

Think Tanks in Belarus

An overview of history and current situation

All over the world think tanks play an important role in the development, implementation and support of states' foreign and security policy. Germany and the EU, but also, for example, Russia, has seen a wave of new foundations and professionalization in the field of think tanks in recent years. This analytical publication takes the stock of the current and historical situation of think tanks in the Republic of Belarus.

Before we start with the assessment of think tanks in Belarus, we need to establish the definitions to limit the scope of the analysis. This analysis employs the definition of James G. McCann¹ and the term "think tank" is used interchangeably with "analytical center". This broad definition allows capturing the organizations as think tanks primarily based on their function² —

¹ "Public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy. Think tanks may be affiliated or independent institutions that are structured as permanent bodies, not ad hoc commissions. These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policymaking communities and between states and civil society, serving in the public interest as independent voices that translate applied and basic research into a language that is understandable, reliable, and accessible for policy makers and the public". James G. McGann: *The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance*, Brookings Institution Press 2016. Available at: <https://goo.gl/gGqjML>. Last accessed 10.05.2018. S. a. in: 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, James G. McGann, University of Pennsylvania, S. 11. Available at: <https://goo.gl/BXD3Fy>. Last accessed 06.04.2018.

² Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US. James G. McGann, S. 3. Available at:

collection and scientific processing of diverse and extensive foreign and domestic information relevant for the development of sound policy recommendations for public and civil society decision-makers.

Prehistory of the Belarusian think tanks landscape

While in the Western world the fourth wave of establishment of think tanks started about 40 years ago — in the late 1970s³ — the Soviet Union and thus also the immediate predecessor of today's Belarus — the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) — remained largely excluded from that and previous developments. First, the USSR lacked the legal, political, social and economic conditions for the creation of think tanks in the present sense of the term. Secondly, the authoritarian, mostly non-transparent governmental structure based on the one-party system and a unified ideology in a closed society had no use for independent analytical centers, especially those from outside the state apparatus.

The collective mind, in the form of the governing bodies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, omnipresent at all levels of the Soviet society in the form of party committees, was essentially all about the enforcement of central party instructions, often without any advice from third parties. The control system was organized centrally, top-to-bottom. The "brains" on site, i.e., the central committees of the national chapters of CPSU in the former Soviet republics and on the regional levels were mainly responsible for receiving and executing the "cerebral" impulses from Moscow and provided limited feedback. The cadre for this partisan "nervous system" was supplied mainly by the central party schools — a kind of Soviet academies for public administration and po-

<https://goo.gl/CNUCCi>. Last accessed 11.04.2018.

³ Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition. Diane Stone, Central European University, S. 3. Available at: <https://goo.gl/oGrTkM>. Last accessed 30.05.2018.

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litical leadership. Now, the science academies, which existed both at the Soviet Union level and at the level of the republics, could be counted among the Soviet think tanks. At least most of these institutions had their own research facilities in economics, philosophy and history.

Demand for significant policy advice from academia was tightly controlled by the Party, since the state and society had to evolve in accordance with the party's guidelines and ideas. Societal, let alone political plurality was not welcome, rather the other way round. Thus, the Soviet system did not require either state or third-party institutions to provide policy-oriented scientific processing of large amounts of information or the resulting political advice.

In the economic field, there was still the economic research institute "Gosplan" at the central planning authority of the USSR, as well as branches of this institute with the respective planning authorities in the individual Soviet republics. It may, however, be worth to do a special study on to what extent these institutes were even able to provide economic policy advice.

So, for the early period, only the Belarusian Bureau for Scientific and Technical Propaganda, which reported to the Belarusian planning authority — "Gosplan" of the BSSR — would be mentioned as a think tank. Founded in 1950, it was converted in 1968 into the Belarusian Scientific Research Institute for Scientific and Technical Information and Technical and Economic Studies. In this capacity it existed until 1993. However, its tasks⁴ suggest, that it functioned primarily as a scientific-technical library, as well as information and archive service for people's enterprises and the authorities. The only task related to that of a think tank was to summarize the materials collected in the Information Fund of the Institute and to prepare technical-economic surveys on the state and prospects for the development of

the economy⁵ of the Belarusian SSR. The legally stipulated clear specification of the sources of information, the format and the topics of the resulting papers — all followed the logic of the centrally organized planned economy. However, this was far from informed and creative policy advice.

It was only the democratization of politics and the economy, which was initiated in the Soviet Union by Gorbachev's reforms under the motto "glasnost and perestroika", led to the emergence of a more pluralistic society, the dismantling of the Soviet centralized planned economy. Thus, the late 1980s and the early 1990s shaped the necessary conditions for the creation of the think tanks. This soon led to the emergence of numerous independent analytical centers in Belarus. 1990 saw the founding of the Institute of Sociology at the then Academy of Sciences of the BSSR. The Gosplan state research institutes mentioned above also developed towards becoming proper think tanks.

First wave of think tanks in Belarus

In 1991, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic declared itself independent as the Republic of Belarus. The main political goal at the time was to build a democratic society modeled after Western democracies. The political plurality of society acquired tangible features: while the Communist Party was banned, several new parties emerged across the political spectrum. The economy was also in totally uncharted territory for at least three reasons: the central planned economy had been abolished, economic relations in the former Soviet Union and under the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance were challenged almost overnight, and these developments were to be dealt with by a government, which until then had de facto been only an offshoot of the central USSR government. This complexity of the economic and social situation as well as the drastic increase in the volume of information to be processed for decision-making,

⁴ Resolution of the Council of Ministers of BSSR of August 14, 1968 No. 244. Available at: <https://goo.gl/j1rZY4>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

⁵ Resolution of the Council of Ministers of BSSR of August 14, 1968 No. 244. Available at: <https://goo.gl/j1rZY4>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

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already in 1992 led to the emergence of the first independent and civil society-affiliated think tanks.

Thus, in the first half of the 1990s, a very buoyant landscape of think tanks emerged in Belarus with about a dozen organizations. Later, after the first presidential election of 1994, the state leadership began to focus more on state-controlled institutions, thereby reducing the role of independent or civil society-affiliated organizations. In response to this, a total of 16 non-state think tanks merged in 1997 into a "Belarusian Association of Think Tanks" (BATT)⁶.

Some of the foundations of that time remain still leaders in their respective fields, including the Institute for Privatization and Management (founded in 1993) with its numerous start-ups in the economic field or the Lev Sapeha Foundation (1992) in the area of local self-government. Alternatively, other institutions founded in the 1990s had a more difficult time, especially when dealing with socio-political and electoral issues. For example, the sociological research institute *IISEPS — Independent Institute of Social, Economic, and Political Studies* (1992-2016) and the sociological laboratory "NO-VAK" (1992-2010) were virtually barred from operating in the country.

Quite a few Belarusian think tanks also had to cease to exist as registered organizations due to a lack of funding sources: since domestic financing for independent organizations is non-existent and foreign financial assistance is strictly controlled, many institutions often find it impossible to meet the legal requirements for a registered organization, for example, the need to manage staff and office. Other organizations are currently in limbo, often as a virtually empty shell, or have dissolved due to internal reasons. Experts of some of the think tanks founded in the 1990s joined other think tanks or appear in scattered research initiatives and research projects or as individual experts.

⁶ Belarusian Association of Think Tanks. Available at: <https://goo.gl/ZRBoj3>. Last accessed 16.04.2018.

State think tanks after independence

The restoration of more centralized traditions in public administration following the introduction of the position of the president in Belarus in 1994, shaped, for many years to follow, the attitude of the state toward all institutions and initiatives that were not under state control. All the more did this attitude affect the independent and civil society-affiliated think tanks, whose goals and values often did not align with the practices of the government. Nonetheless, the economic and social reality in Belarus in the 1990s was no longer that of the former Soviet Union. Even centralized Belarus was forced, albeit half-heartedly, to implement market-based approaches and to ensure a — although limited — pluralistic society.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the branch of the Economic Research Institute, founded in 1930 by the BSSR Planning Authority, was kept in the form of a state scientific institution called the "Science and Research Institute of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus". After the Institute of Economic founded in 1931 at the National Academy of Sciences it is today arguably the most important government-sponsored economic policy think tank for fundamental and applied research and recommendations in the area of socio-economic policy for the government.

In the field of social policy, in 1993, in parallel with the Sociology Institute at the Academy of Sciences of 1990 based on the Institute for Scientific and Technical Propaganda of the BSSR's planning authority (and its successor institutions)⁷ established in 1950, the government created a government-owned think tank — the "Belarusian Institute for Scientific and Technical Information and Forecast" under the Council of Ministers (Government) of the Republic of Belarus. Already in 1995 it was taken over by the Presidential Administration as "Belarusian Institute for Information and Fore-

⁷ Information and Analysis Center at the President's Administration of Belarus. Available at: <http://iac.gov.by/hist.html>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

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cast". Since 1996, the scientific and technical area of expertise was covered by the subject-specific institutes — a separate "Institute for System Analysis and Information in the Scientific and Technical Field" at the Ministry of Education and, since 1997, the State Committee for Science and Technology. The presidential administration preserved the socio-political branch in the form of an "Institute for Social-Political Studies".

In 2006, the institute was transformed into the "Information and Analysis Center for Presidential Administration" (IAC).⁸ The task of the IAC is, above all, to produce policy recommendations.⁹ It is striking that all IAC leaders, with the exception of the first one, have a military, intelligence or police background. Labouring under the assumption that representatives of these bodies tend to be more involved in law enforcement and the implementation of state decisions, one can't help but wonder, to what extent the IAC can fulfill the tasks of a think tank as defined here and whether it possesses sufficient openness and freedom to speak uncomfortable truth and to take proactive-shaping influence on policy implementation.

In addition to these most prominent facilities, there are also research institutions at several other ministries, such as the Scientific Research Institute for Labor at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs or the Information and Analysis Center at the Ministry of Education. Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has an information and analytical center, comparable to the planning staff at the German Foreign Office. However, these facilities are primarily geared to the operation of the respective regulatory decision-making processes, produce hardly

any publicly accessible deliverables and rarely enter into a public discourse.¹⁰

Deliverables by government think tanks

In general, it should be noted that the results of the government think tanks are largely inaccessible to the public or only available in part. Therefore, neither the quality nor the quantity of the information products of the Belarusian state think tanks for the state decision makers can be directly assessed — which also has all the implications for the statements made here. However, it can generally be assumed that the information products in Belarus differ little from those in other states: policy recommendations in specific areas, analytical leaflets, position statements.¹¹ It is further assumed that these materials are often written from a strong domestic Belarusian perspective. Unlike members of Western think tanks, staff of Belarusian state-owned think tanks are barely systematically involved in international working groups, exchange programs, conferences and teams, as evidenced, among other things, by low level of joint research effort and no public appearances and conference participation. This is where the scene of Belarusian state and state-related think tanks still differs fundamentally from the performance of Russian think tanks.

In addition, specific public works of state think tanks, especially in the socio-political sphere, run the risk of being used for propaganda purposes in Belarus — as elsewhere too. The lack of confidence in the objectivity of some reports¹² persists as long as these

⁸ Edict of the President of Belarus of September 13, 2006. No. 580. Available at: <https://goo.gl/yH85qU>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

⁹ Likvidirovan Institut socialno-politicheskikh issledovanij. Pavel Kirillov. Available at: <https://goo.gl/TkT67W>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

¹⁰ Issledovatel'skiye i analiticheskiye centry. Natalya Ryabava. Available at: <https://goo.gl/VgrwhQ>. Last accessed 17.04.2018.

¹¹ The Role of Think Tanks in Affecting People's Behaviours. Available at: <https://goo.gl/DGe2pA>. Last accessed 17.04.2018.

¹² Volshebstvo sociologii ili IAC shutit. Vasilij Korf. Available at: <https://goo.gl/m8uwmq>. Last accessed 17.04.2018; Chto nasleniye dumayet ob otechestvennoy sisteme gosudarstvennogo upravleniya.

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institutions are largely closed and there is no independent review of methods and deliverables.

With all these very limited insights into the activities of state think tanks, one can still surmise that their facilities, methods, activities, and international connections are still far from those of comparable institutions in the West. Belarusian experts point to the following challenges¹³:

1. Virtually complete absence of initiative from the lower levels of the power system, often no response to policy challenges, and issues being addressed only in crisis phase, manual control overriding development of long-term systematic strategies.
2. Dominance of political and corporate considerations over those of professionalism and competence in decision-making; lack of transparency in the decision-making process not only for the general public, but also for many participants.
3. Information vacuum in individual decision-making, low level of inter-departmental interaction.

This peculiar modus operandi of state think tanks and their low-key role in the decision-making process described above have repeatedly led to occurrence of political issues of major importance, as illustrated, for instance, by the Presidential Decree No.3 "On the prevention of social parasitism" of 2 April 2015, and the mass protests that followed in spring 2017. Originally conceived to be a measure of social justice and to tackle hidden unemployment and shadow economy, this decree was generally so in-

Vasiliy Korf. Available at:
<https://goo.gl/Rrg8nM>. Last accessed 17.04.2018;

Samaya primechatelnaya sociologiya 2012 goda. Ella Nikolaychik. Available at:
<https://goo.gl/u2XoaH>. Last accessed 17.04.2018.

¹³ Prakticheskiye podhody k sozdaniyu centra po razrabotke gosudarstvennoy politiki na urovne nacionalnogo pravitelstva. A.Filippov, V. Andriyenko. Available at:
<https://goo.gl/vgqKf7>. Last accessed 16.04.2018.

consistent and out of tune that it drove people to the streets and ended up withdrawn. Also, the successor document — Decree No.1 "On Employment Promotion" of 25 January 2018, which was drafted with the participation of all concerned Ministries and Authorities, but with no inputs from the general public and independent experts and think tanks, seems to be facing similar challenges.

Staffing of state think tanks

According to all the information available, the selection of cadre for a state think tanks is — as is typical elsewhere in — done with special regard to loyalty and often also personal relationships. Not only this, but also the generally small number of experts in the country prevents, for instance, effective inclusion of independent expertise. Also, the dependence on state funding limits the income generating potential for the invited professionals. For example, a broad initiative of the Information and Analysis Center, supported by two Belarusian universities, to promote young analysts for the public sector¹⁴ under the name "Umnyje Seti" (Smart Networks) in 2012-2015, was able to attract around 180 applications from potential young professionals. However, only twelve alumni of the initiative chose to work in public administration. The extent to which this job placement was linked to participation in the initiative¹⁵ and whether the young people were also employed as analysts for a long time was not reported.

There is also a lack of active staff exchanges between the politics and the civil service on the one hand and the analytical centers on the other. This prevents the necessary interaction between science and practice and restricts the flow of information required for the normal work of the think tanks, which in case of state-run think tanks

¹⁴ Umnyje Seti. Wikipedia.org. Available at:
<https://goo.gl/vLCRZV>. Last accessed 17.04.

¹⁵ Derbin: Projekt „Umnyje Seti“ – primer khorosho vystroyennoj raboty s molodymi intellektualami. Belta. Available at:
<https://goo.gl/pSf3xi>. Last accessed 17.04.2018.

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is also limited due to regulatory competition.

**Government-affiliated think tanks:
structures, staff, results**

The government-affiliated think tanks in Belarus may include individual research institutes of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as analytical centers at Belarusian universities.

In the 1990s, the Academy of Sciences with its research institutes didn't quite fit in the centralized system of governance in Belarus as a think tank. First, it was focused on fundamental research rather than applied analysis and policy advice. Second, it was relatively autonomous until 2001 and was even allowed to elect its own leadership. Among other things, this meant long (roundabout) way for the state to place orders. Trust towards a semi-independent scientific institution also seemed to be a problem for the newly-established administrative system, now called the "Presidential Vertical," which guaranteed the direct intervention of the President down to the lowest level.

The Academy is comprised of a number of scientific research organizations that cover virtually every area of modern knowledge.¹⁶ In the field of humanities, the Sociology Institute mentioned above, as well as the Institute of Economics and the Institute of History deserve special mention. The first two claim to be the institutions that elaborate, among other things, recommendations for the application of their results.

The Institute of Economics at the Academy of Sciences employs about 100 researchers and develops practical proposals for the Belarusian authorities on various practical aspects of social and economic policy¹⁷. The Sociology Institute with the scientific staff of 66 produces analytical materials based on

¹⁶ National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Available at: <https://goo.gl/QJdZMq>. Last accessed 19.04.2018.

¹⁷ The Institute of Economics. Available at: <http://economics.basnet.by/en>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

the conducted studies¹⁸, the list of its clients includes, besides the government offices, also companies — these are probably state-owned enterprises.

The Institute of History, also with about 100 fellows, popularizes its own results and disseminates scientific historical information among the general public.¹⁹ There are two separate centers at the History Institute dedicated to the history of geopolitics and the international relations.

The public outreach of these research institutions is relatively modest. The Institute of Sociology publishes a Sociological Yearbook and lists individual data and study results in the section "Analytics" on its website.²⁰ It should be noted that the Institute of Sociology, in addition to a few other government-affiliated analytical centers, holds the monopoly in the field of sociological policy-related research. This undermines the verifiability of the respective results from the institute.

In 2003, a quasi-independent think tank EcooM with nine permanent employees was founded at the Academy of Sciences, which, among other things, also makes political advice. EcooM also engages external experts to implement larger projects. Although at least one representative of EcooM occasionally appears in the media as a commentator on the situation in Belarus, no public results of the EcooM from recent years are available. It turns out that, as in cases of many civic institutions, these institutions are often really one man shows.

The accessible publications of the Institute of Economics are more extensive than those of the Sociology Institute, they include current topics and contain elements of policy advice. The Institute runs a series of semi-

¹⁸ Sociology Institute. Available at: <https://goo.gl/yrNPFy>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

¹⁹ History Institute. Available at: <https://goo.gl/ZVvfNR>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

²⁰ Sociology Institute. Available at: <http://socio.bas-net.by/informatsiya/blog/>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

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nars, round tables and conferences, including those with international participation, on current economic policy issues. The self-portrayal²¹ of the institute leaves the impression of a potent analytical center that can successfully advise not only the government but also the economy.

The Institute of History has recently gained political science edge in addition to the historical-archaeological expertise, e.g. in the form of conferences. However, the results are only advertised on the website of the institute and not presented in full. The state uses the political science expertise of the Institute internally. For example, the Institute recently provided an opinion to the Presidential Administration on the importance of founding the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918 for the development of the modern independent Belarusian state.²² At present, several nationally-oriented scientists are employed by the institute, which ensures a Belarus-centered pro-European position of the institute. This, in turn, gives rise to critical voices from individual members of the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences, who see Belarus as an indispensable part of Eurasia.²³

In 2017, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Academy of Sciences entered into a cooperation agreement, according to which the Academy should assume the role of foreign affairs think tank for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁴

Nevertheless, the influence of the Academy on politics and society seems rather limited. For example, in December 2017 a strategy "Science and Technology: 2018-2040"²⁵ was

²¹ The Institute of Economics. Available at: <http://economics.basnet.by/en>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

²² President's Administration. Nasha Niva. Available at: <https://goo.gl/d6kvqw>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

²³ Philosophy Institute Researcher. Available at: <https://goo.gl/u8iH6T>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

²⁴ NAN Belarus i MID RB podpishut soglashenie. Available at: <https://goo.gl/LpE2ET>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

²⁵ Intellektuelles Belarus 2040. Available at: <https://goo.gl/g74yna>. Last accessed 20.04.2018.

presented by the Academy of Sciences, representing a vision for the future of "intellectual Belarus", but it is not properly anchored in any government documents.²⁶

On the other hand, among many institutions of the National Academy, there is a "Center for Systemic Analysis and Strategic Studies"²⁷ with a staff of 25, who act as a link between the Academy and government agencies and should keep the latter informed about the research results of the academic institutes.²⁸

Among the government-affiliated think-tanks at the Belarusian universities, the Center for Sociological and Political Studies²⁹ at the Belarusian State University deserves special mention. The center was founded in 1996 on the basis of a sociological studies laboratory at the BSU dating back to 1967 and currently employs 15 people. The center is internationally networked, participated in several foreign and international projects. Even after the introduction of the licensing requirement for the sociological studies, the center was allowed to retain its interviewer network and continue sociological surveys. As an institution at a state university, the center has to maintain a degree of loyalty to the state in political studies and in presenting the results. However, the performance of the institute is relatively modest. Judging from the website, the center discontinued its activities in 2013³⁰, although the director, Prof. Dr. Da-

²⁶ Intellektuelles Belarus 2040. Länderbericht des Auslandsbüros Belarus der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Available at: <http://www.kas.de/belarus/de/publications/51378/>. Last accessed 18.06.2018

²⁷ Systemic Analysis Center. Available at: <http://center.basnet.by/>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

²⁸ Analiticheskiye Centry Belarusi. M.Laumulin. Available at: <https://goo.gl/XNqdUY>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

²⁹ Centre for social and political information. Available at: <https://goo.gl/NNrUf8>. Last accessed 23.04.2018.

³⁰ BSU. Center for Sociological and Political Research. Available at: <https://goo.gl/6DyYxr> und <https://goo.gl/HvaJxV>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

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vid Rotman openly makes public statements as an expert.³¹

Another think tank-like institution at the Belarusian State University — Center for International Studies (founded in 2000 with five employees)³² — has a page on the website of the Faculty of International Relations, where it also mentions its task of producing recommendations for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries of the Republic of Belarus in the field of foreign affairs and foreign trade and also describes in detail methods for communicating its results. On the website of the center, however, publications can only be found until 2015. In addition, the public outreach of the institute is unclear. The Institute does not seem to be performing its declared mission of foreign policy and economic advice to state institutions. An indication of this is the above conclusion of a cooperation agreement between the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Academy of Sciences. In view of the staffing capacities of the university centers compared to the Academy of Sciences, this decision by the Ministry seems anticipated.

The Foreign Policy and Security Research Center, which is also a part of the Belarusian State University, represents a new foundation.³³ The institution, which was founded in 2008, conducts research in the area of foreign and security policy with 15 university lecturers and members of the academy. The main communication vehicle for the Center's results are seminars and conferences. In terms of its structure, the center resembles a more or less loose community of interests of scientists, which

³¹ David Rotman: "Stabilizacionniy period v razvitiy Belarusi zakanchivaetsia". Available at: <https://goo.gl/cX9DKn>. Last accessed 10.05.2018; Parlamenskije vybory 2016 goda v Belarusi. Available at: <https://goo.gl/DW7CKL>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

³² Centre for International Studies. Available at: <https://goo.gl/k6Wj32>. Last accessed 10.05.2018; Centre for International Studies. Available at: <https://goo.gl/3A8UfC>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

³³ Foreign Policy and Security Research Center. Available at: <http://forsecurity.org/>. Last accessed 10.05.2018.

is organizationally bound to the Faculty of International Relations at the Belarusian State University.

No other think tanks at other Belarusian universities could be identified in the social, economic or political sphere.

Divergence of analytical centers and second wave of founding think tanks in Belarus

The second half of the 1990s, in parallel with strengthening of the presidential power vertical, saw an overall decline in the visibility of independent think tanks in Belarus. In the early to mid-1990s, independent think tanks working in the areas of democracy, the market economy and civil society development were still often cooperating with state structures, but in the second half of the 1990s, this cooperation almost completely ended. Since then, state and independent think tanks in Belarus have led a largely separate and parallel existence with little exchange.

By the mid-2000s, the landscape of independent think tanks had also shrunk significantly. It was particularly hard for the independent analytical centers that researched public opinion on political issues. In 2002, the government introduced a mandatory accreditation for public opinion polls.³⁴ As a result, independent sociological institutes no longer had the chance to conduct free policy-based opinion polls. However, from time to time results of public opinion surveys are also presented via the *Belarusian Analytical Workroom*,³⁵ with the data being collected via remote surveying, according to the Institute. The registration of the above-mentioned umbrella organization of independent think tanks "BATT", as well as sev-

³⁴ Resolution of Council of Ministers of Belarus from 31.05.2002 No. 707. Available at: <https://goo.gl/cL93UF>. Last accessed on 24.04.2018.

³⁵ Analiticheskaya Masterskaya War-domatskogo. Available at: <https://goo.gl/dDmA9F>. Last accessed on 24.04.2018.

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eral of its member organizations, was withdrawn in 2006 as well.³⁶

Recent Belarusian think tank start-ups include the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS)³⁷, registered in Vilnius in 2007, whose activities clearly relate to Belarus. The work results of the institute are publicly visible, many analyzes are regularly published in series. An important communication instrument of the BISS was a major international annual conference in Belarus with high-profile experts from abroad, which also included Belarusian government representatives in the first phase of political liberalization in Belarus 2008-2010. From 2013 to 2017, BISS implemented the largest civil society project "Reforum"³⁸ to date to develop modernization proposals for Belarus.

By far the most visible and most active think tank on foreign and security issues in Belarus is the Discussion Community "The Liberal Club". It was created in 2007 as a dialogue platform for younger experts and was registered as an organization in 2009. In 2015, with support from the Belarusian Foreign Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and other organizations, the club launched the *Minsk Dialogue Initiative*, which has already held around a dozen seminars and high-profile international conferences on Belarus' and the region's current foreign policy issues. The members of the *Minsk Dialogue Initiative* regularly present their issues in Belarusian and international media. The Initiative is almost the only organization of its kind which regularly publishes analytical papers on the Internet. The organization has also held several discussions and conferences on Belarus outside the country's borders.

³⁶ Likvidirovany „Belarusskije Fabriki Mysli". Available at: <https://goo.gl/97d3Sq>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

³⁷ Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Available at: <https://goo.gl/RVdzBm>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

³⁸ "Reforum": Itogi. Available at: <https://goo.gl/UKcC74>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

Also, since the mid-2000s, the Belarusian *Public Policy Fund*³⁹ has been operational with support from the Slovak Pontis Foundation. The aim is to support public policy in the country. For this purpose several grants for young Belarusian researchers on strategic policy issues have been provided by 2015. This enabled public political dialogue and, among other things, promoted a second wave of grassroots independent think tanks that started in the late 2000s.

Thus, in 2010, three Belarusian independent analytical centers were registered, in 2011 another three, followed in 2012 by six registrations. In the following years it cooled down to one new think tank per year. Thus, by 2015, fifteen new independent think tanks have sprung up in Belarus. Ten of these organizations were registered in Belarus and five abroad.⁴⁰ Among the significant start-ups are: *BEROC*, *Ostrogorski Center*, *Strategicheskaya Mysl (Strategic Thought)*, *IDSM BEE*, *Belarus Security Blog*, *Center for European Transformation*, *Center for Strategic and Foreign Studies* and the *Bologna Committee*. The Institute for Political Studies "Palitychnaja Sfera"⁴¹ deserves a special mention. In addition to a regular political and social science publication "Belarusian Political Science Review"⁴² in English and Belarusian, the Belarusian think tank founded in 2009 in Lithuania provided with its annual Belarus researchers congresses⁴³ the only inclusive discussion platform, especially in the ice age of Belarus-Western relations

³⁹ Belarus Public Policy Fund. Available at: <http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/belarus-en>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴⁰ Analiticheskiye Centry Belarusi. M.Laumulin. Available at: <https://goo.gl/NWhKyf>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴¹ Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere". Available at: <https://goo.gl/YrQKir>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴² Belarusian Political Science Review. Available at: <http://bpsreview.palityka.org/>. Last accessed 30.05.2018.

⁴³ International Congress of Belarusian Studies. Available at: <http://icbs.palityka.org/en/>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

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2011-2015. Results of the congressional discussions are also published.⁴⁴

The coordination and support of the analytical centers in Belarus since 2012 was also driven by the *Belarus Research Council* (BRC) initiated by PACT, which was substantially funded by the US.⁴⁵ The total number of civil society organizations in Belarus today with specific analytical functions in their profile can be estimated at around 40. After all, BRC brings together 42 organizations.⁴⁶ However, if we take a look at the results of the Belarusian think tank's ranking compiled by the BRC for the first time in 2014 as a source of information, the number of think tanks appears to go down more than two-fold — to 18 organizations.⁴⁷ This is broadly in line with the *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* from 2016 and 2017. In both cases, 21 think tanks were identified in Belarus.⁴⁸ In the 2015 report, there were only twelve. The second BRC ranking of the Belarusian think tanks presented in October 2016 contained only 14 organizations⁴⁹. The large difference between the two rankings can be explained by the different methodology: the GGTTT index is created by the nomination of the think tanks by experts, while in the BRC ranking the organizations submit the required data themselves to the jury.

⁴⁴ Working Papers of the First International Congress of Belarusian Studies. Available at: <https://goo.gl/XTD5Rt>. Last accessed 30.05.2018.

⁴⁵ Belarus Research Council. Available at: <https://thinktanks.by/podderzhka-brc/>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴⁶ BRC Stakeholders. Available at: <http://www.eesc.lt/brc-stakeholders.html>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴⁷ Rejting issledovatel'skih centrov Belarusi. Available at: <https://goo.gl/YDQef3>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴⁸ 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report 2017. Available at: <https://goo.gl/brnjV4>. Last accessed 24.04.2018; 2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report. Available at: <https://goo.gl/Ugqpyc>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

⁴⁹ BRC predstavil rejting issledovatel'skih centrov Belarus. Available at: <https://goo.gl/WZ9L7j>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

Political stand

Most Belarusian independent think tanks are pro-European. Apart from the widespread "one-man centers", only two analytical centers see the opportunities for Belarus only in the Eurasian Economic Union together with Russia: "Cytadel" and a community of experts around the initiative "Imho-Club". Interestingly enough, there are no pro-Russian think tanks in Belarus that would openly challenge Belarus' right to independence and state sovereignty. In this regard, the Belarusian state, with trials and criminal judgments passed in respect of three Belarusian contributors to Russian nationalist websites at the end of 2017, sent a clear signal and drew a line for the integration rhetoric of these analysts.⁵⁰ However, this approach by the Belarusian judiciary seems not to have put a stop to attempts to build a stronger pro-Russian lobby even among analytical centers in Belarus. As early as May 2018, journalists uncovered a developing network of regional Belarusian news websites⁵¹, which are registered anonymously in Russia. The news items adopted from other media are supplemented here by anti-Belarusian and anti-Western "analyses".

It should also be stressed that there are virtually no political party-led or otherwise partisan think tanks in Belarus. This is mainly due to the fact that the political system in Belarus is not party-based. Although IDSM-BEE can be classified as a party-affiliated organization with research capacity, and the Party of Power, Belaya Rus, which is not registered as a party, has an analysis center. These deficits are problematic not only from the point of view of promoting democracy — Belarusian foreign, security and economic policy is also cut off from a whole range of influence and contact opportunities abroad due to the absence of political party think tanks.

⁵⁰ Sud nad avtorami Regnuma. Elena Tolkachova. Available at: <https://goo.gl/SfgMnQ>. Last accessed 30.05.2018.

⁵¹ Kak Rossiya sozdayot v Belarusi regionalniye sayti. Nasha Niva. Available at: <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=207674&lang=ru>. Last accessed 1.06.2018.

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The following can be seen as the current trends⁵², that are typical for the independent think tanks in the Republic of Belarus today:

- Attempts to legalize their activities in Belarus. Both the "survivors" from the first wave of founding and the start-ups were able to adapt to the existing living and working conditions in Belarus.
- Growing demand for the expertise of the independent analytical centers — on the part of the opposition political forces — mostly dependent on political (election) cycles, but also on the part of the independent media. Today, reports on virtually every issue are commented on by independent analysts in Belarus-based independent mass media. However, these comments hardly serve as sources of revenue for the experts.
- Narrow specialization of the independent think tanks with regard to the covered topics and expansion of the range of such topics. The most important of these are: economic policy, foreign and security policy and political science. In many policy areas, however, there are still no dedicated think tanks.
- Search for common interests and positions of the state and the independent analytical centers in individual areas. There is a certain willingness to cooperate on both sides on this matter.
- Growing intensity of communication between the independent think tanks and the policy makers. This is especially possible in areas that at least do not directly affect the domestic political order in Belarus. One example in the field of economic policy is the Kastrychnicki Ekanamichny Forum (Kastrychnitski Economic Forum), which has been held annually since 2013 by the Research Center of the Institute for Privatization and Manage-

ment — here the exchanges between individual independent think tanks and state economic authorities have never stopped even during the domestic ice age.

Summary

The development of think tanks in the Republic of Belarus has experienced several ups and downs since independence in 1991. So far, this development has led to the emergence of two larger groups of think tanks — the state or government-affiliated on the one hand, and the independent or civil society-affiliated one on the other. Often, these think tanks differ significantly in their funding mechanisms, objectives, outfits, target groups, values, and ways of working. Attempts by independent think tanks to identify and serve common interests of civil society and the state have so far, apart from some instances in the 1990s, been sporadic and almost exclusively possible during the stages of political liberalization and rapprochement of the Belarusian leadership with the West and yielded modest successes. The state or government-affiliated think tanks mostly act according to strict top-down guidelines. Their visibility is extremely limited not only for the Belarusian public, but also internationally.

At present, the landscape of think tanks in Belarus seems to be stable both quantitatively and qualitatively. The absence of think tanks on many policy areas was pointed out. The emergence of new think tanks in the independent segment is currently unlikely, especially for financial reasons. There are still virtually no government funding sources for independent think tanks.⁵³ Also, the foreign financing of civil society activities will hardly increase in the short and medium term — especially since in recent years a number of international donors have quite clearly outlined their involvement in Belarus. Precisely because of these financial challenges, stronger cooper-

⁵² Issledovatelskiye i analiticheskiye centry. Natalya Ryabava. Available at: <https://goo.gl/XV6pXP>. Last accessed 17.04.2018.

⁵³ Nauchnyye i issledovatelskije obshchestvennyye organizatsii. Available at: <https://goo.gl/6AxSc8>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.

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ation should make sense — with joint financing of the activities or sharing of existing resources. This may result in a reduction in the number of activities, possibly accompanied by an increase in quality of the output. It can be assumed that the larger centers will continue to professionalize. Given the steadily increasing demand from independent media for expert commentary, the media communication by independent think tanks is likely to increase further. Against this backdrop, the demand from the state media for analytical products of the government-affiliated and state think tanks will increase.

The major differences that currently exist between the two larger groups of think tanks — state and government-affiliated on the one hand, and independent or civil-society-affiliated ones on the other — are likely to remain in terms of human resources, procurement, funding and loyalty to the government.

However, as far as the current domestic political liberalization trend preserves, there is more common ground appearing between the independent analytical centers on the one hand and state or government-affiliated think tanks and state decision-makers on the other. This also increases the influence of independent think tanks on the decision-making processes in individual areas of common interests. Foreign and security policy is currently the most promising topic. The idea of incorporating the expertise of the analytical centers is now supported by the head of the Belarusian state.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Lukashenko vystupajet za vyrabotku. BelTA. Available at: <https://goo.gl/AbDyJj>. Last accessed 24.04.2018.