

Democratic Think Tanks in a contested Europe

*Extended event report: session insights,
cases and an agenda for action*

Prepared by the
OTT and EPC teams

European Think Tank leaders convening on radical right ecosystems and democratic resilience

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Democracy under pressure

A coordinated response to protect democratic, liberal, plural institutions in Europe.

Independent think tanks across Europe are navigating an increasingly challenging environment. This initiative brings together think tank leaders to exchange knowledge, strengthen collaboration, and develop practical responses that reinforce democratic resilience.

This is a collaborative initiative by the European Policy Centre (EPC) and On Think Tanks (OTT), supported by the Network of European Foundations.

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Introduction

The project, the convening and why this conversation matters now

The European Think Tank Leaders Convening brought together directors and senior representatives of independent think tanks from across Europe to reflect on how democratic knowledge institutions are adapting to an increasingly contested political environment. Co-organised by the [European Policy Centre \(EPC\)](#) and [On Think Tanks \(OTT\)](#), the meeting formed part of a broader initiative examining the implications of radical-right and illiberal ecosystems for democratic think tanks.

The initiative was not designed simply to analyse ideological competitors and their impact on policy and politics. It sought to understand how the changing political landscape is affecting the role, resilience and effectiveness of independent policy research institutions. Organisations close to the radical right increasingly operate at the intersection of politics, policy, media and advocacy, while democratic think tanks face a wider set of pressures: democratic backsliding, foreign influence, shrinking civic space, political polarisation, technological disruption and changing funding landscapes.

The discussions therefore moved beyond a narrow question of how to respond to the radical right. Participants asked how democratic think tanks should adapt when evidence, expertise and informed public debate are themselves contested. They compared national experiences across Europe, challenged assumptions and identified practical areas for continued learning, cooperation and joint action. The end goal purpose was to surface strategic dilemmas that few organisations can resolve alone and not to force consensus or produce a single blueprint.

This matters because think tanks in Europe do not operate outside democracy. Their ability to produce and communicate independent policy knowledge depends on public trust, plural funding, institutional autonomy, freedom of inquiry, access to decision-makers and the continued legitimacy of evidence-informed debate. When those conditions weaken, analytical excellence remains necessary but is no longer sufficient. Communications, organisational resilience, governance, funding and collective capacity become part of the democratic infrastructure of think tank work.

The convening also highlighted the diversity of the European think tank community. Political conditions, institutional traditions, business models, geography and organisational size shape both the pressures organisations face and the responses available to them. A Brussels-based research institute, a national-oriented think tank in Central or Eastern Europe, a Scandinavian organisation in a comparatively stable democracy, a Southern European policy centre, a media-rooted organisation and a citizen-engagement platform do not experience the same crisis in the same way. This meeting helped participants to compare those differences while recognising the patterns that cut across them.

This extended report preserves the architecture of the four main sessions of the event and the supporting materials that emerged from them. The first four sections provide detailed accounts of the discussions.

The fifth gathers anonymised practical cases shared by participants. The final two sections translate the discussion into actions for individual organisations, for European think tanks acting collectively, and for a secretariat or project seeking to support them. The text has been reduced only where ideas were repeated or where editing improved clarity; the nuance, tensions and examples have been retained.

EDITORIAL NOTE

How this report was prepared

The report is based only on the materials developed from the convening: detailed transcript summaries, the short meeting report, session study briefs, anonymised cases and the three action documents.

The convening operated under the Chatham House Rule. Participants and their organisations are not identified. Country and institutional examples are retained where they were central to the analysis, but comments are not attributed.

The report is written by the OTT and EPC teams. Participant voices appear through anonymised formulations and pull quotes, lightly edited where needed for clarity.

"The challenge is not only to defend existing organisations, but to defend the conditions under which independent policy knowledge can exist."

Core proposition emerging from the convening

1.Mapping the shrinking civic space

The civic and policy space for European think tanks is not changing in one direction. It is shrinking, fragmenting, being captured, politicised and restructured at the same time.

The opening session used a collective mapping exercise to compare lived organisational experiences: funding losses, political pressure, changing relations with public authorities, reputational attacks, uncertainty about engagement with illiberal actors and the need for greater collective action. The discussion resisted a single diagnosis. In some contexts, civic space is narrowing through self-censorship and direct or indirect pressure. In others, the marketplace of ideas is fragmenting into rival ecosystems with different sources of money, audiences and relationships to power.

FRAME

Five overlapping dynamics

- Shrinking: funding cuts, political pressure, self-censorship and fear of speaking publicly.
- Fragmentation: rival knowledge ecosystems that barely share rules or interlocutors.
- Capture: long-term attempts to control institutions, narratives and the market for ideas.
- Politicisation: funding and bureaucratic decisions increasingly shaped by ideological contestation and daily political interests.
- Restructuring: new organisations, funding sources, technologies and business models changing the sector itself.

1.1 Geographically based case studies

a. The Hungarian example: scale, infrastructure and counter-hegemony

The first intervention focused on Hungary and on the infrastructure built around Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) and related institutions. MCC, until Fidesz defeat in the recent parliamentary elections, served as a warning example about the scale and strategic ambition of illiberal institutional development.

The Hungarian case was presented as an ecosystem-building project; not simply as a story about one think tank or one foundation. The speaker stressed the size of the endowment associated with Mathias Corvinus Collegium: roughly €1.5 billion. This is six times more than the total amount distributed by the European Endowment for Democracy since its foundation.

The point was not only financial. It was about asymmetry. Pro-democracy think tanks and funders are often operating with small project grants, short time horizons and fragile organisational budgets, while illiberal actors have been able to build institutions with long-term capital and political backing.

MCC's funding includes shares in major Hungarian companies, including an energy company and a pharmaceutical company, which were transferred into the foundation structure. This created a form of institutional wealth that could be used for political, ideological and international influence. The speaker suggested that the new Hungarian government might try to reverse or reclaim these assets, but that doing so would be legally difficult because the money may now be treated as private or foundation-owned rather than straightforwardly public. This raised an important democratic dilemma: how can a new democratic government dismantle an illiberal institutional architecture without itself resorting to legally or politically questionable methods?

The Hungarian ecosystem was described as part of a Gramscian strategy to build a counter-hegemony against liberal influence. This implies a long-term cultural and institutional project rather than a short-term electoral tactic. It involves not only research organisations but fellowships, international convenings, ideological training, US connections, conservative networks, and attempts to influence debates around free speech, censorship, digital regulation and the EU's Digital Services Act.

The discussion also prompted a comparison with Peru, where Fuerza Popular and its allies have, over the last decade, captured much of the state and established a chokehold over the media and civil society.

One example in Europe was the scale of individual fellowships, with one conservative columnist reportedly receiving €8,000 per month. Another example was the role of the Center for Fundamental Rights, based in Hungary, in building influence with the MAGA camp in the United States, including through CPAC and support for Republican political networks. The implication was that the Hungarian model was not simply domestic but transnational, linking European illiberal politics with American conservative and MAGA-aligned ecosystems.

Yet this example also brought a note of qualified optimism. The international and domestic architecture built around Fidesz (Viktor Orbán's party) may be more fragile than many assumed. As a new government with a strong mandate takes power, some of the state-backed funding structures may be dismantled or weakened. However, this optimism was immediately qualified. Even if Hungarian taxpayer money is cut, the institutions may survive in other legal forms and may attract alternative funding from US federal grants, US conservative philanthropy, or technology-linked money. In other words, the source of support may shift rather than disappear.

This led to a recommendation: European think tanks should systematically track the flow of US federal, state, philanthropic and technology money into European institutions, especially where it supports "patriotic", nationalist, anti-regulatory or anti-liberal networks. Participants noted that other sectors, including LGBT and gender rights organisations, have already conducted similar tracking exercises over several years.

b. The United States: not shrinking, but fragmenting?

A second opening intervention shifted the focus to the United States. Here the speaker challenged the language of "shrinking civic space". In the US, the argument went, the think tank sector is not shrinking. It is expanding and accumulating. The number of think tanks remains large, and many organisations established over the last century continue to exist. The problem is not numerical decline but fragmentation.

The speaker described the traditional US and transatlantic think tank ecosystem as historically rooted in a broad liberal internationalist consensus. Institutions such as Chatham House, the Council on Foreign Relations and Carnegie were products of a Wilsonian or liberal internationalist worldview.

After the Second World War, many think tanks shared basic assumptions: democracy, free trade, human rights and international cooperation were treated as universal goods worth defending. This consensus did not mean all organisations agreed on policy, but they largely operated within a shared marketplace of ideas

That consensus has shattered. A conservative-populist strain that was always present in US politics has become much more powerful. For its leaders and supporters, traditional think tanks are not neutral sources of expertise. They are part of the "blob": a policy establishment associated with failed wars, globalisation, elite consensus, and the abandonment of ordinary workers. This perception has created demand for a parallel ecosystem of think tanks and policy shops aligned with the current political moment.

Some of these organisations are not new. The Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and Claremont Institute were mentioned as older conservative institutions associated with earlier conservative movements. But they have adapted to the new political environment and have been joined by newer organisations established since 2020, including America First Policy Institute, American Compass and Advancing American Freedom. These organisations differ from one another, but collectively they represent a more professionalised and often better-funded conservative policy infrastructure.

This policy infrastructure requires important distinctions. The Cato Institute is free-market and right-wing in the traditional sense of Republicanism in USA and it would not be accurate to describe it as illiberal or anti-democratic: those labels, however, could more plausibly be applied to the Heritage Foundation today.

The speaker suggested that the think tank landscape now resembles two separate "blobs" or amoebas, rather than one shared marketplace. One is the legacy think tank ecosystem, still oriented towards data, evidence, rational debate, liberal internationalism and Enlightenment standards. The other is a newer or reconfigured conservative-aligned ecosystem, where competition for proximity to power increasingly shapes what organisations say and how they say it. The two ecosystems barely overlap.

Against this context, the speaker argued in favour of engaging with the new conservative ecosystem rather than retreating into a defensive "us versus them" posture. The case for engagement was based on the idea that think tanks should remain committed to a marketplace of ideas where arguments are tested, challenged and debated. Drawing hard lines about who qualifies for debate is difficult. A predisposition to openness may be more important than rigid exclusion.

This position immediately raised difficult questions that returned throughout the session. What does engagement mean? On whose terms does it happen? What happens when the other side does not accept rules of good-faith debate? Can organisations committed to evidence and liberal democracy engage with actors whose aim may be to delegitimise those very rules? Is engagement a way to expose weak arguments to scrutiny, or does it normalise actors who use think tank formats for political warfare?

The session did not resolve these questions, but it recognised that many European think tanks are already experimenting with engagement in different ways, including inviting controversial conservative or far-right voices into podcasts, events or discussions.

Participants remained divided on whether this expands debate, creates reputational risks, or allows illiberal actors to set the terms.

A large think tank space is not necessarily equivalent to a large civic space and they may face diverging fortunes. As the US think tank landscape reconfigures itself, there are growing accounts of major funders and institutions dropping words and concepts such as gender, democracy and political polarisation. Funders are less willing to support politically sensitive agendas; some think tanks have failed to secure federal funding, and others have closed.

c. Poland: centralisation, security and the battlefield of ideas

One participant reflected on the Polish experience and compared it with Hungary. Poland had undergone an attempt to centralise the marketplace of ideas under the previous government. This was not as professionalised or resourced as the Hungarian model, but the underlying ambition was similar: to control the narrative, control institutions, and shape the terms of political debate.

The participant noted that the positive side of this otherwise troubling development is that ideas are being taken seriously. Illiberal political actors understand that ideas have consequences and invest accordingly. They seek not only to win elections but to nurture, control and dominate the ideological environment.

The Polish intervention placed this in a broader security context. The participant argued that the struggle over ideas now takes place in a world of cognitive warfare, foreign interference concerns and security strategies. Governments and security establishments increasingly view ideas, research and policy narratives through a security lens. This can make centralisation more attractive to political actors who want control over the information environment.

The participant also connected this to the digital age. The public sphere is both proliferating and centralising: many actors participate, but the infrastructures and controlling assets are concentrated. The analogy to technology monopolies was explicit. The logic is not simply competition within a marketplace, but dominance over the market itself.

This led to three strategic questions for think tanks.

First, who demands the work of think tanks? Are think tanks primarily serving existing political institutions, or are they serving democracy and the public interest more broadly?

e. The Netherlands: self-deterrence and the fear of powerful allies

A participant from the Netherlands offered a revealing example of shrinking space caused not by external authoritarian pressure but by the caution of a democratic foreign ministry.

Their organisation wanted to conduct research on MAGA in early 2025. After struggling to secure funding from the main governmental bodies for such a research, the organisation eventually secured support from another public actor and completed the project. Before publication, it briefed the relevant officials in the Foreign Ministry and the US embassy as key beneficiaries even though neither of them fund it. The US embassy reportedly accepted the research as part of open debate. The Dutch ministry, however, didn't.

The point was that self-deterrence by democratic governments can be more restrictive than actual pressure from external powerful forces. Ministries may avoid research on the United States or China not because those countries have directly threatened retaliation, but because officials fear diplomatic consequences. This produces a narrowing of research space around precisely the topics where independent analysis is most needed. The Dutch organisation responded by diversifying its clients, working more with the private sector, pension funds, security services, police and municipalities. This diversification helps reduce dependence on one ministry, but it also changes the organisational model and raises new questions about mission, independence and agenda-setting.

MAGA

The same intervention also provided a detailed account of the research they conducted on MAGA (yet to be published in English). The organisation had developed a taxonomy of the movement, examined how MAGA ideas resonate in the Netherlands, and analysed different ideological strands within the movement. The participant emphasised that MAGA is not uniform and instead made up of different strands with different ideas of what "greatness" means.

But the participant also warned that the shelf life of ideas within MAGA can be very short. Figures who were once heterodox or influential may quickly become mainstream or boring within that ecosystem. Newer actors on alternative platforms such as Twitch may become more relevant than the better-known conservative figures think tanks might normally engage. This creates a challenge for evidence-based engagement: traditional think tank methods assume relatively stable interlocutors, but the MAGA ecosystem is fast-moving, personality-driven and media-fragmented.

The participant also challenged the idea that engagement can happen in a neutral marketplace of ideas. Some MAGA-aligned organisations were described less as think tanks than as "docks" or holding areas for future administration personnel. Their goal is not necessarily to test arguments, but to advance interests, seek revenge, secure appointments or promote narrow industrial agendas.

Engagement in such a context is not a level playing field.

f. Greece and the emergence of think tank-like competitors

A participant from Greece described a changing ecosystem in which think tank space is being occupied by hybrid organisations that look like think tanks but operate differently. Some are connected to media conglomerates, conservative networks, US interests or business-political alliances. They may have strong funding, glamorous events and access to policymakers, but they do not necessarily produce research in the traditional think tank sense.

This matters because it changes audience expectations. Policymakers, media and funders may begin to associate "think tank" work with large events, high-profile platforms, media visibility and opinion-driven commentary rather than evidence-based research. Traditional think tanks may then face pressure to become event platforms or media brands rather than research organisations.

The participant linked this to US influence in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean. New organisations and initiatives are emerging around US policy, regional business interests and MAGA-aligned networks. Some may disappear if the US political environment changes, but if the current direction continues, they may eat into the space previously occupied by independent policy research organisations.

The positive note was that some evidence-oriented actors, including parts of the diplomatic corps, value independent research more precisely because the environment is becoming noisier. The participant's organisation had recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the policy proposal and think tank track of the Greek presidency. This was described as the first such agreement between the ministry and a think tank, and as evidence that demand for serious analysis still exists.

g. Germany: equalisation of the marketplace and the problem of proving distinctiveness

A participant from Germany introduced the idea of the "equalisation" of the marketplace of ideas. It is not only that far-right actors now have more funding, but mainstream political actors and funders are reducing or redirecting money that previously supported organisations countering the far right. In 2018, there was funding available for work that responded to the AfD. By 2026, that had changed. Some mainstream actors were themselves shifting towards more conservative priorities or becoming more hesitant to fund organisations seen as politically opposed to the right.

The participant also described pressure on public budgets. As governments economise, think tanks may be asked why they all appear to do similar things. A budget committee representative reportedly said that many think tanks in Berlin all claim to be unique but seem to do the same work. This reflects a communication challenge for the sector. Think tanks need to explain not only their individual value but the value of diversity within the ecosystem.

Different organisations may convene similar-looking meetings or publish on similar topics, but they may bring different audiences, methods, ideological positions, geographies, languages or trust relationships.

This led back to the question of whether think tanks need to coordinate more strategically: not necessarily merging, but clarifying their respective roles, target groups and sources of value so that funders and policymakers do not see duplication where the sector sees pluralism.

h. Spain and the societal role of think tanks

One of the later interventions shifted the focus from funding and political pressure to the public purpose of think tanks. The speaker asked whether think tanks should continue to define themselves primarily as organisations that influence policymakers, especially at a time when the legitimacy of policymakers, governments and institutions is itself contested.

"Think tanks should not only connect knowledge to policymaking; they should connect knowledge, policymaking and society."

Participant reflection

The suggestion was to add a third element to the traditional relationship between knowledge and policy: society. Think tanks should not only connect knowledge to policymaking; they should connect knowledge, policymaking and society. This is especially important because many democratic institutions are distrusted and think tanks may be perceived as speaking the language of the mainstream at a time when the mainstream itself is contested.

The speaker argued that this does not mean aligning with anti-democratic actors or copying their agendas but instead engaging with the topics they are exploiting, but from a democratic, evidence-informed and public-interest perspective.

Migration, for example. Even where there are no calls or funding lines on migration, think tanks may need to keep working on it because it is socially and politically central. Housing is another example.

This intervention reframed the concept of usefulness, a theme that OTT has explored extensively. Think tanks need to be useful not only to ministries and EU institutions, but to societies facing anxiety, polarisation and material problems. If democratic think tanks abandon the issues that people care about because funders are not supporting them, they leave that space to illiberal actors.

The facilitator connected this to a broader civil society problem. Many organisations know from opinion polls and public debate that people are concerned about issues they are not funded to address.

The challenge is to find ways to cross-subsidise, develop "cash cows", or otherwise create room to work on socially salient issues even when donor incentives point elsewhere.

1.2 Cross-cutting issues and case studies

a. The EU level: politicisation, scrutiny and "anticipatory obedience"

One of the opening interventions focused on Brussels and the EU institutional environment. This contribution argued that, at the European level, civic space is indeed shrinking, though not always through direct repression or formal censorship. The process is more subtle: funding decisions, political scrutiny, bureaucratic shifts, anticipatory compliance, reputational pressure and growing fear of controversy are reshaping the environment for think tanks and NGOs.

The speaker identified two turning points: the most recent European Parliament elections, which changed the parliamentary balance and gave far-right parties more leverage; and the inauguration of Donald Trump, which had an immediate impact on the political and economic mood in Europe. These developments accelerated longer-term trends. Think tanks and NGOs have become politically contested in a way that was not previously the case in Brussels.

This politicisation is visible in increased scrutiny of civil society funding. There was, in their view, a valid basis for asking questions about the large amounts of money that flowed to organisations in Brussels without sufficient public understanding or transparency. Think tanks themselves have been criticised for not being very good at disclosing funding information, which makes sector-wide analysis difficult. But the concern was that scrutiny has become politically weaponised. It is associated with particular ideological agendas and targeted narratives about "pro-European", "pro-institutional" or progressive organisations.

The European Parliament's NGO scrutiny group is an example of the new politics. Because parties outside the right walked out, the group became dominated by right-wing actors. This was described as a significant departure from the usual Brussels style of consensus, compromise and mutual non-aggression.

The implication was that Brussels politics is becoming less technocratic and more ideologically adversarial.

A central example of the discussion was the loss of EU operating funding by several think tanks and other independent organisations. One organisation reported losing €350,000 in the previous year as a direct result of losing this funding. The speaker said the organisation had received this support for more than a decade and did not accept the official justification for the loss. The decision was interpreted as a sign of changing times.

Most strikingly, the speaker connected the funding losses to a [report by MCC in Brussels](#) that had listed organisations allegedly receiving money to be pro-European or pro-institutional. According to the speaker, there was close to a one-to-one correlation between the organisations named in that report and those that lost their EU operating funding. The speaker did not frame this as evidence of a conspiracy in the narrow sense. Instead, the explanation offered was "anticipatory obedience": bureaucratic or political actors avoiding controversy by making decisions they assume will be politically safer. The effect, however, is real whether or not there was direct instruction.

The consequences go beyond immediate budget gaps. The loss of operating or institutional funding reduces the ability of think tanks to work on strategic issues, underfunded topics, politically sensitive themes, or questions that no donor has explicitly commissioned. It constrains operational capacity and pushes organisations towards more projectised, reactive and potentially less independent work. It may also push organisations towards more dubious funding sources, including funders whose agendas are less transparent or whose commitment to independence is uncertain.

Fewer people are willing to speak publicly. Journalists have reportedly heard similar concerns from many think tanks and NGOs but cannot get people to go on record. Organisations fear loss of access, future funding consequences, or reputational attacks. This produces a deterioration of civic space even without explicit bans.

The Commission was described as exercising pressure more implicitly than national governments. National governments, by contrast, were described in some cases as more direct. The speaker mentioned heads of think tanks receiving blunt phone calls from democratic governments warning that future funding would be cut if they did not stop writing certain things. The point was important: threats to independence do not come only from openly illiberal regimes but also emerge from mainstream democratic governments that dislike criticism.

The role of the EU and the Commission in funding think tanks should not be underestimated. Analysis of founding dates in the Open Think Tank Directory shows a clear correlation between the growth of the European Union and the growth of the European think tank community - a community that has become heavily dependent on EU funding.

b. EU funding: Bureaucracy, politics and the loss of operating grants

Other participants added nuance to the discussion of EU funding losses. They agreed that the loss of operating grants was politically shaped and reflected a hostile climate. But they also cautioned that bureaucracy matters. The relevant programme had been managed by a different Directorate-General that may not have been used to working with think tanks. Funding was redistributed to NGOs rather than think tanks, including organisations working on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, climate, environment and migration - themselves targets of far-right criticism. This suggests that the decision may have combined political sensitivity, bureaucratic unfamiliarity and institutional confusion rather than a single ideological directive.

One participant joining the discussion described attempts by several organisations to create an endowment or cooperative funding mechanism. The idea was to combine the strengths of different organisations: one with study and analytical legitimacy, another with citizen engagement and convening capacity, and others with established networks. The ambition was to improve funding and cooperation. But fundraising has been difficult, partly because each organisation is also trying to save itself. This is a recurring tension: collective infrastructure is needed most when organisations are under pressure, but pressure makes collective investment harder.

The participant, drawing on political experience, made a particularly important point about the relationship between democratic politicians and critical think tanks. Democratic parties and governments need independent analysis to make better decisions, but it is difficult for politicians to fund organisations that then criticise them.

This problem has intensified in the current political environment. Pro-democracy politicians are under attack from many sides and may have less patience for criticism. Yet the ability to fund independent criticism is precisely what distinguishes democratic support for knowledge from political patronage.

c. From individual pain to collective action: the "guild" problem

The issue of collective action was recurring throughout the entire session. One of the most important observations was that each think tank tends to experience funding loss, political pressure, or reputational attack as an individual problem. Organisations speak privately, compare notes informally, and suffer alone. But when experiences are pieced together, patterns become visible.

"Think tanks may need to think more like a guild: compete for funding and influence, but defend the conditions of think tanking together."

Participant reflection

The case of EU operating grants illustrated this problem. It reportedly took informal, one-to-one conversations to discover that multiple organisations had suffered the same fate and that the pattern may have corresponded to external political attacks. Without a forum for collective analysis, each organisation might have assumed that its loss was unique or technical.

The facilitator suggested that think tanks may need to think more like a guild - not only as a collection of individual organisations competing for funding and visibility, but as a sector with shared interests, norms, vulnerabilities and public value. This does not mean merging identities or suppressing differences. It means recognising that attacks on funding, legitimacy or independence can affect the whole trade of think tanking.

This "guild" idea could be transformed in several practical forms. One was the possibility of collective complaints or collective legal action when funding decisions appear politically distorted. Another was the use of pro bono lawyers or legal networks so that individual organisations do not expose themselves alone. A third was collective advocacy to explain the value of independent think tanks to funders, public officials and politicians who may not understand the sector's diversity.

Sometimes the issue is not how think tanks convince decision-makers of their value, but who else can convince decision-makers on their behalf. The sector may need allies who can explain its value from outside, especially to new political actors who do not have the same assumptions about expertise, independence or pluralism as earlier generations of policymakers.

d. Periphery within Europe: access, credibility and two-tier think tank systems

Several interventions focused on geography and the unequal structure of European think tank funding. The problem was not simply national versus Brussels-based organisations, but a broader hierarchy of credibility and access.

Participants from Southern and Eastern Europe described how difficult it is for them to be seen as credible leaders of EU-wide consortia, even when they have strong research and managerial capacity. There is a tendency to assume that leadership should come from Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Rome or established Western European institutions. Organisations from Greece, Bulgaria and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe - and even from Spain and the very developed institutes from the Scandinavian countries - may find themselves invited as partners, local experts or add-ons rather than leaders.

This creates what one participant described as a possible two-tier EU think tank model. Organisations with strong access to EU funding, Horizon projects, operating grants or major Commission programmes can maintain more research independence. Commission funding may come with reporting requirements and administrative burdens, but it is often less directive about the exact conclusions of research than some national or private funding sources. Organisations with less access to such funding may become more dependent on national governments, business memberships, corporate sponsorships or project-by-project consultancy work. This can gradually affect their agendas and independence.

The problem is especially acute because some of the countries where independent think tanks are most needed are also those where political polarisation and democratic fragility are most serious. If think tanks in these countries have less access to independent funding, the overall European democratic infrastructure weakens.

Participants also noted that EU funding appears to be moving towards larger projects, network organisations, regranting schemes and Horizon-like structures. Mid-sized think tanks can fall between categories: too small to manage large networks and too large to survive on small regrants. This "in-between" position is particularly dangerous for independent policy organisations in Central and Eastern Europe.

One participant described their organisation's loss of an EU operating grant worth €430,000 per year, roughly one third of its annual budget. The organisation narrowly missed the threshold and challenged the evaluation through official redress procedures. After months of process, the complaint was rejected. The organisation then escalated the issue to the Commission, where contacts reportedly acknowledged the seriousness of the complaint but also indicated that the money had already been distributed and could not be recovered. At the same time, the organisation was subjected to four audits covering multiple projects and a very large volume of activity. The participant did not claim a direct causal link but described the experience as deeply precarious and chilling. The organisation now has no grant, has spent major staff time on audits and complaints, and remains exposed to future funding losses.

This experience reinforced the need for collective mechanisms. Individual organisations that complain may expose themselves. A sector-wide response could reduce individual risk and make patterns more visible.

e. Tech money, effective altruism and the next legitimacy bargain

Several interventions raised the role of technology money. This was not limited to openly anti-liberal or far-right funding. Participants discussed several strands of Silicon Valley influence.

One strand is traditional philanthropy associated with very wealthy individuals who seek to shape the world according to their values, sometimes in broadly positive ways. Another is conventional lobbying, where companies fund policy work related to their business interests. A third involves more ideologically unusual networks associated with figures such as Peter Thiel and with anti-liberal, anti-regulatory or civilisational politics.

A fourth strand, discussed in detail, was effective altruism. One participant noted that effective altruist money is already funding mainstream institutions in the United States, including university-based programmes. The concern was not that effective altruists are necessarily anti-democratic but that the way in which it funds can have anti-democratic consequences. Such is the scale of the funding that small decisions can easily undermine pluralistic debates but promote certain ideas over others. If major AI companies go public and generate even more wealth, the movement may have more money than it can easily spend.

For financially stressed European think tanks, this creates a serious temptation. As traditional public funders become more cautious, and as ministries decline to support sensitive work on China, the United States or other issues, technology-linked funders may appear attractive. But accepting such money may bring new dependencies, agendas and legitimacy risks.

The facilitator connected this to the broader asymmetry between US and European philanthropy. In Europe, a large amount of wealth is parked in philanthropic vehicles but only a small proportion is spent each year.

In the United States, philanthropic and ideological money appears to move at a much larger scale. This reinforces the earlier point: the struggle is not only about ideas, but about scale, speed, risk appetite and institutional capital.

f. The erosion of the think tank brand

The session repeatedly returned to a concern about the long-term damage to the think tank brand. When organisations that are not research-based adopt the language, formats and aesthetics of think tanks, audiences may struggle to distinguish between serious analysis and propaganda, access-selling or ideological performance.

The facilitator compared this to the way Russia Today used polished experts, studio settings and the visual language of credible commentary to launder low-quality or misleading narratives. The point was not that all new conservative or hybrid organisations are equivalent to propaganda outlets. Rather, the warning was that the outward form of expertise can be imitated. Once audiences associate think tanks with partisan talking points, glamorous events or access to politicians, the credibility of the whole sector suffers.

This brand erosion has also occurred in softer ways. Some think tanks have moved into selling access through conferences, sponsorships and high-profile events rather than producing research. This may be financially rational, but it changes the meaning of think tank work. In the current environment, where ideological actors are also building think-tank-like platforms, the risk becomes more serious.

g. Funding dilemmas: independence, survival and dubious money

Across the session, funding was not treated as a technical issue but as the central infrastructure of civic space. Participants described multiple funding dilemmas.

First, public funding can protect independence when it is plural, transparent and not tied to predetermined conclusions, but it can also create dependence on governments or EU institutions that may punish criticism directly or indirectly.

Second, operating grants are especially valuable because they allow organisations to cover core costs, invest in strategy, work on neglected issues and maintain independence from narrow project demands. Their loss has consequences beyond the amount of money involved.

Third, corporate funding and membership models can diversify income but may pull agendas towards the interests of corporate actors. Even when formal agreements protect independence, subtle pressures can accumulate.

Fourth, large private or tech-linked funders may offer resources at a scale that European democracy funders cannot match, but their ideas, interests and legitimacy needs may reshape the organisations they fund.

Fifth, small regrants and project calls do not sustain mid-sized think tanks with research staff, institutional memory and strategic functions.

A funding environment focused on either very large consortia or very small civil society grants can hollow out the middle.

Sixth, the right and illiberal ecosystems appear willing to invest in long-term institutional infrastructure, fellowships, media, events, litigation and talent pipelines. Pro-democracy funders are often more cautious, fragmented and short-term.

1.3 Overall assessment

The session painted a complex and worrying picture. Civic space is not disappearing uniformly. It is narrowing through funding cuts, political pressure and self-censorship; fragmenting into rival ecosystems; becoming more ideologically adversarial in Brussels; and being reshaped by geopolitical anxieties, public budget pressures and new sources of capital.

The threats are not only external. They also emerge from democratic governments that dislike criticism, public agencies that avoid controversy, funders that withdraw from sensitive issues, bureaucracies that do not understand think tanks, and a sector that often fails to act collectively or explain its public value. At the same time, participants acknowledged weaknesses within think tanks themselves: poor funding transparency, dependence on fragile grants, limited collective action, insufficient engagement with society and, in some cases, a drift from research towards events and access.

The strategic choice is whether organisations continue to experience these pressures separately or begin to act more deliberately as a sector: mapping threats, defending independence, diversifying funding, clarifying the terms of engagement and making a stronger public case for independent think tanks in a democratic Europe.

1.4 Strategic questions emerging from the session

The opening session did not conclude with a set of agreed recommendations, but it produced a clear agenda of questions for further discussion.

1. Mapping. Who is funding illiberal, anti-liberal, MAGA-aligned, nationalist or anti-regulatory work in Europe? What flows from US federal sources, American philanthropy, technology companies, effective altruist networks, European businesses or national governments? How can think tanks produce credible evidence about these flows?

2. Funding transparency. Think tanks criticise opacity elsewhere, but many are themselves weak on disclosure. Without better transparency, it is difficult to defend the sector, distinguish legitimate from problematic funding, or analyse trends.

3. Engagement dilemma. Should democratic think tanks engage with illiberal or MAGA-aligned actors? If so, under what conditions? What counts as good faith? Who sets the terms? When does engagement expose weak ideas to scrutiny, and when does it normalise anti-democratic actors?

4. Collective action. How can think tanks act as a sector when funding decisions, political pressure or reputational attacks affect them collectively? Is there a need for a European think tank guild, association, legal defence mechanism, shared funding platform or collective advocacy effort?

5. Periphery and hierarchy. How can EU funding avoid reinforcing a two-tier system in which Brussels and large Western European institutions lead, while Southern, Eastern and smaller member-state think tanks remain junior partners? How can peripheral think tanks lead consortia and shape agendas?

6. Public role of think tanks. Are think tanks too focused on policy elites at a time when society itself is the contested space? How can they connect knowledge, policy and society without becoming campaign organisations or media platforms?

7. Business models. If traditional public and philanthropic funding becomes less reliable, what models can sustain independent research? Endowments, pooled funds, memberships, business services, citizen support, mergers, shared infrastructure and cross-subsidies were all implicitly or explicitly raised, but none was presented as an easy answer.

2. Foreign threats, influence and interference

Foreign influence is not a single category. The central questions concern mechanisms, intent, transparency, power asymmetries and domestic receptivity.

The second session moved from the internal pressures affecting think tanks to the transnational forces shaping European democratic environments. It began from a deliberately self-critical premise: foreign funding and influence are not inherently new or illegitimate. European governments, foundations and donors have long supported think tanks, civil society and political actors abroad. Think tanks naturally work across borders. The problem is not foreignness as such, but how influence is exercised, with what purpose, under what conditions and with what consequences for pluralism and institutional independence.

ANALYTICAL FRAME

Three models discussed in the session

- Russia: division, confusion and the erosion of trust in institutions, media and elections.
- China: patient, targeted influence designed to shape specific policy outcomes and the wider influence ecosystem.
- The United States: an overt ideological push from an ally, involving public and private funding, policy networks and explicit conditionality.

2.1. Disaggregating foreign interference: why one category is not enough

The first opening presentation warned against treating "foreign interference" as a catch-all category. If very different campaigns are grouped, responses will be poorly designed. Policies that work against one type of threat may be ineffective against another.

"If very different campaigns are treated as one problem, the responses will be poorly designed."

Participant reflection

Three broad models were proposed.

1. Russia's "spread division and chaos" strategy. This was described as an approach designed to erode trust in institutions, media, electoral processes and democratic governance. Russia's objective is not simply to support one actor or one party, but to produce a public that no longer knows what to believe and withdraws from politics. The strategy also aims to split European unity, especially around support for Ukraine. This model is familiar to many European actors and has shaped much of the existing policy response to foreign interference.

2. China's targeted influence strategy. This was presented as qualitatively different from Russia's. China is not primarily seeking to destabilise Europe. Instead, the aim is to shape specific policy outcomes: digital infrastructure, Taiwan, Xinjiang, the transatlantic alliance, trade, industrial policy and related issues. The emphasis is on influence rather than chaos, and on shaping decisions rather than simply destroying trust.

The US campaign operates in plain sight and should not be considered less consequential because it is overt. It includes far-right NGOs, the Trump administration, conservative policy networks, religious groups, technology billionaires and other private funders. Unlike covert Russian operations or targeted Chinese influence, this is an ideological campaign using public and private money to shape European politics.

The speaker argued that Europe's current response is calibrated mainly to the Russian model. It is partially adequate for the Chinese model and almost entirely unprepared for the US one. This mismatch matters because the legal and conceptual framework often defines foreign interference in terms of covert action. If an influence campaign is open, legal, well-funded and framed as ideological solidarity, it may fall outside existing categories even when its effect is to reshape European democratic life.

The presentation also stressed the role of technology. AI and social media are lowering the cost and increasing the reach of foreign influence operations. This complicates traditional thinking about money. Financial transfers still matter, but the same amount of money can now achieve greater reach through digital amplification, platform dynamics and automated content.

2.2. Russia: Spread division, chaos and distrust; the legacy of engagement

Russia appeared in the session as both a familiar threat and a cautionary lesson. Participants did not spend as much time mapping Russia as they did China and the United States, partly because the Russian model is already well known in European policy discussions. Still, several important points emerged.

The Russian strategy's goal is to corrode confidence in institutions and democratic processes. It supports actors, narratives and campaigns that weaken European unity, particularly on supporting Ukraine. It does not necessarily need to produce belief in a single Russian narrative. It can succeed by creating confusion, cynicism and disengagement.

The discussion also highlighted Russia's long-term engagement in disruption operations. A participant referred to research on twenty years of Russian influence and interference in Finnish society. Finland had long maintained open channels with Russia, including people-to-people contacts and research relationships inherited from the Cold War context. At the time, this engagement was often seen as necessary and constructive. In retrospect, however, it may also have created an environment in which Russian influence and interference could continue more easily, including after capturing Crimea.

This point was not used to argue that engagement is always wrong. Rather, it raised the problem of timing and qualitative shifts.

A relationship that appears manageable or useful at one moment may become problematic later if the foreign actor changes its behaviour, if the geopolitical context changes, or if a cooperative relationship becomes a channel for coercion. Participants noted that it is often easier to recognise these shifts in hindsight than in real time.

This has implications beyond Russia. The question is how think tanks should identify moments when a foreign actor's policy, ambition or operating model changes. The shift may not always be as dramatic as war. It may involve a gradual hardening of policy, new restrictions, more aggressive diplomacy, greater use of proxies, or more explicit conditions attached to funding. Think tanks need a way to recognise these shifts before previous engagement becomes reputationally or strategically damaging.

Russia also served as a warning about institutional memory. Organisations that engaged with Russia before 2014 or before 2022 may now find those relationships difficult to explain. The same could happen with other actors if their role changes in the future. This does not mean all engagement should cease, but think tanks need to think about how today's partnerships may look in five or ten years.

2.3. China: targeted influence and strategic investment in the influence ecosystem

China was discussed at length as a distinctive influence actor. Participants described China as making a sustained and massive investment in the influence ecosystem across Europe and globally. Brussels was singled out as an important case. Unlike some foreign actors that struggle to understand how Brussels works, China has invested heavily in the informal EU capital from the beginning.

This investment takes multiple forms: financing for organisations, a large media presence, journalist networks, think tank exchanges, university links, company channels, diplomatic engagement and covert or semi-covert routes. One participant noted that there may be more Chinese journalists in Brussels than journalists from any other country. It suggests an organised, long-term presence designed to understand and shape the European policy environment.

The discussion distinguished China's approach from Russia's. China's activity was not described as having the same destructive intent. It is not about chaos but about influence. It is strategic, patient and linked to clear policy objectives.

An important nuance concerns the channels through which Chinese influence operates. Participants cautioned against assuming that influence always comes directly through the foreign ministry, embassy or mission. The Chinese system works through different routes, reflecting internal Chinese political and institutional realities.

Companies can be involved, though participants noted that Chinese companies are now more clearly under government control than they may once have appeared to be. Huawei was mentioned as an example where business activity and government-linked strategy are difficult to separate.

Participants also discussed covert and open dimensions. Some Chinese influence is visible and transparent: conferences, exchanges, grants, embassy engagement, media presence. Other elements are harder to map.

One participant emphasised that even someone deeply involved in China-related work can only see the tip of the iceberg. Much of the influence activity happens through universities, research chairs, institutes, business platforms and other channels far from the immediate think tank space.

As a reflection, China has long seen think tanks as "windows" that allowed it to look into its neighbours and the West - especially when formal government-to-government relationships were officially closed.

a. China and think tank funding: transparency, diversification and governance

The China discussion became concrete when one Brussels-based organisation openly described receiving an annual grant from the Chinese Mission to the EU for more than a decade. The amount is €50,000 per year, disclosed publicly, and described as less than one per cent of the organisation's turnover.

This example generated an interesting debate. The organisation's position was that the right response to such funding is not necessarily refusal, but transparency, diversification and governance. If the funding is disclosed, if it represents a very small share of total income, if it is restricted to exchange activities rather than research outputs written for the donor, and if the organisation has governance mechanisms to protect independence, then it may be defensible.

The speaker argued that a sector-wide conversation is needed. Some think tanks, particularly in Germany, were described as taking a hard line on China and criticising even dialogue. But the speaker challenged this, arguing that the more one disagrees with China, the more important it may be to talk to Chinese actors. Isolation can be politically easy to defend, but it may not be strategically wise.

The debate did not produce consensus. Other participants asked whether such funding opens doors to further influence, especially given broader concerns about research security, intelligence activity and the strategic use of academic and policy spaces. One participant asked whether China's approach might resemble a low-cost entry strategy: initial engagement appears cheap, polite and non-coercive, but later influence becomes harder to resist.

The response was that, in the organisation's direct experience, China had not overtly tried to dictate positions or force outputs. European governments and companies, by contrast, were described by some participants as more explicit in threatening non-funding or demanding particular lines.

This does not mean Chinese influence is benign but it suggests influence practices vary, and assumptions about who is most coercive do not always match organisational experience.

The strongest defence of accepting limited Chinese funding was transparency. If funding is public, visible and small relative to turnover, it is harder for the donor to exercise hidden control. But transparency alone was not presented as sufficient. Diversified funding, clear boundaries, institutional governance and case-by-case assessment are also necessary.

b. China as a role model? An uncomfortable lesson

One of the most provocative claims in the session was that Europe has something to learn from China's use of think tanks. The speaker was explicit that they did not agree with the goals of the Chinese government but there are strategic lessons to be learned: China has understood think tanks as strategic actors supporting its agendas, while Europe has not.

Chinese think tanks were described as tools for testing narratives, conducting diplomacy, projecting soft power and engaging foreign audiences. They operate with a common goal but through diversified channels. Different think tanks may have different levels of influence within the Chinese system depending on topic and institutional location, but collectively they form part of a state-backed knowledge and influence infrastructure.

This model contrasts sharply with Europe's approach. European actors often have no comparable funding mechanism for think tank diplomacy, exchange or soft power. As a result, European think tanks often face a choice between organising activities with Chinese money or not organising them at all. This creates a structural imbalance. China funds the spaces in which it wants to be present, while Europe lacks the instruments to fund independent engagement on its own terms.

This imbalance also affects global debates. Participants described international conferences where Chinese representation is large, organised and strategic, while European representation is thin. This matters especially in the Global South, where China's influence through think tanks, universities and policy networks may shape perceptions of Europe and the international order. The concern is not only what China does in Brussels, but what Chinese policy networks do to Europe's reputation and influence in the rest of the world.

China also selectively amplifies certain European voices. Participants noted that Chinese think tank conferences often include speakers from Hungary, Serbia or other contexts that may align more closely with Chinese preferences. There was concern that Russian-friendly voices may increasingly enter these settings too. If independent European voices are absent, the field is left to others.

2.4. The United States: overt ideological influence from an ally

The session treated the United States as perhaps the most difficult case because it does not fit standard European categories of foreign interference. The US is an ally, a security partner and a long-standing supporter of European civil society and think tanks. Yet participants argued that current US influence includes an overt ideological campaign aimed at reshaping European domestic politics.

The Heritage Foundation was described as the institutional engine of this effort. Having been central to Project 2025, it was described as pivoting from MAGA to "MEGA" - Make Europe Great Again. It has reportedly signed cooperation agreements with far-right think tanks in Europe and has been tasked by the Trump administration with helping identify which European think tanks should receive US government money.

There are several US strands: far-right NGOs, the Trump administration, MAGA-aligned religious groups, technology billionaires and other right-wing donors. These strands are not always coordinated, but they can reinforce one another. Some are institutional and strategic; others are more performative or volatile.

Elon Musk, for instance, intervened in less coordinated and sometimes counterproductive ways, but still consequential.

Participants discussed the potential scale of US funding. A State Department grant is being prepared with more than \$200 million annually, partly aimed at reshaping European domestic politics. This sits alongside a much larger worldwide America First Opportunity Fund. The timing is significant because some far-right European institutions may be facing funding gaps after political changes in Hungary. US money could fill those gaps.

The suggested pathway for far-right actors was simple: establish an NGO or foundation, frame it in patriotic or sovereignty language, and capture US funding under the new policy priorities. This raised alarm because the funding would not necessarily be covert. It could be formal, legal and publicly justified as support for like-minded patriotic forces.

One of the key political vulnerabilities identified is the contradiction between nationalist sovereignty rhetoric and foreign patronage.

Far-right parties and movements depend on national legitimacy so if the public can see clearly that their sovereignty discourse is subsidised from abroad, the influence may become politically toxic.

Transparency, donor disclosure and public attribution could therefore turn the language of sovereignty back on those receiving foreign ideological sponsorship.

a. US funding, conditionality and the new public diplomacy problem

The post-group discussion gave a concrete example of changing US public diplomacy funding. One organisation described receiving a letter from the US Mission to the EU within weeks of Trump's inauguration. The organisation had an open grant at the time. The letter stated that, under an executive order, the money could no longer be used to fund a number of activities, including gender-related discussions. The organisation was asked to sign the letter, with the implication that refusal could allow the US side to claw back funds already granted and, in some cases, already spent.

The organisation refused to sign. It subsequently turned down additional invitations to tender because similar stipulations had become part of the funding conditions. The speaker suggested that many other organisations in Brussels may have received similar letters or accepted similar conditions, but there has been little public discussion. Fear of consequences keeps organisations silent.

This example is important because it blurs the boundary between funding and interference. It is not covert. It is not necessarily illegal. But it uses financial leverage to reshape what European organisations can discuss. It also exports domestic US ideological priorities into European civic and policy spaces.

The example also raises questions about asymmetry. European think tanks often debate whether accepting Chinese funding creates risks of influence. But US funding may now come with explicit ideological restrictions. This does not make Chinese funding harmless. It does mean that influence must be assessed empirically and case by case rather than through fixed categories of friend and adversary.

b. Radical-right internationalisation: legitimacy, tactics and norm diffusion

The third opening presentation broadened the analysis beyond state influence and asked whether the problem is really foreign interference or Europe's own inability to handle democratic recession. The speaker drew on research on radical-right actors and parties to argue that external influence succeeds when it resonates with domestic issues, actors and anxieties.

A central warning was that mainstream parties have spent decades chasing radical-right themes and platforms in the hope of containing them. The evidence discussed in the session suggests that this strategy has often failed. Mainstream parties adopt radical-right themes, but instead of neutralising the radical right, they legitimise it and erode themselves.

This has happened repeatedly over three decades.

The speaker argued that Europe may now be repeating similar mistakes in how it talks about disinformation and foreign interference. There is a risk of externalising the problem: assuming that dangerous ideas are imposed from abroad, rather than asking why they resonate domestically. Foreign campaigns work when they connect to existing grievances, anxieties and political actors at home.

Several recurring radical-right themes were identified: civilisational decline, the failure of liberal parliamentary democracy, demographic anxiety, nostalgia, the end of progress, extinction narratives, cultural survival, and a multipolar world organised around civilisations. These ideas were not invented by MAGA actors or imported wholesale from the United States. Many have deep European intellectual roots. The radical right reworks and amplifies them opportunistically.

This matters for think tanks because it changes the analytical task. Mapping money and networks is necessary, but insufficient. Think tanks must also understand why certain ideas gain traction, where they resonate, with whom, under what circumstances, and where they fail. Overestimating the impact of foreign actors can be as damaging as underestimating it.

The internationalisation of radical-right networks was described as especially important. Radical-right parties and actors are often nationalist and divided, and mainstream actors have sometimes comforted themselves with the assumption that they cannot cooperate. But the speaker argued that this underestimates the growth of international networks. Conferences, foundations, think tanks and political events have enabled radical-right actors to share tactics, professionalise cadres, legitimise leaders, develop common language and diffuse norms.

These networks help legitimise political leaders. They also allow actors to exchange best practices: what messages work, how to flood the zone, how to identify targets, how to use civilisational language, and how to present illiberal ideas in respectable policy formats.

Think tanks play a role in this process by professionalising the infrastructure around radical-right politics.

The speaker compared this to norm diffusion by human rights activists in the 1980s and 1990s, but in reverse. Through think tank infrastructure and international networks, new anti-liberal norms can gain credibility and become part of the policy conversation.

This may not immediately shift election results, but it can shape the zeitgeist, move the Overton window (the range of ideas considered politically acceptable at a given time) and create durable epistemic communities.

2.5. Foreign ideas that resonate at home: anti-gender politics and mainstream complicity

One of the most important nuances in the session concerned anti-gender politics. A participant cited figures from a study showing that funding for anti-gender initiatives in Europe reached €1.8 billion between 2019 and 2023. According to them, 73% of this funding originated from 27 countries in geographic Europe; Russia contributed 18%; and US spending in Europe accounted for 9%. Hungary, France, the UK, Poland and Spain were named as major European funders.

The point was not only the scale of the money, but it was the origin. Anti-gender politics cannot be explained simply as Russian or US interference. Much of the money comes from within Europe and from organisations that are not necessarily far right. This shows how mainstream actors can buy into, fund or amplify themes associated with the radical right.

The same applies to issues such as immigration, climate scepticism, gender, LGBTQI rights and diversity. These themes succeed because they resonate with audiences broader than the formal electorate of radical-right parties. Foreign influence may amplify them, but it does not create them from nothing.

Again, if think tanks frame the problem only as foreign manipulation, they may miss the deeper domestic shifts. If they frame it only as domestic politics, they may miss the transnational networks and money flows that professionalise and amplify the ideas. The task is to hold both dimensions together.

2.6. Mechanisms of influence identified in the session

Across the session, participants identified multiple mechanisms through which foreign (and domestic) influence operates. Funding was central, but it was far from the only mechanism.

1. Direct funding of think tanks, NGOs, foundations and policy organisations. This can be transparent or hidden, small or large, project-specific or institutional. It can support exchanges, research, events, litigation, advocacy or organisational infrastructure.

2. Network-building. Conferences, forums, fellowships, exchange programmes and study visits create communities that last beyond individual events. These networks can professionalise actors, spread tactics, build trust and create shared language.

3. Epistemic community formation. Foreign influence does not only fund organisations; it helps create communities of experts, commentators, policy entrepreneurs and political actors who recognise one another as legitimate interlocutors. Once formed, these communities can survive changes in government or funding.
4. Agenda-setting. Foreign actors may not need to dictate conclusions if they can shape which topics are discussed, which questions are considered legitimate, which frames dominate and which voices are amplified.
5. Selective amplification. China, for example, was described as inviting certain European voices to its conferences. US conservative networks may do the same through MAGA or MEGA-linked platforms. This gives visibility and legitimacy to some actors while marginalising others.
6. Conditional funding. The US example showed how grants can include restrictions on gender or other topics. European governments and companies were also described as sometimes making explicit or implicit demands.
7. Strategic media presence. China's large media presence in Brussels was noted, as were Russian-style information tactics and American platform dynamics.
8. Research and university influence. Participants discussed the role of university chairs, academic exchanges, visiting researchers and individual researchers who may have dual roles in universities and think tanks. Influence may enter through academic spaces before reaching policy debates.
9. Disguised sponsorship. One participant described a project initially presented as supporting women in the tech industry, which later revealed Chinese corporate branding, including Huawei and other companies. The issue was not necessarily that such a project could never be legitimate, but that the branding and sponsorship were not clear from the beginning.
10. Self-deterrence. Domestic ministries, funders or think tanks may avoid controversial research because they fear offending powerful foreign actors. In such cases, the foreign actor may not even need to apply pressure.

2.7. The grey zone: where influence is hard to classify

The discussion repeatedly returned to the grey zone.

Many relationships are neither clearly corrupt nor clearly harmless. An embassy responding to a critical report with counterarguments may be doing normal diplomatic work. A company funding a conference may be engaging in legitimate policy debate. A foreign mission supporting exchange may create useful dialogue. A government-funded think tank may be both a policy actor and a soft power instrument.

This makes rigid rules difficult. Participants recognised that every donor and partner has an agenda. The issue is not whether an agenda exists, but how it is expressed, how transparent it is, whether it compromises independence, whether the relationship can be publicly defended, and whether it changes the organisation's behaviour.

China provided many examples of the grey zone. Some participants reported Chinese diplomats engaging politely and substantively when reports touched on trade defence instruments or industrial policy. They brought counterarguments and data, much as the French embassy or other governments might do. This kind of engagement was seen by some as within the normal expectations of think tank life.

Other examples were more worrying. Chinese actors reportedly engaged and invited exchanges until organisations became more critical, after which engagement changed. In another case, Chinese money appeared through a project whose sponsorship only became clear later. These examples suggest that influence can range from normal engagement to pressure, concealment or selective access.

The grey zone also applies to the United States. Long-standing American partners may remain important and legitimate collaborators, but some may now push organisations to include Heritage Foundation-linked or other MAGA-aligned actors in transatlantic formats. A think tank may feel compelled to accept such participation to keep a conference or partnership viable, but risks being branded in a different ideological direction.

The grey zone is not an excuse for relativism. Participants acknowledged the danger of saying "everyone does it" and therefore refusing to distinguish between practices. But they also recognised that European actors must own their own hypocrisies. European governments and foundations have funded political and civic actors abroad for decades. The issue is to develop principled distinctions that can be defended consistently.

2.8. Research security and individual researchers

One participant asked how China's influence intersects with the EU's growing interest in economic security and research security. The concern was that influence may not target think tanks as institutions alone. It may also target individual researchers, academics, visiting scholars and people who move between universities and think tanks.

This question remained partly open. Participants recognised that the pathways of influence differ by institution type and geography. A large Brussels-based organisation with high visibility and diversified funding may experience Chinese engagement differently from a small institute in a smaller member state with only a handful of researchers. The same actor may use different tactics depending on the organisation's size, vulnerability, location and relevance.

The university channel was seen as especially important. China may not need to influence a Brussels think tank directly if it can fund chairs, research institutes or academic partnerships elsewhere. These routes may be more effective for shaping research agendas and building long-term influence. They are also harder for think tanks to see.

This raises a challenge for any common code or guidance. Institutional policies are not enough if researchers have multiple affiliations, funding sources or roles. Think tanks need to think about individual conflicts of interest, disclosure of external affiliations, visiting fellow arrangements, academic partnerships and the reputational implications of staff participation in foreign-funded networks.

2.9. Guardrails, consistency and the search for common parameters

By the end of the session, several participants argued that think tanks need shared guardrails. They hesitated to call this a "code of conduct", but the idea was similar: a set of parameters to guide decisions on funding, engagement, transparency, independence and difficult conversations.

The need for guardrails came from the recognition that one size will not fit all. Think tanks engage with many foreign actors: China, the United States, Iran, Israel, India, Georgia, Gulf states, European governments and others - but also corporations and foundations. Each actor has different aims, tactics and relationships with Europe. A rigid rule that applies identically to all may be impractical or hypocritical. But without some common principles, organisations risk inconsistency and loss of credibility.

Possible parameters included transparency of funding, diversification of income, clarity about the purpose of grants, public availability of funding strategies, governance procedures for controversial funding, and rules for convening difficult actors. Participants also asked how independent think tanks differ from partisan think tanks, political foundations or advocacy platforms. Being honest about those distinctions is essential if the sector wants to defend its legitimacy.

The discussion also raised the issue of a level playing field. If think tanks engage with "not very nice people", how should conversations be organised? Who sets the terms? How do organisers prevent the conversation from being shaped by actors whose goal is not debate but domination? What does fair engagement look like when participants do not share the same commitment to evidence, pluralism or democratic norms?

One participant argued that think tanks often tie themselves in knots by debating whether they should withdraw from difficult spaces, while more problematic actors continue operating freely.

There is a risk that responsible organisations take themselves out of the civic space voluntarily, leaving the field to those with fewer scruples. Guardrails should therefore not only restrict think tanks; they should also enable them to remain present in contested spaces with confidence.

2.10. Transparency as a strategy, not just compliance

Transparency emerged as one of the strongest themes of the session - as before. It was not treated merely as a compliance requirement but as a strategic tool.

"Transparency is necessary, but it is the beginning of judgement, not a substitute for it."

Participant reflection

Transparency can reduce hidden influence by making funding relationships visible, it can raise the political cost for nationalist actors who accept foreign patronage, help distinguish between organisations that manage controversial relationships responsibly and those that conceal them, support sector-wide analysis of funding patterns and protect organisations that are wrongly accused of secret influence.

However, it has limits. A transparent relationship can still be problematic if the donor's influence is too large, if funding is not diversified, if conditions constrain research, or if the relationship damages credibility. Disclosure does not eliminate the need for judgement.

Transparency also needs to be applied consistently. If think tanks demand disclosure from far-right organisations, they must be willing to disclose their own funding. If they criticise Chinese or American influence, they must be honest about European government and foundation funding abroad. Credibility depends on avoiding selective outrage.

As mentioned before, transparency could expose contradictions in nationalist movements. If a party or think tank claims to defend sovereignty while receiving foreign ideological sponsorship, public disclosure can make that contradiction visible. This does not require banning the funding. It raises its political cost.

2.11. Funding, independence and the Commission

Although the session focused on foreign threats, the European Commission emerged as a central actor. Participants argued that the Commission's funding decisions and programme designs shape the space in which foreign influence operates.

If the EU does not fund independent think tanks to engage with China, then Chinese-funded engagement may dominate. If the EU withdraws operating support from think tanks, organisations may become more dependent on foreign missions, companies or politically motivated funders. If EU programmes are designed as bureaucratic nightmares, while foreign-funded exchanges are simple and well-resourced, the latter become more attractive.

One participant suggested that this could be used as an argument to the Commission: by keeping money away from independent think tanks, the Commission may unintentionally create space for Chinese or other foreign actors to set the terms of engagement. If Europe wants independent voices in conversations with China, it must fund those conversations. Otherwise, European think tanks may end up inviting the experts China allows and paying for the dialogue with Chinese money.

The EU-UK think tank project was mentioned as an example of poor design. It was apparently modelled partly on an existing China think tank exchange, but participants considered it bureaucratically cumbersome and ill-suited to actual needs. This became a broader point about Europe's inability to build flexible, strategic soft power instruments for think tanks.

2.12. The sector problem: competition versus collective defence

As in the previous session, the discussion returned to collective action. Think tanks often compete for funding, visibility, access and influence and this makes it difficult to have honest conversations about shared vulnerabilities. Yet many of the problems discussed - foreign influence, funding conditionality, attacks on legitimacy, lack of transparency, reputational risk - cannot be solved by organisations acting alone.

"Think tanks may need to compete tomorrow, but defend the sector today."

Participant reflection

Participants suggested more regular coordination among think tank leaders, not only thematic collaboration among researchers. Many organisations are independently debating the same questions: whom to partner with, when to refuse funding, how to remain independent, whether they are becoming too activist, how to protect their brand, and how to respond to hostile reports or foreign pressure. Some organisations have already developed internal playbooks; others are still improvising. Sharing experiences could help the sector learn faster.

The earlier MCC report of the think tanks receiving funding from the European Commission was revisited as a missed opportunity.

Some organisations had discussed whether to respond publicly when it appeared, but decided not to give it oxygen. In hindsight, one participant regretted that decision. The lesson was that underreaction can allow damaging narratives to spread. But overreaction can amplify hostile attacks. A collective mechanism could help organisations judge when and how to respond.

The facilitator emphasised that other professions protect their trade through collective action. Think tanks may need to do the same: compete tomorrow, but defend the sector today. This does not require full agreement on ideology, methods or funding. It requires recognising when the legitimacy and independence of think tanking itself is at stake.

2.13. Overall assessment

The session showed that foreign threats to European think tanks are complex, uneven and difficult to classify. They include covert operations, open ideological campaigns, strategic diplomacy, conditional funding, research partnerships, corporate sponsorship, media presence, epistemic community-building and domestic self-deterrence. They come from rivals, allies, private actors and, at times, European institutions themselves.

The complexity does not justify relativism. There are meaningful differences between transparent exchange and hidden influence, dialogue and coercion, plural funding and dependency, or debate and norm laundering. For think tanks, which sit at the intersection of knowledge, politics, diplomacy and public debate, the task is to move from improvised decisions to shared strategic practice: better mapping, consistent disclosure, institutional guardrails, protection for researchers and collective coordination when organisations are pressured or attacked.

2.14. Strategic takeaways

The session produced several strategic takeaways.

1. Foreign interference must be disaggregated. Russia, China and the United States represent different models of influence. Treating them as one category obscures the mechanisms and weakens responses.
2. Overt influence can be as consequential as covert interference. The fact that US ideological funding may operate in plain sight does not make it harmless. Existing frameworks may be too focused on covert operations.
3. Domestic resonance matters. Foreign actors succeed when they connect to ideas, anxieties and political actors already present in Europe. Think tanks need to study not only external campaigns but also domestic receptivity.

4. Transparency is necessary but not sufficient. It is a core guardrail, but it must be combined with diversified funding, governance, independence protections and judgement.

5. Engagement is unavoidable but must be structured. Withdrawal from difficult conversations may leave space to others. But engagement without rules can legitimise actors who reject democratic norms.

6. Funding is infrastructure. If Europe wants independent think tanks to engage in strategic debates, it must fund them. Otherwise, foreign actors with clearer strategies and easier money will shape the space.

7. Think tanks need collective mechanisms. Shared guardrails, leadership-level coordination, early warning systems, joint responses and sector-wide advocacy are increasingly necessary.

8. The sector must think beyond operational survival. The question is not only how to keep organisations alive, but what democratic purpose they serve in a transformed environment.

3. Communicating in emotional and polarised environments

Communications is no longer a downstream activity. It shapes research, audiences, organisational risk and the democratic role of the think tank.

The communications session shifted the convening from diagnosis towards practice. Participants examined how think tanks can remain credible and useful in a public sphere marked by emotional politics, fragmented platforms, strategic manipulation and a growing volume of AI-generated content. The old sequence - research, report, launch, newsletter, social media post - no longer captures how influence works.

AUDIENCE

A central tension

Think tanks need discipline about who they are trying to reach. Attempting to communicate with an undifferentiated "general public" is rarely a workable strategy.

At the same time, organisations that speak only to policy elites risk losing touch with the societies in whose name they claim to improve policy. The practical alternative is to identify specific publics and work through trusted intermediaries.

3.1. Communications as part of the business model

The first kick-off contribution began with funding, not communications. This was deliberate. The speaker, from a Brussels-based economic policy think tank, argued that an organisation's funding model is the backbone of its communications strategy. Stable and diversified funding gives a think tank the safety and independence needed to communicate clearly, take risks and maintain standards. By contrast, financial insecurity can lead organisations to drop projects, soften policy positions or avoid controversial topics.

This was framed as a position of privilege. The organisation in question has a relatively stable funding model, rooted in its founding structure and supported by a combination of states and corporations. That stability means it does not face the same immediate pressures as organisations that have had to adapt their communication, agenda or policy proposals because of funding threats. The speaker was explicit that this is not the situation of many other think tanks.

Communication is not only a matter of better writing, better social media, or more attractive visuals. It depends on organisational conditions. A think tank that lacks core funding, is dependent on a single donor, or fears political retaliation will communicate differently from one with a stable funding base and strong governance.

The session returned to this theme repeatedly. Different communication strategies reflect different business models. Some think tanks are built around research outputs. Others are built around convening. Others place citizen engagement at the centre. Others operate through membership, media presence, private advisory channels, or public events. Communication cannot be separated from these models. What looks like a communications problem may in fact be a funding problem, a governance problem, a staffing problem, or a strategic identity problem.

3.2. Key events and trends that shaped Think Tanks' Communication

a. The Brussels niche: feature or bug?

One of the key questions raised early in the session was whether being in the Brussels bubble is a feature or a bug. For many Brussels-based think tanks, the target audience is deliberately narrow: policymakers, officials, policy advisers, diplomats, experts and others who are part of the EU policy ecosystem. In that sense, the niche is functional. If the purpose is to influence a small group of people designing legislation or shaping decisions, a broad public communications strategy may not be necessary.

But the same narrowness that makes the niche functional also makes it a liability; this is the 'bug' side of the equation. Brussels can become an echo chamber. People inside it may know every acronym, institution, process and actor, while people outside it have little idea what is being discussed - or who these organisations are or why they matter. This can make think tanks less authentic in how they understand wider social and political concerns. It can also make them vulnerable to the charge that they speak only to elites.

The question was left open rather than resolved. Some participants suggested that think tanks should not abandon their core policy audiences. A policymaker audience is not inherently illegitimate. Indeed, for many think tanks, influencing two or three officials may be more important than reaching thousands of people online. But others argued that the political environment has changed: if the legitimacy of policymaking institutions is under attack, speaking only to those institutions may no longer be enough.

The most useful distinction may be between "the public" and "publics". The session suggested that think tanks do not need to communicate with an undifferentiated mass audience. But they may need to identify specific publics: journalists, teachers, students, local communities, young leaders, municipal actors, children, national media audiences, sectoral stakeholders, or politically relevant constituencies outside the Brussels bubble.

b. Brexit, post-2016 disruption and the negotiability of truth: a turning point in the communications environment

The first speaker identified Brexit as a major disruption caused by illiberal or populist politics. For their organisation, Brexit was not only a political event; it was an institutional and communications shock.

Brexit presented a turning point in the communications environment. The speaker framed 2016 as a dividing line between a "before" and an "after". The significance was that Brexit showed that truth could be treated as negotiable. Falsehoods, simplifications and manipulations could be used effectively and politically, and the actors deploying them could get away with it.

This created a new problem for think tanks. Their core professional logic depends on evidence, analysis, expertise and reasoned argument but the political environment increasingly rewards emotion, identity, repetition, outrage and strategic ambiguity. Think tanks therefore face a difficult choice: they can double down on evidence and risk being ignored, or they can adapt their communications without abandoning their standards.

The session did not suggest that think tanks should become populist communicators. But it did suggest that they need to recognise that the environment in which truth circulates has changed. Producing accurate analysis is necessary, but not sufficient.

Think tanks must think harder about channels, tone, timing, messengers, formats, audiences and trust.

c. Populism in national capitals and the "low-tech" response

Another challenge identified was the rise of populist trends in national capitals. For Brussels-based think tanks, this creates a double problem. First, national populism affects the political actors who eventually shape EU legislation and decision-making. Second, it contributes to the tearing of the European project's social and political fabric.

"When problems go high-tech, go low-tech."

Participant reflection

The response suggested by the first speaker was simple: when problems go high-tech, go low-tech. In other words, when illiberal actors use algorithms, digital platforms, emotional manipulation and polarising media environments, think tanks may need to invest more in direct human contact. Rather than trying to beat polarising actors on their own technological terrain, think tanks can create spaces for real conversation, disagreement and relationship-building.

This low-tech approach appeared in several forms. One was to invite people who disagree with one another onto panels and into events. The purpose is not only to balance but to create genuine debate, generate "aha" moments and avoid the boredom of everyone nodding in agreement. Another was to organise conversations outside Brussels, in national capitals and local contexts, rather than simply broadcasting messages from the EU bubble. A third was to engage civil society, journalists and local audiences directly.

This low-tech approach can be expensive and demanding, but breaking out of the Brussels bubble requires investment in presence, not just distribution.

3.3. Events as a key part of communicating your work

a. Events as communications: disagreement, moderation and convening power

Events were repeatedly described as a central communications tool. They are not simply occasions to disseminate research. They can be spaces for disagreement, relationship-building, agenda-setting, public engagement and policy influence.

Several participants emphasised the importance of convening people who disagree. In polarised environments, think tanks can provide structured spaces where opposing views are tested. But this requires careful design and skilled moderation. A badly designed event can become a platform for propaganda, normalisation or performative conflict. A well-designed event can create genuine exchange and reveal the quality of arguments.

One organisation described organising debates among European election candidates and economic experts from across the political spectrum. Some participants may have felt uncomfortable with this, but the speaker argued that if a party is projected to win a significant share of seats, think tanks cannot simply refuse to engage. Claiming moral purity from a distance may not help.

Another organisation described its "head-to-head" events, in which two speakers argue opposing sides of a major European issue. This format emerged from concern that the quality of European debate on big questions - democracy, Europe's future, major policy choices - was too poor. These events were designed to provide more structured disagreement, not just consensus panels.

Another participant described citizen engagement as part of its think tank's founding identity, with debating formats, focus groups, polling, young leaders and public-facing events. Its annual State of Europe or Festival of Europe event was described as a major communication vehicle, but one that depends heavily on high-quality moderation. The moderator must be able to interrupt, challenge, include different voices and maintain momentum. This is a specific skill, not something every researcher automatically has.

The discussion also highlighted private and semi-private convening. Chatham House-style events, track 1.5 dialogues and closed-door discussions can be among the most influential products think tanks offer. They do not always require public communications. In fact, their value may depend on discretion. But in a more polarised world, even private convening needs stronger guardrails, better chairing and more deliberate moderation.

b. The dilemma of controversial speakers

A concrete example from one of the participating think tanks illustrated the risks of convening controversial actors. The organisation had planned an event involving a representative of the Serbian government after the Serbian mission approached them. Initially, this seemed like a reasonable opportunity for dialogue. But once the event was announced, the organisation received strong backlash, especially from Serbian communities and experts. People questioned how the think tank could invite this person at a time when students and others were protesting against the Serbian government.

The organisation ultimately cancelled the event. The speaker described this as a good decision, though also a risky one because cancelling can itself create backlash. The episode showed that engagement decisions cannot be made only on the basis of formal status or diplomatic relevance. Think tanks need to understand the political and social context surrounding a speaker. They also need to listen to communities and experts who understand that context.

This example raised popular questions at the event: when should think tanks engage with representatives of contested governments? When does dialogue become disrespectful to democratic actors on the ground?

How should think tanks balance openness, access, controversy, and solidarity with those resisting authoritarian or corrupt power? What processes should be in place before invitations are issued?

The session suggested that think tanks need clearer decision-making frameworks for controversial speakers. These should include contextual analysis, consultation with credible experts, reputational risk assessment, clarity about the purpose of the event, and plans for moderation or cancellation if needed.

c. Accessibility, simplification and quality

A second major contribution focused on the "tsunami of thought leadership". The speaker argued that everyone now seems to be a thought leader: experts, consultants, influencers, algorithms, self-identified commentators and organisations competing for attention online. In this environment, the first communications challenge is simply being heard.

The answer proposed better communication. High-quality communications can itself help counter far-right or anti-democratic narratives. This includes being shorter, clearer, more visual, more accessible and more disciplined. The speaker acknowledged that "simplification" is not always welcome in think tank circles. Experts may fear that simple means simplistic. But the argument was that accessible communication means making language and formats usable for the intended audience, not sacrificing rigour.

Visuals were highlighted as important because they engage different parts of the brain and help people process information. Shorter formats were encouraged because policymakers and other audiences are time-poor. The issue is not to dumb down content, but to adapt it to how people actually consume information.

This is linked to a broader theme: think tanks must stop assuming that a long report is the default product. Reports still have value, but they are only one format. Shorter briefs, executive summaries, infographics, carousels, podcasts, closed-door briefings, one-to-one meetings, local events and media explainers may all be more effective depending on the goal.

3.4. Communication: the conceptual challenges

a. The audience question: is "the public" too broad?

The session repeatedly returned to the question of the audience. One speaker challenged the idea that think tanks should try to reach the "larger public" or mass audience. From a communications perspective, this is often too vague to be useful. If the target audience is everyone, the strategy will not work.

This view does not reject audience expansion. It argues that expansion must be intentional. Think tanks can broaden their audiences, but they cannot communicate effectively with people who have no interest in the topic, no awareness of what a think tank is, and no reason to engage with policy analysis. Attempting to reach everyone may waste scarce resources.

Others complicated this view by arguing that think tanks have become too distant from society. The Dutch example was especially important. One institute realised it had become too focused on The Hague and had, in the words of the participant, turned its back on society. In response, it began polling the Dutch public several times a year to map hopes and fears around foreign policy and international developments. This helped the institute understand public anxieties and align parts of its research agenda more closely with social concerns.

The solution, then, is not a binary choice between policymakers and the mass public. Think tanks can maintain narrow policy influence while also developing mechanisms to listen to wider society, test whether their priorities align with public concerns, and work through intermediaries who are closer to broader audiences.

b. Media partnerships and public translation

Several participants emphasised the importance of working with media outlets that can translate think tank analysis for broader audiences. The Dutch institute described working with media that are closer to the general public than the more liberal or elite newspapers it traditionally engaged. One example was a news programme for children broadcast before the main evening news and watched by a large audience. Working with this programme forced the think tank to explain international developments in ways children could understand. This, in turn, helped researchers explain their ideas better to wider public.

The same institute also worked with a large daily newspaper known for its plain language. Journalists pushed back during interviews, telling researchers when explanations were too complex or unclear. This kind of feedback improved communication.

The institute also worked with libraries in smaller towns and rural areas to hold sessions on public hopes and fears, provide context, and listen to what people were seeing and feeling. The speaker acknowledged that this can be awkward in practice, but it creates a different kind of relationship with society.

This approach suggests that think tanks do not need to become mass media themselves. They can work with trusted intermediaries: children's news programmes, regional newspapers, libraries, journalists, educators and community institutions. These intermediaries understand audiences that think tanks often do not.

c. Social media after Twitter: fragmentation, grief and adaptation

The collapse or transformation of Twitter/X was a major theme. Several participants described a sense of loss. Researchers had invested years in building virtual communities on Twitter, only to see the platform change dramatically. One speaker described colleagues almost grieving the loss of a professional space.

There was no consensus on whether to leave X. Some organisations have dropped or deprioritised it, especially because the return no longer justifies the effort. Others never left, arguing that there is still an established audience there. Some have shifted their approach: using X mainly for live reporting from events, targeting journalists, or engaging in semi-bilateral exchanges rather than broadcasting.

LinkedIn was widely used but also criticised: it is crowded with self-promotion, AI-generated content and performative thought leadership. Others saw it as increasingly important and adapted their content accordingly, using graphics, carousels and tailored posts. One organisation observed sharp differences in audience behaviour: a leadership announcement produced hostile and negative responses on X, while LinkedIn produced overwhelmingly positive reactions.

BlueSky, Instagram and websites were also mentioned. The first speaker's organisation now uses BlueSky, LinkedIn and Instagram, while treating social media as only one dissemination tool among many. Press relations, events and the website remain central. The broader conclusion was that no single platform can now play the role Twitter once played. The digital public sphere has fragmented into tribes, platforms and micro-audiences.

Adaptability was presented as the intrinsic quality of communications work. Organisations cannot adopt one fixed recipe and apply it indefinitely. Some teams now plan only one week ahead and check daily whether planned outputs still make sense. The task is not only to expand audiences but to retain existing ones by avoiding bombardment with irrelevant content.

3.5. Think tanks' Communication in the Digital Age

a. Are think tanks using platforms, or being used by them?

A deeper concern emerged around social media and algorithmic influence. One participant warned that think tanks are not only creators of communication; they are also recipients of influence. By relying heavily on social media metrics, organisations can become vulnerable to manipulation. Strategic actors can artificially amplify certain content to influence editorial decisions, organisational priorities or perceptions of what audiences want.

"Having every platform is not a strategy. The channel should follow the audience and purpose."

Discussion synthesis

This was compared to media experiences where editors, seeking advertising revenue or traffic, began prioritising content that appeared to perform well, without realising that performance could be artificially steered. The same risk applies to think tanks. If they chase engagement numbers, they may be led by algorithms or manipulation rather than mission.

This raises an important strategic question: should think tanks be everywhere, or should they deliberately narrow their communications channels to reach committed audiences? One participant compared the dilemma to debates in the Catholic Church about whether to seek a broad but weakly committed public or a smaller and more devoted community. The same question applies to business, media and think tanks.

The conclusion was not that social media should be abandoned entirely. Rather, think tanks should be more conscious of how platforms shape them. Channels should follow the audience and purpose, not the other way around. Having every platform is not a strategy.

1. AI: threat, tool and policy challenge

AI appeared throughout the session as both a communications issue and a research integrity issue. Participants raised several concerns.

One speaker argued that all social media content from their organisation remains human-made. AI is used, if at all, for simple tasks that save time, not for creative work. The reasons were partly practical and partly ethical. AI-generated content can be dull, inaccurate or hallucinated, and correcting it may take as long as doing the work oneself. It may also remove the joy and craft from communications.

Another participant noted that AI is becoming very good at descriptive and analytical synthesis. This may make traditional descriptive analytical writing less valuable. Think tanks may need to increase the emphasis on prescription: judgement, policy recommendations, interpretation, and advice that AI cannot easily replicate.

Several organisations are developing AI policies or protocols. One organisation has produced a policy covering both communications and research. Another has recently approved a protocol on the use of AI in research and organisational work. Participants expressed interest in sharing guidelines and possibly developing a common approach among European think tanks.

There were also concerns about AI detection tools. In the United States, think tank pieces are reportedly being run through AI detection software and flagged as AI-generated even when AI was used only for spell-checking or editing.

This creates reputational risks. Think tanks need clear policies explaining what uses of AI are acceptable, how they are disclosed, and how they protect research integrity.

The facilitator also asked whether think tanks are writing for robots: producing content in ways that AI systems will pick up and reproduce. One speaker confirmed that their organisation is trying to be picked up by AI and already sees signs of AI traffic, including visits from Chinese cities that may not reflect human readers. This introduced a new communications challenge: think tanks may need to think not only about human audiences, but about how their work enters large language models and automated knowledge systems.

The session strongly suggested that AI is an area where collective action is needed. The think tank sector could benefit from shared guidelines, common principles and peer learning on AI use in research, communications, editing, visuals, disclosure and institutional policy.

c. Substack, newsletters and the problem of too much information

Participants discussed the overload of information produced by think tanks themselves. One participant asked how organisations can avoid contributing to the noise. Heads of programmes often want their own newsletters, social media accounts or branded products because projects require deliverables or teams want visibility. But this can fragment the organisational brand and overwhelm audiences.

"Less is more."

Communications principle shared in the session

One communications lead said their internal message is "less is more". The communications team constantly asks colleagues not to produce so much. This is partly about staff capacity, but also about effectiveness. Producing less can make communications more strategic.

3.6. Communicating research credibly: outputs, brands and coherence

a. Research outputs in polarised environments

Several participants linked communications to research products. The question was how to communicate through research outputs when audiences are polarised.

One organisation described maintaining conventional policy briefs with recommendations, but crafting data points that can be used across political divides. The example came from Denmark's referendum on its EU defence opt-out. The organisation supported dropping the opt-out, but it also produced a neutral mapping of how often and when the opt-out had been activated. This data point was then used by both sides: supporters of dropping the opt-out cited it as evidence that the opt-out was an obstacle, while opponents cited it as evidence that the opt-out was useful for protecting sovereignty.

This was presented as a useful strategy to contribute to reducing polarisation: a think tank can make clear recommendations while also providing shared factual material that different political actors can use. In polarised environments, this may help maintain relevance across divides without pretending to be neutral on every question.

Another organisation described moving away from formal policy recommendations. Instead, it focuses more on accompanying policy processes. The argument was that policy recommendations in reports often arrive too late, are too generic, or are not read by the intended audience. More effective influence may happen through meetings, one-to-one conversations, WhatsApp groups, closed-door exchanges and ongoing relationships with policymakers. This approach makes research more personalised and embedded in policy processes.

These two models are not necessarily opposed. One emphasises public data points that can travel across political divides. The other emphasises direct engagement and policy accompaniment. Both challenge the assumption that a long report with recommendations is always the best vehicle for impact.

c. Researcher brands and organisational brands

One participant raised the growing importance of individual researchers as communicators. In many cases, audiences encounter the organisation through specific people. A well-known migration researcher, for example, may have her own brand in their country and beyond. The challenge for the organisation is to integrate that individual brand into the institutional brand.

This reflects a broader shift. Algorithms often respond better to people than organisations. Personal voices may travel further than institutional accounts. Platforms such as Substack also encourage individual expert identities. This can help think tanks reach audiences, but it also creates governance and branding challenges.

If researchers build strong personal platforms, where does the individual end and the institution begin? Is a Substack post an institutional publication? Should it go through peer review? Does it represent the think tank or the individual? What happens if the researcher leaves? How does the organisation benefit from individual visibility without controlling it too tightly?

The session discussions suggested that think tanks need to become more comfortable managing a "sum of its parts" model. Organisational credibility may increasingly depend on the visibility, trust and communication skills of individual researchers. The task is to support these voices while maintaining institutional coherence.

c. Internal communications and organisational coherence

Although the session did not fully explore internal communications, several comments pointed to its importance. Communications were described as two-way: it manages how the organisation is perceived externally, but also how staff understand processes, goals, standards and mission internally.

This matters more in polarised environments. If a think tank is trying to communicate its democratic role, defend its independence, engage controversial actors, use AI responsibly, or navigate social media risks, staff need a shared understanding of the organisation's principles. Researchers, communications teams, events staff, directors and programme heads cannot operate in silos.

The issue also appeared in the discussion of overproduction. Programme teams may want their own products and channels, but without internal coordination the organisation becomes fragmented. Similarly, events and communications teams may need to be better integrated so that events are not treated separately from institutional messaging.

The session suggested that telling a story about a think tank's role to the outside world requires first telling that story internally. Staff need to know what the organisation stands for, who its audiences are, what risks it faces, how it uses platforms, and what standards guide its communications.

3.7 Reaching and protecting audiences

a. Citizen engagement: promise and capacity strain

Citizen engagement was discussed as both necessary and costly. One participant described citizen engagement as central to its identity, through debating platforms, focus groups, polls, young leaders and large public events. Another described using polling of public hopes and fears to learn about their audiences and working with children's news and public libraries to reach the wider public. The Czech organisation described extensive public events, educational projects, media engagement, advocacy and influencer work.

But participants were clear that citizen engagement can be resource-intensive and sometimes draining. Public events, educational activities and influencer partnerships require staff time, money and specialist capacity. The impact is not always as large as expected. Donors and partners often want results but may be hesitant to fund experimentation.

The Czech think tank created a consortium involving research organisations, sociologists, a marketing company and others to understand Czech society and improve communication. It uses sociological data, marketing training and research content to create communication manuals and train researchers. It also works with influencers, providing research support when they engage relevant topics. This sometimes works and sometimes does not. The organisation remains on the "complicated end" of communication because it insists on rational, fact-based content while competing with actors willing to use misinformation or emotional manipulation.

This captures the central challenge of citizen engagement for think tanks: reaching wider publics requires new methods, but think tanks do not want to become activists, entertainers or disinformation actors. They need to experiment without losing their identity.

b. National contexts and the limits of Brussels lessons

Several participants stressed that Brussels communications and national communications are very different. Strategies that work in the Brussels bubble may not work in Czechia, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Spain, Greece or Denmark. National media systems, political cultures, public debates, levels of polarisation and trust in expertise vary greatly.

This means that good practice cannot simply be copied. The economic policy think tank's roadshow, the Dutch polling model, the Czech influencer consortium, head-to-head formats, one think tank's convening model, another's citizen engagement, or a journalist-focused use of X may each work in particular contexts, but not everywhere.

Still, participants strongly supported sharing experiences. Heads of communications, in particular, could benefit from a network or community of practice. Many organisations are facing similar problems: AI policy, X strategy, researcher brands, internal overproduction, events as communication, crisis communication, backlash against speakers, and audience fragmentation. Communications leads may be able to learn from one another more directly than through director-level meetings alone.

c. Crisis communications and attacks on think tanks

The session touched on crisis communications, though it did not explore it in depth. One of the speakers identified the need to think about how to respond to aggressive narratives attacking think tanks and democratic discourse. What should an organisation do if it is attacked? Should it respond publicly, ignore the attack, correct the record, mobilise allies, or change the conversation?

The Serbian event example was one form of crisis. The backlash required a decision about cancellation.

The wider discussions from the convening suggest other possible crises: hostile reports, accusations of foreign influence, attacks on funding, social media campaigns, AI-generated misinformation, controversial speakers, or pressure from governments and donors.

The session implied that think tanks need crisis protocols. These should include monitoring, decision-making authority, internal coordination, legal and reputational assessment, and principles for when to engage or stay silent. Crisis communications is no longer optional in a polarised environment.

3.8. Overall assessment

Think tanks are operating in a communications environment fundamentally different from the one many were built for. Truth is contested, social media has splintered, AI is changing how knowledge is produced and discovered, policymakers are overloaded, publics are anxious and events can create trust or trigger backlash. Organisations are expected to be clear, fast and engaging without becoming simplistic, partisan or performative.

No single communications model emerged because strategy depends on mission, business model, audience, geography, funding and risk appetite. Yet common principles were clear: communications should begin with purpose; audiences should be specific; organisations should produce less but with more intention; disagreement should be designed and moderated; AI requires policies; and human, trusted communication remains a distinctive asset in a noisy environment.

1. Communications must start with purpose. A think tank must know what it is trying to achieve before choosing channels, formats or audiences.
2. Audiences must be specific. "The public" is too broad. Think tanks should identify the particular publics, policymakers, journalists, communities or intermediaries they need to reach.
3. Less can be more. Producing fewer, better, more targeted outputs may be more effective than flooding audiences with newsletters, reports and posts.
4. Events are communications. They require design, moderation, follow-up and integration with broader strategy.
5. Disagreement must be structured. Inviting diverse views can strengthen debate, but only if the think tank has guardrails and skilled moderation.

6. Social media is fragmented. X, LinkedIn, BlueSky, Instagram and websites serve different audiences and should not be treated as interchangeable.
7. Human voice matters. In a world of AI-generated content, recognisable, thoughtful and human communication can be a source of trust.
8. AI needs policies. Think tanks need clear guidance on AI use in research, communications, editing, visuals, disclosure and integrity.
9. Researchers are communicators. Individual expert brands matter, but they need to be connected to institutional strategy.
10. Think tanks need to listen. Polls, libraries, children's media, local events and plain-language journalism can help reconnect research agendas with social concerns.
11. Media are allies and gatekeepers. Working consciously with journalists remains essential, especially when think tanks cannot reach broad publics directly.
12. Communications teams need peer networks. The challenges are changing too fast for each organisation to solve them alone.

4. From diagnosis to action

The closing session asked whether think tanks should optimise familiar models or rethink their role more fundamentally.

The final session invited participants to identify the most important lessons, practical next steps and ideas outside the normal repertoire of think tank cooperation. A central provocation shaped the discussion: are organisations improving what they already do, or does the scale of the challenge require something closer to reinvention? Better communications, funding, coordination and tools are necessary. The concern was that incremental change may still produce a "progress illusion" if it does not match the speed, scale and scope of the threats.

STRATEGIC CHOICE

Two strategic postures

- Guerrilla tactics: faster, sharper and more disruptive interventions that expose the concrete consequences of anti-liberal proposals before they are normalised.
- A rock in the tide: reliability, care and trust as scarce assets in an information environment dominated by speed, outrage and AI-generated content.

The tension may be productive. Different issues and institutions may require different combinations of rapid response and patient credibility.

4.1. The purpose and value of the collective

a. The value of the convening itself: network, solidarity and recognition

One of the takeaways was the value of the convening as a space for exchange among think tank leaders and senior staff. Several participants emphasised that the network dimension itself was important. Many leaders make difficult decisions about funding, risk, staff, strategy, public positioning, controversial partnerships and institutional identity, often with limited peer support.

The meeting allowed participants to see that the challenges they face - funding insecurity, attacks on legitimacy, the changing role of social media, AI, foreign influence, radical-right networks, public distrust, internal pressures and uncertainty about engagement - are shared across countries and institutions. This recognition was valuable even before any concrete action was agreed.

However, participants also noted that shared challenges do not mean identical experiences. Threats are felt differently depending on geography, organisational size, business model, political context, funding mix, thematic focus and institutional history. A Brussels-based think tank, a national institute in Central Europe, a Scandinavian organisation in a relatively stable democracy, a Southern European centre, a media-rooted organisation and a citizen-engagement platform all experience the crisis differently.

This diversity complicates collective action, but it also enriches the network. The value of the group is precisely that different organisations see different parts of the problem. Some are already experiencing illiberalism directly. Others can still act before the threat becomes acute. Some are better equipped for communications, some for-policy influence, some for public engagement, some for research, some for convening, and some for fundraising. A future network should make use of these differences rather than trying to erase them.

b. Scale, collective action and the absence of sector representation

A major practical theme was the lack of scale for collective action. Participants noted that most industries have representatives in Brussels and elsewhere who defend their interests, coordinate messages and influence institutions. Think tanks, by contrast, remain fragmented. They often compete for funding, visibility and access, even when they face common threats.

This fragmentation weakens the sector. When think tanks are attacked, lose funding, face reputational campaigns or confront foreign influence, they often respond individually. There is no strong platform through which the sector can speak, coordinate, defend standards or advocate for better conditions.

Participants proposed more joint campaigns, joint fundraising, shared communications work, and possibly a shared platform for highlighting good communications practices. There was interest in creating spaces where think tanks could compare strategies, pool resources and learn from one another.

However, there was also caution. A formal union or association of think tanks may be difficult. Organisations have different cultures, business models, politics, funders, audiences and priorities. Cooperation sounds easy on paper but becomes difficult in practice because of fundraising competition, institutional habits and differences in working culture. One participant, drawing on experience of cooperation between organisations, warned that moving from competition to cooperation requires patience, trust and attention to unglamorous operational details.

The session therefore suggested a pragmatic approach: maintain and deepen the network, but do not assume that a large formal structure can be built quickly. Start with concrete collaborations, shared learning and areas of mutual benefit. Build trust through practice.

c. Defining the problem: for whom is this a crisis?

One important reflection concerned problem definition. Participants recognised threats to democracy and think tanks, but not everyone experiences them in the same way. Threats vary by geography, sector, organisational model and political context. A threat to one organisation may be a future possibility for another. A threat to the think tank sector may not be perceived as a threat by the general public.

This matters for action. If think tanks want funders, European institutions, businesses or publics to support collective action, they need to explain the problem in a way those actors recognise. A pro-democracy funder may care about civic space. A business may care about regulatory stability, platform risks, or threats to its operations. A young person may care about housing, jobs or climate. A ministry may care about foreign interference. A think tank may care about independence and funding.

The facilitator pushed back against the idea that everyone needs to agree on one comprehensive problem statement. Powerful actors often care only about where the problem hits them. Think tanks may need to work with this reality. Instead of trying to make all actors care about democracy in the same abstract way, they can show each actor the part of the problem that affects them, while connecting these concerns into a broader mosaic.

This is a pragmatic theory of coalition-building. A company may support work because a radical-right agenda threatens its business model. A public institution may support work because foreign influence threatens policymaking. A foundation may support work because civic space is shrinking. Think tanks can address these specific concerns while still contributing to a larger democratic defence.

The challenge is to accept support without compromising independence, and to ensure that issue-specific work still connects to the broader democratic problem.

4.2 Strategic and tactical positioning

a. Optimising versus revolutionising

As mentioned before, the most important strategic tension in the session was whether think tanks should optimise or revolutionise. Optimisation means taking steps that are necessary, and participants proposed several of them.

"Incremental improvement can feel like progress while leaving the sector further behind."

Participant reflection

But the more radical argument was that optimisation may not match the scale of the challenge. One participant described a "progress illusion": think tanks may be making changes, but the speed, scale and scope of those changes are far smaller than the speed, scale and scope of the threats they face. In such a situation, incremental improvement can feel like progress while actually leaving the sector further behind.

This critique was applied not only to operations but also to content. Many think tanks continue to produce the kinds of recommendations, reports and policy advice they have always produced. But these outputs may no longer have traction in a world where political systems are blocked, attention is fragmented, and radical-right actors are setting the terms of debate. The issue is not simply that think tanks need better communications. It may be that their underlying model of influence no longer works.

The session therefore asked whether think tanks are still operating as if they sit at the centre of a functioning democratic policy system: providing evidence and advice to policymakers who want better decisions. If that system is eroding, think tanks may need a different role. They may need to work more politically, more strategically, more collectively, more publicly, and at times more disruptively.

Several participants were careful to point out that this does not mean abandoning evidence or adopting misinformation. But it does mean learning from the effectiveness of radical-right networks, which have built ecosystems, repeated simple messages, coordinated around common purposes and used ideas as tools of power.

The challenge for pro-democracy think tanks is to adapt without becoming what they oppose.

b. Guerrilla tactics, disruption and going on the offensive

One group proposed that think tanks should use more "guerrilla tactics". The idea was that think tanks often nuance their views so carefully that they leave the political field to actors who make radical, simple and disruptive claims. Pro-democracy think tanks are frequently reactive: they respond to premises set by others. By the time they enter the debate, the frame has already been established.

The proposal was not to abandon complexity, but to find windows of opportunity where think tanks can intervene more disruptively. This might mean sharper messages, more creative formats, faster responses, more strategic framing, or direct challenges to harmful ideas. It could also mean identifying moments when a political debate is open and acting before the radical right defines it.

Another group described a related idea as "going fully offensive"; again, the example was Project 2025. Instead of writing another commentary about its general implications, think tanks could analyse it from the perspective of specific groups and sectors: what would it mean for minority groups, companies, universities, public services, women, migrants, researchers or specific industries? This would make the consequences concrete and politically relevant.

c. The "rock in the tide" alternative

Alongside the call to go on the offensive, another idea was almost the opposite: think tanks could become a "rock in the tide". In a world of AI-generated content, misinformation, attention competition and constant noise, their distinctive role could be reliability, slowness and trust.

"The currency of think tanks is reliability."

Participant reflection

This approach would mean doubling down on being a credible source. Journalists, officials, companies and publics would know that certain think tanks provide careful, verified, serious information. They may not be the fastest or loudest, but they are dependable. In an environment where the attention economy rewards speed and outrage, reliability itself can be disruptive.

The two approaches - guerrilla tactics and rock-like reliability - seem contradictory, but the session suggested they may both be needed. Some situations require rapid, sharp, proactive interventions. Others require patient credibility and long-term trust. The challenge is knowing when to use which mode, and whether the same organisation can credibly do both.

This connects to the earlier optimisation-versus-revolution question. Becoming a trusted rock may sound traditional, but in a polluted information environment it could be a radical strategic choice. Going on the offensive may sound necessary, but it risks undermining the reputation for careful analysis that makes think tanks valuable. The future may require organisations to differentiate roles: some act as rapid responders, others as trusted archives, others as conveners, others as campaigners, and others as deep research institutions.

d. Operating as disruptors in systems no longer built for them

One of the facilitator's reflections was that think tanks may need to operate as disruptors. Online communication channels are not democratic in structure; they are stacked against the values and styles of communication that think tanks often rely on. Political systems may also be changing in ways that reduce the influence of pro-democracy actors.

In many contexts, think tanks still assume that they operate within a system they partially control or at least recognise: democratic institutions, open debate, evidence-informed policymaking, and rules-based politics. But if the system increasingly works against them, they need a different posture. They may be minority power-holders operating in a hostile or semi-hostile environment.

The analogy was made to think tanks in authoritarian regimes. A progressive or pro-democracy think tank in such a context automatically works, at some level, to change the existing system. Europe is not yet in that position, and participants hoped it would not get there. But thinking in those terms can be useful. It forces organisations to ask: what does it mean to operate when the system is not fully on your side?

This does not necessarily mean revolution. Before revolution comes disruption. Think tanks may need to disrupt narratives, funding patterns, policy assumptions, communication channels and institutional complacency. They may need to act strategically from a position of asymmetrical power, especially when facing large platforms, corporate power, foreign influence or well-funded anti-liberal networks.

4.3 Learning from the other side and peers

a. Mapping US influence and radical-right networks

One of the most concrete research proposals was to map US influence on non-democratic or radical-right forces in Europe. This idea had appeared in earlier sessions and returned in the final discussion. Participants argued that the flow of US money, ideas, networks and institutional support into European radical-right or anti-liberal spaces needs much more systematic analysis.

This mapping should not be limited to funding. It should include soft power, networks, think tank partnerships, religious organisations, political foundations, public diplomacy, tech money, media connections, events, training, litigation support and ideological exchange. It should look at member-state level and EU level, and it should connect national cases into a European picture.

The purpose would be both analytical and strategic. Think tanks need to understand the threat they are facing. Funders and policymakers need evidence of the scale and mechanisms of influence. Publics need to see when sovereignty rhetoric is backed by foreign support. Democratic actors need to know where vulnerabilities lie.

The group also expressed interest in understanding Project 2025 and the Heritage Foundation more deeply. Participants wanted a lecture, briefing or analytical session on how Project 2025 was built, how long it took, who was involved, what methods were used, and what lessons can be drawn for democratic actors. The point was not to imitate its goals, but to understand its organisational effectiveness.

b. Learning from the other side without becoming the other side

The session repeatedly returned to the uncomfortable idea that pro-democracy think tanks need to learn from radical-right and anti-liberal actors. These actors have often been better at building ecosystems, defining simple goals, repeating messages, linking ideas to political power, mobilising funders, creating talent pipelines and acting with discipline.

The facilitator noted that authoritarian or illiberal projects often benefit from a clear pyramid. There is a clear goal, a hierarchy, a command structure and a disciplined ecosystem. Liberal and pro-democracy actors, by contrast, value pluralism. They debate nuance, disagree over priorities and often spend time arguing over whose version of the grey zone is better. This pluralism is a democratic strength, but it can make action harder.

Participants wrestled with how a pluralistic group can act together. One idea was not to force agreement on a single grand agenda, but to create a solidarity mechanism. One think tank could set a goal and others could support it; then another organisation could lead on a different issue. This would avoid endless negotiation over one common platform while still enabling collective action.

This approach recognises that pro-democracy think tanks do not need to agree on everything to help one another. They need a shared commitment to defending the conditions for democratic debate, independent knowledge and pluralism. Within that, different organisations can lead on different topics.

c. Twinning, peer support and solidarity exchanges

A more traditional but still practical idea was to revive or adapt twinning models between think tanks. Earlier funding models had paired Eastern European think tanks with Western European partners, or new member-state organisations with older member-state organisations. These partnerships were often project-based and could be efficient.

Participants discussed two possible versions of this. One is thematic cooperation: organisations from different regions work together on a common issue. The other is organisational peer support: directors or senior staff advise one another on internal processes, strategy, communications, fundraising or governance.

The facilitator suggested that some of this could be done cheaply through solidarity. Think tank leaders often attend the same conferences or events. Adding an extra day to visit a peer organisation, advise a director, support a strategy discussion, or exchange practices could create value without requiring major funding. This would be based on reciprocity: one organisation offers time and expertise, another does the same later.

This idea responds to the loneliness of think tank leadership and the lack of organisational development support. It could create a marketplace of needs and offers: who needs help with what, and who can provide it? The principle would be solidarity rather than direct economic gain.

4.4 People, skills and organisations

a. Researchers as influencers and the changing profile of thinktankers

One group focused strongly on the changing role of individual researchers. Research, influence and communications are becoming more personalised. Audiences increasingly connect with individual experts rather than institutions. Algorithms privilege people over organisational accounts. Policymakers often trust specific researchers. Public debates are shaped by visible personalities.

This has implications for management. Think tanks need to think of researchers as influencers in the broadest sense: not social media celebrities, but individual carriers of expertise, trust, networks and institutional influence. A policy brief may be a useful tool, but the researcher is often the actual mechanism of influence.

This can create tensions as individual researchers have incentives to build their own profile, networks and reputation while at the same time, they act on behalf of organisations that provide salaries, platforms, legitimacy, peer review, institutional brands and teams.

For directors, the challenge is to keep researchers connected to the institution while allowing them to develop individual authority. Too much institutional control can suppress talent. Too little can weaken the organisation, make impact hard to measure and create confusion about whether influence belongs to the person or the think tank.

This issue affects impact assessment. If a researcher shapes a debate through a meeting, media interview, WhatsApp exchange, Substack post, LinkedIn thread, or informal policy conversation, how does the organisation capture that? If the researcher later leaves, does the influence leave too? Think tanks need new ways to think about institutional value in a more personalised influence environment.

b. Self-reflection and organisational strategy

Several participants argued that think tanks need more structured self-reflection. In earlier periods, some funders supported organisational development: strategy, communications, outreach, self-definition and internal processes. Smaller organisations, in particular, rarely have time or money for this now. Yet the current environment makes self-reflection more necessary than ever.

Think tanks need to ask basic questions: who are we? What do we stand for? Who are our audiences? What is our business model? What is our democratic purpose? What distinguishes us from advocacy groups, consultancies, media platforms, political foundations or university centres? What risks are we willing to take? What compromises are unacceptable?

This self-reflection is not abstract. It affects funding choices, communication strategy, AI use, event design, partnerships, recruitment, crisis response and research priorities. If a think tank has not clarified its purpose, it will struggle to decide whether to engage radical-right actors, accept controversial funding, prioritise policy influence or public engagement, or respond to attacks.

Participants suggested that future work could support this reflection through online sessions, peer exchange, strategy workshops, director-to-director mentoring, and practical tools. The point would not be to impose one model, but to help organisations think more clearly about their own.

c. Sharing practical tools: communications, AI, fundraising and campaigns

A recurring practical proposal was to share tools and best practices. Participants wanted more structured learning around communications strategies, AI policies, fundraising, budgeting, organisational development and public engagement.

One concrete suggestion was for each organisation to share its most successful communications campaign or communications product and explain why it worked. This would allow others to learn from practical examples rather than abstract advice. Such a session could include communications directors as well as organisational leaders, recognising that communications staff face specific operational challenges.

AI was another priority. Several organisations are developing AI guidelines or protocols, and participants saw value in sharing them. The issues include AI use in research, editing, communication, visuals, dissemination, internal workflows, ethics and disclosure. Since AI affects all think tanks and is developing quickly, a shared learning space could be especially useful.

Fundraising and budgeting were also mentioned. Some participants stressed that think tanks need to understand and compare business models, especially as traditional funding becomes more precarious. A practical exchange on fundraising from foundations, governments, businesses, members, citizens or pooled funds could help organisations adapt.

The general principle was that the group should produce tangible value. Convenings are useful, but participants want resources, templates, shared protocols, comparative examples, and opportunities for direct collaboration.

d. Youth and the future of the profession

One participant argued that the group had not discussed young people enough. This was framed not only as a workforce issue, but as a generational democratic problem.

Younger generations are growing up in a world where business figures can enter politics, exit politics, manipulate politics and appear more powerful than democratic institutions. This changes how young people understand politics, diplomacy, public service and the role of democratic institutions.

Older generations may have grown up believing that politics and diplomacy were the spaces where peace, prosperity and social organisation were pursued. Younger generations may see politics as weaker, more performative or subordinate to business and platform power. This may reduce the appeal of think tank careers and public-interest policy work.

At the same time, many think tanks employ remarkable young people who want to become future thought leaders. But the sector may not have the resources, career pathways, salaries or communication styles needed to support them. Youth engagement by institutions can also be tokenistic: young people are invited to special youth events, but kept separate from real decision-making spaces.

The implication is that think tanks need to bring young professionals into these strategic conversations, not merely feature them in youth formats. They need to think about career models, mentorship, leadership pipelines, communication platforms, and the political economy of becoming a pro-democracy policy professional.

The facilitator expanded this point to pro-democracy politics more broadly. The political economy of becoming a pro-democracy politician is increasingly unattractive: public abuse, private-life disruption, polarisation, low trust and high personal costs. By contrast, stoking discord can be a viable business model for anti-democratic actors. This makes the talent pipeline for democracy a strategic concern.

4.5 Looking ahead: Innovation and future

a. Arts, culture, theatre and foresight

Several "crazy ideas" focused on arts and culture. One group proposed combining arts with big ideas: opera, theatre, painting, comedy, musicals, sci-fi and foresight. The underlying argument was that think tanks need to reach beyond the usual policy formats if they want to shape public imagination.

A relevant comparison is Micro Teatro in Peru, which hosted a series of shows written by researchers and journalists dealing with corruption and democracy.

Foresight was discussed as one route. Think tankers could work with artists or writers to imagine different futures: a democratic, thriving future and a darker alternative. These could be presented through stories, performances, exhibitions or public debates. The purpose would be to make abstract political choices emotionally and imaginatively tangible.

Participants referred to examples of political television, musicals and shows that shaped public understanding. The idea was that think tanks could advise writers, theatre producers, filmmakers or streaming platforms on political context, historical framing and policy realism. Rather than trying to reach broad audiences directly through reports, think tanks could influence cultural products that reach millions.

This was presented as a way to shape the wider narrative environment rather than specific policies. If anti-liberal actors are building cultural ecosystems, democratic think tanks should not ignore culture. They may not produce the art themselves, but they can inform it, frame it, advise it and help create the intellectual scaffolding behind it.

The facilitator noted that some thinktankers have already advised political shows, and that national productions on platforms such as Netflix may offer opportunities to inject better political understanding into popular culture. This is a different kind of influence: indirect, narrative and public-facing.

b. The think tank of the future

One group framed its discussion around the question: what should a think tank look like twenty or forty years from now, and how do we work backwards from that? This future-oriented question led to deeper reflection on values, purpose and political role.

The group asked whether think tanks should come together to identify three or four core values they want to preserve and enhance. These might include independence, pluralism, democracy, evidence, public reason, freedom of inquiry, institutional integrity or civic responsibility. The specific values were not finalised, but the need for a deeper conversation was clear.

The group also worried that think tanks may continue producing reports and reform proposals that are analytically sound but politically impossible. The reference to major reform reports and white papers captured the frustration: everyone may know what needs to be done, but political systems cannot act. The question is how to remove or overcome political impossibility.

This led back to Project 2025. Should democratic think tanks become more political and produce their own equivalent? What would that require? What mental shifts would be necessary? Are think tanks ready to move from analysis to agenda-building? Can they do so while preserving pluralism and evidence?

The think tank of the future may need to be more than a research provider. It may need to be part of a democratic infrastructure capable of turning ideas into political possibility.

c. Integrated research on democratic vulnerability

Another concrete proposal was for an integrated research project across European countries on democratic vulnerability and ripple effects. Participants noted that even countries with apparently stable political systems may be vulnerable to rapid disruption. Checks and balances, political parties, media systems and legal frameworks can be used for malign political purposes if captured by populist or radical-right governments.

A Dutch phrase - when the tide goes out, you see who is swimming naked - captured the idea. Stability can conceal vulnerability. Countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK or others may appear robust, but their systems may contain weaknesses that only become visible under pressure.

Because the European Union is deeply integrated, democratic disruption in one member state has ripple effects for others. A captured or destabilised national system can affect EU decision-making, foreign policy, rule of law debates, funding, information flows and the broader democratic environment.

The proposed project would involve think tanks in different member states examining similar indicators: institutional checks, information ecosystems, party systems, media vulnerabilities, foreign influence, civic space, judicial resilience, public administration and political culture. It could also examine how disruption travels across borders.

This research could be linked to existing expertise on hybrid threats and disinformation, but participants suggested it should focus more on internal EU debates, information flows and the democratic infrastructure of member states.

d. AI, barriers to entry and the changing information landscape

The changing information landscape appeared again in the final session. AI lowers the barriers to entry into the think tank field. It becomes easier to write proposals, produce reports, generate communications and appear professional. This may increase competition for grants and make it harder for funders to distinguish quality from polished output.

Participants worried that organisations representing narrow interests may present themselves as think tanks more easily. AI-generated content can create the appearance of expertise. In a crowded attention economy, reliability becomes more important but also harder to signal.

The attention of recipients is increasingly scarce. There is no scarcity of information. The scarce resource is trust, attention and judgement. One participant noted that the currency of think tanks is reliability and that think tanks should respect their audiences. This means not overwhelming them, not producing low-quality content, and not chasing attention at the expense of credibility.

AI therefore affects think tanks in multiple ways: research production, funding competition, communication, reputation, audience trust and sector boundaries. It strengthens the case for shared standards, peer review, transparency and perhaps a clearer definition of what distinguishes a serious think tank from an AI-enabled advocacy or lobbying outfit.

e. Geography, timing and unequal perceptions of threat

The final discussion emphasised that geography matters. In Central and Eastern Europe, illiberalism is already present in many contexts, making the operating environment difficult and sometimes hostile. But in Scandinavia or other relatively stable democracies, fundraising for democratic protection can also be difficult because funders do not yet perceive the threat as urgent.

This produces a paradox. Where the threat is already visible, think tanks may be under pressure and resource-constrained. Where the threat has not fully arrived, preventive funding may be hard to secure because the problem feels abstract. Brussels adds another layer: if Brussels-based think tanks lose ground, this can have multiplier effects across Europe because of their role in EU debates and policy networks.

Participants also noted duplication. Pro-democracy think tanks often work on similar issues, organise similar events and apply for similar grants, but without the hierarchical coordination available to their better-funded opponents. Each organisation has commitments to donors, staff and plans, making it hard to give things up or merge efforts. Yet the result may be many small events and outputs where a coordinated effort would have more impact.

This relates to the broader asymmetry of messages. Anti-liberal forces often repeat one simple message many times. Pro-democracy actors produce many nuanced messages that occupy the same broad space but do not reinforce one another. Nuance is valuable, but in moments of political urgency it can dilute impact.

4.6 Shared structures, shared purpose and the limits of loose networks

The final reflections returned to structure. Loose networks are valuable, but one speaker argued they may not be enough. The sector is weak partly because it is lonely and competitive. Think tanks need some form of shared vision, shared purpose and perhaps shared structures.

"Think tanks cannot simply claim to be everything at once: neutral and political, slow and fast, expert and popular."

Discussion synthesis

The core question is identity. Are think tanks centrist, evidence-based research organisations that sit in the middle of democratic systems and help decision-makers with better evidence? Or are they more activist, political actors working in ecosystems, shaping narratives, overcoming blockages and defending democracy more directly? Can these models be combined, or do they contradict one another?

The speaker suggested that many think tanks still operate according to the first model, but doubted whether it will work in future. The fate of think tanks may resemble that of centre-left and centre-right parties if they remain tied to a political centre that is losing traction. At the same time, moving towards activism creates trade-offs. If a think tank becomes a narrative-shaping political actor, can it still be seen as a neutral evidence provider? If it remains purely evidence-based, can it influence a political debate driven by emotion, identity and power?

There was no final answer. But think tanks cannot simply claim to be everything at once: neutral and political, slow and fast, expert and popular, independent and funded by interested actors, conveners and campaigners. They need to decide who they want to be.

4.7 Cooperation is necessary, but hard

The final exchange added a cautionary note. Cooperation is necessary, but it is not easy. Organisations have different cultures, work habits, governance structures, priorities and funding pressures. Even when complementarity seems obvious on paper, building shared structures can be slow and difficult. There is a risk of disillusion if the group assumes cooperation will happen automatically.

The response was that this difficulty is precisely why common purpose matters. Radical-right actors have managed to cooperate despite differences because they rally around relatively simple goals. Pro-democracy actors often spend more time negotiating nuance than acting. The challenge is not to eliminate differences, but to build enough shared purpose to act despite them.

One example used in the discussion was abortion. For anti-abortion actors, the goal can be stated simply. Those in the room would oppose that goal, but the point was that simplicity helps build ecosystems. Pro-democracy actors have not yet found an equally potent, simple message about preserving, defending or advancing a democratic way of life - one that includes rights, pluralism and individual freedoms.

This is both a communications challenge and a strategic challenge. Without a clear shared purpose, cooperation remains fragile. With one, differences may become manageable.

4.8 Overall assessment

European think tanks can and should improve existing practice, but the closing session questioned whether better versions of old tools will be enough. The institutions they were built to serve are changing; radical-right actors are constructing ecosystems; AI is transforming information production; social media rewards outrage; funding is fragile; and younger generations may no longer view politics or policy work as the central arena of social change.

The unresolved question is what democratic function think tanks are prepared to perform. They may be advisers, conveners, public educators, watchdogs, narrative-shapers, coalition-builders, trusted archives or rapid responders - in different combinations and at different times. The session did not settle the balance between independence and political action. It did establish that organisations need to be more explicit about their purpose, the risks they will take and the forms of influence they are willing to pursue.

4.9 Practical agenda for follow-up

The session produced a broad menu of possible follow-up actions

1. Maintain the network and create regular spaces for peer exchange among think tank leaders.
2. Organise dedicated sessions for communications directors, including sharing successful campaigns, platform strategies, crisis communication practices and AI-related challenges.
3. Collect and share practical resources: AI policies, communications guidelines, moderation guidance, funding transparency practices, crisis protocols, fundraising models and organisational development tools.
4. Map US influence and radical-right infrastructure in Europe, including funding, networks, soft power, think tank partnerships and ideological exchange.
5. Organise a session on Project 2025 and the Heritage Foundation: how it was built, what made it effective, and what democratic think tanks can learn from it.
6. Explore a solidarity or twinning model in which think tank leaders and senior staff support one another through peer visits, strategic advice or thematic collaboration.
7. Consider joint campaigns or coordinated interventions where think tanks can act with greater scale.
8. Experiment with arts, culture, fiction, theatre, foresight and popular storytelling as vehicles for democratic ideas.
9. Develop research on democratic vulnerability and ripple effects across European member states.

10. Bring young think tank professionals into future conversations and think more deliberately about leadership pipelines.
11. Clarify the problem statement or problem mosaic for different audiences: funders, EU institutions, businesses, publics and think tanks themselves.
12. Explore whether the sector needs more formal shared structures, beyond informal networks.

5. Concrete cases of how think tanks are already responding

The discussions included practical examples of organisations testing guardrails, diversifying support, reconnecting with society and learning from difficult decisions.

The following cases are drawn directly from the four main sessions. They are presented together because they show how strategic dilemmas become organisational choices. They are not universal models, and the report does not treat every decision as transferable. Their value lies in making the trade-offs concrete.

CASE

Using transparency and diversification to manage controversial foreign funding

One Brussels-based think tank described receiving a small annual grant from the Chinese Mission to the EU for EU-China exchange activities. Rather than treating any Chinese funding as automatically disqualifying, the organisation's response has been to disclose the funding, keep it below one per cent of turnover, limit it to exchange activities, and maintain internal governance boundaries. The argument was that transparency, diversification and clear purpose can reduce the risk of capture.

This is a practical response to a difficult grey-zone problem. It recognises that think tanks need to engage with actors they may have concerns about, especially powerful foreign governments. But it also implies that such engagement must be made visible, proportionate and governed. The lesson is not "take the money" or "refuse the money" but to define the conditions under which engagement is defensible.

CASE

Refusing ideologically restrictive funding conditions

Another organisation described receiving a letter from the US Mission to the EU after the change in US administration. The letter sought to impose restrictions on the use of an existing grant, including restrictions related to gender-related discussions, with the possibility of clawback if the organisation did not sign. The organisation refused to sign and later turned down other tenders with similar stipulations.

This is a clear example of drawing a red line. The pressure did not come from an adversarial authoritarian state, but from an allied government. The response shows that foreign influence can come through formal, overt and legal funding mechanisms, and that think tanks need pre-agreed principles for when donor conditions become unacceptable.

CASE

Finding alternative support when democratic governments self-deter

A Dutch think tank wanted to study MAGA and its implications, but the foreign ministry declined to fund the work because the Netherlands was hosting a NATO summit and did not want to provoke the United States. The organisation found support elsewhere, conducted the research, briefed the ministry and the US embassy, and published the work. Ironically, the US embassy reportedly accepted the research as part of open debate, while the Dutch ministry reacted more nervously.

The case shows that shrinking space can come from self-deterrence by democratic governments. The practical response was not to abandon the topic, but to diversify support, keep relevant actors informed, and maintain the organisation's research agenda. It also pushed the organisation to broaden its client base beyond one ministry.

CASE

Cancelling a controversial event after listening to affected communities

A Brussels think tank planned an event with a representative of the Serbian government after being approached by the Serbian mission. Once announced, the event generated strong backlash from Serbian communities and experts who argued that hosting the speaker would be disrespectful to students and citizens protesting against the Serbian government. The organisation cancelled the event.

This case illustrates a practical decision-making principle: formal diplomatic relevance is not enough. Think tanks need to understand the political context, consult people who know it, and be prepared to reverse decisions. Engagement with controversial actors may be justified, but only when the purpose, framing, moderation and timing can be defended.

CASE

Going "low-tech" through direct engagement beyond

One economic policy think tank responded to polarisation and the limits of Brussels-based communication by organising a European roadshow. It visited member-state capitals, held events in English and local languages, worked with local civil society and journalists, and tried to speak directly to audiences rather than merely broadcasting from Brussels.

The practical insight was: when the problem goes high-tech, sometimes the response should go low-tech. Direct, human, localised engagement can help think tanks escape echo chambers, test whether their messages resonate, and build relationships with people who do not normally participate in Brussels policy debates.

CASE

Reconnecting research agendas to public hopes and fears

A Dutch institute recognised that it had become too focused on The Hague and had "turned its back on society". It began polling the public several times a year to understand hopes and fears around foreign policy and international developments. It also worked with children's news, plain-language newspapers and public libraries outside major cities.

This is a practical way to add society to the traditional knowledge-policy relationship. The organisation did not become a mass media outlet, but it created feedback loops with wider publics. The polling shaped research agendas; children's media forced clearer explanations; libraries created listening spaces in smaller towns.

CASE

Producing data points that different political sides can use

A Danish think tank took a clear policy position in favour of dropping Denmark's EU defence opt-out, but also produced neutral data on how often the opt-out had been activated and both sides of the referendum debate used the same data point: one side to argue that the opt-out was an obstacle, the other to argue that it protected sovereignty.

This is a useful model for polarised environments. A think tank can make recommendations while also producing shared factual infrastructure. The practical lesson is to distinguish between the organisation's judgement and the evidence base that different actors can use to deliberate.

CASE

Structuring disagreement instead of avoiding it

Several think tanks are using events to structure disagreement. One has developed "head-to-head" debates with opposing views on major European issues. Another relies heavily on private and semi-private convening under Chatham House-style rules. Others emphasised the need to train moderators to manage difficult panels and prevent events from becoming propaganda platforms.

The practical response is not to avoid disagreement, but to design it. In a polarised environment, convening is not neutral logistics. It requires guardrails, strong moderation, clarity about the purpose of the exchange, and sometimes private formats where trust and candour are possible.

CASE

Using sociological data, marketing expertise and influencers

A Czech think tank described working in a consortium with sociologists, a marketing company and other organisations to understand public attitudes and improve their communication. The consortium produces communication manuals, trains researchers to speak to media, and works with influencers who can either amplify research or consult the think tank when they cover relevant topics.

This is a practical example of borrowing capacity from outside the think tank sector. The organisation does not pretend that research skills are enough. It combines data about society, marketing expertise and credible messengers. The challenge is cost and capacity, but the model points to a more professional approach to public communication.

CASE

Learning from a missed response to hostile mapping

Several think tanks were named or targeted in hostile reports by illiberal or radical-right-linked actors. At least one organisation chose not to respond publicly at the time, fearing that a response would give the report more oxygen. In hindsight, participants felt this may have been the wrong decision and that a collective response could have been stronger.

This is a useful negative case. It shows that silence may reduce immediate escalation, but can also allow hostile narratives to settle. The lesson is that think tanks need collective judgement mechanisms: when to ignore, when to correct, when to expose, when to litigate, and when to respond together.

"The lesson is not simply "take the money" or "refuse the money". It is to define the conditions under which engagement is defensible."

Synthesis from the cases

6. Actions individual think tanks can take

The actions move from immediate safeguards that can be put in place using existing capacity to choices that require investment, leadership and a greater appetite for risk.

This section brings together 23 suggestions for actions that think tanks can take independently, without requiring support or collaboration from others. These actions emerged from the session discussions and the cases presented above. They are organised into three categories according to the level of effort they require: Easy, medium and hard. This reflects the level of difficulty involved, rather than the importance of the actions.

Some actions can begin with an internal conversation or a one-page protocol. Others require a shift in the business model or theory of influence. The sequence allows organisations to begin with what is feasible while recognising that resilience cannot be built entirely through low-cost measures.

Each suggestion is presented as a short, deliberately unelaborated idea. We welcome comments, additional suggestions and examples illustrating how a specific think tank has implemented, or is currently implementing, any of these actions.

Easy: do now, mostly using existing capacity

1. Conduct a basic threat and vulnerability audit

Each think tank should map where it is exposed: funding, board composition, donors, public positioning, social media, controversial topics, foreign partnerships, staff affiliations, data security, legal risks, and political relationships. Most think tanks' leaders already do this subconsciously, but they need to do it in a structured, simple audit: one internal workshop and a short risk map.

The point is not to become paranoid. It is to move from vague anxiety to named vulnerabilities. Once risks are visible and listed, they can be prioritised.

2. Publish or improve a funding transparency page

Every think tank should disclose core funders, project funders, corporate members, government grants and relevant foreign funding in a format that is easy to find and understand. Where possible, include approximate amounts or funding bands.

Transparency is not only a moral prerogative but also the most basic defense against bad-faith accusations. It also gives the sector credibility when demanding transparency from others.

3. Create a controversial funding checklist

Before accepting money from a government, embassy, corporation, technology funder, politically aligned foundation or foreign mission, use a short checklist: Is the information about the funding public? What share of think tank turnover does it represent? Are there content restrictions? Can we criticise the funder? Is the purpose clear? Would we defend this relationship publicly?

The output should be a short internal note, not a bureaucratic burden.

4. Create a controversial speaker checklist

Before inviting a polarising political figure, government representative or ideological actor, ask: Why this person? Why now? What is the public-interest purpose? What is our publicity / public communication interest? How will our own image be affected? Who might be harmed or disrespected? Have we consulted credible experts or affected communities? Can we moderate this properly? What is our cancellation threshold? Are there alternative solutions, if needed?

This helps avoid last-minute crises and makes decisions more consistent.

5. Prepare a crisis communications one-pager

Each organisation should have a one-page protocol for attacks: who decides, who drafts, who approves, who speaks, who monitors, who contacts legal counsel, who informs staff, and when the board is alerted.

The protocol should include three response options: ignore, correct quietly, correct and respond publicly.

6. Develop a short AI use policy

Even a basic policy is better than none. It should say what AI can be used for, what it cannot be used for, when use must be disclosed, how confidential data is protected, and who is accountable for final outputs. There are plenty of [examples](#) that others have already [produced](#).

Start simple. Update regularly.

7. Make human voice a communications asset

In a world of AI-generated content, recognisable human voice matters. Encourage researchers and communications staff to write posts, explainers and commentary in a tone that sounds like a person, not an automated institutional account.

This is a low-cost trust signal.

Medium: requires management attention and some resources

8. Train researchers as public communicators

Researchers increasingly act as individual carriers of influence. Offer training in media interviews, social media, plain-language writing, public speaking, hostile questions and policy briefings.

This should not turn researchers into influencers in a shallow sense. It should help them carry institutional credibility into more personal communication spaces. It also gives the think tank a more human face. A diverse group of researchers can strengthen the organisation's broader legitimacy and create a greater sense of representation among different constituencies.

9. Clarify the relationship between researcher brands and the institutional brand

Develop guidance on personal newsletters, Substack, LinkedIn, podcasts, media appearances and external affiliations.

What represents the institution? What is personal? What needs review? What happens when a researcher leaves?

This protects both the researcher and the organisation.

10. Invest in moderation skills

Moderation is now strategic. Train staff to moderate difficult panels, interrupt misinformation, manage hostile speakers, include quieter voices, and prevent events from being captured.

This is especially important for events involving radical-right, illiberal or government-linked actors.

11. Build low-tech listening mechanisms

Run small listening sessions with journalists, teachers, students, local civil society, public libraries, regional media or sectoral actors. These do not need to be large or expensive.

The aim is to test whether the think tank's agenda connects to public concerns. At times, also detect potential attacks.

12. Diversify dissemination channels

Do not rely on one platform. Use different channels for different purposes: LinkedIn for professional reach, X for journalists or event reporting if useful, newsletters for loyal audiences, private briefings for policymakers, local media for public translation, and events for relationship-building.

The channel should follow the audience. If you cannot create your own audience, be present where your desired target group is and be present in conversations there.

13. Build relationships with plain-language media

Identify media outlets that force researchers to explain things clearly: children's news, regional newspapers, podcasts, public broadcasters, sectoral newsletters or educational media. Remember that the opponents of evidence-based research are already present, sometimes even dominating, this media.

These relationships can improve both reach and clarity.

14. Develop a donor red-lines policy

Agree internally which funding conditions are unacceptable: content control, topic bans, restrictions on gender or rights, prior approval of conclusions, hidden branding, non-disclosure requirements, or limits on criticising the donor.

This makes it easier to refuse problematic funding when pressure comes.

15. Create internal political-context checks

Before events, publications or partnerships on sensitive countries or movements, ask someone with deep contextual knowledge to review the risks. This could be an internal expert or trusted external adviser. Also, create an early warning when the political context has changed. One does not need to wait for elections and formal political change to detect it.

This avoids avoidable mistakes.

16. Track self-censorship

Once a quarter, ask programme teams: what did we avoid saying, publishing, researching or convening because of fear of funding, access, backlash or diplomacy? With the benefit of hindsight, was such a decision a good choice?

This makes the invisible visible. And also allows the think tank to review and reconsider approaches.

Harder: requires money, leadership and risk appetite

17. Create a serious public engagement function

Move beyond occasional public events. Build a structured public engagement model: polling, listening sessions, local partners, schools, libraries, podcasts, media explainers, or citizen panels.

This requires dedicated staff and should not be added casually to already stretched research teams. This engagement goes in two directions: It creates visibility, builds constituencies which will also come handy in case of an attack on the think tank.

18. Establish a rapid response capacity

Create a small internal mechanism to respond quickly to hostile narratives, bad policy proposals, attacks on democratic institutions, or foreign influence operations.

This does not mean constant commentary. It means being ready when a window opens.

19. Produce “consequence analysis” of illiberal proposals

When radical-right or anti-liberal actors publish agendas, analyse what they would mean for specific groups: businesses, women, migrants, universities, local governments, researchers, minorities, public services or security institutions.

Make the consequences concrete. Do not only say “this threatens democracy”.

20. Build private advisory and convening channels

Develop trusted spaces where policymakers, journalists, business leaders and civil society actors can discuss sensitive issues under clear rules.

In polarised environments, quiet influence may matter as much as public communication.

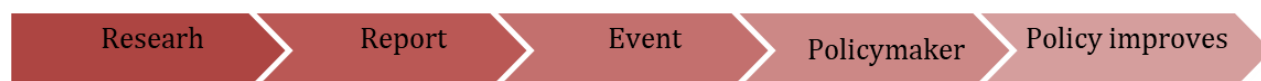
21. Create an organisational development reserve

Dedicate a small annual budget to strategy, staff training, AI, communications, crisis preparedness and security. Treat this as core infrastructure, not overhead.

If organisations do not invest in themselves, they will remain reactive.

22. Redesign the think tank’s theory of influence

Ask whether the old model still works:



If not, define a new model: relationships, public narratives, coalition-building, strategic litigation, cultural influence, rapid response, private advice or long-term talent development.

This is a leadership-level exercise.

23. Decide whether the organisation is purely advisory or also democratic infrastructure

This is the hardest internal question. Is the think tank only there to provide evidence to decision-makers, or is it also there to defend the conditions under which democratic decision-making is possible?

The answer affects everything: funding, communications, partnerships, risk, staffing and governance.

7. Actions think tanks can take collectively

Think tanks can begin with trusted exchange, move towards coordinated public work and eventually build mechanisms for collective defense and agenda-setting.

The collective agenda reflects a recurring message from the convening: organisations often experience political pressure, funding restrictions and reputational attacks as individual problems, even when they form part of a broader pattern. Collective action does not require think tanks to erase their ideological, thematic or institutional differences. It requires enough trust to share information, defend common conditions and work together where scale matters.

This section brings together 21 suggestions for actions that think tanks can build together. It complements the previous section, which brought together 23 suggestions for actions that think tanks can take independently, without requiring support or collaboration from others. Together, the two parts recognise that strengthening resilience requires both actions that organisations can take on their own and collective approaches that allow them to address challenges that are difficult to tackle individually.

As in the previous section, the suggestions are organised into three categories according to the level of effort they require: Easy, Medium and Hard. This reflects the level of difficulty involved, rather than the importance of the actions. Some can begin with relatively simple forms of exchange and coordination, while others require greater commitment, resources and trust across organisations.

Each suggestion is presented as a short, deliberately unelaborated idea. We welcome comments, additional suggestions and examples illustrating how a specific think tank has implemented, or is currently implementing, any of these actions.

Easy: start with exchange and mutual learning

1. Create a trusted peer list

Set up a closed list or channel for participating think tank leaders to ask for advice, flag attacks, share dilemmas and compare experiences. In other words, know whom to call in times of hardship before trouble reaches you.

Keep it small enough to be trusted and useful.

2. Share templates and policies

Create a shared folder with AI policies, funding transparency templates, speaker checklists, crisis protocols, moderation guidance, donor red-lines policies and communication strategies of other think tanks, NGOs or other governmental or non-governmental institutions you can learn from.

Start with what already exists. Do not wait for perfect documents.

3. Run a “best communications campaign” exchange

Each organisation presents one campaign, product or event that worked, explaining the audience, objective, format, cost, results and lessons.

This is practical and immediately useful. One step further would be to document the key lessons anonymously and publish them so that others can learn from them as well.

4. Hold communications directors’ sessions

Create a peer space for heads of communications, not only directors. Topics could include AI, X/LinkedIn strategy, crisis communications, researcher brands, newsletters, events and public engagement.

Communications teams are facing these challenges daily. You can already learn from existing initiatives such as [WonkComms](#).

5. Compare controversial funding practices

Hold a confidential session on difficult funding: China, US missions, corporate money, tech money, government grants, business memberships and ideological funders.

The aim is not to shame organisations, but to identify common guardrails.

6. Compare controversial speaker decisions

Discuss real cases: who was invited, who was refused, who was cancelled, what backlash occurred, what worked.

This could lead to shared principles for engagement.

7. Develop a joint informal early warning mechanism

When an organisation is attacked, listed in a hostile report, pressured by a donor, or targeted online, it can alert others.

Others can then watch for patterns, offer advice, or decide whether a collective response is needed. While this can also be done by an individual think tank, it would be much easier and more cost-effective if several like-minded think tanks did it together.

Medium: coordinate public-facing work

8. Map attacks and pressure on think tanks

Collect cases of funding cuts, hostile reports, government pressure, donor restrictions, public smears, legal intimidation and self-censorship.

This would create evidence that individual cases are part of a pattern. It also creates ground for future collective action.

9. Map foreign influence on anti-democratic forces in Europe

Coordinate country-level and EU-level research on funding, networks, think tank partnerships, political foundations, religious groups, tech money, public diplomacy and ideological exchange.

This could become a major shared research agenda.

10. Organise a Project 2025 / Heritage Foundation learning session

Study how Project 2025 was built: governance, funding, talent, messages, political connection, outputs, timing and implementation strategy.

The purpose is to learn organisational lessons, not copy the politics.

11. Produce joint explainers on illiberal agendas

When anti-liberal actors publish programmes or narratives, think tanks can jointly produce short consequence analyses for different audiences: businesses, local authorities, minorities, universities, young people, journalists or EU institutions. There are plenty of excellent academic articles about such events in the past. Very little of it is presented in a reader-friendly format to general audiences, which represents an opportunity.

This is more concrete than generic warnings about democracy.

12. Build a shared media contact strategy

Coordinate with trusted journalists who understand think tanks, funding, foreign influence and democratic threats. Offer background briefings and evidence. Share the burden among several actors. There is no need for all to think the same, just to agree on the broader phenomenon.

This approach helps avoid each organisation trying to explain the sector alone.

13. Share intelligence on donor restrictions

If a funder introduces problematic conditions, organisations can confidentially alert others. This helps prevent divide-and-rule dynamics.

Over time, this could support collective negotiation.

14. Develop shared AI standards for think tanks

Agree minimum principles on AI use in research and communications: disclosure, confidentiality, no fabricated sources, human accountability, use in editing, use in visuals, and peer review.

This protects the credibility of the sector.

Harder: build collective power

15. Create a European think tank defense mechanism

This could include legal advice, crisis communications support, rapid peer consultation, and small emergency grants for organisations under attack.

It would reduce the cost of standing up to pressure.

16. Establish a pooled fund for independent work on sensitive topics

A pooled fund could support work that individual governments or donors are reluctant to fund: MAGA influence, China, Russia, democratic vulnerability, radical-right networks, gender backlash, foreign funding, or attacks on civic space.

The key would be flexible funding and protection from donor interference.

17. Create a joint “state of European think tanks and democracy” report

An annual or biennial report could track funding, threats, foreign influence, public trust, organisational resilience, political pressure and examples of good practice, or add a section in already existing reports that threat democracy and the state of civil society altogether.

This would give the sector a common evidence base.

18. Develop a solidarity response protocol

When one think tank is attacked, others can sign a statement, brief journalists, offer legal support, amplify corrections, or quietly engage funders and officials.

The response should depend on the case. The important point is that organisations do not face attacks alone.

19. Create shared campaign infrastructure

Think tanks could coordinate around specific democratic threats while producing different outputs for different audiences. One organisation leads on data, another on business implications, another on legal analysis, another on public communication, another on EU institutions.

This avoids forcing full consensus while creating scale.

20. Experiment with arts and culture partnerships

A group of think tanks could partner with artists, playwrights, filmmakers, comedians, museums, theatre producers, or streaming writers to bring democratic ideas into popular culture. A presence in popular culture allows think tanks to explain complex policy and societal issues in simpler, more accessible language.

This is not normal think tank work, but that is the point.

21. Explore a more formal European think tank platform

Over time, the group could consider whether a light association, guild, network or secretariat is needed to represent independent think tanks, defend standards and advocate for funding.

This should not be rushed. Start with practical cooperation, then decide whether structure is needed.

Closing reflection

The convening did not produce a single organisational model or a finished programme of work. Its value lay in bringing together experiences that are often treated as isolated and showing how they connect: funding is linked to independence; communications to public trust; foreign influence to domestic vulnerabilities; AI to the credibility of the sector; and organisational resilience to collective capacity.

The emerging agenda is deliberately plural. Some think tanks may choose to become faster and more politically assertive; others may double down on depth, reliability and quiet influence. Some will engage wider publics directly; others will work through media, local institutions or private convening. The common task is to defend and renew the conditions under which independent policy knowledge can contribute to democratic life.

REPORT NOTE

Source basis

The detailed narrative in Sections 1-4 is based on the long summaries developed from the four session transcripts. Section 5 brings together the anonymised response cases derived from those sessions. Sections 6-8 reproduce and lightly edit the action agendas that emerged from the same material.

The shorter meeting report and session study briefs were used only to frame the introduction and the overall structure. No external sources were added.