

## **A Brief Analysis of Think Tank Sector (Go to Think Tank Index Report) and the Turkish Case**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) of Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania has launched the eight edition of the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report in Washington and in New York. This report is considered to be an important benchmark for global “think tank sector”, and for its impact on policy making. This year, as a first, the launch was also marked by think tank events organized by 80 organizations in 50 countries around the world including fourteen leading think tanks from Europe, seven from North America and seven from Middle East and North Africa, three of which participated from Turkey; International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), Istanbul and Ankara; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Istanbul, Turkey, Association for Liberal Thinking (ALT), Ankara.

### **I. What is the Go to Global Think Tank Index?**

TTSCP’s Go to Global Think Tank Index was initiated in 2006 in order to gather an extensive global database for the public policy sector and analyze the contributions and emerging global trends of think tanks worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Each year, the data gathering and report preparations involve prominent academicians and leading policymakers from all around the world. In 2014, nearly 3752 scholars, think tank administrators, journalists, opinion leaders from 182 countries have participated in the process.<sup>2</sup>

The think tanks in these reports are acknowledged as “*independent or affiliated institutions that are structured as permanent bodies*”.<sup>3</sup> The very concept was derived from the London School of Economics Center for Civil Society’s definition of third sector as:

*“.. is an arena of coerced collective action around shared interest, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of state, family and market, though in practice the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institution forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power”*<sup>4</sup>.

The index’ preparation process this year has evolved around four stages: *nominations, peer/expert rankings, expert panel selections and preparation of the findings*<sup>5</sup>. The report not only endeavors to measure the work done by think tanks but also attempts to analyze think tanks’ contribution to their respective policymaking environment and civil society, and more specifically ranks the impact of their policy recommendations<sup>6</sup>. Distinct criteria are taken into account while assembling the rankings; the range varies from the quality and reputation of the think tank’s staff, their accessibility to national and international media; to their ability to bridge the gap between policymakers and the public<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> James G. McGann, “*Global Go to Think Tanks Index 2013*”, Introduction, January 2013

<sup>2</sup> James G. McGann, “*Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014*”, Acknowledgments, January 2015

<sup>3</sup> James G. McGann, “*Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014*”, January 2015

<sup>4</sup> James G. McGann “*Democratisation and Market Reform in Developing and Transitional Countries*” Introduction, Routledge Research in Comparative Politics, 2010

<sup>5</sup> James G. McGann, “*Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014*”, January 2015

<sup>6</sup> <http://gotothinktank.com/index/the-go-to-index-ranking-process/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

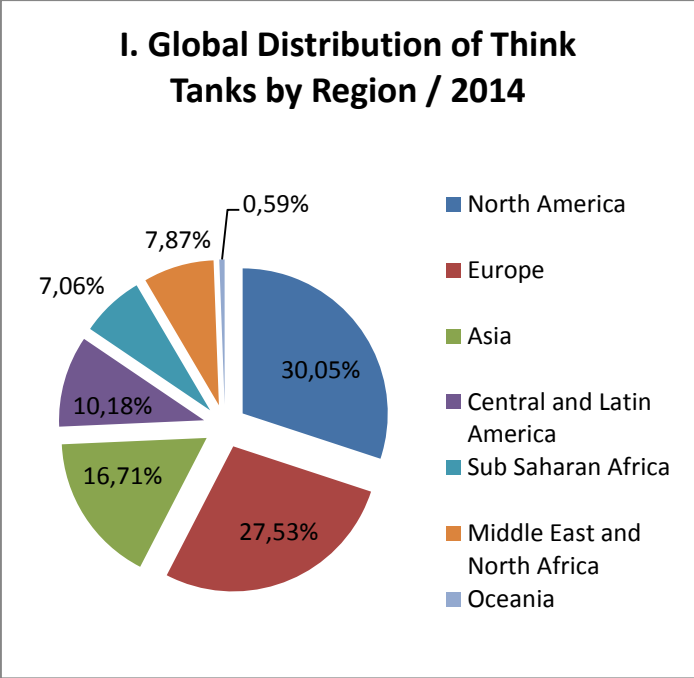
To distinguish between the think tank’s output and impact, and measure the effectiveness of their work, the index uses four categories: *Resource Indicators, Utilization Indicators, Output Indicators and Impact Indicators*<sup>8</sup>.

Various criticisms target the index, concentrating mostly on these qualifications and the credibility of the assessments. The most striking critique is the fact that the measurements are based on the perceptions of those in the sector, in this case, hundreds of journalists, policy makers, opinion leaders and academicians, rather than actual performance. There are distinct categories for rankings but the report does not go into the details of why particular a think tank was chosen. The contexts and organizations are chosen from a wide range and this fact actually hinders the objectivity of the comparisons.<sup>9</sup>

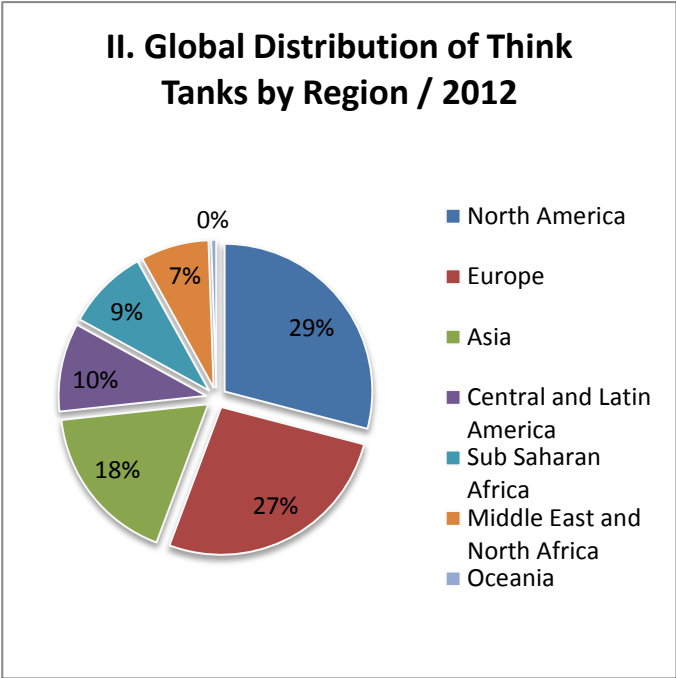
There is ample room for improvement and although such critiques undermine the findings as arbitrary, the index manages to ameliorate the definitions, qualifications and listing every year and succeeds to position itself as the leading and most exhaustive database for think tanks worldwide.

**II. Key Findings of the Global Go to Think Tanks Index 2014**

While this year’s report<sup>10</sup> covers a wider variety of institutions, which resulted in a slight increase in a number of newly established think tanks, one should be aware that the worldwide potential of think-tanks to support governments and civil society is far from exhausted. The report indicates preservation on the number of think tanks in Europe and North America, whereas there is a clear pattern of expansion in number and type of think tanks established in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Middle East and North Africa.



Data Source: Global Go To Think Tanks Index 2014



Data Source: Global Go to Think Tanks Index, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to “Go to Global Think Tanks” Reports for further explanation.  
<sup>9</sup> <http://onthinktanks.org/2012/01/20/and-the-winner-is-brookings-and-once-again-the-loser-critical-analysis/>  
<sup>10</sup> The think tanks in the report are presented under seven categories (*autonomous and independent, quasi-independent, government affiliated, quasi-governmental, university affiliated, political party affiliated and corporate*)

The findings demonstrate that the information and technological revolution, complexity and nature of policy problems as well as the need for timely, concise and implementable policy recommendations are counted as main reasons for the growth of think tanks. Yet political and regulatory environments hostile to think tanks, budgetary restrictions, undeveloped institutional capacity and increase in competition through advocacy groups, law and consultancy firms hinder the proliferation of think tanks<sup>11</sup>. The table below presents a list of problems and obstacles that think tanks are currently facing:

<b>Current Trends in Think Tanks*</b>	<b>Emerging Issues Facing Think Tanks*</b>
Globalization	Dramatic shifts in funding patterns
Growth of international actors	Increased specialization
Democratization	Increased competition
Demands for independent information and analysis	Influence and independence
Big data and supercomputers	
Increased complexity of policy issues	Outputs vs. inputs
The Information Age and the rate of technological change	Phantom NGO think tanks
Increasingly open debate about government decision making	Hybrid organizations
Global “hacktivist”, anarchist, and populist movements	Impact of the internet, new media, social networking, and the Cloud
Global structural adjustment	Action vs. ideas
Economic crisis and political paralysis	Greater emphasis on external relations and marketing strategies
Policy tsunamis	Going global
Increasing political polarization	Leadership and managing tensions
Short termism	Decentralization of power
	Blurring of the lines between think tanks and journalism
	Global Gridlock
	Crisis Fatigue

Source: James G. McGann, “Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014”, January 2015

I believe this year’s results have clearly set out major challenges that think tanks encounter worldwide:

- a) Independence: how to attain and/or sustain the financial and intellectual independence of the institution while battling over budgetary restrictions? Naturally, this problem is aggravated on the developing and transitional countries where the support, both intellectual and financial, is limited or dependent on the governments. But the situation in USA is also not a sight for sore eyes as the New York Times reported, “*the money is increasingly transforming the once-staid think-tank world into a muscular arm of foreign governments’ lobbying in Washington.*”<sup>12</sup>
- b) Concrete and timely recommendations/debates: how to provide timely, accountable and accurate policy recommendations with a global perspective in an environment of fierce competition? The rise of advocacy groups, law and consultancy firms as source of “independent” policy recommendations puts serious pressure on the think tanks to produce reliable output.

<sup>11</sup> - \* James G. McGann, “Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014”, January 2015

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html?_r=1)

- c) Impact analysis: how to measure the impact? Is it limited to the number of books, policy briefs or seminars; or the created impetus for new legislation or policy change?<sup>13</sup>
- d) Dissemination of knowledge: how to ensure the dissemination of the output through relevant media channels? Policy makers demand not only credible but also easy to grasp and fast tracked analysis. This forces think tanks to adapt to new social media tools.

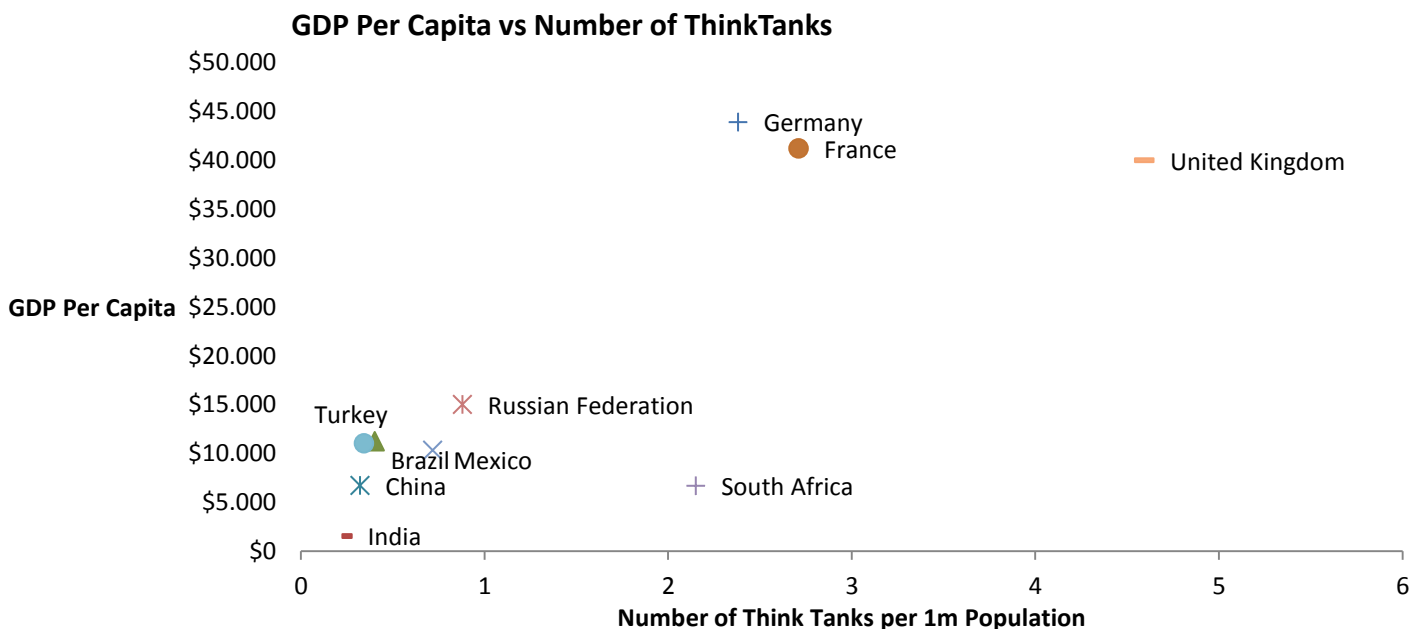
### III. Think Tanks in Turkey and their influence in policy making

If we were to narrow down the data to Turkey’s case, we would see a slight increase in the number of think tanks ranked in the index since 2008: in 2008 & 2009, the number of think tanks in Turkey listed in the report was 21, this number got a minor boost to 27 in 2010 and remained there until 2013. In 2014, a very slight expansion took place and the number reached 31.

Some of the key findings about Turkey mentioned in the 2014 report:

TESEV was ranked 72<sup>nd</sup> and Association for Liberal Thinking 87<sup>th</sup> among the worldwide best think tanks’ listing. Five institutes from Turkey made it into the top 50 think tanks in the MENA region ranking. In both categories, the Top International Economic Policy Think Tanks list and Best Managed Think Tanks list, EDAM was the only think tank from Turkey to make it to the lists<sup>14</sup>. Istanbul Policy Center was placed 29<sup>th</sup> among the best education policy think tanks.

Although one could easily cheer the good results above for showcasing an ameliorating trend, Turkey has some catching up to do with its counterparts. Below, you will find a comparative chart demonstrating the correlation between the GDP per capita and number of think tanks per one million population in BRICTS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, Turkey and South Africa) and UK, Germany, France based on 2014 findings. The gap is apparent: among the upper middle income countries, Turkey has the lowest number of think tanks (per one million population), just behind Brazil and Mexico.



Data Source: Global Go to Think Tank Report, 2014 and IMF World Economic Outlook, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Alejandro Chafuen, “15 Ways of Measuring Think Tanks Policy Influence”, Forbes Magazine, 24 April 2013  
<http://www.hacer.org/usa/us-15-ways-of-measuring-think-tank-policy-outcomes-by-alejandro-chafuen/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/>

How could Turkey get better rankings in 2015? Actually, the methodology of the data gathering and the indicators of the Global Go to Think Tanks index demonstrate the importance of “*perception among its peers*”. Think tanks in Turkey need to invest time and effort to raise awareness of their work and studies abroad. Organization of international conferences, connectedness and idea sharing with their counterparts in foreign lands could expand their recognition on a global scale. Even a relatively simple effort such as translating their published articles to English would increase the distribution of the works in hand and will positively impact the outcome.

Surely, an increase in the number of think tanks doesn’t automatically signify quality work. Think tanks (in these countries<sup>15</sup>) often face a dilemma between demonstrating their ability for independence/transparency and combatting financial restrictions. This issue gets more complicated when the private donors push for high impact work on public policy. Crucially, what we need to interrogate is whether government institutions can or will use the information and input generated from these institutions to strengthen public policy.

Within this scope, the book entitled “*Rise of Think Tanks: Foreign Policy and National Security Culture in Turkey*” by Bülent Aras, Şule Toktaş and Ümit Kurt, provides considerable insights for the Turkish case, especially on how think tanks in Turkey, affect policy making in the security area and demonstrates the views of both think tank representatives and bureaucratic entities<sup>16</sup>. While the disposition of the Turkish bureaucracy can create a challenging environment for think tanks to flourish, their goal of acting as a bridge between the state and civil society in order to serve the public interest as independent voices still remains valuable.

There are some positive developments. The Turkish Ministry of EU Affairs for instance has launched an exhaustive and important report on Turkey’s EU strategy providing a detailed account of Turkey’s EU communication strategy and an action plan for strengthening the capacity for EU-related activities abroad and in Turkey. The strategy and the action plan incorporate civil society and think tanks as consultative bodies in the decision making process. However, the question remains whether the policy oriented research and analysis on domestic and international issues generated by these think tanks will be actually used by policy makers.

As the Economist argues “*good (successful) think tanks are the ones that are able to combine intellectual depth, political influence and flair for publicity, comfortable surroundings and a streak of eccentricity*”<sup>17</sup>. I believe, in the Turkish case there is a room for improvement especially on one component of this success recipe: comfortable and idea encouraging surroundings would better help think tanks contribute a dose of objectivity and rationality into otherwise polarized debates.

Nur Beler Levi

---

<sup>15</sup> Please refer to Chart III

<sup>16</sup> Bülent Aras, Şule Toktaş and Ümit Kurt, *Rise of Think Tanks: Foreign Policy and National Security Culture in Turkey*, SETA Publications, 2010 & <http://www.insightturkey.com/rise-of-think-tanks-foreign-policy-and-national-security-culture-in-turkey/book-reviews/179>

<sup>17</sup> James G. McGann, “*Global G oto Think Tanks Index 2014*”, January 2015