

Article

European Think Tanks as a Channel of EU Public Diplomacy Towards Transnational Publics

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Abstract

This article examines the role of European think tanks in public diplomacy efforts of the EU. It builds on Bourdieu's field theory and concept of capital using data from EU official documents, website materials, and semi-structured interviews with representatives of think tanks from Brussels, France, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom, as well as their networks and the EU institutions. The article argues that EU institutions provide financial support for think tanks to obtain political capital in the form of internal and external legitimacy. The European Commission mobilises think tank academic capital by funding their educational activities, which helps to deal with the "democratic deficit" and plays the role of intellectual "soft power" by training current and future policymakers in Europe and beyond as potential allies in competition with other regions. Due to the particularity of the EU public sphere, characterised by the lack of outreach mass media, the European Commission tries to improve its capacity to shape public opinion at the European and global levels by using think tank publicity capital in its communication activities via new media platforms, distinguished by direct access to wider audiences. The European Commission benefits from think tank social capital, encouraging them to create transnational networks regarded as contributing to the promotion of integration within the EU, building relations with candidate countries, and strengthening its position in multilateral negotiations. Although the citizen's dimension is not always at the core of practices of European think tanks, this article demonstrates their effectiveness as a channel of public diplomacy towards transnational publics.

Keywords

Bourdieu; capital; European Commission; European Union; field theory; public diplomacy; think tanks

Issue

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1. Introduction

The state has until recently been regarded as the main actor of public diplomacy (PD). Due to globalisation and the international expansion of civil society, non-state actors have increasingly entered the world politics arena (La Porte, 2012). Ministries of foreign affairs now share the diplomatic realm with think tanks (TTs), universities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and others (Pisarska, 2016). Moreover, considerable migration flows and the development of new information technologies significantly blurred the boundaries between national and international affairs. In these conditions, the PD concept has to be transformed into a new PD, comprising domestic and external non-state actors, as government

collaborators in PD implementation and as autonomous PD actors. Recent studies focus more on the PD domestic dimension, where domestic non-state actors contribute to the effectiveness of PD abroad (Huijgh, 2019; La Porte, 2012). Engaging with one's own domestic constituency with a view to foreign policy development and external identity-building has become part of countries' PD strategy (Melissen, 2005). The notion of a PD audience also has to be extended, with "strategic publics" including both domestic and foreign publics (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 432). A widespread use of social media in foreign affairs has brought the emergence of new PD forms, such as PD 2.0, social media PD, and post-truth PD targeting foreign or domestic publics (Wu, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has urged expanding the

state-centric PD's perspective to a humanity-centred PD, comprising the wider needs of global publics (Zaharna, 2022). Nevertheless, the involvement of (inter)national non-state actors in both international and domestic dimensions of PD is still not sufficiently empirically investigated, while the theoretical framework of the relationship between state and non-state actors in PD efforts needs to be further elaborated.

PD's domestic dimension should be considered part of the ongoing democratisation of foreign policy, with the increasing participation of domestic stakeholders in foreign policy formulation, debate, and implementation. Ministries of foreign affairs have recognised that domestic public support for a government's foreign policy is essential to their internal and international legitimacy, where the former is a prerequisite for the latter (Huijgh, 2011). Civil society participation in EU policymaking is regarded as a remedy for the so-called "democratic deficit" (Vauchez, 2014, p. 7), as well as a tool to gain internal and international legitimacy (Schmidt, 2013). The development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the growing public demands for transparency and accountability mean the European Commission is increasingly seeking to explain its policies in the field of external relations to both domestic EU publics and its external stakeholders to form a positive public image, advance European values, and reinforce the EU's public legitimacy (Michalski, 2005). Taking into account that lack of domestic and international public support enfeebles EU legitimacy, the issues concerning the involvement of domestic citizens in the EU's PD projects have become increasingly relevant. The EU has reconsidered its practices directed at civil society engagement and has initiated several participatory initiatives, including the Europe for Citizens Programme (Huijgh, 2019). In its description, TTs along with NGOs and other groups are considered part of "civil society," playing "a key part in public life." TTs and policy research organisations are seen as "invaluable in providing visions for the future," and as "generating ideas and recommendations on how to approach complex issues, such as EU policies, active European citizenship, identity and values" (European Commission, 2012).

TTs are usually seen as part of civil society or as a particular type of NGO (Jeziarska, 2018; Stone, 2007) and even regarded as the "civil society elite." TT hybrid identity means "they both are and are not part of civil society." Most TTs emphasise their difference from other civil society organisations to demarcate their specific field in the socio-political milieu (Jeziarska, 2020, pp. 153, 156). TTs differ from other NGOs by a less narrowly normative research and the aspiration to be directly engaged in policy-shaping processes (Bajenova, 2019). On the basis of financial data declared by the organisations registered at the EU Transparency Register (2017), 235 TTs and research organisations occupy the third position (about 10%)—just after companies and groups (18%) and NGOs, platforms, and networks (36%)—among 2,256

recipients of the funding received from EU institutions in the form of grants or procurement. Taking into account that the majority of interest groups registered in the Transparency Register represent business and producer interests (about 50%), the European Commission seems to subsidise citizen groups to a greater extent than other types of organisations to balance dialogue with civil society and to encourage their wider participation (Bouwen, 2009).

TTs exceed "national policy spaces," increasingly entering the European "public sphere" (Bajenova, 2019, p. 62; Barani & Sciortino, 2011, p. 40; Stone, 2013), also supported by EU institutions, seeking foreign and domestic public support for their policy decisions. Although some studies demonstrate that TTs contribute to states' diplomatic efforts and implement diplomatic functions themselves (Tyler et al., 2017), the involvement of TTs in diplomacy has only recently begun to attract the more comprehensive attention of scholars. Menegazzi (2021) considers the development of TTs focused on international affairs as a main priority for Chinese PD. Bardauskaitė (2022) argues that the Baltic states employ TTs as tools of foreign and security policies to disseminate Baltic positions abroad and to influence foreign TTs. Besides state-centric studies, some scholars consider the relations of TTs with international and supranational organisations in their diplomatic and foreign policy efforts: examining the interrelationship between UNESCO and TTs in intellectual diplomacy (Desmoulin & Rondot, 2018) or showing active TT engagement in developing the 2016 European Global Strategy (Veselinovič, 2022). However, further empirical work is required to assess TT involvement in EU PD.

This article studies the role of European TTs in the EU PD towards domestic and foreign publics. It contributes thus to the academic literature in both theoretical and empirical aspects. First, the chosen research question is relatively new in the field of European studies. Currently, there are no important scientific works analysing how the EU involves TTs in both domestic and international dimensions of its PD practices. Recent studies investigating PD at the EU level focus solely on certain aspects of EU PD, such as specific actors (Aggestam & Hedling, 2020; Altman & Shore, 2014) or specific activities (Hedling, 2020; Yifan Yang, 2015), while more comprehensive studies analysing both internal and external dimensions of EU PD (Fanoulis & Revelas, 2023; Michalski, 2005) do not address TT involvement in these efforts. Second, this article analyses empirical data drawing on a conceptual framework combining Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and the language of different forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/2014) with the concept of "intermesitic" PD (Huijgh, 2019). The article examines domestic and international approaches to public involvement of European TTs operating at the EU and national levels. Thus, it extends Medvetz's (2012b) approach, studying American TTs based on a Bourdieusian analytical framework to the European level and thereby contributing

to the study of TTs and their networks at a transnational level (Bajenova, 2019, 2023; Plehwe, 2014; Stone, 2013) and to a conceptualisation of the interrelation between domestic and international dimensions of PD (Huijgh, 2012, 2019). The article also enriches empirically the scholarly discussion on the role of civil society in a broader sense in coping with the EU's "democratic deficit" and the crisis of legitimacy in EU governance (Marxsen, 2015; Vauchez, 2014).

2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

As a diplomatic practice, PD focuses on diplomatic communication between political actors and foreign and domestic general publics. As a multidisciplinary field of study, it is an area of research resulting in multiple definitions and practices often exceeding the limits of those related to diplomatic studies. If the PD's domestic dimension directed towards domestic civil society as publics, partners, and actors has been neglected, the role of non-state actors has been regarded as particularly important in PD's success. However, PD should adapt to a mobile, virtually connected, and interdependent world where the domestic and foreign spheres increasingly penetrate each other (Huijgh, 2019). Therefore, the engagement of domestic non-state actors in broader PD initiatives and their consideration in the framework of the PD concept has also taken on special significance (Huijgh, 2012), having important repercussions for updating and broadening its notion: featuring both the object and the subject of this activity; underscoring the significance of gaining (and retaining) legitimacy seen as trust and support from domestic citizens and demonstrating effectiveness in coping with international problems (where legitimacy and effectiveness are prerequisites for intervening and representing citizens' interests abroad); representing the shift from the domestic-international differentiation, persistent in state-centric definitions, towards an "intermestic" PD concept better answering the new conditions of blurring boundaries between domestic and international spheres provoked by the "intermestic" PD actors, possessing "domestic interests with international projection" (La Porte, 2012, p. 444). Moreover, PD research and practice should include both foreign and domestic citizens as potential "strategic publics." Domestic publics, previously seen as "non-publics" or "inactive publics" due to their low levels of knowledge or interest in PD, can be recognised as legitimate stakeholders affected by, or possessing the possibility to influence a nation's ability to attain its PD objectives (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 432).

To analyse the role of European TTs in the EU PD's international and domestic dimensions I use Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and his concept of capital. The "field" in this theory is seen as a game, where participants own particular forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/2014, p. 143). The players' strategies depend on their posses-

sion of a particular capital in the field, convertible in other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's theory offers a solution to the endless debate over the "TT" definition. Traditional Anglo-American definitions (McGann, 2017; Rich, 2004) and more flexible definitions proposed by scholars studying EU TTs (Sherrington, 2000) contain some allusion to the notion of "independence." Considering the unclear boundary between policy analysts and the state in some countries, using independence as a determining TT feature is not useful (Stone, 2013). Avoiding one all-embracing definition or any pre-defined typology for European TTs, typical of the institutionalist perspective (Kelstrup, 2016; Ullrich, 2004), this approach allows analysing European TTs as empirical questions, conceptualising them as "boundary organisations" collecting various forms of capital (Bajenova, 2019, p. 62; Medvetz, 2012a, 2012b).

Medvetz (2012b) has employed this approach and its developments (Eyal, 2013; Wacquant, 2004) to conceptualise TT's importance in American policymaking, defining them as structures divided by the paradigms of academic, political, economic, and media fields, reasoning from their dependence on those organisations from which they are often portrayed as independent because they rely on them for funding, personnel, recognition, and practices. Whereas the typological approach conceals hybridity as a major TT feature, Medvetz (2012b, pp. 35–36) portrays TTs in "relational terms," emphasising the social relations to other fields and among TTs, ensuring their existence. This approach is compatible with a more relational approach towards PD, emphasising the significance of establishing mutually beneficial relationships between a state and its strategic publics (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). However, the Bourdieu-inspired works analysing TTs dealt mainly with organisations embedded in a single country and their role at the national level (Medvetz, 2012b). The transnational nature of TTs and political foundations is emphasised, underscoring their embeddedness in their national political space in their activities on a supranational level (Dakowska, 2014). Simultaneously, Bourdieu's followers increasingly transfer his field concept to a global (Buchholz, 2016) or European level (Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013; Kauppi, 2003).

Here, I analyse the forms of capital EU institutions exchange with TTs to gain political capital as "a form of symbolic capital, credit founded on credence or belief and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 192) in the form of public legitimacy in both foreign and domestic public spheres by looking at four manifestations of publics: audiences, public interests, public spheres, and institutions (Mende & Müller, 2023).

European TTs generate economic capital described as "immediately and directly convertible into money" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) by obtaining EU public funding as a manifestation of their "utility" for EU institutions (Bajenova, 2019) or their main "audience" in their PD efforts, sharing "a common attention focus"

(Mende & Müller, 2023, p. 93), thus aiming to influence transnational audiences. PD includes educational activities intending to affect foreign governments through their citizens (van Ham, 2005). European TTs exchange their academic capital represented as a particular form of cultural capital in its “institutionalised state,” i.e., “in the form of academic qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247), providing education activities as part of their “public interest” mission, for economic capital in the form of EU funding. Public interest frequently contributes to the production of “publicness” in global politics (Mende & Müller, 2023).

The global development of digital technologies transformed the relational dynamics between state actors and publics, where non-state actors, using social media, have also become important players in PD communication (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). Although Bourdieu analysed the influence of a specific media platform in his book *On Television* (Bourdieu, 1996), he did not use the term “media capital,” which applied to TTs includes “access to the means of publicity” and special media-related skills (Medvetz, 2012b, p. 140). The term “publicity capital” is more appropriate to describe strategies for accumulating publicity of European TTs, considering the specific characteristics of the EU “public sphere” (Bajenova, 2019, pp. 64–65). In this manifestation of publics, European TTs create “communicative spaces” by participating in debates (Mende & Müller, 2023), using a social media presence as one of the essential elements of their publicity capital (Bajenova, 2019) to communicate with particular audiences because of the scarcity of outreach mass media (Perez, 2014).

PD is more effective in a network model of international relations than in the traditional hierarchical state-centric model (Hocking, 2005). Network capital of European TTs, as a particular form of social capital defined as “possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships” and “socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name” (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248–249), important in the framework of EU policy because it enhances the legitimacy of EU policymaking, is generated through their membership in transnational TT networks (Bajenova, 2019, 2023), which can be seen as “institutions” established by the group of actors to operate on their behalf. Their publicness is based on their claimed representation (Mende & Müller, 2023).

This research builds on the analysis of semi-structured interviews, carried out in 2014–2015, with representatives of EU institutions (the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European External Action Service) and 24 TTs in Brussels, France, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom, as well as their networks. The study is enriched by the analysis of official EU documents and materials from the websites of EU institutions, TTs, and their networks. As a method, document analysis is essential to qualitative research, providing comprehensive information on the

object of analysis (Dieu, 2008). The initial TT sample was constructed following analysis of the various surveys, reports, and registers (Boucher, 2004; Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012; Transparency Register, 2014) of European TTs, refined and complemented based on the recommendations of research participants. To select organisations, I used the following criteria: membership in transnational TT networks, appearance in international and European TT rankings, and participation in EU funding programs. This enabled including in the sample those organisations functioning either exclusively at the EU level or at both EU and national levels. Having a Brussels office and registration in the Transparency Register accounting for a strong EU focus were complementary but not exclusive criteria. Due to the dilemma of defining TTs, the strict criteria to differentiate TTs from other organisations were not determined before starting the fieldwork. A question about the perception by TT experts of their own organisations and TTs in general was included in the interview guide, which enabled defining boundaries of the TT field from the standpoint of its representatives. The question of a TT definition was also included in the interview guides for representatives of the European institutions, which complemented this internal field view by the view from outside. The study sample includes permanent not-for-profit organisations, describing themselves and/or recognised externally as “TTs” but taking various legal forms according to the practices in their countries (registered charity, *association internationale sans but lucrative* (AISBL), political foundation, *fondation d'utilité publique*). The exclusion of for-profit organisations reflects the “public interest” mission of TTs, often associated with the “TT” label (Stone, 2013, p. 74). The “permanent” criterion allowed for the exclusion of temporary advisory or expert groups. However, legal independence, achieved by establishing a private structure (Stone, 2013), is not often compatible with the political environment of the studied countries. Therefore, I included in my sample two organisations affiliated with ministries of foreign affairs and two university-based research centres working on international and domestic policies, not legally independent from universities, recognised as TTs externally through appearance in international TT rankings or membership of European TT networks. The collected information was reduced, coded, and grouped to analyse factual data on the selected TTs and the opinions of the research participants concerning their organisations and the TT space in general (see Smith, 2000). I used thematic analysis to determine, analyse, and interpret patterns in my research material. This method was chosen for its flexibility and theoretical independence. Themes within data were identified inductively. This approach allowed to reveal semantic themes related to TT activities and a “latent” theme of “publicness,” as well as their underlying conceptualisations (intermestic PD and forms of capital) explaining the data’s semantic content (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Academic Capital of European Think Tanks: Public Interest Mission or Intellectual “Soft Power” of the EU

One of the essential functions claimed by many TTs is to inform and educate the general public (Rich, 2004), which is conditioned by their charitable status, implying they serve the public interest (Stone, 2013). The purpose of the Institute for Public Policy Research (2016), a British TT, “is to conduct and promote research into, and to educate the public in, the economic, social and political sciences.” Another British TT Policy Exchange’s (2016) mission “as an educational charity” is “to develop and promote new policy ideas which deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.” Concurrently, although education is still not a principal TT role (Stone, 2013), many of them organise educational activities (Medvetz, 2010). This phenomenon increasingly concerns European TTs, working on European affairs (Bajenova, 2016, Lewis et al., 2022, pp. 71–76). According to Boucher (2004), the main TT activities in the EU-15 included educational work (12%), scholarships (11%), and executive training (10%).

A research director of a French TT on European affairs notes: “In the sphere of education, what we do is...we teach, we teach a lot, we do much post-graduate training, we offer many post-graduate courses” (interview, Paris, June 2014, translated from French by the author).

European TTs organise training programmes for government, EU officials, and other practitioners. The Belgian TT Egmont Institute and the Slovenian Centre for European Perspective are among 12 implementing partners co-funding Europe’s New Training Initiative for Civilian Crisis Management with the European Commission (90%), which trains members of the EU, UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and African Union (AU) missions (Egmont, 2016). Besides executive education, some TTs strive to link academia and the policy field. The Brussels-based TT Bruegel (2016) offers a visiting fellowship programme for academics, policymakers, practitioners, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellows funded by the European Commission, for short-term research visits, research cooperation, and communication with its members and audience. The Centre for European Policy Studies, also based in Brussels, goes further, creating the CEPS Academy in 2015. Its motto—“Preparing the student of today to make a contribution to the Europe of tomorrow!”—is reflected in its mission “to equip both students and professionals with original insights and tools to better understand the European Union,” which “will stimulate interest in EU policymaking and encourage fresh thinking among the younger generation of Europeans who will shape and lead the EU in the future” (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2016). Finally, some TTs establish master’s and doctoral training programmes. The German Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP), portrayed as “a forum for exchange between academia, politics, administration and political education” (IEP, 2016a),

actively participates in the European policy education sector (IEP, 2016d). It offers, together with the Centre International de Formation Européenne, the online master’s programme for postgraduates and young professionals from wider Central Asia (IEP, 2016c) and the PhD Support Programme for students from Central Asia and the Caucasus (IEP, 2016b), which are funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and the European Commission in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme (Lewis et al., 2022, pp. 71–76).

These initiatives, increasingly widespread in the world (Kelstrup, 2016), might be seen as a manifestation of the TT “public interest” mission (Boucher, 2004; Stone, 2013); they are also strategic investments not only in academic capital, becoming part of the “academic” field and thereby increasing public credibility, but also in political capital, training future political elites in Europe and beyond (Kelstrup, 2016; Lewis et al., 2022, pp. 71–76). This political capital can be exchanged with EU institutions for their economic capital through European funding programmes, such as the Erasmus+ programme and Jean Monnet activities, which support “active European citizenship” and focus on “the role of the EU in a globalised world” (European Commission, n.d.). The potential long-term impact of Jean Monnet activities on policy-making is seen in the education of EU citizens in aspects of European integration to publicise the credibility of Europe and to solve the problem of “the EU democratic deficit” (European Commission, 2015, p. 45), but also as “soft diplomacy” instruments in the EU’s relations with other world regions (European Commission, 2015, p. 51). The European External Action Service (2022) lists Jean Monnet activities among “global initiatives” to illustrate “PD in action.” TTs are among the main recipients of this funding because of their public image as a “bridge” between research and policy (Stone, 2013), as well as their important role in the global competition to export ideas (Wallace, 2004). Although TT educational initiatives blur the long-established boundaries between universities and TTs (Bajenova, 2016; Kelstrup, 2016; Lewis et al., 2022, pp. 71–76), they can be seen not only as a tool in the competition between different knowledge providers but also as an instrument of intellectual “soft power,” i.e., a country’s ability to influence other states through “attractive” culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2009, p. 161), in order to build the internal and external legitimacy of the EU, exporting its values and convincing foreign publics to accept its norms (Spence, 2009).

4. The Role of Think Tank Publicity Capital in the EU Public Sphere: “Bringing the Union Closer to Citizens”

In the 1990s, as a consequence of the EU legitimacy crisis and because of its obligation to inform citizens about EU policies, the European Commission began to implement programmes to raise the transparency of decision-making and increase civil society participation (Perez, 2014). In spite of the important growth

of EU media coverage, owing to the increasing grasp of EU-related questions in political debates in many member-states, news media still analysed the EU in the light of domestic problems, following its administrative technicalities, the complex character of decision-making, and geographical distance (Aldrin, 2013). Therefore, the EU institutions tried to improve their reach to the general public by involving NGOs, local authorities, trade unions, and TTs in their communication activities (Perez, 2014).

In 2016, EU Foreign ministers determined PD as one of the strategic priorities for accomplishing the EU Global Strategy and emphasised “the need of joining up efforts in the field of PD including strategic communication, inside and outside the EU” (Council of the European Union, 2016, p. 3). According to the EU Global Strategy (2016, p. 23), the EU will invest in PD “in order to connect EU foreign policy with citizens and better communicate it to our partners...fostering an open and inquiring media environment within and beyond the EU, also working with local players and through social media.”

Under the overall goal of “bringing the Union closer to citizens,” the European Commission’s Europe for Citizens Programme established for the period 2014–2020 had two principal aims: “to contribute to citizens’ understanding of the Union, its history and diversity” and “to foster European citizenship and to improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at Union level” (Council Regulation of 14 April 2014, 2014, p. 5). The programme funded actions implemented at a transnational level or with a European dimension, including structural support for organisations regarded as “bodies pursuing an aim of general Union interest.” The funding could be provided in the form of operating or action grants or public procurement contracts for organising events, studies and research, information and dissemination tools, monitoring, and evaluation. The programme was intended for “all stakeholders promoting European citizenship and integration,” including “European public policy research organisations” (TTs), civil society organisations, and educational and research organisations (Council Regulation of 14 April 2014, 2014, pp. 6–7). The budget for carrying out this programme for the period from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2020 was fixed at 185,468,000 euros (European Commission & European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2017a). European TTs and civil society organisations active across the EU can receive operating grants, supporting their activities. Both strands of the programme European Remembrance and Democratic Engagement and Civic Participation distinguished “TTs” among the applicant organisations from “platforms of pan-European organisations” and “civil society organisations.” This programme defined European TTs as organisations which “provide a link between research and policymaking at European level” and “help to find solutions to problems and facilitate interaction between scientists, intellectuals and decision-makers” (European Commission & European

Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2017b, pp. 4, 13–14). Ten TTs granted under Democratic Engagement and Civic Participation in 2017 out of 36 organisations of all the categories granted under both strands included one Brussels-based TT and two French TTs working on European affairs: Fondation Robert Schuman and Notre Europe—Jacques Delors Institute (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2017). Brussels-based TT European Policy Centre (2017) has repeatedly received an operating grant under this programme, amounting, in 2016, to 250,000 euros (11% of its total funding).

Although EU funding can be seen as an indicator of credibility in the eyes of EU institutions, it can also raise the question of TT independence. Those “pro-European” TTs receiving EU funding in the form of operating grants claim they do commissioned studies for European institutions relatively rarely, not to limit their critical ability and to avoid becoming a European Commission “service provider,” doing research projects within the EU framework programmes. However, TTs actively taking part in the Horizon 2020 research programme consider that this type of funding gives them more “leeway” to determine their research priorities and assumes intellectual independence concerning research findings. The complexity of procedures related to getting EU funding can partly explain the financial “independence” of some British TTs from EU institutions, affirming that their purpose is to retain their intellectual independence.

Although the main focus of the Europe for Citizens Programme was EU-based civil society organisations and citizens, the Council Regulation of 14 April 2014 (2014, pp. 5, 7–8, 12) also emphasised the “transnational and multilateral” character of the programme, concerning both its actions, which should “be implemented on a transnational basis or should have a European dimension,” and its actors, involving participants from the member states, the European Free Trade Association countries, and “accessing countries, candidate countries and potential candidates.” Moreover, it stipulated the necessity of “the coherence and the complementarity” between the programme and other EU initiatives, including those related to “enlargement and the external action of the Union.”

The Council Regulation of 14 April 2014 (2014) also underlined the importance of networking and the multiplier effects, including the use of social media, especially to reach the younger generation. For example, “dissemination,” one of the award criteria for funding through operating grants under this programme, evaluates applicants’ work programmes in terms of their potential to “create a multiplier effect among a wider audience than that directly participating in the activities” (European Commission & European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2017b, p. 21). TTs are well-known among EU institutions as capable of generating awareness of a specific problem and disseminating policies: “We know they have this kind of capacity, wide enough membership, that they will be able

to disseminate information and so on, which we don't have" (interview, European Commission representative, Brussels, March 2015).

TTs working on European affairs increasingly use internet technologies to reach the wider public. Many TTs disseminate information on European subjects to academics and others through regular email updates and multilingual electronic newsletters provided free of charge. Some TTs have even developed applications for smartphones and increasingly establish their presence on social media, thus enlarging and broadening their potential impact and their audience, diverse from that engaged in their activity via traditional media. The main social media tool for Euro-focussed TTs is Twitter, which in theory was to help them communicate directly with policymakers and opinion leaders (Bajenova, 2019). Facebook is also used by some TTs to reach out to younger people working in EU institutions. As audio-visual materials on social media make complex publications more "digestible" for the general public, TTs increasingly use YouTube and Suncloud to attract the attention of their target audiences to their activities in a cost-effective, flexible, and user-friendly way.

As for the language of dissemination privileged by stand-alone TTs, British and Brussels-based TTs publish exclusively in English. French TTs on European affairs produce their products in both English and French "to target all the actors of the public debates on Europe, in Europe and even beyond" (interview, TT representative, Paris, November 2014). If they have an office in other countries, they also translate certain publications into the local language. Both stand-alone TTs and university-based research centres publish their research results in English, but if for the latter this is a precondition for professional recognition, TTs aim to have a bigger "impact" disseminating their research beyond their national borders.

The complex nature of the European communication system and the limited number of available outreach instruments means European TTs use alternative low-cost methods to inform their audiences (e-mail subscription, social media), targeting specific groups directly, but without achieving the "atmospheric impact" granted by national mass media (Perez, 2014, p. 329). While social media assume both a social and a media component (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), even the most successful TTs in social media presence are more effective in its "media" component, i.e., careful choice of social media platform compatible with their target audience, while their success in the "social" component, such as active engagement with their "followers" through interaction and feedback, is less evident, as already observed in traditional communication channels. Most European TTs face the common challenge of being interactive, explained by some TTs by the lack of resources or their incapacity to be completely open online with their followers "not seriously engaged in issues." However, the main dynamic of the "new global communications era," where interactiv-

ity is a central characteristic, concentrates not on "information as a product," but on "communication as a process" (Zaharna, 2007, pp. 216–217).

TTs describe themselves as information channels for the educated public and claim their role as bridges between the policy world and the general public, however, they are not always able to fulfil these assertions or even do not intend to (Barani & Sciortino, 2011). Although many TTs widely disseminate their research results, through their publications freely available online to shape the "climate of opinion" (Denham & Garnett, 1998, p. 16), their relationship with the general public can be seen as a "one-way, top-down process," where the public is regarded as a subject to be informed in place of a source of ideas (Stone, 2013, p. 74). TTs' relationships with the political field are of a more reciprocal nature; EU institutions also seem to be interested more in their media capacity than their social engagement with the general public. Along with other European NGOs, TTs and their networks are seen as "information relays," serving as supplementary channels for the European Commission to widely disseminate information on EU policies to the general public (European Commission, 2000, p. 6). Thus, instead of being an "interface" between elites and citizens, they play "brokerage and gate-keeping roles" (Stone, 2013, p. 76). Although their potential to foster the emergence of a European public sphere is called into question—it is questionable that TTs could present unbiased reasoning in the public sphere playing an advisory role for the policy-makers, without turning into simple channels of propaganda (Barani & Sciortino, 2011)—their role in PD towards European and foreign publics is evident. However, states (or EU institutions) in PD still seem to regard themselves as possessing control over the communication process (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

5. Social Capital of European Think Tank Networks: European and Global Dimension of Public Diplomacy

The networks also serve as "multipliers spreading awareness of the EU and showing policies in action" (European Commission, 2001, p. 14). Taking into account the need for more active communication by institutions with the general public on European issues, the communication policy of the European Commission and the other institutions use networks to disseminate information at both national and local levels (European Commission, 2001, pp. 8–9). Such cooperation has advantages for both domestic and international dimensions of EU PD.

5.1. European Dimension: Facilitation of Consultation Process at the EU Level

The TT networks are seen as "powerful mechanisms for exchanging and for progressing." Keeping "dynamic centres of knowledge and excellence in more than one or two places...makes Europe very unique in the world" and

determines its future (interview, European Commission representative, Brussels, October 2014). The EU documents also mirror this positive view. According to the European Commission (2000, p. 5), the European NGO networks foster the formation of a “European public opinion.” The European Commission (2001, p. 16) affirms that networking at the European and global level demonstrates “clear benefits” combining resources “in the common interest of EU citizens,” these “structured and open networks should form a scientific reference system to support EU policymaking.”

The European Commission believes that European networks contribute to its dialogue with civil society. Policymakers could get better input if the organisation moderating a TT network, often located in Brussels, explains how to work with EU institutions (Bajenova, 2019): “These networks improve the quality of consultation and cooperation” (interview, European Commission representative, Brussels, March 2015). “Self-selection by the NGO community,” through “the setting-up of networks,” is considered a “useful alternative” to selection by the European Commission of its “interlocutors” (European Commission, 2000, p. 11). The European Commission fosters organisations to collaborate in European networks with one “constituent representative body” operating on behalf of its members reducing the number of contracts managed by the European Commission (2000, p. 19), which “considerably facilitate the efficiency of the consultation process,” while ensuring their representativeness with regard to their “roots” in the different EU member-states (European Commission, 2000, p. 9). “The ability of European NGO associations and networks to channel and focus the views of the various national NGOs is very useful for the Commission” (European Commission, 2000, p. 5). Therefore, European TT networks aim to attract at least one organisation from all EU member states (Bajenova, 2019, 2023). Although representativeness at the European level should not be applied as the only assessment criterion of “the relevance or quality of comments,” it is considered in a consultation process (European Commission, 2002, pp. 11–12). Representativeness is very important for EU institutions to ensure the transparency and objectivity of the consultation process, which determines their own legitimacy (Bajenova, 2019); NGOs and their associations should be “democratic and transparent as regards their membership and claims to representativeness” (European Commission, 2000, p. 9). The European Commission underlines the “increasingly significant role” of expertise in “preparing and monitoring decisions,” along with “undermined public confidence in expert-based policy-making” due to the “opacity” of the EU system of expert committees or insufficient information about how they function. The main concerns are related to the actual deciding power of experts and policymakers, as well as to the content and independence of the expert recommendations (European Commission, 2001,

pp. 15–16). TT networks possessing wide and diverse membership have the potential to rectify the exclusive character of the EU consultation process with civil society (Bajenova, 2019; Marxsen, 2015).

5.2. Global Dimension of Think Tank Networks: “Bridges to the Applicant Countries and to the World”

Networks seem to help “building bridges to the applicant countries and to the world” (European Commission, 2001, p. 14). In the opinion of our interviewee in the European Commission, the main problem in their relations with civil society organisations in Serbia is “when they work with us they perceive this as an endorsement,” which is not the case in Brussels (interview, Brussels, March 2015). Therefore, participation in projects supported by the EU necessitates cooperation with the European Representative Network Organization, regarded as contributing to a “better understanding of European institutions and their functioning,” as well as disseminating “new methods of work” and “good practices” among organisations in candidate countries, mainly in Serbia (SIPU International, 2011, p. 13).

European TT networks often include organisations from candidate countries as full or associate members, which can facilitate the enlargement process (Bajenova, 2019). Involvement in these networks of partners from other parts of the world is seen as “absolutely natural” (interview, European Commission representative, Brussels, October 2014). A stronger consideration of the global dimension by the EU “through a more proactive approach to international networks” could even mean “strengthen[ing] its voice in multilateral negotiations” (European Commission, 2001, p. 22). The project Think Global—Act European of the French Jacques Delors Institute (2017), uniting 16 TTs and co-funded by the European Commission, is one example of such initiatives (Bajenova, 2019).

5.3. Representativity and Exclusivity of Think Tank Networks

Taking into account these apparent benefits, the European Commission (2000, 2001) supports these networks financially. Some TT networks are mainly funded by or were initially created with funding from European institutions. The Trans European Policy Studies Association (2017) has important funding sources from the Europe for Citizens grant, projects funded by the European Commission, and studies for the European Parliament. The European Policy Institutes Network (2008) was partially funded in the framework of the PRINCE Future of Europe programme of the European Commission. The first three years of activity of the European Network of Economic Policy Research Institutes were funded by the European Commission under the Fifth Research Framework Programme (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2017).

Such TT networks are intended to reduce the number of actors while being representative. They do not always achieve inclusivity and surmount the danger of “misappropriation” of the collectively owned social capital by dominant network members (see Bourdieu, 1986, p. 251). Nominating the interlocutors for dialogue with the European Commission by the NGO community, the NGO networks should provide information on the criteria for their selection. In the case of regular consultations with a limited number of NGO networks, for transparency reasons, the general public needs to be informed about their legal status, goals, membership, and main funding sources. This data can be provided by the structures themselves; however, the mandatory character of revealing such information is not indicated (European Commission, 2000), along with the debates concerning the mandatory character of the European Transparency Register (European Commission, 2016). These measures are not sufficient to avoid the issue of exclusivity within some of these networks, which, claiming their representativity, rely mostly on active members based in Brussels or old member-states, while others lacking resources often cannot actively participate in their projects. This leads to their marginalisation or even exclusion. However, besides internal exclusivity within these networks, they themselves can be represented as the whole spectrum of civil society stakeholders, where EU institutions, striving for internal and external legitimacy, financially support TT networks with large formally representative membership in exchange for their social capital (Bajenova, 2019, 2023).

6. Conclusions

This article examined the role of European TTs in the EU’s PD efforts towards domestic and foreign publics based on Bourdieu’s field theory and the concept of “intermestic” PD (Huijgh, 2019). The article argues that the EU institutions provide financial support (economic capital) for TTs claiming their role as bridges between the policy world and the general public in order to gain domestic and international public legitimacy (political capital). It shows that all manifestations of publics such as interests, audiences, spheres, and institutions are present in this relationship, while the main dynamic which shapes their interconnections is the aim to legitimise EU governance at both domestic and global levels (see Mende & Müller, 2023). The European Commission mobilises TT academic capital funding their educational activities, seen as a manifestation of the TT “public interest” mission, to deal with the issue of “the EU democratic deficit” through education of EU citizens in the aspects of European integration, but also to use them as “soft power” instruments in its international relations. Due to the lack of outreach mass media in the EU public sphere and the increasing movement of the policy debate online, the European Commission tries to shape public opinion at the EU and global level by employing TT

publicity capital in its communication activities via new media platforms, to access wider audiences. TTs which describe themselves as channels of information for the educated public serve as “information relays” for the European Commission to widely disseminate information on EU policies to domestic and foreign publics. Finally, the European Commission benefits from TT social capital, encouraging them to create transnational networks with a wide formal representative membership to facilitate the consultation process with civil society at the European level, but also relations with the civil society from the candidate countries and beyond.

This study shows that increasing penetration of the domestic and foreign spheres in the interdependent world (Huijgh, 2019) blurs boundaries between domestic and international dimensions of the EU’s PD, meaning both the object and the subject of this activity, as well as its instruments. European TTs operating at global, EU, and national levels as EU collaborators in PD implementation can be seen not only as “intermestic,” but as transnational PD actors. Moreover, their PD audience includes both foreign and domestic citizens, where “domestic” publics targeted by European TTs are also of a transnational nature, representing not only citizens of a particular country, but EU citizens or the European general public as a whole. The PD tools, privileged by European TTs, such as social media and networks, are also highly transnational. So, this article demonstrates that the state-centric domestic-international differentiation is not relevant for such “transnational” PD actors, as EU and European TTs. Therefore, following the new transnationalism perspective investigating the interrelations between state and non-state actors across national borders to achieve political and social goals at national, international, and global levels (Orenstein & Schmitz, 2006), this article argues that a concept of transnational PD even better than “intermestic” PD reflects the new conditions of blurring boundaries between domestic and international spheres of PD efforts at the EU level.

Although the public dimension is not always the primary concern of European TTs, this article reveals the funding of European TTs and their networks by EU institutions to maximise their public legitimacy in exchange for TT academic, publicity, and social capital, which indirectly proves TT utility as a channel of PD towards transnational publics. TTs contribute to the establishment of such manifestations of publics as “audiences” and “public spheres” creating transnational digital “communicative spaces” targeting wider transnational publics, “institutions” launching transnational networks claiming to be representative, as well as declaring their “public interest” mission educating domestic and foreign citizens, thereby producing “publicness” essential to the “legitimation” of EU policymaking (see Mende & Müller, 2023). However, although TTs use “public-centric” PD tools, i.e., digital media and networks, typical of relational and network approaches to PD (see Hocking, 2005), they still remain “state-based,” where

the EU often initiates, funds, and strives to control these PD activities (see Zaharna & Uysal, 2016, p. 112) failing to provide true interactivity and representativeness that would allow for wider publics to become fully active PD participants. Therefore, the state-public relationship in our case can be described as a scalene triangle where EU institutions and TTs have a mutually beneficial relationship, where the latter represents not the autonomous players, but “soft power” tools, “information relays,” or awareness “multipliers” for the former, while transnational publics are seen as a subject to inform, to educate, and to represent.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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