

THINK TANKS SHOULD NOT BE REMOVED FROM SOCIETY

James McGann



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RJ What are the factors contributing to the emergence and increase in the numbers of think tanks?

In terms of the forces behind that and the reasons for the growth, I think there are three major areas – democratisation, globalisation and modernisation – in terms of advances in technology and communications, and the complexity of the technical nature of policy problems.

In terms of democratisation, there has been demand for independent research and analysis, as well as more open debate about government decision-making and policies. Essential to that, and also

related to technological advances and globalisation, is the end of the state monopoly on information. Then, in terms of globalisation, there is also a crisis of confidence in governments around the world, be it in Washington, Beijing, Berlin, and Moscow. For that reason, those forces are opening up, and greater citizen participation in decision-making has resulted in the growth of think tanks, because **citizens nowadays are seeking advice from institutions rather than governments.**

Simply put, there is a growth in international actors on the world stage; there is internationalisation in terms of funding for groups; and there is also the general pressure of globalisation in terms of the ability to move people, information and money – faster, further and more frequently than ever before. All of those forces – democratisation, globalisation and modernisation – have made the rapid growth of think tanks around the world possible.

RJ What is the role that think tanks can and should play in the modern world? Where are the limits of their mandate? Is the creation of political manifestos one of their functions?

I think, in that regard in the traditional sense, my definition of think tanks reflects what I think is a

definition, which I think is widely accepted, the definition of think tanks is that they are research, analysis and engagement oriented institutions on key domestic and international issues, which inform and debate policies related to those issues. So, to answer your question, **I think political manifestos is rather strong, but I think one of the key ingredients in the role of think tanks is the engagement of policy-makers, the media and the public on the key public policy issues facing the country.**

They fulfil a range of functions. There are those which embody all the functions of a think tank – research, analysis and engagement – and there are those that are simply involved in engagement, a traditional think tank, a 'think and do tank', which is one that both thinks and engages. And then there is a 'do tank', which simply engages and advocates, and they certainly do research, and a 'talk tank', which is one that convenes people to talk about policy issues. Increasingly, we are also seeing a 'virtual think tank', transmitting its ideas through the new media. You can look at the revolutions sweeping in the Middle East, which use democratisation, and clearly see this combination of traditional ideas, in terms of how research and the power of ideas

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change that is taking place in the traditional concept of think tanks, which entails that they would be research and analysis centres. I think that the new reality, partly driven by the factors that I previously indicated, stipulates that it is now required that think tanks be involved in public engagement. In my view and according to my defi-

were central to that moment's movement; however, it was also linked with non-traditional elements.

In the U.S.A. a lot is being said nowadays about the activities of think tanks in the context of the problem of lobbying. I consciously avoid using this term, preferring to speak about engagement in publicly

important affairs. The time is long gone when, speaking about think tanks, one implied only scientists, who, in proud solitude, would write sophisticated works and expect ordinary citizens to turn to them for their ideas. Think tanks can no longer be passive observers expecting that policy-makers and the public will be at their doors to embrace their ideas.

duce much more research of relevance to policy. Certainly some are more about advocating ideas than providing objective analysis and research. Certainly there has been politicisation. But in reality, I think that this is more where we can find a healthy civil society, where the range of opinions is represented, and where the playing field is level. This is a positive thing, and it is

which measures a whole range of aspects of a given think tank and identifies what makes and distinguishes it from the other thousands of other think tanks operating in the world. Thus, they do have influence, and there is a clear distinction between them. There are institutions that, even in a crowded and competitive market, are able to produce high quality research. **In my mind, there are four ‘R’s that determine whether an institution is successful and effective in this regard. These are rigor, relevance, reliability and reach.** In other words, their research and analysis is rigorous and is of highest quality. Secondly, it must be reliable. Thirdly, because of its rigor, policy-makers and the public can rely on the ideas and policy proposals that they are presenting, as they are evidence-based, and they are not based on opinion, but on evidence. Fourthly, such research and analysis must have reach, meaning that they are effectively reaching the media, as well as policy-makers and the public with their ideas.

There needs to be much more proactive analysis to identify what the emerging trends are. We do not have the luxury of waiting for a crisis

RJ How politicised are think tanks today, for instance, in the United States or in Europe?

I think people tend to focus on this politisation on think tanks, but I think there is a more important and focal point. Certainly there are some that I think are overly politicised, let’s be clear about that. But what is important and what has taken place is not so much the politisation of think tanks, but the movement away from the traditional, academic model into a more policy-oriented model, whether it’s historical and whether it is occurring in Russia, in China, in the United States, in Germany or France.

One of the key historical criticisms of think tanks and universities is that they produce research that is totally irrelevant to the policy-making process. That has changed very fundamentally across the borders so that think tanks have moved to pro-

incumbent upon think tanks and policy-makers in the region and the country to keep that in balance and not be overly politicised.

RJ There are many thousands of think tanks in the modern world. How is it possible to discern which are the really influential ones? Do you have an opinion about what think tanks should be listened to? How influential can a single think tank be when there are so many differing opinions in the world, so many experts and so many think tanks?

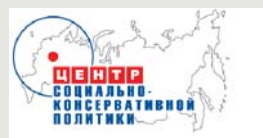
That’s where the challenge lays - in a highly crowded, competitive market place of ideas, both in the domestic and global contexts. The reason why I constructed the global ranking of think tanks is to help policy makers and the public identify what the leading think tanks are, including some of the leading think tanks in the world, both by geographic area and functioning area. This is based on extensive criteria,

RJ In what direction should modern think tanks develop in order to fully meet all the challenges of our time?

The threats that we face on the global scale are quite substantial, and what occurs within one country, more so than ever before, impacts the rest of the world. There is, what I would describe in terms of my research, ‘policy tsunamis’. They will be encountered on a more frequent basis because of globalisation, and they will be political, environmental, social or economic in scope. They will emerge very suddenly, mushroom and have a

The Centre for Social and Conservative Policy is an anti-crisis centre that aims to formulate the position of the parliamentary majority party on key issues concerning the socio-economic development of Russia, while it also elaborates on the ideology of Russian conservatism. The Centre is headed by the Chairman of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, **Boris Gryzlov**. Other leading experts include **Vyacheslav Glazychev**, **Yuri Shuvalov**, **Andrey Isaev**, and **Andrey Kokoshin**. The Centre closely cooperates with the ‘United Russia’ party, the

social organisation **Molodaya Gvardiya** (Young Guard), and the State-Patriotic Club. In March 2011, the Centre issued a report authored by Vyacheslav Glazychev and Irina Starodubtseva, entitled ‘**Real Federalism, Local Governance and Inter-budgetary Policy**’, which unveils a variety of scenarios related to the development of federalism and inter-budgetary relations in Russia.



devastating impact. **And those who are not prepared to deal with that, who have not moved to identify key trends, will be devastated or buried by these tsunamis.**

A part of the problem and the shift that needs to be made to make further progress is away from think tanks and most research organisations focusing on forensic analysis, analysing events that have already happened. For instance, in November 2008, you could easily attend a conference focused on dissecting the global economic crisis, what caused it and what to do about it post-factum. What needs to occur, and mostly because of the emergence of what I describe as tsunamis, is that there needs to be much more proactive analysis in order to identify what the emerging trends are, and there must be a commitment, a political will - that's the other part of the problem - to do something about it. And that has always been a problem because policy-makers find crisis to be liberating due to the fact that they can do things under the crisis that they cannot typically do under normal circumstances. We do not have the luxury of waiting for a crisis, because there will be policy tsunamis, which will be devastating and will have a global impact.

Secondly, the great promise of these universities and think tanks was to provide an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary analysis of the world's problems. **And clearly it is a fact that no single problem can be understood by a single discipline.**

Thus, there has to be a transformation in terms of think tanks and in terms of universities, so that they are structured in a way that addresses the problems that we are facing in the world, which are multidisciplinary. And only through that kind a change can true progress take place. So it can be said that think tanks are advancing with progress in a whole range of areas, but there are some fundamental flaws in how they and universities are structured. They will need to learn how to resolve the global problems that we face today. ■

Yulia Netesova exclusively for RJ

The Russian Institute is an independent non-commercial organisation that was established in March 1996. According to its charter, the Institute's purpose is 'to promote the formation of Russian cultural self-awareness and the establishment of institutions that will assist in the formation of a new social identity'. The Russian Institute was founded by **Gleb Pavlovsky, Sergey Chernyshev, and Yaroslav Kuzminov**. In 2010, the Russian Institute issued a report entitled '**Russian Democracy: from Stability to Renewal**', which was presented at the Global Political Forum in Yaroslavl. The report urges shifting the focus to the actual democratisation experience within Russia, instead of simply discussing the common value-oriented foundations of Russian and Western democracies, which are already evident.



PROGRESSIVE AGENDA FOR THE XXI CENTURY



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Exclusively for RJ

There is a clear, **emerging progressive agenda** in Europe and the US. The 20th century represented progress towards more equitable, stable, and open societies at the domestic level plus the creation of an international order that could promote political freedoms, human rights, and economic opportunity. Obviously, there were major setbacks in the process and serious issues remain. But, in general, the creation of a progressive 'mixed economy' model helped to promote wealthier societies in the West while correcting the negative aspects of economic development through the welfare state, labour rights, education, workplace protection, environmental regulations, and poverty reduction measures.

The XXI century progressive agenda starts from the assumption that global problems require global solutions. Poverty, disease, climate change, terrorism, financial instability,

and other issues can no longer be dealt with on a nation-by-nation basis. We must strengthen international institutions and cooperation to identify emerging problems, work through common solutions, and enable real action to address these problems.

The West must do more to invest in its long-term competitiveness through funding of education, science and technology. But we must also work to build a global middle class that can enjoy more productive, meaningful and secure lives. Challenges such as youth unemployment and migration must be dealt with cooperatively if we are to avoid strife and conflict, as well as increase our collective living standards. Global finance and commerce will require stronger global oversight and regulation. Energy needs and scarce resources must be handled not through exclusion, but through cooperation and shared knowledge. ■