years of independence of the Republic of Lithuania. The Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations was established at Vilnius University in 1992 (with the funding support of the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania, a political organization in the United States representing a pre-war Lithuanian political organization in exile). The Institute has provided the cadre for the diplomatic service and the political elite ever since. The staff of the Institute has provided commentators of the domestic political processes often shaping the political discourse about the democratic process and the key values in the society. It is considered to be politically on the centre-right. Two minor think-tanks (the Centre for Geopolitical Study and the Eastern Europe Studies Centre which are concerned with the foreign affairs mostly) are associated with its former graduates or members of staff.

The Lithuanian Free Market Institute was established as early as in November 1990. It was founded by six economics who co-authored the book entitled *Rinkos ekonomika ir valstybinis reguliavimas* (The market economy and the state regulation) published as the first title of the Institute. The title of the book has become the leitmotiv for the main direction of this organization – to act as a proponent of the free market and a watchdog of the state regulation. The Institute drafted a number of important legislation and was spearheading the market deregulation in the economy. One of the co-founders of the Institute would become the key negotiator with the European Commission over the accession of Lithuania to the European Union. One would become the key politician of the liberal party and one would become the tycoon in the media sector. The confluence of all four sources of power (the academia, the politics, the media and the business sector) had ensured that the Institute would grow into a think-tank to be noticed on the global map of similar organizations. Though being politically close to the classical liberalism, the Lithuanian Free Market Institute has been inclined more towards right-libertarianism. Twice in 2004 and in 2016 the think-tank was given a prestigious award by Templeton Foundation in the US, established by John Templeton, a contrarian investor, to support progress in

religious and spiritual knowledge, especially at the intersection of religion and science.

The list of the organizations which run the activities in Lithuania that could be regarded as being characteristic to those of a think-tank include some other notable organizations, however, none of them fully qualify for a status of a think-tank, to use the conceptual framework as above. As a rule, those are the organizations that have a strong involvement from academics (and their credibility at least in the scholarly circles is higher than in the “real think-tanks”), and exposure to the media, especially on social media (due to the involvement of public intellectuals). Yet what those organization lack to keep them on a par with the seasoned think-tanks is the political clout (the engagement of the politicians and their apparatuses) and the access to the financial donors that could provide a more sustainable source of income that could keep the think-tanks in operation beyond the horizon of individual projects. This is becoming even more challenging to achieve due to the legislation regulating the influences of the public sector by the private sector. The law on the lobbying activities (*Lobistinės veiklos įstatymas* – in Lithuanian) adopted back in 2000 and further enforced with a new rigour after the latest changes to the law were made in 2017) implemented by the parliamentary watchdog Chief Official Ethics Commission keeps the politicians and the business sector separated from the formally recognizable mutual influences. Besides, a number of activities that would provide bread-and-butter for a think-tank have migrated to other professional services: legal, financial advisory services and media planning.

Three challenges have been noted by the prime expert on think-tanks Prof. Diane Stone from the University of Warwick, namely, 1) the short termism and difficulty to ensure sources for a long-term operation, 2) a strong competition from other knowledge providers (such as universities and university-affiliated think-tanks, non-governmental organisations or even commercial banks, each of which acquired and/or established in-house capacity for monitoring, analysing and participating in public policy processes), and, 3) the so-called “ post-truth” politics, a political culture in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points to which factual rebuttals are ignored. (Marcos Hernando and Diane Ross, “Think tanks can transform into the standard-setters and arbiters of quality of 21st century policy analysis”, London School of Economics and Political Science, the LSE Impact Blog, 20 Febr. 2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/20/think-tanks-can-transform-into-the-standard-setters-and-arbiters-of-quality-of-21st-century-policy-analysis/>).

The major Lithuania think-tanks have partially overcome those challenges due to the organizational setup, including a broad stakeholder involvement from the start representing different fields of power, at the time when the political and economic transformation of the country in transition allowed this to happen. Those who would come after them would have to invent a new modus operandi in a more restricted environment.