



Weekly Briefing

Estonia Social briefing:
Major ‘think tanks’ in Estonia: an overview
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Major ‘think tanks’ in Estonia: an overview

Since the time when Estonia had regained its independence in 1991, the country managed to successfully establish itself in a highly competitive field of think tanks. Gradually, Estonia ‘drifted’ afar from the Soviet times when the objectively original academic thought in social sciences was almost non-existent. It has effectively resulted in establishing a good number of government-, business- and society-sponsored non-profit research centres and institutes, which started making a noticeable difference on the European stage as well as internationally. In principle, the process led to an interest-driven natural segmentation within the ‘family’ of Estonian think tanks, and, by now, there is a possibility to classify them into the following three distinct ‘baskets’: **political strategy and security**, **political economy and/or economics**, and **societal communication**.

Political strategy and security

Given the geographic location of Estonia and considering the country’s history-framed developments, this cluster of research is destined to be associated with geo-strategy in its broadest possible sense. Estonian border with Russia is also the EU’s as well as the Schengen area’s and NATO’s borderline with the outer world. In a significant addition, in 2007, the Republic of Estonia had to fight one of this world’s first cyber wars (if not the first one). Therefore, the Tallinn-based **International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS)** and the **NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE)**, whilst being the most prominent Estonian think tanks in the ‘political strategy and security’ cluster, have to be able to perform a first-class research and policy advising in a strategically important location and at a difficult time of change.

In the particular case of ICDS, it defines itself as “the leading think-tank in Estonia specialising in foreign policy, security and defence issues [...] aim[ing] to be the regional knowledge hub of first choice for the security and defence communities of Estonia, its allies and partners”¹. Indeed, in order to implement what it aims at, the Centre organises a number of major events that usually make headlines internationally. For example, from 2007, the ICDS has been arranging the annual Lennart Meri Conference, the country’s main foreign policy-bound forum, during which, as declared, “foreign and security policy issues are discussed from the perspective of the Northern and Eastern parts of Europe”². Celebrating the Estonia Republic’s centennial with the title of ‘The Next Hundred Years’, the Conference’s 2018 agenda contained an impressively comprehensive range of topics – from European defence issues, “democracy and digital misdeeds” and Afghanistan to the China’s interactions in/with Europe, Russo-Ukrainian war and the Arctic³.

Yet another noticeable event organised by the ICDS is the Annual Baltic Conference on Defence (ABCD), which has a historic linkage to the Baltic Security Assistance forum established back in 1997. These days, the ABCD provides a platform for “policymakers, military officials, academics, analysts and media representatives [to discuss] defence issues pertinent to NATO and the EU”⁴. In 2018, the ABCD had a distinct focus on NATO, having the title of ‘NATO at 70: no time to rest’ and debating on “overall status of transatlantic relations”, common defence and deterrence⁵.

On classic academic research and policy advising, the ICDS publishes a high-profile foreign affairs journal *Diplomaatia*, with issue 181 being published in

¹ ‘About’. ICDS. Available from [<https://icds.ee/icds/about/>].

² ‘The Lennart Meri Conference’. ICDS. Available from [<https://lmc.icds.ee/>].

³ ‘Lennart Meri Conference 2018’. ICDS. Available from [<https://lmc.icds.ee/lennart-meri-conference/choose-year/2018-2/agenda-2018/>].

⁴ ‘About ABCD’. Available from [<https://abcd.icds.ee/>].

⁵ ‘Programme 2018’. Available from [<https://abcd.icds.ee/2018-2/programme-2018/>].

October 2018⁶, and conducts field-trip based studies. On the latter segment, the Centre, for example, is directly involved in the process of implementation of the Estonian-Ukrainian development cooperation programme Resilient Ukraine 2018-2020, conducting a research on cyber and informational resilience in the war-torn Ukraine and while the Russian aggression is still on⁷.

In general, the ICDS significantly contributes towards broadening and enhancing the Republic of Estonia's role within NATO and the EU and introduces the country as a location of excellent think tanks. At the same time, another Estonia-based organisation – CCDCOE, – which even has the word 'excellence' in its name, strives to do the same. It is "a multinational and interdisciplinary hub of cyber defence expertise [...] [that is] focus[ing] on technology, strategy, operations and law"⁸. As any other NATO Centre of Excellence, the CCDCOE is not a structural unit of NATO *per se*; rather, it is a research-driven think tank that arranges different workshops and conferences, academically and operationally 'tackling' some of the most important topics in the field. For example, in May 2018, the CCDCOE hosted the International Conference on Cyber Conflict, focusing on maximising effects in the cyber domain⁹.

Nevertheless, the *Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations* could be considered, perhaps, the CCDCOE's most noticeable contribution to the academic niche where the Center 'resides'. Written by nineteen prominent international law experts, the volume (available in both paper and electronic copies from Cambridge University Press, 2017) represents "the most comprehensive analysis of how existing international law applies to

⁶ *Diplomaatia*, Nr. 181, October 2018. Available from [<https://diplomaatia.ee/publication/nr-181-oktoober-2018/>].

⁷ 'ICDS Contributes to Development of Cyber and Informational Resilience in Ukraine'. Available from [<https://icds.ee/icds-contributes-to-development-of-cyber-and-informational-resilience-in-ukraine/>].

⁸ 'NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence'. Available from [<https://ccdcoc.org/index.html>].

⁹ 'The 10th CyCon Hosts 700 Cyber Experts in Tallinn'. 30 May 2018. Available from [<https://ccdcoc.org/cycon/content/10th-cycon-hosts-700-cyber-experts-tallinn.html>].

cyberspace”¹⁰. As argued, the book’s analytical approach “rests on the understanding that the pre-cyber era international law applies to cyber operations, both conducted by and directed against states [...], mean[ing] that that cyber events do not occur in a legal vacuum and states both have rights and bear obligations under international law”¹¹.

Political economy

In this particular ‘basket’, there is a range of organisations, which may not necessarily always be described as think tanks. For example, when it comes to the **Estonian Employers’ Confederation** (*Eesti Tööandjate Keskkliit*), discussed at length in the October 2018 economic briefing, it is a lobby-type entity that represents more than 1,500 companies, which employ approximately 11% of the country’s population. However, in our context, it is not about what the organisation is – the main point is about what it actually does. Having issued the *Employer’s Manifesto 2018*, the Confederation ‘acted’ as a conventional think tank, producing a major analytical document for both the Estonian Government and society on the country’s economic development and its perspectives in the nearest future (please, see more on the Manifesto in the October 2018 economic briefing).

On the other side, **Praxis Centre for Policy Studies Foundation** (further – Praxis) is a classic “independent, non-profit, civil initiative think tank [...] [that] deal[s] with socio-economic topics in Central and Eastern Europe”¹². Since its establishment in 2000, Praxis has been able to produce about 500 analytical studies, employing a highly sophisticated range of methods – from impact assessing, modelling and forecasting to case studies, surveys and cost-benefit analysis¹³. For example, one of the Centre’s latest studies – ‘Labour force and

¹⁰ ‘Research’. Available from [<https://ccdcoe.org/research.html>].

¹¹ ‘Research’. Available from [<https://ccdcoe.org/research.html>].

¹² ‘Think Tank’. Available from [<http://www.praxis.ee/en/organisation/think-tank/>].

¹³ ‘What We Do’. Available from [<http://www.praxis.ee/en/what-we-do/>].

skills needs in cyber security’ (2018-19) – aims at determining “the demand and supply of ICT specialists focused on cyber security in private as well as public sector in Estonia”¹⁴. Yet another important analysis – ‘Opportunities and challenges derived from the changing labour market and migration’ (2018-20) – contributes to the process of finding a solution on how to “decrease the tensions derived from the effects of Soviet-era immigration, increasing immigration and societal cohesion”¹⁵ in Estonia. From the Praxis-originated studies that are already finished, ‘Impact assessment of EU-funded transport investments’ (2016-17) could be singled out, because it professionally drew many “lessons and best practices from the planning and implementation stages of previously funded projects to be considered in future transport projects”¹⁶ in the EU.

Societal communication

Having been regularly named among the broader region’s leading think tanks by the *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*¹⁷, the Tartu-based **Institute of Baltic Studies** (IBS) is an internationally recognised non-profit policy research and development think tank that conducts a high-profile research on development of Estonian and regional societies¹⁸. It was established in 1996 and, since then, the IBS has been carrying out many of the EU-funded projects, related to the EU’s 5th, 6th and 7th Framework Programme as well as the European Commission’s flagship initiative Horizon 2020. At present, the IBS, in partnership with the Tallinn University-hosted Civil Society Research and Development Centre and Turu-Uuringute AS, is in the process of conducting a highly anticipated

¹⁴ ‘Labour force and skills needs in cyber security’. Available from [<http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/labour-need-in-cyber-security/>].

¹⁵ ‘Opportunities and challenges derived from the changing labour market and migration’. Available from [<http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/ritamigration/>].

¹⁶ ‘Impact assessment of EU-funded transport investments’. Available from [<http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/impact-assessment-of-eu-funded-transport-investments/>].

¹⁷ ‘Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports. Available from [<https://www.gotothinktank.com/global-goto-think-tank-index/>].

¹⁸ ‘Organisation’. IBS. Available from [<https://www.ibs.ee/en/organisation/>].

evaluation of the Civil Society Development Plan/CSDP 2015-2020¹⁹. This particular project is expected to be finalised by May 2019, and the outcome is planned to be in **a)** mapping “the current situation in Estonian civil society”, **b)** evaluating the impact of the CSDP and **c)** submitting “practical policy recommendation for the 2021-2030 Civil Society Program”. Undoubtedly, it will be one of the main documents, which the new Estonian Government (to be formed after the March 2019 parliamentary elections) will be using in the process of designing its policy on social cohesion in Estonia.

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¹⁹ ‘Evaluation of Civil Society Development Plan 2015-2020’. Available from [<https://www.ibs.ee/en/projects/kodanikuuhiskonna-arengukava-2015-2020-mojude-hindamine/>].