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Role of Think Tanks in Social Transformation Process

Social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe has a number of dimensions. The advance of democratic institutions and market economy goes hand in hand with development of civil society. Experience from Central European countries shows that activities of civic forums play a very important role in the overall success of the post-communist transition. In this field, independent public policy institutes that focus on various aspects of public policy play a crucial role as they ensure that those social changes that have taken place in the countries of Central Europe in the 1990s are irreversible.

The history of think tanks in central Europe is very short in time span but very rich in substance. After the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, a number of independent institutes have come into existence that have been doing research on transformation of political system, international relations and foreign affairs, economic transformation, social sphere, human rights, ecology and other spheres. These institutes not only identified the most pressing problems of social development but also came up with expert proposals towards their resolution. Furthermore, they advanced their implementation by creating a sustained pressure on the executive and legislative bodies of state, bringing them to the attention of the media and by reaching out to a wider public.

At first sight, it is a small wonder that independent public policy institutes were founded and survived in post-communist societies in which After all, there were societies in which all social institutes were run and controlled by state to further state ideology for a number of decades. However, this “wonder” was brought about by the sheer force of intellectual freedom coupled with commitment to universal values and democratic society. Thanks to an independent stand, organizational flexibility, skilled and qualified human resources and, above all, material help extended by partner organizations from overseas, these Central European institutions have quickly become quite successful in advocate and push through many pro-reform policies, in spite of strong opposition from rigid state bureaucrats.

In various post-communist countries Think tanks have played a role of catalysts in reform process. Today they have crossed the borders of their countries and are establishing international networks of “public policy” institutes which should make their work even more effective. As a concrete example, one could mention the Visegrad forum of think tanks, which was established last year in Warsaw at the initiative of Slovak think tanks - Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) and Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA).

It is not a matter of chance that these two Slovak think tanks were the forefront of networking Central European public policy institutes. Slovakia is considered a country where civil society institutes have been playing an exceptional role in social transformation process. Its independent public policy institutes have created functional bonds among them

thereby establishing a kind of national coalition of think tanks. IVO has been one of the main forces behind the creation of these bonds. Since its foundation in 1997 IVO has pulled together the technical potential of various Slovak think tanks thanks to its annual publication Global Report on Slovakia. By now the book has acquired the reputation for being the most respected and comprehensive analysis of political, economic, and social developments. Moreover, the participation of leading experts from institutions such as IVO, SFPA, MESA10, INEKO and SPACE Center for economic development created a synergic effect that surpassed the limits of this single publication and laid foundation for cooperation on many other projects.

During the past decade, Slovak think tanks have conducted and published critical analyses of government policies and proposed concrete solutions in virtually all aspects of the post-communist transformation process. Between 1994 - 1998 think tanks played an important role in preventing Slovakia from completely slipping from the path of democratic and market-oriented reforms. In this effort, they became a part of a broad political alliance of diverse civil society actors. Moreover, in this period think tanks also become a refuge for leading public policy experts who were quite often expelled from public administration apparatus for political reasons. Think tank provided them with space for research and publication work, thereby helping to retain and improve the Slovak human resources in the field of public policy.

In 1998, the broad alliance of civil society actors helped to change the political equation in the country. After 1998 general elections relation between state organs and various civil societies went through an important change. It moved from a position of antagonism in which the government viewed think tanks as one of its enemies to a position partnership. The Slovak think tanks became a reservoir of experts for reformist political forces that are now governing the country. Even more importantly, they have designed many crucial pieces of reformist legislation and played an important role in its advocacy and implementation. Even in this new relationship with state institutions, Slovak think tanks have been able to maintain an independent stand. This is a precondition for being able to provide truly critical and objective analyses of present government policies.

One of the next major tasks facing think tanks in the near future is their own long-term sustainability. A continuing active work of public policy institutes should be in the best interest of the pro-reformist economic forces and political elites, as well as NGOs, academics, media and others. The topic of long-term sustainability of Slovak think tanks, should therefore become a topic of public discussion among all those people who care about the development of Slovakia and its further progress in the direction of a modern and open society.