

Cooperation with think tanks: What for?

Think-tanks are relevant actors in shaping the broad conceptual and political debate. They play two fundamental roles: making research, and formulating and disseminating alternative concepts and policy agendas. They should further be recognised for their competence at pan-European level and have a real influence on political policy-makers, who are involved in elaborating political policy proposals. In their capacity to speak “truth to power”, or to simply bring knowledge, evidence and expertise, they have developed an in-depth knowledge and expertise in all public spheres: economy, politics, science and society. Policy-makers could make the best use of think tanks as sources of innovative policy options and as sounding boards for new approaches.

This is why the Council of Europe has decided to enhance its existing relations with think tanks, a key component of the research sector which can be particularly pertinent for medium-term reflection, and whose new ideas and innovative approaches could represent a meaningful added value for the Organisation policy planning.

The Directorate of Policy Planning is building contacts with major European think tanks and reviews academic work on relevant topics, such as climate change, demographic changes, robotics and ethics, in order to provide Senior Management with strategic expertise and background information.

Meeting of Major Think tanks (December 2012)

On 4 December 2012, Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland hosted a meeting of directors and representatives from 27 major European think tanks in Strasbourg, as part of the Council's efforts to enhance its impact by strengthening the collaboration with all relevant actors having a role in broad conceptual and political debates.

In a discussion on the state of European co-operation and challenges to its societies, the participants debated the state of democracy, the management of growing diversity and migration, and human rights standards in Europe. It was repeatedly stressed that the efforts to overcome the present crisis in Europe should be based on the strict respect for European values and its model of solidarity and tolerance. The participants came forward with concrete suggestions on how make better use of the Council of Europe's potential and capacities. They stressed the continuing relevance of the pan-European format of co-operation. At the end of the meeting discussions focused on ideas for follow-up dialogue with think tanks as well as on possibilities for specific co-operation projects.

Task Force meetings (2013 - 2014)

As a follow-up to the December 2012 meeting of major think tanks, a task force-format with three different CoE-related focal topics had been agreed upon. Each task force would discuss and work on a central topic or concept which from the CoE's perspective seems to be of strategic importance in the near or long-term future. The three Task forces met in 2013 and 2014, gathering high-level and experienced think tank representatives.

The **First task force, ‘Smart Power – Ways of Enhancing the Council of Europe's Impact’** met in Munich, on 27 June 2013. It was devoted to general strategic questions concerning the

Council of Europe's role and impact as an international organisation in the future. Major aspects such as the Council's mandate, its relationship with the EU, capabilities-question etc. were addressed. The following issues were also addressed : How can the CoE's political impact be enhanced? What strategies could be imagined to make the Council and its work more relevant and visible to societies and governments? What could the relationship between the Council and other international organisations look like and which synergies could be used? The work of this task force could later result in an innovative new "political strategy" for the Council of Europe. The Advisory Report was published in January 2014.

The **second task force 'The Pan-European Dimension: Ensuring the Use of the Council's Wider European Membership'** met in Istanbul on 22-23 April 2013. It addressed the membership and scope of the Council of Europe as one of its key assets. Researchers exchanged reflections in terms of how the Wider European nature of the CoE's membership can be used more effectively, taking into account the contradictions between the Organisation and its membership. The participants gave their views on the following questions: In what way can the membership of key non-EU members be used to enhance the Council's role in European affairs? What role does the membership of states in conflict regions [(Balkans, Caucasus)] imply for the Council? How should the Council address the question of challenging non-members ? What could an effective neighbourhood policy [(Arab region, Central Asia)] look like? The Advisory report was published in May 2014 - Read also cover note by Director of Policy Planning.

The **third task force, on 'Challenges to European Societies: Identifying Major Risks and Finding Innovative Policies'** took place in Warsaw in April 2014. It addressed the deeper and long-term challenges affecting European societies which have a direct or indirect impact on the CoE's mission, with as a starting point the identification of major new trends and challenges for European societies such as diversity, demographics, life in urban mega-communities etc. It also tried to identify the consequences those phenomena have on the Council's main fields of activity such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law and examined the question whether those challenges could be properly addressed by established instruments and policies or how new formats could look like.