

POLICY ADVICE IN ELECTORAL REGIMES: THINK TANKS IN HUNGARY AND POLAND

Scientific Report

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

This project was agenda setting with respect to launching the study of think tanks/policy advice and de-democratization. With our solid research design, including coordinated and systematic data gathering in Poland and Hungary, and with the large amount of interview data we gathered (53 interviews in total), our analysis brought forth interesting and novel results.

Broadly speaking, we found similar trajectories in the two cases. In both Hungary and Poland we observed a bifurcation of the think tank space. On the one hand, liberal and leftist think tanks as policy advisers and advocacy organizations face challenges and closures, with less funding, entrenched room for maneuver and hostility in both civil society and policymaking. On the other hand, think tanks aligning ideologically with the illiberal governments experience new opportunities, with increased funding and easier access to policymakers.

A first key result regards polarization. With our focus on policy advice and de-democratization polarization emerged in almost all interviews as an important contextual condition for think tanks, impacting on their ability to produce knowledge and advocate policy makers and the broader society. In both contexts think tankers note that polarization, while not a new phenomenon, had increased to a level where the two sides cannot talk to each other or deliberate on almost any policy issues. Our results point to a strong alignment along a single divide (pro- and anti-government). Think tanks perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’, even as we posed general questions on transformations. Both sides of this cleavage describe a deeply problematic situation of threats, hate and threats of violence.

In effect, think tanks in Hungary and Poland have had to diversify their tools and their agendas: they have altered in both what they do and how they do it. Centrist, liberal and left-leaning organizations tend to turn to advocacy and education, whereas those aligning with the government can uphold policy-advice functions, and work towards legitimizing government policies. For anti-government think tanks, for whom the national arena for policy advice is mostly blocked, another adaptation is Europeanization, i.e., turning to the EU arena and/or localization, i.e., turning to local government level where those are governed by opposition parties.

A second key result relates to the role of think tanks with respect to policy making in illiberal contexts. In de-democratizing contexts in general, evidence-based policymaking is undermined, and the role played by policy advice changes. We analyzed how changes in policymaking and public administrations in Hungary and Poland impact policy advice. We identified four aspects of policymaking characteristic for de-democratizing states that were particularly consequential for the role of think tanks and the knowledge they produce in policymaking processes. These were 1) questioning expertise 2) centralizing policymaking 3) politicizing public administration and 4) dismantling accountability mechanisms. Based on these results, we argue that changes in policymaking are conducive towards a controlled policy

advice system, which favors short-term policy advice, aligned with government ideology, while it marginalizes and excludes actors and knowledge that do not fit this pattern.

A third key result relates to the matter of feasibility for think tanks to come forth as producers of independent knowledge. As they are drawn into ideological debates, defending liberal democracy or professing views in favor of illiberal regimes, think tanks' image of neutrality and independence is challenged. In the context of illiberal policy making and strong "post-truth" contexts, think tanks must re-think their claim to neutral policy expertise and independent knowledge production. Consequently, think tank identities, strategies, tactics change. Liberal think tanks abandon the independent image, and become more openly politically engaged, even activist, embracing the identity of democracy defenders. Among think tanks aligning with the illiberal governments, who cherish easier access to decisionmakers, the independent knowledge producer image is made problematic because of their close financial and personal links with the government.

Still, the public sphere at large comes forth as more open in Poland than in Hungary. This may partly reflect the shorter time span of Polish de-democratization. Another possible explanation is that Poland is less centralized, the government less unified, together providing multiple entry points for policy advice. Moreover, Polish civil society, of which think tanks are a part, even before 2015 was more vibrant, and thus more resilient. Networking between think tanks who are politically and ideologically on the same side, is comparatively weaker in Hungary than in Poland. Think tanks describe how other think tanks – irrespective of ideological closeness – talk in negative terms about each other. In Poland, think tanks – especially the liberal ones – are more appreciative of each other and collaborate.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

Our project was one of the first to systematically study policy advice in de-democratizing contexts. Our publications already in print, together with those in pipeline, will further contribute to this academic discussion, which is gaining prominence internationally as we write this report. Additionally, our publishing on polarization in civil society in these contexts is also gaining traction.

To broaden the international discussion, early on in the project, we organized an international workshop with researchers with adjacent research interests, exchanging theoretical, methodological and empirical inspirations. For this occasion, we secured external funding (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond) for an international workshop "Policy advice in De democratizing and Undemocratic Contexts" organized at Hjortviken conference center, Sweden, in November 18-19, 2021. The open call in our respective networks resulted in a broad interest in this event, in spite of insecurities linked to travel during Covid-19 restrictions. In the end, 25 researchers took part in the discussions and 13 papers were presented. 14 people participated physically, the rest via an online platform. Participants were active at universities in 10 different countries. We made sure to keep a balance between senior and junior researcher as well as between men and women (with a slight majority of women).

The fact that Jezierska was invited to write a chapter on illiberal think tanks for the Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism shows that this project is internationally recognized as being at the front edge of research on think tanks and de-democratization.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe is usually omitted in the studies of think tanks. Building on and expanding the few previously existing contributions (including those of the project participants) our project contributes with several articles in top ranked political science journals, thus introducing the study of CEE think tanks to the mainstream. The fact that we are publishing in highly ranked journals certifies that our contributions are both theoretically innovative and empirically solid.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

As indicated above, the focus on how think tanks are implicated in polarization dynamics was not anticipated in our grant application. This issue emerged abductively through data collection and analysis. We were surprised to see that, in spite of polarization being a burgeoning field of study, the meso level of think tanks (and other civil society organizations) is usually omitted in these studies. Hence, two of our articles aim to fill this gap.

Our research places emphasis on how think tanks take part and manoeuvre increasingly difficult de-democratizing contexts. However, as our analysis proceeded further questions emerged in terms of the potential impact on policy-making and democracy that think tanks may have in such contexts. This question emerges as particularly prominent as Poland turns towards re-democratization following its 2023 elections.

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

List of Publications

Articles in International Scientific Journals

Jeziarska, Katarzyna (2022) Coming out of the Liberal Closet: Think Tanks and De-democratization in Poland, *Democratization*, Vol. 30 2023, Iss. 2, pp. 259 – 277.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2022.2130259>

Jeziarska, Katarzyna and Sörbom, Adrienne (2020) Proximity and Distance: Think Tanks Handling the Independence Paradox, *Governance*, Published online June 1 2020,

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gove.12503>

Adrienne Sörbom and Katarzyna Jeziarska (2023) Social capital and polarization: The case of Polish think tanks, *Journal of Civil Society*, Published online August 18 2023:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17448689.2023.2242517>

Krizsán, A., Jeziarska, K. & Sörbom, A. (submitted) “Policy Knowledge Production in De-democratizing Contexts.” *Policy and Society* [under review, submitted in August 2023]

Jezierska, K., Krizsán A. & Sörbom, A. (submitted) “(De)Polarization Entrepreneurs? Think Tanks and Pernicious Polarization in Central Europe.” *Perspectives on Politics* [revise and resubmit, revision submitted in February 2024]

Krizsán, A., Fekete, D. (in review) Legitimizing Policy Knowledge in Autocratizing Contexts: The Case of Hungary. *Policy and Politics*.

Chapters in Edited Volumes

Jezierska, Katarzyna (2023) "Illiberal Think Tanks", in Marlène Laruelle (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/55211/chapterabstract/430636604?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

Popular Science/Daily Press

See below, outreach.

Seminar Presentations

Sörbom, Adrienne and Katarzyna Jezierska (March, 2023) Katarzyna Jezierska, Andrea Krizsan och Adrienne Sörbom ett papper om tankesmedjors roll i den politiska polariseringen: *(De)polarization Entrepreneurs. Think Tanks in Central Europe as Agents in Pernicious Polarization*. Stockholm School of Economics.

Sörbom, Adrienne and Katarzyna Jezierska (May, 2023) 'How Can You Talk to Them?' *Social Capital and Polarization among Polish Think Tanks*. Södertörn University.

Sörbom, Adrienne, Katarzyna Jezierska and Krizsan, Andrea (November, 2023) *Bifurcation of Knowledge Dissemination: Strategies of Policy Advice Organizations in De-Democratizing Contexts*, at Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research, Stockholm University.

Five most important Conferences

Workshop (2021) on Policy Advice in De-democratizing Contexts Gothenburg, Sweden, 18–19 November 2021 Think tanks In De-democratizing Contexts: A Framework for Analysis, Katarzyna Jezierska, Andrea Krizsan and Adrienne Sörbom.

SWEPSA 2021, Online: Bridging or Bonding? Think tanks in a polarized context, Katarzyna Jezierska and Adrienne Sörbom.

EGOS 2022: Polarizing social capital? The Case of Polish Think Tanks, Katarzyna Jezierska and Adrienne Sörbom.

EGOS 2023: (De)polarization Entrepreneurs. Think Tanks in Central Europe as Agents in Pernicious Polarization. Katarzyna Jezierska, Andrea Krizsan and Adrienne Sörbom.

Conference presentations

Jezierska, K., Krizsán, A. & Sörbom, A. “(De)Polarization Entrepreneurs. Think Tanks and Pernicious Polarization in Central Europe”, Paper presented at the EGOS Colloquium, University of Cagliari, 6-8 July 2023

Jezierska, K., Krizsán, A. & Sörbom, A. “(De)Polarization Entrepreneurs. Think Tanks and Pernicious Polarization in Central Europe”, Paper presented at the IPPA conference, University of Toronto (online), 27-29 June 2023

Krizsán, A., Jezierska, K. & Sörbom, A. “Policy knowledge production in de-democratization contexts”, Paper presented at the Workshop on Correcting Bad Policy: Malignity and the ‘dark side’ in public policy, Yonsei University (online), 24-25 April 2023

Jezierska, K. & Sörbom, A. “Pernicious Polarization and Social Capital Transformation: The Case of Polish Think Tanks”, Paper presented at the EGOS Colloquium, Vienna, 7-9 July 2022

Krizsán, A., Jezierska, K. & Sörbom, A. “Policy knowledge production in de-democratization contexts”, Paper presented at the IPPA conference, Budapest (online), 28-30 June 2022

Jezierska, K., Sörbom, A. & Krizsán, A. “Think Tanks in De-democratizing Contexts: A Framework for Analysis”, Paper presented at Policy Advice in De-democratizing Contexts workshop, Gothenburg, 18-19 November 2021, ORGANIZER of the workshop

Jezierska, K. “Coming Out of the Liberal Closet. How Polarization Affects Civil Society Organizations in Poland”, Paper presented at the German Political Science Association (online), 14-16 September 2021

Krizsan, A “The Landscape of Knowledge Production in Illiberal Contexts” Florida International University, Florida Feminist Fridays Talk Series. 2023, November 17, Online

Outreach

29 December 2023, interview for Swedish radio, Studio Ett, about the situation in the Polish public media <https://sverigesradio.se/play/avsnitt/2295121#1333>

- 11 December 2023, interview for Swedish radio, Studio Ett kväll, about the new Polish government <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt?programid=1637>
- 28 November 2021, Op-ed in Göteborgs Posten “Polska makthavare lever i en parallell värld” <https://www.gp.se/debatt/polska-makthavare-lever-i-en-parallell-v%C3%A4rld-1.60128966>
- 26 November 2021, Invited panelist at “Offentliga samtal: Avdemokratisering? Hur demokratier urholkas och vad vi kan göra åt det”, Vetenskapsrådet & Institutet för framtidsstudier
- 16 October 2023, interview for TT Nyhetsbyrån about the Polish parliamentary elections, e.g., <https://www.svd.se/a/MoGejm/expert-polarisering-i-polen-pa-giftig-niva>
- 5 October 2023, Invited panelist on ”Det polska parlamentsvalet,” Utrikespolitiska institutet <https://fb.watch/nLfRkVsXzT/>
- 13 September 2023, presentation ABF Huddinge: ”Är demokratin i kris och har vi tagit den för given?” [About challenges to democracy in Sweden and Europe]
- 8 September 2023, presentation Bildningsbaren, Bagarmossen: Makt, hemligheter och politik: tankesmedjan som samtida politisk arena” [About the role of think tanks in contemporary politics and democracy]
- 11 February 2021, Interview for Aktuellt about the Polish media law proposal
- 13 July 2020, Interview for P1 Morgon about the presidential elections in Poland
- 12 July 2020, Interview for Ekot about the presidential elections in Poland
- 6 July 2020, Interview for Aktuellt about the presidential elections in Poland
- 29 June 2020, Interview for P1 Morgon about the presidential elections in Poland