

The event is financed and organized by:



Balkan Trust for Democracy
Think Tank Fund
Human Rights Governance Grants Program



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STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION



European Fund for the Balkans
Bringing the Western Balkans closer to the European Union

Balkan Peer Exchange Enhancing Analysis and Research-Based Advocacy in an Era of Open Data¹

February 21-23, 2012

Belgrade, Serbia

Event description & Call for Applications

Open to members of think tanks and advocacy organizations operating in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The Western Balkans has witnessed the emergence of a considerable number of influential advocacy organizations and think tanks in the last two decades. Acknowledged by donors and governments alike, these two types of organizations have grown into a small, but stable and important part of civil society in their respective countries. Notwithstanding their constructive and important place, their input to policy processes needs to be improved / streamlined in light of the increasing number of overdue reforms at national levels, the stalled processes of EU integration as well as the re-surfacing of authoritarian tendencies across the region. While various donors have unequivocally supported activities of these organizations, exchange of practices and learning from peers has been sporadic and uneven across the region. Moreover, the exchanges hitherto have often been either directed by donors or were a part of a broader range of capacity building activities. The upcoming event has the modest goal to provide space for discussion and open new avenues for systematic and structured exchanges of know-how and experiences among peers from different organizations.

Three key factors shape the context in which this event would take place: dysfunctional or broken policy processes characterized by persistently low demand by policy makers for outsiders' analysis and independent monitoring; relatively modest capacity of these organizations and unfortunate duplication of efforts to cover all relevant topics at the national level; and convergence in the work styles and practices of think tanks and accountability organizations, a trend that has emerged in the last couple of years.

The dysfunctional or broken policy processes throughout the region necessitate a proper and thorough look for a number of reasons. First, political deals tend to be made in a murky world of connections and backroom deal making. Persistently low demand by policy makers for outsiders' analysis and independent monitoring have become the rule and not the exception. Consultations with stakeholders

¹ The event is jointly financed and organized by the European Fund for the Balkans, Think Tank Fund and Human Rights and Governance Grants Program of the Open Society Foundations, Foundation for Open Society Serbia, National Endowment for Democracy and Balkan Trust for Democracy.

are cursory at best and do not galvanize public interest². Second, despite adopting freedom of information acts, government data is scarce and often corrupted, and public access to information remains erratic. Third, the inability or unwillingness of state agencies to efficiently process sophisticated expert analysis reduces think tanks' impact on policy processes. Fourth, the rush to introduce, adapt or approximate EU regulation into/to national legislation has become the perennial (and hollow) argument of governments when neglecting the findings of detailed monitoring reports and thus supplanting any urge for innovation in policy development. Finally, good governance is a mantra repeated in every ministry, but it is hardly given a second thought in practice. Implementation is not usually the point, as administrations may not even understand the laws the legislator has passed³. NGOs across the board have to devise more effective strategies to circumvent or override these limitations.

Providing grants is an essential but not sufficient part of supporting the region's think tanks and accountability organizations. Although these organizations have made important strides in influencing policy processes and profited from the return of Western-educated graduates, they still lag behind their more developed western peers in two important, albeit contradictory, ways: lack of capacity across the sector, and duplication of efforts. On the former, the most pressing issues include enhancing think tanks' capacity for carrying out effective communication and advocacy strategies. Likewise, accountability organizations would benefit from diversifying and deepening the methodology behind their monitoring reports and ensuring that the data they force government to post is widely used. Understanding and using new media for effective presentation of research findings and advocacy, motivating young and talented people to join the sector are some of the common challenges of these two types of NGOs.

Duplication of efforts at the national level and absence of cooperation hinders the entire sector. Given that all these organizations compete on the same market for donor support at national and regional levels, it is not surprising that competition has taken the place of cooperation and exchange. The competition, while not unusual, has led to organizations centering their efforts on a few topics, often duplicating activities failing to divide the tasks according to their strengths and thus cover a broader spectrum of pressing issues.

In the last three years, we have witnessed another emerging trend of convergence. Reputable advocacy groups have realized the need for solid, evidence-based policy research to back up their advocacy efforts. Given that the small community of think tanks in their countries could not provide timely research on all issues or that they are perceived as competitors, a few advocacy organizations have started carrying out their own policy research projects. A few have resolved to develop their own internal research departments/units. Conversely, think tanks operating in small markets for policy advice / research have ventured into the provision of training, design and carrying out advocacy campaigns in order to sustain their operations. Little reflection has taken place about the viability and the value added of these two strategies.

² Except some window dressing exercises by the government and bilateral donors who rather fake participatory policy making than really practicing it. A notable exception are few processes at local / municipal level where the policy process and participation is genuine.

³ Analysis adapted from Buldioski, Goran. 2009. Think Tanks: Untangling the Gordian Knot of Policy Research in the Western Balkans. Western Balkans Security Observer English Edition (Western Balkans Security Observer English Edition), issue: 11-12/2009, pages: 53-67. Available at on www.ceeol.com.

In sum, this event aspires to bring a representative group of think tanks and advocacy organizations as well as donors to address these issues and open new avenues for future cooperation. Its organizers do not have any pre-conceived ideas to float and impose at the event. It is not our goal to spearhead establishment of any networks, regional platforms or anything similar. Likewise, while we expect participants to suggest new ideas and forge new partnerships throughout the event, the organizers do not consider the event as a direct laboratory for designing new projects that they would later underwrite.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the Peer Exchange is to gather representatives of 50 think tanks and advocacy organizations (with established track records in policy relevant research) and 10 donors active in the region and offer them a space for peer-to-peer exchange of practices, positive and negative lessons learned and brainstorming on new innovative ideas.

Specific objectives:

- Sharing opinions / analysis on relevant topics such as EU integration, governmental transparency and accountability, economic policy, social and integration policies
- Exchanging relevant experiences and good practices on topics specifically linked to these types of organizations (access to information, fiscal transparency and abuse of state resources, political system and transparency of government decisions, quality standards for policy-relevant research)
- Presenting and promoting good practices of policy research designs / monitoring and advocacy
- Providing participants with general awareness, knowledge of basic tools and language to formulate and communicate their ideas on how to use data / analysis for effective communication and impactful advocacy to be able to search and identify tools and partners for their implementation.

ELIGIBILITY

For think tanks: The term “think tank” defies exact definition, as the organizations in different parts of the world that appear under the term vary considerably in size, legal form, policy domain, organizational structure, standards of inquiry, and political significance. The UNDP defines think tanks as “organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy⁴. In order to assess applications from organizations in the Balkans that claim to be think tanks we would use the following definition: “Think tanks are independent (and usually private, in the Balkans mainly registered as NGOs) policy research institutes containing people involved in studying a particular policy area or a broad range of policy issues, actively seeking to educate or advise policy makers and the public through a number of channels⁵.”

For advocacy organizations: ‘Advocacy organizations’ is also a broad label that describes a truly diverse set of organizations. One broad definition is: any group that seeks to influence public policy but not to govern⁶. For the purposes of this event, we narrow the scope of advocacy organizations that engage in legal and legislation advocacy, then community and issue advocacy as well as new forms of advocacy that involve the internet⁷. Moreover, we are interested to host advocacy organizations that

⁴ Source: UNDP (United Nations Development Program). 2003. *Thinking the Unthinkable*. Bratislava: UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

⁵ Source: Stone, Diane. 2000. Think-tank Transnationalisation and Non-profit Analysis, *Advice and Advocacy*, Vol.14, No.2, Jan 2000:

⁶ Source: Young, Lisa, Everitt Joanna. 2005. *Advocacy Groups*. UBC Press 2005

⁷ Source: Agard, Kathryn A.. 2010. *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations: A reference Handbook*, Volume 1. Sage

regularly carry out and commission policy-relevant, evidence-based research. While we value and some of the participating donors actively support the work of organizations that base their advocacy solely on human rights, a set of values and/or international legal instruments, we deem that this event will be less useful for them⁸.

For both types

Eligible applicants

- would be engaged in first-hand policy relevant research to generate or collect data that is otherwise not available in the public realm to give a clearer picture of what is the reality on the ground versus legislation or policy on paper.
- would advocate for concrete policy reforms, whether that is in the area of governmental accountability, or police and security oversight, or broader political or economic systems design, European integration, social, health or education policy.
- have published minimum of two policy briefs / policy studies (or similar publications) and organized at least one public advocacy event in the last 12 months.
- would demonstrate their motivation to attend the event, actively present concrete work and achievements of their organization as well as share concrete approaches / methodologies drawn from their work (part of the motivation statement of successful applicants should enlist several current practices and ideas to be shared at the event)

APPLICATION PROCESS

We invite applications from staff of think tanks and advocacy organizations operating in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo. We recommend that the nominated participants be directors/senior program/policy staff, and *not* junior researchers or technical support staff. In case there are two applicants from a single organization, we recommend one nomination to be of a senior management and one of an implementing program/policy staff person. The event will take place in English with no translation in any of the region's languages. The eligible applicants should be fluent in English and are able to use English as their working language. We aim to create an intensive creative forum for discussion and exchange from a wide variety of experiences, and thus reserve the right to limit the number of applicants per organization, depending on the quality and number of applications received. Applicants that submit low-quality applications, irrespective of the relevance and proven track record of their organizations will not be accepted. The application should include a motivation statement including several ideas for contribution at the event, a list of a minimum three practices / projects they will bring documentation about and present at the organizational market during the event.

Board and lodging

The organizers will provide full board and lodging for up to 50 participants, for the entire duration of the event. Organizers will reimburse reasonable travel costs over 50 Euro⁹, to be approved in advance.

Publications

⁸ For the sake of example, we find that many of the Transparency International chapters or members of the European Movement throughout the region have engaged in considerable research activities to support their advocacy and thus fit the desired profile. Conversely traditional mainstream human rights organizations have engaged in first hand in-depth monitoring that is policy relevant, but in nature is different of the focus of this event. Therefore such organizations are less likely to benefit from this event.

⁹ First 50 EUR should be borne by the nominating organization.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE:

The on-line application form is available from **Tuesday, December 27, 2011 from 12 am** at www.balkanfund.org/balkanpeerexchange

DEADLINE for APPLICATIONS 12 pm on January 16, 2012

DATE

21-23 February 2012

PLACE

Hotel Zira, Belgrade, Serbia

DRAFT PROGRAM OUTLINE

Arrival Day (February 21, 2012):

Morning

Key-note speech: Roles and position of think tanks and advocacy organizations in Western Balkans today

Thematic panel 1: EU integration - blessing and a curse to NGOs engaged in the process

Thematic panel 2: European economic crisis and its ramifications on the Balkans: What role for think tanks and advocacy organizations

(Note: The panel will enlist resource people and speakers from the from the EU and the region)

Afternoon

Thematic workshops (run in parallel, by resource people from the EU and participating countries)

Note: Each WS will be bring a mixture of civil servants, politicians and think tank or advocacy practitioners discussing the current situation in the respective field and approaches they take.

- Governmental transparency and accountability
- Social and integration policies
- Security and international relations

Evening

Organizational Marketplace – Part 1 (Buffet dinner included)

Day 2 (February 22, 2012)

Morning

Workshops for sharing practices (by resource people from the EU and participating countries)

Round 1: Concrete projects – ideas and innovation

- Open and closed data in context, and why it matters in the Western Balkans
- Fiscal transparency and abuse of state resources
- Political system and transparency of government decisions, and

Round 2: Art of policy analysis and monitoring

- Quality standards for policy-relevant research (policy research design and methodological concerns)
- Developing overall organizational communication strategy

- Code of conduct and ethical considerations for think tanks and watchdog organizations
- Strategies for getting data disseminated

Afternoon

Track 1: Data Visualization and evidence-based advocacy¹⁰

Introduction to information visualization

Followed by a small group discussion on what think tanks and watchdogs currently do with data (practices of visualization)

Set of consecutive workshops:

- Open government data in your country
- Internationalizing WhatDoTheyKnow: Making Public the FOI Request Process
- Tech project management
- Geospatial tools and policy data
- Government Spending Tracked

Development and consultation on concrete ideas

Track 2: Enhancing policy advocacy (*alternative for those not interested in Track 1 on data visualization*)

- Research policy networks and some good/bad practices
- Monitoring and evaluation of policy influence
- Statistics and policy evaluation
- Workshop offered by participants

Evening

Organizational Marketplace – Part 2

Dinner in town

Day 3 (February 23, 2012)

Morning

Track 1: Data Visualization and evidence-based advocacy block – continued

Track 2: Enhancing policy advocacy – continued

Afternoon

Donors panel – Everything You Always Wanted to Tell Your Grantees but Were Afraid To Say Out Loud

Follow up activities - - Laboratory for joint projects (TTs and advocacy groups find their potential partners and brainstorm future project ideas)

Closing plenary – Think tanks and advocacy organizations - Where from now?

Presentation from Event Rapporteur

¹⁰ Note: Think Tank fund organized a specialized event in March 2011 on this topic. For more info see here: <http://goranspolicy.com/god-trust-bring-data/>

Departure

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