

The role of think-tanks in the EU policy process remains largely uncharted territory for political scientists

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How do think-tanks influence the EU's policy process? [Hartwig Pautz](#) and [Dieter Plehwe](#) assess the range of European think-tanks which are active at the EU level of politics. They argue that there is a notable lack of ideological diversity among EU think-tanks, with most organisations polarised around the issue of advocating 'more' or 'less' European integration. There is also a substantial lack of information on the role of think-tanks in influencing policy and no consensus over how they should be classified alongside other interest groups.



We have long got used to the involvement of think-tanks in British politics. They help journalists to fill their columns, they support politicians to put together policy agendas and manifestos, and they contribute directly to policy making when they work with ministers and civil servants. However, while the British media report extensively on think-tank output and activity when it concerns British politics, the opposite is true for the European Union level of politics.



One reason is that British journalists have limited interest in how 'Europe works'. This is particularly deplorable with respect to the nexus of policy, politics and policy expertise, given that think-tanks and the transnational networks they are embedded in are playing an important role in the EU. There are many reasons for this latter development, not least the EU institutions' lack of resources and the resultant dependency on external expertise, and the continuing transfer of decision-making authority from the national to the EU level.

Think-tanks and the European Union: uncharted territory

So what goes on with regard to think-tanks at the EU level of politics and policy-making? While most think-tanks in EU member states are [focused on domestic affairs](#), there are some which are explicitly dedicated to EU matters. One example of such an institution is the British think-tank [Open Europe](#). From its offices in London, Brussels and Berlin, it promotes the EU as a solely economic union. Open Europe is supported by a number of British businesses and some Conservative politicians. Like many pro-market think-tanks, it is part of the [Stockholm Network](#) which seeks to be the hub of a neo-liberal European think-tank network. The Stockholm Network also has close ties to US-based conservative free market think tanks. A further British example of an EU-focused think-tank is the [Centre for European Reform](#). Largely reliant on corporate funding, it is in favour of closer European integration.

Alternatively, an example of a German think-tank expressly dedicated to EU matters is the cross-party and pro-integration [Institute for European Politics](#). Among the larger think-tanks are the publicly-funded [Centre for European Economic Research](#) and the [Centre for Applied Policy Research](#). The latter has benefited from the financial and organisational resources of Germany's largest private corporate foundation, the [Bertelsmann Foundation](#), but also uses resources from Munich's LMU University. The Centre for European Politics is another privately sponsored think-tank dedicated to European affairs. It is also part of the Stockholm Network and concentrates on providing a critique of EU legislation from a free market perspective. One last example is [Notre Europe](#). It was set up by former EU Commission President Jacques Delors. Located in Paris, it is a good example of a think-tank performing a 'revolving door' function: founded by former Brussels insiders, it provides career opportunities for young professionals who use think-tanks as a gateway into the European Parliament, the Council or the Commission.

Alongside these organisations, the 'pan European' [European Council on Foreign Relations](#) is a unique experiment among European think-tanks. It is based in seven EU countries from where it seeks to develop a 'European values-

based foreign policy' for the EU. As the European counterpart to the [American Council on Foreign Relations](#) it was financed by George Soros with the aim of providing alternatives to the increasingly unilateral outlook of foreign policy under George Bush.

A lively think-tank world also exists within Brussels itself. Many think-tanks receive a large share of their funding from research-commissioning EU bodies, but private corporations are also important financiers. One example is the [Centre for European Policy Studies](#). If funding is a proxy for relevance or even influence, then it must be one of the more substantial players in Brussels. Over a third of its 7.6 million euro budget is funded by the EU and about 20 per cent comes from private corporations. Its research programmes seem to mirror the EU Commission's core directorate general structure. The [Bruegel](#) organisation also offers an example of a well-funded think-tank. Sponsored by EU member governments and large corporations, it has been credited with significant influence on EU public policy. Unlike many other EU-focused think tanks in Brussels, Bruegel avoids money flowing directly from EU institutions to bolster its claims of independence from the Commission.



Note taking during the Commissioner hearings at the European Parliament, Credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)

Finally, one last breed of think-tank should be mentioned. The European 'political foundations' are recent creations following [protracted negotiations](#) between the Commission, Parliament and Council over whether money should be made available to support think-tanks associated with the European political parties. When, in 2008, consensus was reached on funding these foundations, official [expectations](#) were that they would contribute to stepping up the organisational capacities of the European parties and help promote dialogue between European citizens.

The [underlying rationale](#) of directing money towards the setting up of de facto party think-tanks was that the Commission wanted foundations to foster the legitimacy of EU institutions. Today, many of the 16 European political parties have [associated foundations](#), financed on the basis of their share of seats in the EU Parliament. Since 2008, this funding arrangement has meant that the European People's Party's [Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies](#) has received the largest chunk of funding – around 4.5 million euros in 2014. In contrast, the [Organisation for European Interstate Cooperation](#), associated with [Europeans United for Democracy](#), received 150,000 euros in 2014.

How is European tax payers' money used by these organisations? There is still little research on this type of EU think-tank actor available and the foundations are not exactly in the crosshairs of critical journalism. Research by Dieter Plehwe and Matthias Schlögl came to the [conclusion](#) that the [New Direction Foundation](#) – the foundation of the Eurosceptic [Alliance of European Conservative and Reformists](#) (AECR) in the Parliament – has provided 'a complementary structure that allows para-political forces' in countries without parliamentary representation in the AECR party to take part in its political networks. European party foundations also support issue networks across official party alliances. While mainstream Conservatives from the European People's Party and Eurosceptics from AECR officially keep a distance, the party's foundations promote quite similar perspectives in several areas.

The impact of think-tanks on the EU policy process

The issue of Eurobonds offers a useful illustration of the potential impact of think-tanks on EU policy. In 2010, the integrationist Centre for European Policy Studies and the Bruegel think-tank pushed the idea of Eurobonds at the same time as the then Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker spoke favourably of the idea. Both think-tanks are well-funded by EU institutions, private and corporate sponsors and EU governments, including the

German government. However, in 2011 Bruegel felt the wrath of Angela Merkel's government, which had turned publicly against the idea of Eurobonds. Threats of funding cuts may have succeeded in moderating Bruegel's agenda on the issue. At the same time, centre-right think-tanks such as the German Centre for European Politics stepped up their attack on Eurobonds. The Eurobond controversy was very much a think-tank 'battle' in this respect, pitting certain think-tanks against others.

There is less ideological diversity between think-tanks dedicated to EU matters in comparison to the diversity we find among domestic policy think-tanks in EU member states. There is a trend towards polarisation between think-tanks in favour of 'ever closer union' and think-tanks promoting an economic Union. Furthermore, the number of think-tanks in favour of an economic Union outweighs the number of think-tanks dedicated to EU integration. But, of course, resources and the effectiveness of networks matter as much as the raw number of think-tanks.

It is unrealistic to expect such a polarised and skewed think-tank landscape to contribute to a lively 'market of ideas', given the comparative lack of a wide spread of policy perspectives taken by think-tanks. Whether think-tanks actually contribute to an independent and diversifying European civil society is therefore questionable. A comparison between national policy discussions involving think-tanks and those on the EU level finds that the former are usually more complex and multi-faceted than the more direct and polarised opposition of supporters and opponents of 'ever closer union' in the EU policy arena.

Interestingly, it was the European Commission itself that once cast doubts over any clear distinction between think-tanks and lobby groups. In 2009, then Vice-President of the European Commission, Siim Kallas, who was also responsible for Administrative Affairs, Audit and Anti-Fraud, voiced his [disappointment](#) at the fact that hardly any think-tank had joined the EU's voluntary Transparency Register for lobby organisations, given that the Commission included think-tanks in the definition of lobby groups. While this has changed to some degree, it is certainly not only the Commission that should monitor think-tank activity as one form of lobbying and interest politics among others.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the authors

Hartwig Pautz – *University of the West of Scotland*

Dr Hartwig Pautz is lecturer in social sciences at the University of the West of Scotland. He has published on think-tanks in the UK and Germany and is currently working on policy expertise and UK Government policy in the context of the 'Great Recession'.



Dieter Plehwe – *Berlin Social Science Research Centre*

Dr Dieter Plehwe is senior fellow at the Berlin Social Science Research Centre. He has published on the history of neo-liberalism and on think-tank networks. He has led the establishment of the [Think-tank Network Research Initiative](#). His current focus is on economic, social and environmental think-tanks.

