Coming out of the liberal closet. Think tanks and de-democratization in Poland

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De-democratization is a global trend, with an increasing number of governments gradually dismantling democratic institutions and norms in their countries. De-democratization can be seen as an incremental crisis that radically redraws the sociopolitical order. This article is among the first to highlight external knowledge producers in autocratizing contexts. Relying on a unique data set of 40 interviews with Polish think tankers conducted before and after the Law and Justice party came to power in 2015 and began pushing the country in an authoritarian direction, the article analyses how liberal think tanks handle de-democratization. The findings show that autocratization entails a reconfiguration of the think tank space; i.e. think tanks aligning with the government blossom and think tanks opposing the government are marginalized through a lack of public funding and access to policymakers. Second, significant changes in think tank tactics, strategies, and identities, especially among liberal organizations, are exposed. The doxic mode through which liberal think tanks produce analyses and provide policy advice as “nonpartisan experts” has shifted to the use of contentious tactics and the assumption of an openly political identity as “democracy defenders”.

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Introduction

De-democratization, or autocratization, is a global trend in which an increasing number of governments are gradually dismantling democratic institutions and norms. While these processes have been studied from various angles, one aspect of de-democratization has evaded scholarly scrutiny thus far – the effects on policy advice. Understanding the changing conditions of policy advice in a de-democratizing context is crucial if we want to grasp the internal dynamics of autocratization and find strategies to counteract it.

This article approaches policy advice in de-democratization through a focus on think tanks, a special type of civil society organization (CSO), that produce social
analyses and provide policy advice to policymakers and the broader public. Their claim to having a voice in the public sphere and among decision-makers hinges upon their image as neutral experts. Hence, even though think tanks come in many varieties, one recurring characteristic is that they present themselves as independent and apolitical actors. However, what we see in the de-democratizing context of Poland is that think tanks do engage in political battles, signing political petitions and even protesting in the streets. This presents a puzzle: Why would organizations that put so much effort into manufacturing the appearance of being neutral experts compromise this image by engaging in contentious tactics more commonly seen among social movements? Departing from this empirical puzzle, the article theorizes the transformation of think tanks in a de-democratizing context with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of doxa and heterodoxy.

Think tanks are fundamentally relational organizations. They are situated at the intersection of the fields of politics, the media, the market, academia, and civil society, utilizing the forms of capital from all these fields to influence policymaking in a given direction. Indeed, hybridity is one of the defining characteristics of think tanks. This means that a variety of forms in these organizations is possible, with different think tanks emphasizing academic aspects (universities without students), closeness to media (thinkzines), links to civil society (think and do tanks), etc. This article argues that de-democratization, by radically redrawing various social fields (politics, media, civil society), forces think tanks and other CSOs to reflect upon and ultimately shift their position with respect to adjacent fields. De-democratization can be seen as an incremental crisis, which sparks a question regarding how the sociopolitical order is taken for granted – its doxa. Analysing how think tanks are handling de-democratization in Poland, this article is among the first to cast light on policy advice and the role of external knowledge producers in autocratizing contexts. The research questions are as follows: How do the strategies and tactics of think tanks transform in a de-democratizing context? How does their identity change?

The article is structured as follows. Since existing scholarship on think tanks and de-democratization is very limited, the literature overview turns to the broader scholarship on civil society and (de-)democratization to unearth themes useful for this article and identify gaps in the literature. The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it expands the scope of think tank literature to de-democratizing contexts, exploring the transformation of think tanks in the face of democratic erosion. Second, it adds a focus on another set of actors to the autocratization literature, bringing deeper understanding of the processes and effects of autocratization. Next, the theoretical tools for this study are introduced. Bourdieu’s doxa and heterodoxy help convey how de-democratization affects think tanks in Poland, and the notions of tactics, strategy, and identity borrowed from the social movement literature enable a systematic analysis. The methods section presents Poland as a typical case of de-democratization. Together with Hungary, Poland is among the vanguard of democratic backsliding within the European Union. The unique data set for this article consists of 40 interviews with Polish think tanks across the ideological spectrum, conducted before and after the critical juncture of 2015, i.e. the coming to power of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party, which currently controls the government and president. Next, the article turns to the analysis of the interview data. The concluding section summarizes the findings and notes avenues for future research.
Prior scholarship on de-democratization and civil society (and think tanks)

There is a long tradition in civil society scholarship, following a Tocquevillian approach, of seeking a connection between social organizing and democratization, for instance, in studies of the transition to democracy in the late 1980s in Central and Eastern Europe and in Latin America. In a similar fashion, some scholars argue that civil society organizations can be a counterbalance as democracies are dismantled by providing checks and thus acting as democratic firewalls. What unites these studies is a shared view of civil society as a democratic force that either drives the country towards increased democratization or halts de-democratization.

Such a perspective is countered by studies on the uncivil side of social organizing, showcasing how civil society can itself be a de-democratizing force that strengthens undemocratic trends. There is also evidence that illiberal leaders have used CSOs to gain power and solidify their rule. Taken together, these studies display the ambiguous role of civil society in a de-democratizing context, which is mirrored in the divided approach that autocratizing regimes take towards civil society. It is now generally agreed that de-democratization is accompanied by the repression of CSOs critical of the government, which are in various ways excluded, harassed, or even persecuted by those regimes. These organizations, often engaged in issues associated with liberal values, such as women’s rights, environmental protection, and minority rights, experience a shrinking sphere of action. However, a recent strand of research has observed a simultaneous and reversed trend for CSOs that align with autocratizing governments. These organizations experience increased support and inclusion, and thus, their sphere of action expands rather than contracts. Hence, de-democratizing regimes reconfigure civil societies.

Scholarship on think tanks in de-democratizing contexts is very limited. Mirroring the wider field of civil society studies, some authors highlight the democratizing potential of think tanks, while others are more sceptical. A slightly larger section of the literature is dedicated to think tanks in authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, and Belarus. These studies convincingly show that think tanks can be very useful for authoritarian leaders, serving both domestic and international purposes, for example, as a more external but controlled source of information for rulers, thereby creating a false impression of pluralism in domestic policy debates, or as informal diplomatic channels in the face of restrictions on bilateral diplomacy. The specific conditions of de-democratization, i.e. the coexistence of remnants of democratic institutions and norms with authoritarian solutions, limit the transferability of lessons from authoritarian contexts. What we can expect in contexts of democratic erosion is that think tanks will experience dynamics similar to those of broader civil society. While autocratizing rulers sometimes avail themselves of the ideas developed in think tanks and think tankers that align ideologically with governments have filled the public administrations of illiberal regimes, there is also evidence of liberal think tanks and expert organizations being cut off and harassed by the government.

Learning from prior scholarship and being one of the first studies of policy advice in a de-democratizing context, this article takes an exploratory approach to enable capturing the transformations of think tanks (asking broadly about tactics, strategies, and identities) and making no a priori assumptions about think tanks enhancing or eroding democracy.
Doxa and heterodoxy in de-democratization

To better understand how think tanks handle processes of de-democratization, this article turns to Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argued that “the primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident”⁵. Hence, according to this practical logic, most of the time, our social positioning is taken for granted and intuitively understood: “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness”.⁶ Normally, we do not realize or reflect upon alternative structurations of the sociopolitical order in which we live. In this naturalization, we are guided by doxa, the domain of pre-reflexive belief, or “of that which is taken for granted [where] political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned”.⁷ However, in times of crisis, when the conditions of existence and the playing field are shaken, this “doxic mode” is put into question, bringing “the undiscussed into discussion”, thus dismantling the legitimacy of self-evidence. The questioning, what Bourdieu calls heterodoxy, disturbs the obviousness of the sociopolitical order. This process, prompted by a crisis, evokes reflexivity and “the awakening of political consciousness”.⁸

What we can extrapolate from Bourdieu is that the space of think tanks will be structured with some rules, practices, and positions that are taken for granted. In a concrete empirical setting, certain organizations will occupy a given place in this space with respect to other actors; they will perform certain functions as well as define themselves and be defined by others in a certain way. This positioning will generally not be reflected upon. The situation might change in times of crisis, which shakes the obviousness of doxa. We know from previous studies of think tanks that they are very keen to take on an apolitical image, cherishing such a self-understanding and presenting themselves as nonpartisan expert organizations.⁹ What gives think tanks legitimacy is their image and reputation as nonpartisan, which does not mean that they truly are nonpartisan. This article treats the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2015 in Poland and the de-democratization that followed as a critical juncture that shook the doxic way that think tanks operate and forced them into a heterodoxic, reflexive mode of operation.

Studying the transformative effects that de-democratization has had on the tactics, strategies, and identities of Polish think tanks, the article leans on established notions from the civil society and social movement scholarship. Collective identity is defined as “a perception of a shared status or relation”.¹⁰ Identities are often studied together with strategies and tactics, and their complicated relationship is explored. Tactics are defined as specific types of action undertaken by a CSO.¹¹ The set of tactics characteristic of a CSO will form its repertoire and, following the social movement literature, might be grouped into three basic types: conventional, disruptive, and violent.¹² Strategies are commonly defined as “the conscious decisions and actions activists take to pursue their objectives”.¹³ While sometimes conflated with the notion of tactics, strategies should be seen as the more general, often longer term, course of action taken by a CSO. Hence, for heuristic purposes, tactics, strategies, and identities can be seen as organized in a hierarchical way, with specific tactics grouped into more general strategies that in turn form the basis of organizational identities.¹⁴ In practice, however,
tactics, strategies, and identities are never fully aligned, and might come in conflict with each other, which prompts a transformation of the organization. For instance, when a think tank adopts a new tactic, it might affect some of the organization’s strategies, and push the think tank to redefine its identity. Importantly, if strategies are linked to identities, the idea of a purely rationalistic framework is called into question. As Polletta and Jasper influentially argued, “Collective identities can supply criteria for making decisions that compete with instrumentally rational ones. […] Strategic choices are not simply neutral decisions about what will be most effective, in this view; they are statements about identity”. CSOs often choose what to do based on “who they are,” thus following the logic of appropriateness and not exclusively the logic of consequentialism. In effect, the ways an organization operates, or its strategies and tactics, coincide with its organizational identity, “organizations embody forms of action”. Another qualification of an overly rationalistic view of “strategy” comes from Bourdieu, for whom strategies are adjustments to the social surrounding and its change rather than “the product of a conscious and rational calculation”. Hence, this article relies on the conviction that reason and embodied intuition do not have to be opposed to each other. Looking for how the tactics, strategies, and identities of think tanks have changed due to de-democratization of their surroundings, the analysis seeks to detect the heterodoxic discourse, i.e. a reflexive mode, that think tanks are expected to operate in. This, however, does not preclude some of the adjustments made by think tanks (in their self-perception and the types of action they take) being less of a rational, conscious calculation and more of an intuitive morphing to better fit the space left for these institutions.

Case selection and method

The analysis focuses on Polish think tanks. As a single-country study, this article seeks to “yield general theoretical insights with comparative implications” for other de-democratizing countries. The unique data set consists of qualitative semi-structured interviews collected in 2013 and in 2020/2021, which makes it possible to track the changes in the identity, strategies, and tactics of Polish think tanks both before and after democratic erosion instead of relying exclusively on ex ante rationalizations.

After the peaceful Round Table Agreements of 1989, Poland became frequently cited as an exemplary pupil of liberal democracy and the market economy. Having fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria and joined the European Union in 2004, the country continued to be lauded the epitome of successful democratization. Part and parcel of this success story was Polish civil society, which significantly contributed to the overthrow of the undemocratic state socialist regime, and later, with the generous support of foreign funding, CSOs, especially think tanks, helped keep the institutional and economic transformation on track and solidified the (neo)liberal consensus. This given trajectory was reverted, however, when the radical right-wing Law and Justice party won parliamentary elections and secured the presidency in 2015. At that point, a counterrevolution moving in a rapid and systematic manner was launched, shifting the country in an illiberal direction. Liberal institutions guaranteeing the accountability of the executive branch (e.g. the courts, the Constitutional Tribunal, the media, ombudsmen) have been under attack. CSOs, many of which were equated by the new incumbents to former liberal elites, were
among the first institutions to be targeted.\textsuperscript{43} Funding was cut for various civil rights organizations; public smear campaigns were orchestrated by the state-controlled media, and the legal harassment of these organizations began. The space for liberal CSOs shrank significantly.\textsuperscript{44} At the same time, parallel structures of newly founded conservative organizations sympathetic to the ruling party were instituted, and significant financial and symbolic resources (recognition, access to decision-makers) were channelled to new and already existing CSOs that supported the regime. A crucial institution in this respect was the newly founded National Freedom Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development, which provides CSOs with financial support programmes. This government agency has engaged in a systematic restructuring of Polish civil society by privileging CSOs that are ideologically aligned with the government.\textsuperscript{45} The National Freedom Institute has a special funding scheme (PROO4) reserved for think tanks. Right-wing think tanks (and some CSOs that claim the think tank label but lack any previous achievements in policy knowledge production or advice) have been clearly prioritized in this new funding scheme.

In Poland, as elsewhere, think tanks constitute the top tier of organized civil society, capturing greater economic (larger average budgets), human (higher average education of staff) and social capital (easier access to the public sphere in the form of media and other elites).\textsuperscript{46} Polish think tanks fall into the same legal category as other CSOs and register as either associations or foundations. The development of think tanks in Poland mirrors the trajectory of broader civil society in the country, with an initial phase of rapid expansion after democratization in the early 1990s, a stalemate after the withdrawal of foreign funding in the mid-2000s and a boost in the number of organizations with a conservative profile beginning in approximately 2015.

According to available directories, there are approximately 70 think tanks in Poland today, and representatives of 24 of them were interviewed for this study. There were only approximately 40 such institutions during the first wave of interviews in 2013, of which 9 were selected for the sample. All interviews were conducted with CEOs, directors of research or board members, i.e. people with a deep understanding of the institutional perspective of the organization they work in. For some think tanks, more than one staff member was interviewed, so the total number of interviews from both waves was 40.\textsuperscript{47} The sample was purposefully selected to comprise a broad range of think tanks in terms of budget and staff size, ideological profile, issue area and organizational age. In this way, even though no outright representativity can be claimed, maximum effort was made to include diverse voices and experiences of Polish think tanks. Each conversation was recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. No requests for anonymity were made; however, to keep the focus on the organization, references in the text are made to think tanks, not individuals. In this article, the argument focuses only on liberal and centrist think tanks, in which the shift in tactics, strategies, and identities is most consequential. These constitute the largest group in the Polish think tank landscape and, hence, the biggest share in the sample (15 of 24 organizations). Leftist and conservative think tanks are only referenced as supplementary data. While the time comparison is crucial for this article, the main emphasis in the analysis is placed on the transformations after 2015, with the data from the first wave of interviews forming a reference point.
Manufacturing nonpartisanship – the pre-2015 doxic mode

Before 2015, liberal and centrist organizations dominated the Polish think tank landscape. The few existing right-wing and leftist institutions found themselves more on the fringe of the public sphere, with occasional access to policymakers. Despite complaints about meagre recognition among decision-makers of the value of external policy advice, all think tanks pictured influence on policymaking as their ambition.

There are various definitions of think tanks, but for me, a think tank is an organization that aims to influence the shape of public policy. To do that, the other side must be willing to listen. And this other side is hopeless. There are obviously some niches where you can try to sell your ideas, but it’s not systemic.48

Due to this proclaimed weakness of the political class, think tankers expressed a sense of “dangling in a vacuum”,49 lacking partners on the decision-making side. The typical strategy for think tanks to reach their goal of policy influence was to provide policy advice through such tactics as providing consultations on policy proposals at various stages or supplying decision-makers with ideas for new policies. The unresponsiveness of decision-makers created obstacles for deploying these tactics and strategies. In effect, some organizations struggled with their identity as a think tank.50 As a complementary strategy, many think tanks turned to the broader audience to educate the public about and seek support for their policy ideas, hoping to influence decision-makers indirectly through a shift in public opinion.

In such relatively unwelcoming surroundings, many think tanks resorted to diversified forms of action to secure their survival. Sometimes it led to think tanks employing tactics not central to their goal of policy influence. Think tanks “have spread themselves too thinly, like ‘we can do anything depending on where the money is – give us the money and we’ll do it’”.51 Facing the need to diversify their tactics and focus on various projects with currently available grants, the interviewed think tankers highlighted the struggle to not give in to mission drift.52

As a pure think tank, [our Institute] would never survive, it wouldn’t have enough financial means for the activities, so unfortunately, we need to reach out for different projects. We are careful to always have a research component, but it’s often simply concrete engagement.53

While most think tanks saw this multitasking as undesirable, polluting their idealized image of a “pure” think tank, other organizations declared that an exclusive focus on knowledge production and policy advice based on that knowledge was not what they strove for. They strategically planned engagement in projects that included both knowledge production and community engagement. These organizations cherished their identity as think-and-do tanks (e.g. Shipyard 2013), marking their belonging to the broader community of CSOs:

[We] engage in social campaigning, realized in partnership with other organizations, which are NGOs but not think tanks. We … feel like part of this community. We don’t want to be the smarty who sits on the side and tells other people what to do.54

In line with the literature,55 the interviewed organizations described having various forms of hybrid identities.56

In addition to hybridity, a striking theme in the interviews with respect to organizational identity was the unwillingness, especially among centrist and liberal organizations, to talk about and reflect upon their ideological position. They repeatedly
underlined their nonpartisanship and often claimed to be apolitical, at least in the sense of existing beyond the party-political debate. One telling example came from the Civil Development Forum, a think tank founded in 1997 by Leszek Balcerowicz, who is still chair of the council. Balcerowicz, (in)famous for implementing the neoliberal “shock therapy” that radically transformed the Polish economy after 1989, was Minister of Finance in 1989–1991 and 1997–2000 and chairman of the liberal party Freedom Union (Unia Wolności) 1995–2000. Nevertheless, the CEO of the Civil Development Forum shrugged at a question about the think tank’s ideological profile:

“We never had any meta-discussions about ideology. … It was a tactical decision not to engage in moral and worldview issues. … We left it out, consciously, not to discourage those who could potentially support us but also to honor the will of our founder [Leszek Balcerowicz] – with the aim of being more serious, more scholarly.”

The desired strategy of the think tank – reaching decision-makers with policy advice through the procurement of collaborative grants and the production of papers that live up to academic standards – made having an affinity with an outspoken ideological profile undesirable. Aligning themselves with academia and its Weberian ideal of disinterested, independent knowledge production, think tanks used the construction of an “apolitical” or “nonideological” identity to maintain the necessary distance from politics. Interestingly, the lack of reflection on issues of ideology is presented here as a strategic move. As argued elsewhere, the apolitical and nonideological identity evoked multiple connotations of politics, which served specific purposes for think tanks. First, it leaned on the notion of politics as partisanship, and hence an apolitical identity projected objectivity and neutrality crucial for think tanks’ role as knowledge producers. Second, it alluded to a common understanding of politics as a uncivil, corrupt sphere, thus projecting think tanks as civil (society) actors, providing a critical reference point for formal politics. Such an identity construct also alluded to the Central European tradition of anti-politics, as developed by the dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s.

The default apolitical identification, when explicitly inquired about and thus at least to some extent born out of an unreflective state, appeared to have some ideological taint after all.

*De facto*, our being apolitical was directed at defending the reforms defined as free market and democracy in general but referring to the tradition of the democratic opposition, post-Solidarity rather than post-communism. It was apolitical but with a defined mission to modernize the country.

The “modernization of the country” indicates the (neo)liberal consensus in politics and the economy that was enthusiastically and almost univocally embraced by various actors in Poland after 1989, including many think tanks and CSOs.

Before 2015, Polish think tanks struggled to shape their strategy and tactics in line with their think tank identity. What a think tank should do, according to them, was produce knowledge in the form of various reports and policy briefs and spread this knowledge to decision-makers, sometimes via the media and the broader public. Their ambition was to provide evidence on which to base political decisions. Blaming constraints in the structure of political and economic opportunities, think tankers developed a hybrid identity, combining think tank strategies and tactics with those borrowed from other fields, for instance, from CSOs (direct engagement in community projects). One firm element of their identity, and the one that was
most difficult for liberal and centrist think tankers to critically reflect upon, was their expressed apolitical image. The doxic mode of think tanks prior to 2015, especially those situated in the liberal mainstream, was a nonpartisan and nonideological identity.

**Manoeuvring political engagement – the heterodoxic mode post-2015**

The remaining part of the analysis is divided into two sections, the first reviewing how liberal and centrist think tanks adapted their strategies and tactics after the 2015 crisis and the second focusing on how, in conjunction, the studied think tanks redefined their identity.

The landscape of Polish think tanks changed significantly between the two interview waves. Before 2015, there were few right-wing think tanks, while liberal and centrist organizations dominated the scene, as they received more funding as well as attention from the public and policymakers. As the CEO of one right-wing think tank pointed out.

> We, as an environment critical of the previous governments, felt it acutely, that [before 2015], we were practically outside the circle, with very occasional possibilities to appear in the media or to participate in expert discussions.63

After 2015, the vectors flipped, “in the same spirit as before, only more”.64 Liberal and centrist organizations now find it much harder to obtain public funding and access to decision-makers,65 while these routes are more open to right-wing organizations. This reconfiguration, which benefitted right-wing think tanks, was largely orchestrated by the government: “parallel third sector organizations [appeared] – I don’t know if the third sector, because if we look at the way our counterparts are built, well, they are more GONGOs [government-organized nongovernmental organizations] than NGOs.”66 For liberal, centrist, and leftist CSOs, especially those dealing with issues towards which the government is openly hostile, such as gender equality or minority rights, public funding opportunities have been cut off. Instead, a range of previously existing and newly founded organizations that align ideologically with the government have seen significant boosts in their budgets.

**De-democratization and think tank tactics and strategies**

The new political situation has forced especially liberal think tanks to change. While before 2015, think tankers complained about the lack of established access routes and the general unwillingness of the political class to accept their expertise, after 2015, illiberal policymaking,67 with its centralization, dismantled consultation, and drastically shortened legislation process,68 entailed a further reduction in access for most external actors. For liberal CSOs, giving policy advice has become almost impossible.

> The Ministry [of Justice] ceased to be a partner for us. We are convinced that we cannot trust it, so here, from our side, the efforts to make them use our solutions and implement them are quite … well, we present these solutions and so on, but we do not work on it too intensively […] We have put those activities on hold a bit.69

Such bracketing (“putting on hold”) also relates to another typical way that think tanks operate – knowledge production, which furthers the think tanks’ policy advice and
influence goals. When access is blocked, it is harder to internally motivate (and find funds for) knowledge production. Liberal think tanks have started questioning their doxic mode of operation, which, despite the unfavourable opportunity structure even before 2015, largely leaned on policy analysis and advice: “We also came to the conclusion that it is not analyses alone that can change anything.”70 This sentiment was echoed by another liberal think tanker: “at this moment, think tank activity in Poland […] such activity is simply losing its raison d’être a bit.”71 Yet, another leftist think tanker concurred, noting that “it is no longer enough just to be a medium that shifts the discourse”.72 For liberal and leftist organizations, de-democratization and, more concretely, illiberal policymaking have affected their two most basic activities – knowledge production and policy advice. Not surprisingly, the narrative about changes after 2015 differs between think tanks sympathetic to the government led by the Law and Justice party and those opposing it. Right-wing organizations have intensified these tactics and strategies, often claiming better access to decision-making and a broader demand for conservative policy ideas after 2015. These organizations acknowledge that a declaration of ideological allegiance is a requirement but by no means a guarantee to be let into the consultation room.

The activities of liberal think tanks have been reoriented towards a greater watchdog function and more engagement in education.

The Polish conditions are as they are, so sometimes there is no special need for think tanks. However, it turns out that there is quite a lot going on in the sphere of monitoring or classifying or watchdogging reality, checking how it all works.73

The CEO of the Helsinki Foundation explained that education used to be the organization’s main tactic during the first years of the transition, when the think tank, founded in 1989, defined its goal as “safeguarding [society] against the possible return of an undemocratic system”.74 Once the liberal democratic institutions were in place, the organization turned to litigation and advocacy as their main tactics. Since 2015, “whether we want to or not, […] we are partly returning to the basic education”.75

While think tanks are often very reflexive institutions and many of the shifts in tactics and strategies were deliberately designed, not all these changes can be seen as calculated decisions. The CEO of Court Watch, telling the story of his think tank after 2015, concluded that they gradually dropped the training of judges, which used to be one of their core activities. “And maybe it wasn’t a very conscious decision either […] Such trainings […] died out over time”. Nonetheless, new tactics seem to be emerging, opening new avenues: “It wasn’t some special strategic decision like ‘now this is how we’re going to do it,’ but there were opportunities, there were possibilities […] it just so happened that we could do it here”.76 The notion of strategy adopted in this article allows to capture the shifts in tactics and strategy that happened without a “strategic decision” being made by the think tank. Some changes “just so happened,” some activities “died out over time,” and other “possibilities” appeared. This morphing of tactics and strategy into the new sociopolitical landscape should not be overlooked when analysing more explicit decisions about shifts in activities.

The change in the political situation required not only the slight adaptation of liberal think tanks’ tactics and strategies but also necessitated a radical stepping out of their comfort zone. De-democratization “forced [think tanks] to take sides and take more activist than think tank actions”.77 They now use contentious tactics
more typical of social movements, such as participation in protests and signing political petitions: “At the moment, it’s like we’re habitually [nagminnie] signing [petitions].” For this think tank, it has become a new strategy, a course of action it switched to. Other think tanks are more cautious and have internal discussions every time before signing a petition or taking a political stance. However, still others have decided to engage in such contentious tactics only if the topic aligns with their competences.

We get 10 or 15 proposals a month for various addresses, letters to sign. We respond ‘no’ to some of them, risking offending many of the people sympathizing with us. However, we must accept the rule that we never express our opinions on subjects in which we do not feel we have strong alignment or expertise.

Apparently, the turn to more contentious tactics has given rise to certain dilemmas for these think tanks: “We sort of, overall, should be a research institution, though. And this taking of positions is very reactive, not proactive. […] So, this is not a comfortable situation for me as the head of a think tank.”

De-democratization and think tank identity

While even before 2015, many of the studied organizations showcased a diversified repertoire of action, resulting in a hybrid identity, one clear trope in the interviews from 2020/2021 is that liberal think tanks have trouble with nonpartisanship, which was their core identity trait before 2015. The identity of disinterested experts producing policy knowledge requires a public sphere where these ideas can be expressed and heard. Think tanks are relational actors who define themselves with respect to actors from adjacent fields, such as the media, politics, and academia. When these other fields transform, think tanks are also affected.

It is not the case that such a think tank simply digs around, does research, and then is in a different space. Unfortunately, it is not. Everything is currently wallowing in the sludge of a political fight, and from our point of view, this makes it very difficult for a think tank to work as we understand it, that is, to serve the public interest.

“Serve the public interest” refers to developing policy ideas and not dirtying one’s hands by engaging in politics. Such distancing is much harder since “the political dispute has moved to the level of public policies.” Stanley Bill and Ben Stanley concur: “Polish politics remains dominated not by disagreements over policy, but by the metapolitical question of who has the right to govern Poland.” In effect,

such a broadly defined nonpartisanship [is] impossible. I mean, you can be not affiliated with a particular party, but it is still difficult to avoid the fundamental choice imposed on us by the current power holders.

The liberal and centrist think tanks’ pre-2015 doxic mode was their taken-for-granted nonpartisan identity. They disapproved of me inquiring about their ideological position. The changes after 2015 put a spotlight on the hitherto invisible mainstream liberal position, which was hidden behind the veil of an apolitical and nonideological identity. The illiberal policymaking of the Law and Justice party has entailed a “fundamental choice” for these organizations – for or against democracy – with no room for a neutral position.
After ‘15, well, obviously those political stakes have risen, we just found that we must actively participate in, well, opposing unconstitutional government actions, right? Hence, we have a team of legal experts that publishes positions on the rule of law, etc., and that, I think, is very much something that we should be doing. And, of course, this is political engagement, isn’t it? But in our view, it is justified precisely by a higher reason. […] I think that any power holders who violate the rule of law should be met with resistance from all possible organizations.\(^8\)

In line with Michael Bernhard, who argues that “civil society can function as democracy’s firewall against autocratic power grabs,”\(^8\) the liberal, centrist, and leftist think tanks interviewed for this project have begun to see themselves as “democracy defenders”. This clearly clashes with their pre-2015 view of themselves as “neutral experts.” The think tanks rationalize this new self-understanding, as organizations who openly take sides and develop strategies and tactics accordingly, by reference to external conditions – in their narratives, the transformation was necessitated by de-democratization. Compromising nonpartisanship through political engagement is “justified by a higher reason” and a “choice imposed on us by the current power holders”.

Our profile of projects has certainly changed as well … It was certainly more technical before all this madness started. […] So, we made a decision that the things we deal with will be a bit in opposition to this counterreformation, which is happening in Poland, right? That if it’s already clearly going back to the Middle Ages, then you can’t just deal with numerical methods there, right, and [mathematical] integration, because it’s kind of pointless. Especially if you’re doing social integrals. They should be somehow relevant, you know?\(^9\)

The concept of being relevant appears to have changed after 2015. It is no longer solely connected to policy influence. In the face of de-democratization, those who abide by the doxic mode of policy advice and nonpartisanship do so at the cost of silencing themselves.

And, in my opinion, those organizations that try to go beyond this dispute do it at the price of being silent on certain issues that are quite fundamental for what is happening in Poland. I mean the democratic backsliding, the violation of the constitution, and so on. They simply decide that they will deal with something else.\(^9\)

According to this view, the democratic erosion in Poland is so serious that a neutral image, which the liberal think tanks upheld before 2015, is viable only if one chooses not to speak up. For organizations that perform social analysis, this means that a shift in strategy, a decision to “deal with something else,” is required. However, taking an openly political stance sits uneasily with the identity of an expert organization and is deemed “unthink-tanky” by some organizations. One interviewee reflected upon the incompatibility between declaring a political position, which they feel they must do to defend liberal democracy, and maintaining a neutral image.

We have reactions. Once we got too involved on a certain side, and of course, we got a lot of signals of support, but also, to a lesser extent, but still it was significant, the number of signals that they didn’t like it, that we shouldn’t take a stand, and this was not what they expect from us.\(^9\)

The negative reactions, the interviewee believed, sprang from the fact that “people think it is … and somehow, we’ve gotten them used to it, too, that we’re just this kind of data source for everybody that’s supposed to be kind of transparent”.\(^9\) De-democratization apparently erased think tanks’ transparency (or doxa) both in the
sense of their identity as a neutral actor and in their sense of obviousness, a position that did not have to be reflected upon.

De-democratization forces liberal think tanks into a heterodoxic mode, in which their taken-for-granted role and position are made visible and must be renegotiated.

We even had a rather serious dilemma once. Maybe in such conditions as we have in Poland or Hungary – is the role of a think tank really to sit and think and say what is good, how it should be? Or, unfortunately, at some point, a think tank has to change into a fighting activist who says, “Values are important, we have to do so and so,” and changes a little bit from this role of an unbiased observer to something like this – an engaged activist. We try as much as we can to stick to this role of observation – cool, analytical. However, we do not hide the fact that it is extremely difficult. Sometimes we operate outside this role.94

Embracing their identity of defenders of democracy was not an easy step for liberal think tanks, as it went against the image they had put so much effort into manufacturing. The critical juncture of 2015 destabilized their doxic mode of operation and identification. As one of the think tankers acutely observed:

Maybe what was going on before 2015, well, as we were in a bit of a different sort of position when it came to, I don’t know, government action, right? [...] Now we are in the opposition, and back then we weren’t. So maybe we just didn’t see various situations, right? I mean we didn’t reflect on them at all.95

The heterodoxic mode made certain things visible. Interestingly, after 2015, organizations perceived to be right-wing became increasingly likely to talk about successfully occupying a neutral position.

I believe that we are independent because we have not entered this dispute. We are the only ones who can afford a centred approach. I personally know many presidents of Polish think tanks, and I feel sorry for them because they cannot afford it because they are tied strongly to one side.96

This indicates that the doxic understanding of nonpartisanship as a default identity of think tanks has not disappeared under questioning by heterodoxy. Instead, this self-understanding has been adopted by other think tanks following the shift in the mainstream public discourse. While for liberal think tanks their ideology and political positioning were largely unreflected upon before 2015, after the right-wing orientation became mainstream, the cloak of invisibility now serves the right-wing organizations in their identity formation.

Conclusions

The democratic erosion that has ensued since the coming to power of the Law and Justice government in 2015 marked a critical juncture for liberal and centrist Polish think tanks that pushed them to transform. This article studied the processes of think tanks’ adaptation (both calculated and not) to the new sociopolitical landscape in terms of their tactics, strategies, and identity. While the pre-2015 period offered far from favourable opportunity structures for think tanks, especially in terms of funding and access to decision-makers, liberal think tanks managed to carve out a position in the comfortable middle of the sociopolitical space, where they could omit ideology and politics from their self-narrative and manufacture a nonpartisan identity. This doxic mode of nonreflection about their political positioning was questioned after 2015. As discussed in the literature,97 notwithstanding think tanks’ actual and
perceived political proximities, an apolitical identity is intrinsic to think tanks even beyond Polish context. Hence this shift cannot be explained solely as a corrective of an idealized image. Since 2015 in Poland, the interviewees expressed a sense of crisis that demanded extraordinary measures. De-democratization sparked heterodoxy among liberal think tanks, leading to “the awakening of political consciousness”.

The think tanks were pushed out of the “primal state of innocence of doxa” and forced to renegotiate their tactics and strategies. Those opposing the illiberal shift have since added contentious tactics to their repertoire, engaging in protests and signing petitions, which are rather unusual activities for think tanks. According to the literature on the entanglement of tactics, strategy, and identity, the reorientation of tactics has affected the self-perception of think tanks. These organizations have been forced to redefine what it means to be a think tank in a de-democratizing context. Taking a stance against the illiberal politics and the policies of the Law and Justice party, they came out of the liberal closet identifying as defenders of democracy.

This is one of the first studies to shed light on policy advice institutions in a de-democratizing context. It shows that think tanks are not exempt from the deep reconfigurations of the social space observed in the broader civil society literature. Antigovernment think tanks are deliberately circumvented, with limited chances of obtaining public funding or access to decision-makers, while progovernment organizations flourish. This finding clearly suggests that policy advice institutions should be included in studies of civil society reconfiguration in autocratizing contexts. The analysis shows that liberal think tanks alter their tactics, strategies, and identities to find new ways to remain relevant in their changing surroundings. Hence, autocratization transforms not only the civil society (and think tank) landscape but also the actors involved. While think tank scholarship is still predominantly focused on liberal contexts, assuming that think tanks function similarly around the globe, this article suggests that there are significant differences in the way think tanks operate depending on the political system. This calls for a new comparative research agenda. Another implication of the findings is that when exploring potential for redemocratization, think tanks appear to be one more place to look. The empirical data indicate wide alliances between think tanks and other CSOs in adopting contentious tactics. Future studies can examine whether this tightening further erases the specificity of think tanks as policy advice institutes. Future studies should also assess the effectiveness of this more explicit political orientation of liberal think tanks in counteracting de-democratization.

Notes
2. Weaver and McGann, “Think Tanks and Civil Societies,” 17.
3. Jezierska and Sörbom, “Proximity and Distance.”
4. Medvetz, Think Tanks in America; Stone, “Recycling Bins, Garbage Cans.”
5. Weaver, “Changing World of Think Tanks.”
6. Zielonka and Rupnik, “From Revolution to ‘Counter-Revolution’."
12. Carothers and Brechenmacher, Closing Space; Glasius, Schalk and De Lange, “Illiberal Norm Diffusion.”
14. Kravchenko, Kings and Jezierska, Resourceful Civil Society?
15. Scott, “Transnationalizing Democracy Promotion.”
17. Ab, “China’s Foreign Policy”; Menegazzi, Rethinking Think Tanks; Wuthnow and Chen, “China’s ‘New-Type’”; Zhu, “Influence of Think Tanks.”
21. Özlé and Obach, “Polarization and the Environmental Movement.”
22. Bourdieu, Distinction, 471.
24. Ibid., 166.
25. Ibid., 168.
26. Ibid., 170.
27. Jezierska and Sörbom, “Proximity and Distance”; Stone, “Out-Side the Realm of Politics.”
30. For an overview of different classifications of tactics see Taylor and van Dyke, “Get up, Stand up”.
31. Tarrow, Power in Movement.
33. See Online Appendix.
35. Ibid., 293.
37. Tarrow, “Progress outside of Paradise.”
40. Ost, The Defeat of Solidarity.
43. Bill, “Counter-Elite Populism.”
44. Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel, “Polish Interest Groups.”
47. See Online Appendix.
48. Interview, Batory Foundation, 1 July 2013.
49. Interview, Green Institute, 2 July 2013.
51. Interview, National Federation of Polish NGOs, 1 July 2013.
52. Jones, “The Multiple Sources.”
53. Interview, Institute of Public Affairs, 12 June 2013.
54. Ibid.
55. Medvetz, Think Tanks in America; Stone, “Recycling Bins, Garbage Cans.”
56. What follows is a hybrid organizational identity with even less alignment among the tactics, strategies, and overarching identity.
57. Interview, Civil Development Forum, 2 July 2013.
58. Jezierska, “Performing Independence.”
59. The concept of anti-politics was developed by dissidents during 1970/1980s (e.g., György Konrád, Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, and Jacek Kuroń) and referred to a programmatic non-engagement with formal politics while strengthening social bonds and building a parallel, ethical sphere of civic activities. While think tanks obviously engage with formal politics through policy advice, the anti-political connotation associates them with the ethical, civic side.
60. Interview, Institute of Public Affairs, 12 July 2013.
63. Interview, New Confederation, 14 January 2021.
64. Ibid.
65. Interview, Batory Foundation, 22 April 2021.
67. Pirro and Stanley, “Forging, Bending, and Breaking.”
69. Interview, Court Watch, 19 January 2021.
70. Interview, Civil Development Forum, 18 March 2021.
71. Interview, Court Watch, 19 January 2021.
72. Interview, Political Critique, 28 April 2021.
73. Interview, INPRIS, 27 January 2021.
74. Interview, Helsinki Foundation, 18 December 2020.
75. Ibid.
76. Interview, INPRIS, 27 January 2021.
77. Ibid.
78. Tarrow, Power in Movement.
80. Interview, Klon/Jawor, 13 January 2021.
82. Interview, Institute of Public Affairs, 11 January 2021.
83. Medvetz, Think Tanks in America.
84. Interview, Court Watch, 19 January 2021.
88. Interview, Batory Foundation, 22 April 2021.
90. Interview, Institute for Structural Research, 18 December 2020.
92. Interview, Klon/Kawor, 13 January 2021.
93. Ibid.
95. Interview, Klon/Jawor, 13 January 2021.
96. Interview, Ambitious Poland, 27 January 2021.
97. Jezierska and Sörbom, "Proximity and Distance"; Stone, “Out-Side the Realm of Politics.”
99. Ibid., 169.
100. Jasper, Art of Moral Protest; Polletta and Jasper, “Collective Identity.”

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