

# MOLDOVAN THINK TANKS: AIMING FOR INCREASED INFLUENCE OVER THE POLICY PROCESS

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## **Abstract**

As think tanks' role is to improve policy making, this thesis is researching the role Moldovan think tanks play on the domestic policy arena. The proxies to think tanks' power to influence the policy making process are used to analyze the Moldovan market for policy analysis and research. The need for high quality policy advice that Moldovan think tanks are capable to provide clashes with the clear lack of government openness. The thesis shows opportunities Moldovan think tanks could capitalize on to have increased influence on the government.

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## INTRODUCTION

Specialized literature suggests that think tanks' role is primarily to improve governments' decision making process on most stringent social, economic and political issues through policy advice based on research and analysis (Struyk 1999; Stone and Denham 2004). The purpose of this thesis is the research of the state of Moldovan think tanks from the perspective of their influence on the government. The hypothesis is that at present Moldovan think tanks have almost no direct influence on the government. This is due to the opportunities think tanks could capitalize on but do not on one hand, and to certain circumstances such as political environment and/or preferences of financing/donor organizations on the other.

In Moldova, the first think tank appeared only in summer of 1993 – two years after Moldova declared its independence in 1991 and after Moldova and Russia signed the cease-fire agreement on Transnistrian armed conflict. It is estimated that up to 100 think tanks have registered till present. This figure does not represent the real state of things on the Moldovan market for policy ideas and research<sup>1</sup> as most of them are not active. Still, the active ones play a role in the social and political processes in Moldova (Eurasian Home).

The Moldovan think tanks subject to research of this thesis conform to the Anglo-Saxon definition of think tanks. I use the strict definition and, therefore, am excluding other entities that may be otherwise considered think tanks. The working definition for the purposes of my thesis is that think tanks are “nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations that generate policy oriented research, ideas, analysis, and formulations and recommendations on domestic and international issues” (Day 2000, p. 103).

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<sup>1</sup> Later referred to as “think tank market”.

The contribution of this thesis is to provide greater empirical understanding of the think tanks phenomenon by addressing the Moldovan case which has not yet been done<sup>2</sup>. While the thesis recognizes some of the theoretical debates, it is primarily an empirical study. The research relies mainly on qualitative research methods. The central research question of the dissertation is: What – if anything – should be changed on the Moldovan think tank arena for the Moldovan think tanks to have greater direct influence on the government? The timeframe of my analysis is 2001-2009, years during which the Party of Communists from the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) held the political power in Moldova. Note that this thesis was conceived and written before the July 29 early elections, which are about to bring considerable political change.

My research is based on information gathered generally from three sources: CEU library, Internet, and interviews<sup>3</sup>. The analytical framework is drawn from the literature available at CEU library. The case study is based on information available on the Internet as well as gathered from interviews with leaders of Moldovan think tanks and third parties that are mainly consumers of think tank products. I heavily rely on Internet and interviews, as information needed for this thesis is scarce. The great deal of non-transparency with Moldovan government bodies and think tanks also hindered this research.

The first chapter identifies the theoretical framework, and thus criteria for explaining and assessing how and why think tanks have or do not have influence with governments. This

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<sup>2</sup> Limited in time and resources, my research does not cover the Moldovan separatist region Transnistria.

<sup>3</sup> I conducted 9 interviews during the first half of June 2009. All except one interview transcripts are in Romanian. Transcripts can be made available only upon request and with the written permission of the interviewee.

chapter contains two sections: first, on the debate and second, on the sources of think tanks' power to influence public policy.

Comprising of three sections, the second chapter aims to provide historical and contextual understanding of think tanks' development in the Republic of Moldova. First I provide a general overview of the think tank market in Moldova; second and third focus on the legal and political environments respectively. Without a general overview provided first, the later analysis would lack context.

The third chapter continues with the case study discussion of the proxies/sources to/of think tank influence as outlined in the theoretical chapter. Once the third chapter is over, I believe the information provided will be sufficient to draw conclusions on the power of Moldovan think tanks to influence the domestic policy process.

In the concluding chapter I give an overall appreciation of the state of the Moldovan think tanks sector. I also bring a list of suggestions, addressed to think tanks, on changes in practices that could potentially enhance the influence they have on public policy.





# **CHAPTER 1: THINK TANKS' POWER TO INFLUENCE. THEORETICAL STANDPOINT**

## **1.1. THE DEBATE**

In specialized literature one can generally find statements that think tanks do have influence and impact on policy decisions, however, without further explanation. “Determining the extent to which a think tank or group of think tanks influenced a particular policy decision remains a daunting methodological task” (Abelson and Lindquist 2000, p. 58; also Day 2000; also Abelson 2004). This means that the influence and impact of think tanks in the policy making process cannot be measured in absolute terms. In addition, it is almost impossible to establish a clear causal link between the activity of think tanks and policy decisions.

However, this does not mean that the matter of influence cannot be explored in a meaningful way. Given such broad organizational and ideational diversity, the analysis of power, influence and the effects of think tanks cannot be based on a strict set of criteria or rigid methodology. An approach with consideration given to complexity and interdependence, characteristic to the think tank hosting political and social environment, seems to be the most appropriate.

According to Stone (2004) think tanks may be analyzed from the perspective of two broad schools (p. 1). The main representatives of one of the schools are Weaver, McGann and Smith. This school is primarily focused on explaining the emergence and influence of think tanks. These explanations are drawn from analysis of organizational forms of think tanks (Stone 2004, p. 2). According to this school, the success of a think tank should be measured

in terms of organizational structure, management practices, sources of funding and their target audiences (Stone 2004, p. 2, also Abelson and Lindquist 2000). Used as proxies, a positive relationship between organizational structure, management practices, sources of funding and target audiences of think tanks on one hand and their influence on the policy arena on the other hand is implied.

From the perspective of the second school, the analysis of think tanks should primarily focus on ideas and expertise think tanks generate and the impact they have on the public policy decision-making process (Stone 2004, p. 2). In other words, this second school is focused on the policy influence and political impact of think tanks. Having as a starting point the fact that ideas matter, Stone continues, the role and influence of think tanks is explained from the perspective of windows of opportunity that appear as a result of changes identified in the architecture and functions of the state (p. 2). ‘Policy community’, ‘advocacy coalitions’ and ‘epistemic communities’ are the network approaches most often employed by the scholars of this school for their analysis of think tanks (p. 2).

Drawing from both schools, the influence of think tanks on the policy making process may be regarded in two distinctive ways. In a narrow sense, influence of a think tank may be regarded as direct impact of one or another think tank on one or another policy decision. In a broad sense, the influence of a think tank may be regarded as its power to shape opinions and consensus on issues of public concern (Stone 1996 cited in Krastev 2000, p. 284).

With a focus on influence rather than schools of analysis of think tanks, I shall outline the main proxies the analysis of which will bring us close to understanding the sources of power of think tanks as well as the degree of influence think tanks have on the policy arena within a state. Hence, I will provide a blend of elements that point to the influence of think tanks. This

mix of elements will be drawn from both schools without trying to distinguish between them, as for the purpose of my thesis the two schools are highly complementary. Once outlined, the proxies to think tanks influence will be used to analyze the influence of think tanks in the Republic of Moldova.

## **1.2. SOURCES OF THINK TANKS' POWER TO INFLUENCE**

### ***Legal and political environment***

Think tanks' influence directly depends on the type of political system, which implies a certain legal framework. Both are fundamental components of the environment in which think tanks operate. With reference to the political system, in countries where the executive and legislative powers are separated the demand for policy advice – and hence the influence of think tanks – is more likely to be high. This is because separation of powers in the state provides for “[...] many possible sources of policy formulation that have a chance of having their ideas adopted [...]” (Abelson and Lindquist 2000, p. 57). By contrast, in countries where the “government is likely to rely on departments and forego other sources of policy advice” (Abelson and Lindquist 2000, p. 57) such as functional substitutes for think tanks – which are mainly temporary bodies created and controlled by government – the demand for think tanks and hence their influence is lower.

From a different perspective, often policy research findings of think tanks are critical of the government in power. This implicitly means that in less democratic or/and pluralist political systems the dissemination of think tank products and thus their influence is subject to overt political constraints. Moreover, according to Kimball (2000),

*“[...] central and eastern Europe's think tanks everywhere must navigate through an immature legislative environment, fraught with complex formulas for determining tax exempt status and unclear ideas on what constitute publicly beneficial organizations” (p. 261).*

This way, think tanks' ability to disseminate their policy research findings and thus impact the public policy arena is also constrained, however indirectly, by various legal frameworks (see also Day 2000). Hence, the influence of think tanks is augmented or decreased by specific legislation regulating the activity and taxation of not-for-profit organizations – some public policy activities might be not allowed by law. In Moldova, as it will become clear later in this thesis, the influence of think tanks is constrained by the authoritarian type political system; while the legal framework regulating the activity of Moldovan think tanks is considered to be rather think tank friendly.

Think tanks' power to influence increases and thus think tanks are “more successful in engaging constructively with officials when the latter need assistance in carrying out tasks the bureaucracy can not itself perform” (Parmar 2004, p. 27). Essentially the influence of think tanks grows when the state needs assistance from outside its governmental bodies. From this perspective, the Moldovan think tanks reached the peak of their influence during the elaboration stage of the policy process (2003-2005) as the government lacked policy formulation capacity. Once the major national policies were elaborated, the direct involvement of Moldovan think tanks with the rest of the policy process was reduced to almost none. In this respect, the evidence presented in chapter 2 section 3 shows a sinuous dynamics of the government-think tanks cooperation.

### ***Strategies***

The influence of think tanks may also be regarded in terms of strategies they employ. In the words of Abelson and Lindquist (2000), “what distinguishes one think tank from another, in addition to the nature of the outputs produced, are the values and priorities they assign to performing particular functions” (p. 56). In this order of ideas, strategies of think tanks vary

depending on their primary target groups. Thus, some think tanks focus their efforts primarily on research institutes and universities on both the national and international levels; others on members, caucuses and committees of the state's legislative body; others on bureaucracies of the state's executive branch. This enumeration is not exhaustive as think tanks may also target individual political parties, mass media, private companies, trade unions and non-governmental organizations (for a discussion on strategies of, for example, German think tanks see Thunert 2004, p. 83).

Abelson (2004) distinguishes two sets of strategies think tanks adopt. A set of strategies used to gain public influence, another – to gain private influence. Examples of public influence strategies, Abelson continues, would be: organizing public forums and conferences to discuss various domestic and foreign policy issues; public lectures; publishing op-eds and articles in influential newspapers; creating web pages on the internet, publishing opinion magazines, newsletters, policy briefs and journals that have wide distribution (pp. 226-227). On the other hand, part of private influence strategies of think tanks would be accepting positions in government, offering former policy-makers positions at think tanks, maintaining direct ties with policy-makers (pp. 228-229). Analysis of the specific strategy or mix of strategies employed by one or another think tank will bring us closer to understanding the role the think tank plays in the policy process.

With reference to Moldova, the analysis of data gathered during fieldwork as well as available on Internet points to the fact that the strategies think tanks employ are reactive. In other words think tank strategies change depending on government's attitudes. This point is discussed in chapter 3 section 1.

### *Size*

The degree of influence and impact of a think tank may also be perceived as function of its size. Size of a think tank means both the size of its budget and the size of its organizational structure involving premises and staff. In simple terms, a think tank's budget is the reward for its hard work and relevance to those interested in think tank products. Static analysis of a think tank's budget does not say much. However, if regarded in dynamics over a reasonable period of time, the fluctuations of budget size may reveal the degree of relevance a think tank had at certain periods in time.

Bigger budget means better research premises and better qualified staff. In line with this, Abelson and Lindquist (2000) rightly point to the fact that “[...] a critical mass of scholars at any one institution is not necessarily a precondition for providing expertise” (Abelson and Lindquist 2000, p. 51). However, a think tank that can afford a greater number and better qualified research staff is more likely to have greater impact on policy-making than a poorly endowed one. In this order of ideas, the size of the budget and organizational structure is equated with visibility. The latter, in its turn, speaks about the authority of one or another think tank and the ability to impact policy decisions. The case study will highlight that Moldovan think tanks are paid to influence.

### ***Geographical location***

Essential to effective operation is also the physical presence of think tanks close to the seat of government (Day 2000, p. 130). In countries with federal or regional systems of government a greater number of think tanks are likely to be found in cities other than the capital (see the example of Germany, Spain and USA). However in most countries, they are generally concentrated in the capital city (for a discussion see Day 2000). Thus, it can be assumed that think tanks that are established in the capital cities are more influential and powerful than those in non-capital cities. This assumption is based on indeed greater possibilities for think

tanks located close to political and social centers for formal and informal networking. Moldova is de facto a highly centralized state. No think tanks or think tank branches were identified outside the capital city.

### ***Personal relationships***

Relationships with members of parliament, government officials and ministries also reveal the degree of a think tank's power to influence public policies. Krastev (2000, p. 289) argues that aside from expertise in a particular policy field and thorough knowledge of the country's policy process, the source of think tank's influence derives from access to elite policy communities and government policy-makers.

If Krastev is right then evaluation of think tanks should also comprise references to personal connections of think tank staff with the representatives of power in the state. However, the lack of personal ties with government officials must not be regarded as indicator of diminished think tank influence. In cases where governments are hostile to think tanks, the latter draw their influence on the policy decisions from sources alternative to personal connections with government. Examples of alternative sources would be the influence think tanks exercise through numerous appearances and debates in media, this way shaping public opinion and hence exercising public pressure on government decision-makers. Alternatively or complementarily, by briefing different international organizations present in the country, think tanks are able to build international pressure on the local policy making process. Hence, personal ties of think tanks with those in power as a measure of think tank influence must be regarded in a broader context of think tanks' complex environment.

Further in this thesis evidence will be brought to show that despite a generally unfriendly political environment, Moldovan think tanks have overall good personal and professional

relationships with the government decision-makers. Both clearly understand that cooperation is mutually beneficial. Decision-makers receive expertise and consultancy. Think tanks get access to data and ability to influence the policy process.

### ***Media attention***

The degree of influence of one or another think tank is perceived on the grounds of media attention one or another think tank is given: “[...] a think tank’s influence on the policy making process depends partially on its cultivation of a brand name that leads to familiarity and acceptance by donors, policy makers, and opinion leaders” (McGunn and Weaver 2000, p. 23). Hence, the more media attention a think tank has, the more influence and impact it exerts. However, Kimball (2000) suggests differentiating between making media appearances and making, what he calls, “meaningful media appearances” (p. 168).

The idea is that often think tanks “take any opportunity to appear in the media, often discussing issues in which they lack solid expertise, providing general rather than concrete analyses. Numerous appearances may make the think tank a household name, but do little for developing a strong institutional identity or credibility” (Kimball 2000, p. 168). Hence, appearance in the media of think tank experts on issues outside their immediate expertise works counterproductive for the think tank’s image. The Moldovan case reveals a somewhat different attitude think tanks have toward their media appearances. In Chapter 3, section 5 it will be revealed that media appearances are not regarded as an indicator of one or another think tank’s influence.

### ***Networking***

The level to which a think tank is engaged in networking is another dimension that speaks about a think tank’s ability to influence the policy decision-making process. In one sense,



such networking may be regarded as the ability of think tanks to establish links, mainly informal, with different government bodies, key government decision-makers, mass media, interest groups, political parties and other players on the policy arena. This brings us to the discussion of already mentioned above links that think tanks develop with different policy actors. Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that successful networking does not necessarily equate influence (Stone 2000, p. 14)<sup>4</sup>.

In another sense, think tanks become formal or informal members of national, regional or transnational networks of think tanks. Often organized around similar ideologies the benefits of such networking are wide-ranging. Relevant to the purposes of my thesis is that once in a network, think tanks are able to draw on a bigger pool of expertise this way eliminating the problem of running out of new ideas. Moreover, in certain instances, the network may act as the core team of supporters for a think tank's efforts to push for enactment or preservation of policy changes. In short, membership in a network of think tanks can be regarded as adding to the power to influence the policy arena, as knowledge generated within translates into political influence. In this regard, my case study proves to be in line with the theory.

Thus far it can be asserted that the political system, size, geographical location, media attention, links and networks as well as strategies of a think tank are the universal elements the analysis of which renders a better understanding of the power of a think tank to influence policies. The following chapters will provide a discussion of the above mentioned elements. This is not to suggest that the analysis of only, for example, the size of a think tank will tell us a lot about the influence it has on the policy arena. The conclusions about think tanks' power to influence will be based on the analysis of the interplay of those sources.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Stone (2000), "networks may generate intense activity that does not necessarily translate into policy" (p. 14).



## CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING THE MOLDOVAN CONTEXT

### 2.1. MOLDOVAN THINK TANKS. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Before going into the step by step analysis of the proxies to think tank influence outlined in the previous chapter, it is crucial to have a good overall understanding of the Moldovan context. Without a general overview provided first, the later analysis will lack context. Besides a discussion of the legal and political environments, below I provide an overview of the typology of Moldovan think tanks, perception of their products' quality as well as the six key features of the Moldovan think tank market.

#### *Typology*

There is no one pattern in the ways think tanks appeared and developed in Moldova. Some started as analytical support branches within projects of international organizations in Moldova. As the respective projects ended, these entities continued their activities as think tanks, after acquiring the status of nongovernmental organization. An example in this regard is the Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms (CSSR) currently headed by Galina Selari. It was founded in November 1996 as a result of a joint initiative of the Government of Moldova, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank in the framework of UNDP "Strategy for Development" project (for details see Economic Policy Institutes Network).

Other think tanks are the so-called "spin offs" of foreign donor organizations such as SOROS Foundation Moldova. For example Institute for Public Policy was initially created at the

initiative and based on funding from SOROS Foundation Moldova and the Euro-Atlantic Center from Moldova. There are also think tanks that appeared at the initiative and as a result of personal efforts of a group of people, experts in a specific policy area, which had to earn their status as a think tank from scratch (for example Expert-Grup). The ways Moldovan think tanks appeared and developed are not the only differences found among them.

Moldovan think tanks also differ in terms of values and priorities they assign to performing particular functions. Some think tanks gravitate predominantly toward advocacy with more or less developed policy research capacities (Advocacy Tanks<sup>5</sup>). Good examples are the Resource Center of Moldovan Nongovernmental Organizations for Human Rights (CReDO) and the Independent Journalism Center (IJC). Other think tanks are oriented more toward policy analysis and consultancy, be it to government bodies, international community or corporations (Contract Research Organizations<sup>6</sup>). Examples, relevant in this regard are Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms (CSSR), Expert-Grup and Institute for Public Policy (IPP)<sup>7</sup>.

Based on values and priorities assigned, the positioning of think tanks in relation to government also differs. Some think tanks, mainly contract research organizations, work predominantly on contracts with international organizations present in Moldova, however not without government approval. In other words, in this mechanism the government is the beneficiary but think tank's services are paid by an international organization. It is important

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<sup>5</sup> Term found in *Think Tank Archetypes*. Transition Newsletter. The Newsletter About Reforming Economies. World Bank. No date. <http://www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/trans/so99/boxpg19.htm> (Last accessed on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2009).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> There are also other good examples, however not mentioned in this thesis, of both advocacy tanks and contract research organizations in Moldova.

that in this mechanism the government approves the contract with one or another think tank or at least participates in the selection process, thus having an important say. Part of this mechanism is that think tanks cannot afford to be in open disagreement with the government, but rather stay within the prerogatives of a consultant.

On the other hand, advocacy tanks draw their funding from sources other than contracts with international organizations, however from projects financed by foreign donors<sup>8</sup>, and hence enjoy greater freedom in the ways they engage in influencing public policies. In most cases, Moldovan advocacy tanks focus on building constituency among the general public and are often in open disagreement with the government.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to state that this classification of Moldovan think tanks into advocacy tanks and contract research organizations is rigid. There are numerous examples of advocacy tanks doing contracted research or examples of contract research organizations doing training and/or advocacy activities. However, these deviations/diversifications in think tanks' activities should be regarded as means to secure organizational survival and sustainability.

### ***The market for policy ideas and research***

The discussion of the Moldovan think tank market is relevant as it directly affects the quality of think tank products and thus the level of influence think tanks have on public policies. Among other things, it is important that the Moldovan think tank market is very small. Small think tank market in this context has at least the following six implications:

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<sup>8</sup> Examples include but are not limited to Open Society Institute, Soros Foundation, Eurasia Foundation, Swedish Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, MATRA program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Balkan Trust for Democracy.

First, there is only a handful of think tanks. The number of Moldovan think tanks, estimated at 10, related to the wide range of policy areas in which expertise is in demand, leaves plenty of room for think tank activity without facing almost any competition. Nevertheless, there are some policy areas such as economy, media, human rights and foreign relations which are most popular among think tanks and hence there is more competition. For example IDIS Viitorul, Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms and Expert-Grup identified each other as sources of competition in the field of economic policies, while there is almost no competition in the field of higher education which is covered by the Institute for Public Policy.

Think tanks' preference for certain policy areas may be interpreted mainly, however not only, as dictated by the interest of donor community to finance expertise in certain policy areas. Moreover, looking at the different policy products and projects of each Moldovan think tank, it is possible to surmise a tacit agreement followed by all Moldovan think tanks. Namely aspects of public policy areas are selected in a way to avoid overlap and/or unnecessary rivalry.

Second, there is chronic undersupply of highly qualified personnel, which has a negative effect on the quality of think tanks' policy products. The pool of qualified experts in Moldova is very small. This, among other things, drives the price of independent experts' consultancy up. At the same time, the budgets of Moldovan think tanks are relatively modest and hence they are in a position to keep the minimum permanent in-house personnel. In this context, it often happens that the same "independent" expert authors different policy products of different think tanks. Moreover, think tanks are in unfavorable position as they compete in terms of offered wages with international organizations that also hire local experts and can

afford better pay. On top of this, modest budgets make think tanks hire inexperienced staff. All the above put together indicate that the search for qualified personnel is a matter of permanent concern for Moldovan think tanks.

Third, speaking about the Moldovan think tank products, there is a somewhat general consensus that the organizations are very good at identifying and analyzing public policy problems. However, they are criticized that their concrete policy solutions and/or recommendations are too general and/or unrealistic in practical terms. This misbalance needs to be taken into consideration as perception and not as de facto reality. However, even as a perception, but a negative one, it is counterproductive in terms of think tanks' influence. Thus, the roots of the above perception need to be addressed if one aims at increasing influence.

Fourth, the donors active in Moldova have preference toward project-based financing. Institutional development funding for Moldovan think tanks is almost absent. The only institutional development funds identified during fieldwork are made available in Moldova by Open Society Institute, Think Tank Fund headquartered in Budapest, Hungary (see the Strategy for the Think Tank Fund 2008-2010). Uncertainty regarding financial sustainability redirects the efforts of Moldovan think tanks from their research agendas toward constant search for funds. Moreover, it makes them vulnerable in terms of independence of opinions expressed.

Fifth, Moldovan think tanks are almost 100% dependent on funds from foreign donors. No cases of government contracting out policy studies paid from public money could be identified. Moreover, philanthropy from Moldovan business sector or the general public is

absent. The Law on Philanthropy and Sponsorship was approved in 2002. However according to Sergiu Ceaus (2007) philanthropic donations and sponsorships through deduction procedures specified in it are neither popular nor functional (p. 53).

Sixth, transparency is still a feature that can be seldom found among Moldovan think tanks. Namely, Moldovan think tanks, just like any other NGO, hardly ever make their financial and/or activity reports public. There is no solid ground for any nongovernmental organizations, moreover think tanks, not to make their financial reports public. The only reasonable explanation for the non-transparency is that the organizational culture of Moldovan think tanks is at a low level and both the think tanks and the donor community need to pay more attention to this aspect.

Low level of competition or its absence coupled with scarcity of qualified personnel on one hand and, on the other, the permanent search for funds to survive are nothing but hindrances to the quality of think tank products. Despite all of the above, during the interviews, some of the policy products were referred to as of a good quality. Thus, despite a think tank market that is unfavorable to high quality policy products, Moldovan think tanks still manage to meet the standards<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, the issue of financial transparency of Moldovan think tanks appears to be one still to be addressed. Moreover, financial non-transparency of think tanks works against them in terms of credibility and ultimately in terms of influence. It also has a negative effect in terms of public influence. No link between think tanks' financial transparency and their private influence could be established.

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<sup>9</sup> "meet the standards" should be regarded conventionally as perfectly serving the end consumer's purposes.



## 2.2. LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

In terms of legal environment, two elements are relevant to my research. First is the legal status Moldovan think tanks have. Second is the legal framework that shapes the activity of think tanks domestically. Both are discussed below. I will outline the features of the legal environment that are key to my research, without going into all the other details.

### *Legal status*

The overwhelming majority of think tanks in Moldova are registered as nongovernmental organizations. No law specifically addresses think tanks as a distinctive organizational form and, in legal terms, think tanks are treated as any other nongovernmental organization in Moldova. Surprisingly enough, in a generally unfriendly political atmosphere (which will be discussed further in this thesis), the legal framework regulating the activity of NGOs is generally good in the Republic of Moldova (NGO Sustainability Index 2007, p. 2; also interviews). The first Law of Public Associations, under the incidence of which think tanks fall, was passed in 1996. It has been modified several times, the latest Law of Public Associations being passed on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

### *Legal framework*

The main flaw of the Moldovan legal framework regulating the activity of nongovernmental organizations and thus think tanks is that these are treated by the tax authorities like any other economic agent in the country. That is the financial resources think tanks earn through their activities are subject to the same taxation regulations as any other business in the country. This doesn't allow think tanks to use their resources/revenues for their own development in a way they would if they would be exempted from taxes.

Exceptions to the above rule are think tanks that manage to obtain the public utility certificate. However, as it is mentioned in the Nations in Transit 2008 report on Moldova, “only a few bother, owing to excessive bureaucracy in obtaining tax exemptions” (p.10). As to the procedures a think tank has to go through in order to obtain a certificate of public utility, the director of one of the think tanks in Moldova said:

*“It is a great miracle that we finally obtained this certificate which we waited for years in a row. By the time we obtained it, the government initiated the re-registration procedure for Moldovan NGOs. We feel pressure under the Communist regime which distributes the certificates in exchange for some services. Any certificate that one obtains from the authorities is negotiated in political terms. We did not negotiate and this is clearly the reason why it lasted so long for us to obtain it. We had to fight for it”.*

The above indicates that the conclusion expressed by USAID in its NGO Sustainability Index in 2007 and 2008 is still valid for 2009: “Overall, NGO legislation remains vague, which allows government officials to apply provisions of the law arbitrarily” (2008, p. 2). Nevertheless, vague or no regulation on certain aspects of NGO activities in Moldova turns out to be not necessarily a negative feature. Relevant in this regard is the government-think tanks collaboration mechanism discussed below.

The Moldovan legal framework does not stipulate any specific mechanism of collaboration between the government and think tanks. The importance of such a mechanism derives from the implications it has in terms of demand and impact of Moldovan think tanks’ products on public policies adopted by the government. According to one interviewee, the fact that the collaboration mechanism between the government and think tanks is not regulated by law is positive.

*“[...] our experience shows that the Moldovan state tries to control the activity of NGOs. The fact that such a collaboration mechanism is not regulated by law is good because it does not give reasons to the state to interfere. The bad side of things is that the state is not obliged in*

*any way to take into consideration think tanks' opinions. When the opinions of NGOs do not suit the government, it creates GONGOs<sup>10</sup> and invites them to consultations”.*

From the above, it appears that legal non-regulation of the mechanisms through which Moldovan think tanks are to participate to the policy process should be regarded positively. Not regulated, think tanks have all the freedom in terms of strategies they employ to influence public policy decisions.

## **2.3. POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Theoretically, as it was mentioned earlier in this thesis, in countries where the executive and legislative powers are not separated the demand for policy advice and hence the influence of think tanks is more likely to be low. Below, I will provide evidence that the Moldovan case, despite its highly centralized political system, proves a somehow different reality. The facts clearly show that the influence of Moldovan think tanks on government was at its highest level during the elaboration stage and at its lowest level during the evaluation stage of the policy process. Thus, the government-think tanks relationship has a rather sinuous character, the government's approach toward think tanks being very instrumental. I will start with a snapshot of the present and then provide a historical synthesis of government-think tanks interaction with a focus on think tanks influence in dynamics.

### ***Present days***

The Republic of Moldova is a parliamentary republic. Nevertheless, in practice, the executive and legislative powers are not separated. The executive runs the country. Beginning with

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<sup>10</sup> GONGO stands for Government-Operated Non-governmental Organization, set up by undemocratic governments to create confusion when NGOs seek to promote democracy in the country in question, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GONGO> (Last accessed August 17, 2009).

2001 the Republic of Moldova is ruled by the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, (for a discussion of political developments in Moldova see Popescu and Wilson 2009, p. 16). In regard to the National Democratic Governance, the Nations in Transit 2008 report states the following:

*“Moldova’s national governance continues to be marked by tight presidential control over the legislature, executive, and judiciary. [...] Opposition parties and civil society organizations lack oversight of government policies” (p.2).*

Moreover, after the April 2009 parliamentary elections which, due to widespread allegations of fraud, resulted in massive protests and devastation of Parliament and Presidency buildings, and failure of the newly elected Parliament to elect a president, Moldova found itself in a deep political crisis, with early elections scheduled for July 29<sup>th</sup>. According to one of the interviewees: “during the last couple of months there was everything but normal politics... extremely heated fight and a lot of paranoia fears in government circles”.

With early elections to be held soon, the risk of Moldova sliding to authoritarianism is still very real (Popescu and Wilson 2009, p. 33). Along with political opposition, targets of political pressures are the media and NGOs the views and commentaries of which are not in line with the party in power (for a discussion see Popescu and Wilson 2009; in line with the above arguments see also ProTV, 29.04.2009; IDIS Viitorul 08.05.2009; Jereghi, 11.06.2009; Amnesty International 22.06.09).

### ***Low level 2001-2003***

The analysis of involvement of think tanks with the policy process in Moldova since 2001 shows a sinuous interaction between the Moldovan government and local think tanks. Thus, the first years (2001-2003) when PCRM came to power, think tanks were regarded as agents

of western influence and/or of promotion of the western ideology<sup>11</sup>. At the time the Government had a pro-CIS orientation which was opposite to the values and ideas promoted by the overwhelming majority of civil society organizations. Under such circumstances, Moldovan think tanks were treated with a high degree of reticence. Hence the access of Moldovan think tanks to the policy arena was very much restricted.

Relevant in the support of the above argument is the experience of the Institute for Public Policy (IPP). At the time it was working on projects related to Bologna Process and synchronization of the Moldovan education system with the European one. Before the Moldovan government announced a pro-European change of the political orientation, IPP was attacked by “Communist” newspaper as enemy and always referred to in negative terms (Gremalschi, 2009).

### ***Increasing influence 2003-2007***

#### ***Europeanization***

The government’s attitude changed with the change in the political course. In 2003, The Moldovan Government declared its pro-European orientation with EU integration of Moldova as a strategic goal (for a discussion of political orientation change during 2001-2003 see Argint 2003). The change in the political orientation of the country allowed for the think tanks and the government to share the same agenda.

The government announcing its pro-European orientation brought about the need for elaboration of a series of development strategies and adjustment of the Moldovan legal framework to the European democratic standards – the so-called process of

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<sup>11</sup> Conclusion drawn from interviews.

“Europeanization” of the Republic of Moldova (Argint 2003). Collaboration between the government and think tanks started to intensify as the Moldovan government alone had neither institutional nor human capacities for elaboration of sound policy products. Many of the think tanks were being invited to round tables and governmental working groups as representatives of civil society.

In the new framework, the demand for think tank assistance increased. Moldovan think tanks started to become actively involved with elaboration of a series of national strategies as well as adjustment of the national legal framework to European and international democratic standards. The most significant example is the Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy approved by Parliament in December 2004; accompanied by a series of sectoral strategies such as national development strategies in education, justice, labor, agriculture etc. Think tankers participated in governmental working groups, being responsible for elaboration of entire policy documents.

The most recent example of active involvement of Moldovan think tanks with the elaboration stage of the policy process is the assistance offered for elaboration of the National Development Strategy 2008-2011 approved by Parliament in December 2007. There are also numerous examples of laws and regulations integrally elaborated by think tanks, later promoted with the support of think tanks on international level as laws most suitable to the Moldovan context and ultimately integrally approved by the Government<sup>12</sup>.

*2005 – the formal peak of think tanks’ influence*

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<sup>12</sup> Conclusion drawn from interviews.

Cooperation between the Moldovan Government and think tanks was apparently strengthening. The demand for think tank expertise and hence their influence was noticeably increasing. On December 29<sup>th</sup> 2005, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova passed Decision No. 373-XVI for approval of the Concept of cooperation between Parliament and civil society. The Concept is based on: “the fact that the Republic of Moldova declared European integration as strategic direction of country’s development, [...] the necessity to promote participatory democracy, [...] the necessity to establish cooperation between the Parliament and civil society from the Republic of Moldova” (p.2).

The above referenced concept was approved based on the already fruitful collaboration with think tanks and should be regarded simply as an attempt by government to formalize cooperation with think tanks, and not as a founding block for such cooperation. Moreover, the status of “Concept” of the above described document should be regarded in a critical light. I take it as a sign of the very instrumental approach of the Moldovan government toward think tanks. The Government simply outlined the ways it is open to cooperate, but reserved the right to decide when such cooperation is appropriate. There is nothing wrong with it in principle. But, as it will become clear later in this thesis, the Moldovan government focused on satisfaction of solely its short-term political interests rather than on genuine fulfillment of democratic reforms.

From the above, we can certainly draw that the Moldovan think tanks were actively involved in the elaboration phase of the policy process. At this stage, the Moldovan Government showed clear signs of openness and willingness to cooperate with the Moldovan civil society.

### ***2007 and beyond - reticence***

Things changed dramatically during the implementation and evaluation stages of most of the policies elaborated earlier. Starting with 2007, the Moldovan government became increasingly reticent to cooperation with think tanks. The most important signs of this reticence are the following two:

*Criticized and accused of manipulation*

First, in October 2007, in the last stage of implementation of the European Union – Republic of Moldova Action Plan (EURMAP), then Prime Minister Vasile Tarlev harshly criticized the way in which independent experts presented the implementation of EURMAP and accused them of manipulation:

*“if you take a look at the declarations of some so-called experts in the media, whom I did not ask to be experts, but who consider themselves experts, you will see that they misinform the society and raise concerns among experts from European Union”* (BBC citing premier Tarlev 2007; translation from Romanian).

The same day, the same speech, in order to overcome the above unpleasant situation, Tarlev personally requested Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Andrei Stratan to initiate meetings and dialogues with, as he formulated, “the so-called experts who are, consider themselves and want to be experts” (BBC citing premier Tarlev 2007; translation from Romanian). Premier Tarlev requested the independent experts to be involved with the implementation of actions and stated that the government was ready to delegate some responsibilities in the implementation stage.

Regardless of how progressive the above statements of the top government official may sound, according to the information gathered in fieldwork, the above never happened. Aside from the elaboration stage, the Moldovan think tanks were never welcome in any other stages of the policy process. This is in line with one of the conclusions reached with interviewees.



The de facto government–think tanks collaboration mechanism looks as follows: policy papers and laws are elaborated by the Moldovan government in active consultation with civil society organizations; the Government or Parliament approves them; no more involvement of civil society organizations in later stages of the policy process is of interest to the government.

### *National Participation Council – an illusion*

The second persuasive indicator of the government’s increasing reticence toward Moldovan think tanks is the story of the Participation Council. In early 2008, the Moldovan Government launched the idea of the so-called National Participation Council (NPC). Then, it was interpreted as another positive sign, however declarative, of the Moldovan Government opening toward cooperation with civil society in terms of elaboration, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies. According to the initiative, the National Participation Council was to be formed of representatives of the most reputable Moldovan think tanks and other civil society organizations. The main purpose of the NPC was to participate to the policy process at the highest level, namely at the level of ministers and prime-ministers (National Participation Council Concept Paper).

The implementation of NPC went as far as official institutionalization of NPC as a consultative body with the Government. Before institutionalization, the Council had two meetings. In the first meeting the discussions focused on the need for such a council and its possible ways of operation; in the second meeting – the governing bodies of this council were elected. As accepted by the Moldovan Government, the Council was formed of 33 organizations, diverse in terms of political preferences, ideologies, represented interests, and

fields of activity. In other words, “the Council was diverse, if not representative” (Prohnitchi, 2009).

According to some interviewees, the idea of NPC had strong political support of then Prime Minister Zinaida Greceanii, however not without dovetailing interests. Examples of dovetailed interests which combine into one project are opening of funding lines for the Moldovan government in exchange for more openness to collaboration with civil society. According to the interviewees, the political support was pressured mainly by international financing/donor organizations in the Republic of Moldova such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and United Nations agencies on one hand and some government officials who believed consultations with civil society was very much necessary on the other.

By the end of 2008, instead of receiving official status, the National Participation Council was called to a full stop. No more political support was to be found within Government; no more meetings of the NPC were called. According to one interviewee, “it was a symptom... we interpreted it as a symptom of internal fracture of the government”.

### ***Present days continued***

The Government demand for think tank products continued to down slope in 2009. Most interviewees were aware that many of the governmental departments they were working with were allegedly instructed by the country’s top political leadership not to work with one or another think tank. Heavily criticized by think tanks on top of the approaching April 2009 parliamentary elections, the Communist Party did not want to jeopardize its popularity with discussions of the numerous flaws in the implementation of national policy papers and action plans developed earlier.

The government-think tanks relationship became worse after the April 2009 violent protests. Currently, the government restricted the involvement of Moldovan think tanks with the policy process to almost none. Moreover, the government proceeded with harassment of think tanks and their experts, as these made public their criticism against government.

With the latest developments on the Moldovan political arena in mind, namely the rapid backslide toward an authoritarian state, one can firmly argue that a think tank in Moldova is a civil society organization that is in declared or undeclared opposition to the government. In the words of one of the directors of Moldovan think tanks: „it almost became a *Modus Vivendi*”. Year 2009 has all the chances to become the cornerstone year, decisive in terms of what type of relationship Moldovan think tanks are to/will have with the government. The political crisis characterized by open pressure and harassment of civil society, in most cases think tanks, proved that the lack of institutional and human capacity within the government capable to elaborate, implement and evaluate sound policies was not the main problem. The core issue, or as some interviewees referred to it: “the very serious moral dilemma”, came to be the values that the government holds. The main question the Moldovan think tanks face at present is how to work with the government from now on.

To conclude, the Moldovan political system is undemocratic and hence the influence of the Moldovan think tanks is subject to overt political constraints. Nevertheless, the influence of think tanks on government was not always at low level but had a rather sinuous character. Basically the influence of think tanks grew when the state needed assistance from outside its governmental bodies. The government has an instrumental approach to think tanks, focusing on satisfying its short-term political interests.



## **CHAPTER 3: THINK TANKS' POWER TO INFLUENCE. THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

Having an understanding of Moldovan think tank market as well as the legal and political environment that shape the process is only part of the picture called the influence of Moldovan think tanks on the government. For the picture to be complete, I shall continue with a discussion of the proxies/sources to/of think tank influence as outlined earlier in the theoretical chapter. By doing so, I believe there will be enough information provided to draw conclusions on the power of Moldovan think tanks to influence the domestic policy process.

### **3.1. STRATEGIES**

In the theoretical chapter it was emphasized that think tanks' influence varies and hence may be analyzed in terms of their primary target groups and strategies employed to build public or private influence. Based on the information gathered, none of the Moldovan think tanks have one specific target audience. The absence of one clear target audience has repercussions on strategies they employ to influence public policy.

The strategies Moldovan think tanks employ are meant to build both public and private influence. All Moldovan think tanks engage in a way or another in public forums and conferences to discuss various domestic and foreign policy issues. All of them have appearances in media with national coverage. Slight exceptions are CSSR and CASE Moldova. The two think tanks do not perceive the general public as their direct target audience and neither have a strong focus on strategies for building public influence. Nevertheless, it is wrong to state CSSR and CASE Moldova have no public influence.

On the other hand there are considerable differences in the structure of private influence Moldovan think tanks have. For example Foreign Policy Association (APE) was established by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior public officials and diplomats. Among the founding members of APE are Ion Sturza – former Prime-minister of Moldova and now deputy CEO of Rompetrol Group (oil and gas company); and Ambassador Iurie Leanca – former First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. These are just a few influential Moldovan personalities who are part of APE. With this in mind, it would be childish to believe that Foreign Policy Association does not have private influence in the field of Moldovan foreign policy. Moreover, one may argue with certainty that APE has strong personal ties with former and present policy-makers. This combined with the quality of work which was highly appreciated by some of the interviewees make APE the most influential Moldovan think tank in the foreign policy area. Somewhat similar examples, in terms of structure of private influence, are the Institute for Public Policy and Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, however with their own specific differences.

By contrast, the private influence of some Moldovan think tanks such as Expert-Grup and CReDO is rooted in contracted policy research, which involves close cooperation with government bodies and public officials. Once established, such direct ties with the decision makers are capitalized on throughout further official and unofficial cooperation. From this perspective, the number of ties a think tank has with decision-makers of different levels is a function of think tank's age<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> The analysis of Moldovan think tanks age shows no correlation between the age of a think tank and its perceived visibility and influence on the policy arena. One cannot state that, for example, Expert-Grup registered in 2005 is less influential on economic policies than IDIS Viitorul or Center for Strategic Studies and Reforms, both 10 years older and with high level of expertise. It is rather a question of quality of expertise and strategies employed to reach decision makers and the general public.

In both mechanisms, think tanks regard decision-makers as sources of information and targets of influence. Decision makers regard think tanks as sources of policy advice. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the unfriendly political environment in Moldova, this mechanism is not fully operational. Once the elaboration stage of the most important national strategies was over, many Moldovan government bodies were, allegedly, informally instructed by the country's top political leadership not to work with think tanks. This heavily restricted the access of Moldovan think tanks to public policy process.

The numerous restrictions in the process of influencing public policy directly play the role of an additional strong trigger for policy research and consultancy think tanks to engage in predominantly advocacy type activities. One of the interviewees put it in the following way:

*“People ask: why do you do so much clamor? Because when all the other ways one can negotiate better solutions are exhausted, you switch to lobbying, advocacy... in order to attract the public opinion on your side.”*

Based on the above, it is clear that Moldovan think tanks have a high degree of flexibility and adaptability regarding their primary target groups and strategies employed. In other words, a think tank's strategy depends on the government's attitude toward one or another policy issue. If the solution of a policy problem is of mutual interest, the strategy will most likely be based on building and capitalizing on strong private influence. On policy issues that lack political will, think tanks will most likely focus on building and exercising their public influence.

### **3.2. SIZE**

The below discussion of size as a source of influence of think tanks on decision-makers is reduced to the analysis of funds administered by each think tank per year, beginning with

2001. Budgets regarded in dynamics provide a good general reflection of relevance one or another think tank had at a certain point in time.

The table below contains data on funds administered per year by each think tank subject to my research. The empty year/think tank cells mean that the respective think tank was not present on the market at that time. “N/A” should be read as “Not Available”, as the web pages of the respective think tanks either did not have an “activity reports” category (in most cases) or the activity reports were not downloadable (IJC and Expert-Grup). The number of in-house personnel reflects the present situation, as per 2009.

**Table 2:** Think tanks’ budgets in dynamics

<b>Think Tank</b> (founding year / in-house staff)	<b>Budget Size \$/Year</b>							
	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
<b>1. CReDO</b> <sup>14</sup> (1999 / 14)	71.500	74.000	130.000	256.250	194.000	215.700	352.000	480.000
<b>2. IJC</b> (1998 / 14)	204.262	210.104	N/A	310.823	N/A	368.842	460.321	481.943
<b>3. IDIS Viitorul</b> (1993 / 13)	N/A	N/A	148.026	263.775	341.687	202.013	507.771	N/A
<b>4. IPP</b> (2000 / 7)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>5. APE</b> (2003 / 7)			N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>6. CSSR</b> (1999 / 9)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>7. CASE Moldova</b> (2003 / 4)			N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>8. Expert-Grup</b> (2005 / 6)					N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>9. ADEPT</b> (2000 / 8)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Source:** Think tanks’ web pages.

From the little information available, the following relevant points may be drawn, however without a high degree of certainty as additional information and further research is necessary.

<sup>14</sup> The data for CReDO is approximated from Moldovan currency.



First, the demand for think tank products in Moldova increases during pre-electoral years and is somehow lower during the years between elections. In any country, elections are a matter of great public concern. In the case of Moldova, influence had to be exercised in order to determine the decision-makers focus on securing democratic electoral process as it was the main problem during elections since 2001.

Parliamentary elections were held in Moldova in spring 2005 and spring 2009. Local elections took place in summer 2007, and the next will occur in summer 2011. In this order of ideas, IJC had a budget increase of about 50% in 2004 pre-electoral year compared to 2002. IDIS Viitorul also registered an increase of almost 80% in 2004 pre-electoral year compared to 2003, and later an increase of 150% in 2007 electoral year compared to 2006. CReDO's budget in 2004 pre-electoral year doubled compared to 2003; and increased by over 60% in 2007 electoral year compared to 2006; followed by an increase of another 36% in 2008 pre-electoral year. Budget increases should be also expected before and during next local or parliamentary elections.

Second, as the available data shows, the funding of Moldovan think tanks has been consistently increasing. Intuitively, think tanks' growing budgets point to the increasing expectations of the roles think tanks should play in solution of the growing number of policy issues to be solved, among which free and fair elections, freedom of media, respect for human rights, corruption and poverty to name just a few.

From the above, one may conclude that think tanks are paid to influence. When more influence is required, think tanks are paid more. As the democratic governance in Moldova is worsening, the demand for think tank work is increasing. In the Moldovan political

circumstances, think tanks become one of the few alternative tools to the international community to exercise influence and even often public pressure (through building public influence) over the clearly undemocratic government.

### **3.3. PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF THINK TANKS CLOSE TO THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT**

All Moldovan think tanks are located in Chisinau, the capital city of Moldova. No think tanks neither think tank branches were identified outside Chisinau. In line with theory, think tanks' location in the political and social center renders greater possibilities for formal and informal networking and influence. Moreover, it would be unreasonable, at least for the moment, to have branches outside the capital city, as Moldova is still, de facto, a highly centralized state. From geographical standpoint, it is logical to conclude that the Moldovan think tanks have equal opportunities to influence the policy process.

### **3.4. RELATIONSHIPS**

Earlier in this thesis it was stressed that aside from expertise in a particular policy field and thorough knowledge of the country's policy process, the source of think tank's influence derives from access to elite policy communities and government policy-makers. Below is a discussion of relationships think tanks have with the government decision-makers.

Overall Moldovan think tanks have good personal and professional relationships with government decision-makers. Both clearly understand that cooperation is mutually beneficial.

However, the collaboration between the two is not always fruitful. Failures arise when the political factor interferes. Policy issues the solution of which is politically inconvenient to the power have little chance to register openness from behalf of government bodies to cooperation with think tanks.

Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of experts from Moldovan think tanks being consulted on a personal level by decision-makers of different levels, be it from government or international community. Such examples include but are not limited to Galina Selari on Macroeconomic Policies, Andrei Popov<sup>15</sup> on issues of foreign and domestic politics, Oazu Nantoi on Transnistrian conflict settlement.

The above prove that Moldovan think tanks have influence on decision-makers; however this influence does not always materializes into concrete results. Such failures are due to contradictions between the policy solutions offered and the political interests of those in power. If political will would be present in the above-mentioned cases, think tanks influence would had been tremendously higher.

### **3.5. MEDIA ATTENTION**

Theoretically, the more media attention a think tank has the more influence and impact it exerts. Analysis of the number of media appearances of every think tank in Moldova is beyond the scope of this thesis. A simple cursory look per policy area/issue reflected in the media, reveals that think tank experts are often guests in different thematic talk shows and media reports. Their commentaries are often solicited to explain or forecast one or another

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<sup>15</sup> On July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, Andrei Popov announced his resignation from the position of APE Executive Director and his decision to join the Moldovan Democrat Party for the early parliamentary elections scheduled for July 29<sup>th</sup> 2009. INFOTAG Press Agency. <http://www.infotag.md/reportaje/579610/> (Last accessed July 15, 2009).

event of public concern. At this stage, the comments on think tank media appearances cannot go beyond the qualifiers such as “often” and/or “seldom” media appearances.

Moldovan think tanks do not count but rather “keep an eye” on their media appearances.

None of Moldovan think tanks under research had any statistics on their media appearances.

In the words of one of the interviewees,

*“media appearances do not mean anything (in Moldova, my note). We know, for example, that in relation to some institutions and processes we are very influential, but without going public. This influence comes from our long-lasting relationships. We are invited to different meetings, our solutions are accepted... and things move on”.*

Nevertheless, on the web pages of Moldovan think tanks one can often find links to appearances of their experts in the media. As pointed out during interviews, it is more of a purpose to monitor the way media presents think tanks’ commentaries and expertise. Such a careful approach to media appearances is because often, declarations think tank experts make are removed from context and hence their meaning is changed, which harms one or another think tank’s reputation.

The meaning of the above is that the number of media appearances is not regarded as an indicator of one or another think tank’s influence. Media appearances are a matter of one or another think tank’s choice of whether to go public or not, while the demand for commentaries from behalf of the media is high.

At the same time, media appearances are often interpreted as aspirations of think tankers to political careers. Thus, in Moldova, for think tanks to have direct influence on public policies, they should have a reserved approach regarding media appearances. Think tankers should chose to appear in the media only when they are confident that such appearances will have no negative effect on their structure of influence.

### 3.6. NETWORKING

Membership of a think tank in a formal or informal network of think tanks theoretically adds to its power to influence the policy arena as knowledge generated within translates into influence. Moreover, in certain instances, the network may act as the core team of supporters for a think tank's efforts to push for enactment or preservation of policy changes.

All Moldovan think tanks are part of informal networks both domestically and internationally. All of them have some sort of established links with government bodies, key government decision-makers, media, interest groups, political parties and other players on the domestic policy arena. Moreover, all interviewees mentioned friendly and constructive inter-think tanks cooperation on issues of common concern. Internationally, Moldovan think tanks have well established links with policy experts from abroad. For example, the CSSR has established cooperation with the Institute of Social Studies from Hague, Netherlands and the National Institute of Economy from Bucharest, Romania to name just a few.

Speaking about domestic formal networks, Moldovan think tanks are members of issue-based networks composed of a range of different organizations. For example, since 2005, before and during national and/or local elections, coalitions of Moldovan nongovernmental organizations monitor electoral campaigns and evaluate the electoral process. The Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT) was member of Coalition 2005, 2007, 2009. The Independent Journalism Center (IJC) was member of Coalition 2007 and 2009.

Drawing from interviews with directors of Moldovan think tanks, networking at international level is perceived more as a tool of internal use. Think tanks view their membership with

international networks as opportunity to gain additional access to exchange of information, experience and expertise, visibility and improved standards. CReDO is the only Moldovan think tank under my research which is not member of formal networks. Nevertheless, at the time of the interview, Sergiu Ostaf, CReDO director, mentioned that formal membership with some networks was on the agenda of the next board meeting.

The same interviews point to the conclusion that overall, membership in an international network is regarded rather as a matter of prestige than a clear understanding of the added value it brings to one or another think tank in terms of influence on the policy process. This, despite the fact that for example the Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS) from Prague, Czech Republic, was mentioned, during the interviews, as a very supportive network.

In the words of one of think tank directors, member of PASOS:

*“[...] when the April events started (protests in April 2009, my note), the only network that operated in our support was PASOS. It was driving crazy those in Brussels. All officials received 4-5 letters each per day. Due to us, besides PASOS other international organizations were mobilized as well: Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Slovak etc. There were piles of letters signed by organizations... and all of this in a matter of several days. Nobody could do such a thing outside a network”.*

Linked domestically and internationally, formally and informally, Moldovan think tanks capitalize to the maximum extent on networks as sources of influence. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that a networked think tank does not necessarily equate an influential think tank. Networking, like all the other proxies to influence are meaningful only if part of the synergy the elements complementary to each other.



## CONCLUSIONS

Deep political and economic crisis heated by political paranoia and mutual accusations constitute moving grounds for activity and development of think tanks in the Republic of Moldova. As Sandle (2004) would have mentioned, Moldovan think tanks are in a paradoxical situation: “trying to effect change whilst establishing themselves as viable entities within a constantly evolving and rapidly fluctuating situation” (p. 128) specific to post-communist states.

Universally, given that think tanks have high expertise in their policy area and their produce is of high quality, the highest degree of direct influence a think tank can have on a government can be reached when the latter is in need of assistance and open for such input at the same time. Although there is great need for progressive and out-of-the-box thinking for improved governance and reform, there is clear lack of political openness for think tanks’ participation in the policy process as a whole. The government has an instrumental approach to think tanks and their produce, the former focusing on satisfying its short-term political interests. The influence of Moldovan think tanks on government is at its highest level at the policy elaboration stage and at its lowest during the evaluation stage of the policy process.

Given the circumstances, the flexibility and adaptability Moldovan think tanks have in terms of strategies they employ to produce change is plausible. Moldovan think tanks have learned to effectively combine the government’s attitudes toward one or another policy issue with the appropriate think tank strategy. If the solution of a policy problem is of mutual interest to government and think tanks/constituency, the strategy will be based on building and



capitalizing on strong private influence. On policy issues that lack political will, think tanks will focus on building and exercising their public influence.

As there is no genuine consistent government demand for think tanks' produce, the latter is widely and generally supported by the international community interested in the democratization of the Republic of Moldova. It seems that if the government is not open to a transparent policy process, than think tanks get paid to influence. When more influence and pressure is needed, think tanks are paid more.

There is enough evidence that the existing old fashioned government will be replaced by a more democratic and open one. When it happens, the influence of Moldovan think tanks will increase. Change of government will happen rather sooner than later and think tanks themselves have to be ready for this increased demand in their products and influence. To be ready, in my view, means at least the several things below.

Think tanks have to keep a strong emphasis on building their networks both as personal links with decision-makers and as members of domestic and international, formal and informal networks. Think tanks should stay open to whatever new contacts. They should try to forecast the future political developments and build healthy relationships with the prospective politicians who will sooner or later ascend to power. This will secure think tanks with open doors in government bodies. While, on the other hand, as the recent experience has shown, think tank networks prove to often act as the core team of supporters for a think tank's efforts to push for enactment or preservation of policy changes.

Complementarily, more targeted efforts need to be undertaken toward building constituencies among the general public. When so, the messages think tanks promote through advocacy

campaigns would have greater impact compared to launching these to a broad and disperse public. It is key that before choosing a strategy of public influence and going into public disagreement with the government, one has to make sure that all the possible ways of private influence are exhausted. Otherwise, think tankers risk accusations of building a political career which at the time of doing so harms the think tank's image and credibility.

Along with lobbying for a better Law on philanthropy, think tanks should consider diversification of sources of funding in order to diminish their high dependency on any one donor. One way to go is to develop "for fee" services/products. The idea is not new. Some, but few, Moldovan think tanks already practice this. By doing so, think tanks will secure at least two important targets: (i) financial sustainability and (ii) independence of opinions expressed. Both have positive effect on think tank's influence.

Finally, although think tanks do not regard media appearances as an indicator of one or another think tank's influence, these do matter. In line with Kimball's (2000) point, media appearances have to be meaningful. Think tankers should profit from media's high demand for commentaries but, at the same time, avoid media appearances on issues outside their immediate expertise. If not avoided, the result may be twofold: (i) harm credibility and (ii) weaken the structure of influence.

To conclude, the above mentioned suggestions are not exhaustive, but, in my view, are the most important and relevant to the Moldovan think tank community. More specific suggestions would require a case by case approach which was not the aim of this thesis. Moreover, some of the empirical findings in this thesis speak for themselves while some require a more in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, I believe, this thesis may be taken as a solid

start for debate among all stakeholders. It should be regarded as my personal input into augmenting Moldovan think tanks' influence on public policy.



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