

**Political Science or Science in the Service of Politics: Internal and External Co-option in
Belarus**

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Introduction

Although political science (PS) has been viewed as a “science of democracy,” from a broader perspective we may observe that it often develops in a non-democratic political environment (Latin America in the 1970s, former Soviet countries in the 1990s till present). Belarus, a post-Soviet country that for a long time has been referred to as “Europe’s last dictatorship,” represents a captivating case: Consolidation of the authoritarian regime caused a twofold institutional reaction by the professional community, resulting in the appearance of “official” (state-directed) and “alternative” (independent) political science(s) (Naumova 2010: 64).

That division is based first and foremost on the position - autonomous or not - and loyalty of PS communities vis-à-vis state authorities. The difference between the two communities has also been reflected in the funding opportunities for research and other professional activities. While official political science enjoys limited but stable internal public funding, the alternative mostly depends on external support, with limited (or even non-existent) opportunities for domestic financing.

Belarusian official PS is located at state-run institutions that are institutionally and politically subordinated to and co-opted by the authorities. Universities are major recipients of national public funds for education and have access to research funding as well. Another type of institution that also forms part of official political science in Belarus are government research institutions and think tanks.

Oppositional/ alternative PS in Belarus was institutionalized in the form of think tanks, expert groups and initiatives financed mainly from abroad as a part of Western democracy promotion programs. For the professional Belarusian PS community, think tanks (especially in the 1990s) became an opportunity for faster – as compared to state universities - careers and better salaries. During the early period of PS institutionalization, positions at a state-owned university and an independent think tank could be combined (Bigday, Kryzhanouski 2015). With the consolidation of the non-democratic regime, the divide between official and alternative political sciences deepened. From the 2000s, it was hardly possible to belong to both communities at the same time.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the division between the two types of PS has become less marked. Due to internal and external political changes - including relations with national authorities and external donors’ support policies, the “alternative” camp has also been reshaping. Many think tanks

created in the 1990s have ceased to exist, and new institutions have emerged. The institutional forms and relationships of today's "alternative" political science with Belarusian authorities vary. We may observe a new type of research institutions that has appeared: those in-between official and alternative PS poles. Meanwhile, when it comes to sources of funding, we still believe that external funding is the main source of support to all think tanks in Belarus.

This paper analyzes internal and external co-option caused by the PS split and the resulting issues, challenges and opportunities. The following questions are raised: What is the situation regarding research funding for political scientists/ researchers in the country? Does (and if yes, how) belonging to official or alternative political science affect funding opportunities? What are the sources and arrangements via which research money is made available to state-owned universities and alternative think tanks? How do internal and external political co-option influence and possibly transform political science research and its funding?

While the topic of political science institutionalization in Belarus has received at least some attention from international (Naumova 2010, Bigday 2020) and Belarusian (Antanovich 2014; Bobrovich 2003; Bondar' 2006; Panchenko 2018; Reshetnokov 2009) scholars - although in the latter case, possibly with a descriptive or even political bias, the topic of research funding has been neglected. There have been some recent policy papers (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019; Chulitskaya et al. 2017; Toshkov et al. 2019) on science and research policies and international research cooperation. However, the topic of PS funding itself has remained largely unexplored.

Analyzing PS research funding in Belarus must cope with several significant constraints. As regards official political science, the limited nature of information on public spending in Belarus should be mentioned. While annual budget laws, government science and education programs and other major finance regulations are publicly accessible documents, they do not provide any comprehensive information on the funding of academic disciplines. Also, it is next to impossible to find such information in other open sources. Moreover, the budgets of PS departments are not officially published. Information about the finances of state-run research centers and think tanks is limited. When it comes to the issue of external funding of political science think tanks and research organizations, the situation is not much better. Budgets of external donors' democracy promotion programs and other international support to Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs) are usually either classified or just not published. As these circumstances make a comprehensive quantitative analysis of funding impossible, a qualitative evaluation has been the chosen method.

In addition to an intensive desk research on funding information available in open sources, 11 semi-structured interviews about political science as an academic discipline in Belarus, institutional

development, research directions, research funding, and challenges for the discipline were conducted. The respondents were representatives of Belarusian think tanks (6 interviewees) and universities (4 persons), plus one independent expert. Interviews were conducted between summer 2019 and summer 2020. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, the majority of respondents preferred to stay anonymous, even if some agreed to be named in the text. Unfortunately, despite formal and informal requests, the author did not succeed in interviewing representatives of the biggest and, probably, even monopolist governmental think tank – the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research (BISR). Experts from this institution ignored all requests.

The paper's first part briefly analyzes the discipline's institutionalization process in Belarus. From there, the paper proceeds to describing and evaluating the main funding sources – the state budget and different democracy promotion programs. Subsequently, the changing terms and conditions of research funding are examined and compared for official and oppositional/ alternative PS. In concluding, the paper discusses the prospective development of funding opportunities for PS research in Belarus.

Institutionalization of Political Science and Political Research in Belarus: Opening Remarks

Unlike other social disciplines, no institutional basis for political science research, such as departments or academic courses, existed in Belarus during the late 1980s/early 1990s before and shortly after the USSR's collapse (Reshetnikov 2009). The discipline's formative process was shaped by external and internal challenges. In the early 1990s, the external influence of Western countries and their democracy promotion programs constituted important elements in the country's societal development generally and the formation of political science particularly. Some Belarusian authors (Babrovich 2003) argue that the most important task in creating the discipline consisted in overcoming the heritage of the Soviet past and specifically of "scientific communism". Indeed, at the outset political science merely formally replaced that ideologically biased Soviet discipline (and several other social science disciplines), while the majority of teaching staff and even some course content remained the same.

The very process of PS institutionalization in Belarus was uneven and fluctuating. From the late *perestroika* in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, PS and political research were developing intensively. In the late 1990s, the growth of nondemocratic tendencies in the country split the PS community. Since that period, two national political science and research communities of different size and quality co-existed. However, while in the late 1990s – mid-2000s the divide between the two

communities was sharp and independent think tanks could claim to be pro-democratic, mostly pro-Western and opposed to the political regime, over time the situation began to change.

Since the approximate 2010s, but especially from 2014, the gap between the two camps has been fading and is not so obvious anymore. Some independent Belarusian think tanks have commenced closer cooperation with Belarusian authorities, while preserving good relations and getting financial support from Western donors at the same time. One such example is the “Minsk Dialogue” think tank launched in 2015. Its main target audiences are the Belarusian MFA, the Ministry of Defense and other governmental bodies and officials, but also foreign diplomats, embassies, foundations and organizations. While the official PS community continues developing its own research organizations and think tanks, e.g. the National Academy of Sciences (NAN) and the Faculty of International Relations at Belarusian State University (FIR BSU), these organizations have a double identity: on the one hand, they depend on state-run institutions or closely cooperate with them; on the other, when it comes to funding, their main sources are external. In the paper’s subsequent sections, every type of institutions, financing sources, conditions, and practices will be analyzed.

Content-wise, an important characteristic of PS in Belarus is a strict division between different fields within the discipline. Political science, public administration, international relations and policy analysis exist as separate academic disciplines and research directions. From an institutional point of view, these disciplines (branches) are separated from each other, and their representatives (with an exception of a narrow group of “pure” political scientists) do not identify themselves and their activities as “political research.” Such division can be explained by a lack of institutional traditions, relatively late (in comparison with other social science disciplines) formation of PS in the country, and a non-democratic domestic political environment.

Official Political Science’s Institutionalization and Development

The late 1980s – mid-1990s were the formative period of Belarusian PS. Political developments in Belarus created a certain demand for specialized political knowledge. Already by 1991, the first PS department was created at BSU, later transferred from the Philosophical-Economic to the Law Faculty, where the chair has since been located. The department also initiated and created a council for PS doctorates (*kandidat nauk*) and habilitations (*doktor nauk*) (Naumova 2010, Antanovich 2004).

Later, in the 1990-s – 2000s, PS departments (either specialized or combined with other social science disciplines) were created in every state-run Belarusian university. The teaching staff was recruited mostly from the “older generation”, whose majority had specialized in scientific communism, history and philosophy. It took some time for Belarusian universities to engage staff with a political

science specialization (Naumova 2010, Antanovich 2004). Content-wise, PS was included during the mid-1990s by the Ministry of Education as a compulsory core curriculum for all BA programs in Belarusian Higher Education institutions (HEIs) (Naumova 2010, Antanovich 2014).

Analogous to developments at state-run universities, the discipline was included in the curricula of private HEIs. In particular, a Franco-Belarusian Faculty of Political and Administrative Science supported by the French Embassy in Minsk was created in 1993 at the private European Humanities University (EHU). By the beginning of the 2000s, PS departments were established in many other private HEIs as well (Naumova 2010). However, private universities did not succeed in creating a viable alternative to the state-run establishments. EHU is probably the exemption here. Supported by Western donors, the university provided education different from that offered by state universities. The PS department had a strong professional reputation in Belarus and abroad. In 2004, the entire EHU was closed for political reasons by the authorities (its later reopening in exile in Lithuania *de facto* was a process of creating a different institution, without PS as a leading discipline). Other than EHU, private have never been competitors of the state-run universities.

Further institutional development of PS was determined by the political changes in the country. In 1996, President Lukashenka conducted an internationally unrecognized referendum, followed by an intensification of non-democratic tendencies in the country (Silitski 2005). Born as a result of these changes, official PS developed as a part of the heavily centralized national policy in the field of higher education. Another important event took place in 2003, when Lukashenka decreed the introduction of an ideological education. Political scientists from state-run universities developed the curriculum, and a course on state ideology for BA students appeared in all Belarusian HEIs. By 2008, the process of establishing PS as a university discipline had been completed. A standardized PS curriculum was approved by the Ministry of Education (see Ministry of Education 2008).

As already mentioned, Belarusian academic political science exists within a heavily centralized higher education system. That centralization, however, has not only had negative, but also some positive ramifications for PS. In the mid-1990s, PS was included as a compulsory subject in the socio-humanitarian core curriculum of all BA programs. The step provided political scientists with relatively stable positions, including a guaranteed workload. At the same time, according to the logic of the heavily centralized political system, such positive achievements could be easily and quickly destroyed.

In 2012, after President Lukashenka had publicly criticized education in the social sciences and humanities at national HEIs,¹ the Ministry of Education developed a concept of “Optimizing the

¹ The transcript of the Belarusian President’s speech is available at http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view_stenogramma-vystuplenija-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aglukashenko-na-soveschani-pedagogicheskogo-aktiva-5808/ (accessed July 8, 2020).

content, structure and volume of social science and humanities disciplines in HEIs” (Ministry of Education 2012). As a result of the introduced innovations, the number of hours in PS decreased, and the discipline itself became part of an integrated module along with the course on “Introduction to the ideology of the Belarusian state.” These changes had an impact on the official PS community, who lost both part of their workload and their relatively stable positions in the educational system. As of this writing (summer 2020), there are further plans to reform education in the social sciences and humanities, which might lead to the exclusion of PS from the list of obligatory courses for all BA programs.

Despite the fact that Belarus has been conditionally accepted (since 2015) into the European High Education Area (EHEA), any real changes concerning the quality of education and research and the institutional autonomy of the HEIs failed to materialize (Dounaev 2018). Direct political interference by the President and the government led to the described changes in educational programs and further split the national academic community.

Summing up: PS departments produce a small number of graduates who, from a professional perspectives point of view, demonstrate limited interest toward this specialization. The equally limited number of programs and students and intentions to reduce PS teaching hours within the core curriculum create additional challenges for official political science teachers and researchers highly dependent on teaching workload. Similar to other former Soviet republics, the involvement of Belarusian universities in R&D activities is relatively low, while government institutions and enterprises play an important role (Chulitskaya et al 2017). Research activities have a rather formal nature, and departments, faculties or even universities in general seldom - if ever - conduct full-scale research (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019; Lavruhin 2020). Like state-run universities, official PS is more focused on the staff’s administrative and teaching activities than on publications, projects, or conferences. As a rule, academics try to take on more teaching hours, because they provide higher salaries.

Such formalistic approach results in a lack of internationally recognized publications. International databases list practically no publications by Belarusian authors in the social sciences and humanities. Belarusian academic journals are not included in these bases (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019). Only 22 of 51 universities have profiles in Scopus and the Web of Science; 2/3 of all publications belong to the Belarusian State University (BSU) (35%) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) (34%). The 2020 Hirsh Index of Belarusian social sciences was 15 points (134th position in the world) (Lavruhin 2020). At the same time, state-run universities perform ideological or informational functions, providing support to Belarusian authorities via written papers, particularly in

international relations and foreign policy, where Eurasian integration is one of the most popular topics (Kazakevich interview).

Generally, teaching far outweighs research at Belarusian HEIs. According to evaluation (Lavruhin 2020), among 51 universities in the country merely one (BSU) can be regarded as a research institution, although social science faculties and departments (with, probably, a single exception – the Faculty of International Relations) conduct practically no research. Regarding research obligations and guidelines for political scientists and other academics, the situation has been changing recently. However, it still seems possible to work at a university without engaging in any research activities (Lavruhin 2020, Kazakevich interview).

Meanwhile, state-run universities might and often do have research institutes or even think tanks specializing in political issues. Thus, the BSU Faculty of the International Relations has at least three research centers (for International Studies, for Eurasian and European Studies, and a Center of US International Politics Studies), focusing on different regions and aspects of regional integration, employing predominantly academic staff from the same faculty. However, the centers are not necessarily active. Some of them do not have official webpages or other publicly available sources of information about their activities. At the same time, the centers might be active in conducting and organizing internal discussions, workshops and other events, to which they invite experts and officials, particularly from MFA.

Some other BSU faculties and other universities also establish and support research centers, e.g. the BSU Center for Social and Political Studies,² which specializes in surveys of different types and has been participating in international research projects. However, this and other university research centers are not widely known and have a very limited academic and social impact. One explanation why universities create and support research centers at all is that such institutes create a space for a bit broader autonomy and an opportunity to attract additional external resources, i.e. funding from international foundations and organizations.

Another group of official PS institutions are different pro-governmental research centers, e.g. the Labor Research Institute under the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) has no PS section, but research institutions in social sciences. Some of these have established research centers with a focus on geopolitical issues (Belarus – Russia and Belarus – EU relations in particular). One example is the Center for History and Geopolitics founded in 2014 as part

²Information about the Center (in Russian only) available at: http://www.cspr.bsu.by/?fbclid=IwAR3fzQpSnUFFLAHy31SgQ1NLPn9JTri6Z1st2aJ_Lzit76f9YKQCLItIoh8, accessed September 18, 2020.

of the NAS Institute of History.³ The Center's official website provides very limited information about members and research topics and no data on events or current research.

Finally, a limited number of state-run think tanks count among official PS institutions. One of the most important is the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research (BISR), created in February 2019 as a result of reorganizing the main governmental research center (the Information and Analytical Center, directly responsible to the President). BISR conducts political and policy research and analysis, but its main goal is "to provide information and analytical support to government agencies and officials in strategic areas of domestic and foreign policy" (BISR 2020). The papers of the Institute may rarely be publicly obtained, and those that are available are in some cases ideologically biased. Typically for a closed decision-making system, even the state-run BISR admits that Belarusian officials do not follow the principles of evidence-based decision-making, as they do not perceive that analytics would improve the quality of decisions (Ryabava 2020).

We may conclude that the official political science's level of institutionalization, autonomy and research capacity is insufficient. Although PS departments exist in almost every Belarusian university, they suffer from diverse internal and external institutional challenges, ideological pressure from the authorities, and self-censorship. PS chairs in state-run universities do not have any decision-making autonomy regarding studies and research programs. Official PS still exists in a very Soviet-like format, and the gap between Belarusian and European political science concerning notions of research, quality of education and internationalization is growing. Activities of the state-run centers are not publicly known, and the centers themselves function as closed institutions implementing tasks formulated by the government, rather than research establishments as such.

Alternative PS and Research: Think Tanks in a Non-Democratic Environment

Having sprung up in the country as new institutions in the late 1980s - early 1990s, think tanks are defined here as "institutions claiming autonomy whose main aim is to influence policy-making based on the social analyses they produce" and "to bridge the gap between knowledge (academia) and power (politicians and policy makers)" (Jezierska, Giusti 2020: 1-2). Theorists of democracy promotion believe that think tanks contribute to an intensification of political participation and might potentially lead to democracy (Carothers 2002; Struyk 1999). However, in a heavily centralized and stable non-democratic system, the very role and functions of these institutions are transformed, and

³ For more info on the Center for History and Geopolitics of NAS see http://history.by/struktura-institutu/center_for_history_of_geopolitics/, accessed July 9, 2020.

they need to search for a mode of operation in a hostile environment. In addition, as Struyk (2000) shows, all think tanks in the post-Soviet bloc face stark challenges of sustainability.

According to Belarusian experts' (Ryabava 2020), there are approximately 40 independent think tanks in Belarus today. However, 2019 international ratings (in particular, the University of Pennsylvania's Global Go To Think Tank Index) contain data on a mere 22 such organizations (McGann 2020). As Ryabava (2020) emphasizes, it is unclear which centers and why are included in the rating, but none of them rank among the top-90 of Central-/East European centers, or are present in the thematic sub-ratings.

Belarusian think tanks have a diverse field of expertise: starting from "pure" political issues to international relations, economics, social issues, civil society and others. A separate group of institutions identify themselves as think tanks, but in reality are media or expert platforms publishing opinions of different experts (e.g., the web portal "Our Opinion"). For the purpose of this analysis, all organizations that focus on different types of political research and/ or identify themselves as independent think tanks are included into the category. They produce around 60 research reports annually, although the overwhelming majority belongs to just two economic think tanks (IPM and BEROC) (Ryabava 2020).

When these institutes first appeared in Belarus, they destroyed the state monopoly in research. The institutionalization of think tanks was interconnected with domestic and external political developments, foremost with the evolution of the non-democratic regime and changes in international donors' support policies towards Belarus. According to existing literature (Naumova 2010; Bigday 2020), the first phase happened from 1990-1996. During that period, non-academic political research was developing intensively, coinciding with a high level of political competition and relative political pluralism in the country. There was a demand for independent political research from domestic and external political players, and the new think tanks were close to the political arena. Among the most prominent centers were the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) established in 1992, and the East-West National Center of Strategic Initiatives, established in 1993 and later transformed into the Analytical Center "Strategy" (Naumova 2010: 63).

However, the golden age of independent think tanks in Belarus remained short, and after the constitutional referendum of 1996 which enormously enlarged presidential powers, the favorable environment declined. The domestic policy of the newly elected populist President Aleksander Lukashenka focused on increasing the overall role of the state. Belarusian international relations took a sharp turn with a new focus on Russia and a generally anti-Western agenda. The years 1996 – 2001 comprised the second period of institutionalization, marked by the politicization of independent think

tanks. Political elites at different levels were replaced by President Lukashenka with his loyal supporters. These changes resulted in a break between official political elites and independent think tanks. The latter de facto lost space and tools for policy advice. Authorities now preferred not to cooperate with them, and “a vast ideological campaign was launched [by authorities] to stigmatize the leading think tanks”⁴ (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015). Financial assistance from the West (as the main source of think tanks’ funding) became a target for harsh criticism of them as presumed proof of their dependence on external players, unfriendly to Belarusian authorities. Politicians who had previously collaborated with think tanks found themselves in opposition. They continued cooperation, and the research centers were for all practical purposes co-opted by the political opposition.

The third period (years 2001 – 2008) was shaped by the political crisis which followed the 2001 presidential election, resulting in further consolidation of the authoritarian regime. This led to a decreased demand for independent political analysis. In addition, democracy promotion programs related to Belarus changed priorities during that period, leaving think tanks without sufficient resources for their activities. Not surprisingly, the majority vanished, while the rest were ghettoized within existing research fields (Bigday interview). According to Bigday, among 24 institutes, existing from 1990 till 2006, only five survived the regime’s deterioration, preserving their legal status, while nine were - mainly between 2004-2006 - totally prohibited (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015).

Moreover, from 1999 till 2006 no new centers were officially registered. As a result, the first-generation centers which had not ceased to exist started looking for new ways of institutionally adapting to their marginalized status (Bigday interview). From the mid-2000s, acting in a mostly hostile environment, some think tanks obtained their registration abroad. Others changed activities and became mere discussion platforms. Meanwhile, a new generation of think tanks lacking experience of relations with authorities has appeared on the scene (e.g., “Political Sphere”).

From 2008 till approximately 2016, a new period of think tank activation took place, caused mainly by the liberalization process in Belarus-West relations during 2008 - 2010. Although the 2010 Presidential election was judged by the international community as unfree and unfair, and international sanctions were imposed on the country, the liberalization of Belarusian foreign policy occurred just two years later. Democracy promotion programs were relaunched by international donors. The resulting need for research led to the intensification of activities of existing think tanks and the appearance of new ones.

⁴ For example, in 1995 IISEPS was accused of relying on foreign secret services. The East-West Center was accused in having prepared several oppositional rallies together with “Western agents” (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015: 77).

However, from 2016 up to the present (2020), external support of civil society in general and of think tanks in particular again deteriorated. According to Kazakevich, democracy promotion programs - especially those operated by US organizations and foundations - changed priorities. They started to focus more on social issues, including regional development, urbanism etc. and less on political research. Moreover, the programs became focused on project aid rather than institutional support. In many cases, international donors preferred to support state-run institutions and organizations, rather than civil society organizations. Consequently, support for Belarusian think tanks has substantially decreased. The very sphere of independent think tanks in Belarus has been reduced to a state of stagnation.

According to respondents, research takes up only some 20%-30% of think tanks' activities. The rest is absorbed by the organization of various types of events, such as popularizing conducted research, conferences, workshops, summer schools. In general, the development of the think tank sector and alternative political research in Belarus may be seen as a complicated and fluctuating process with numerous ups and downs. Uneven development, non-regularity of research activities and institutional "youth" of the organizations (the average age of think tanks in Belarus is about 6 years) are among key factors affecting alternative political research today (Kazakevich 2015).

From the point of view of cross-sectoral cooperation, think tanks in a non-democratic environment have very limited opportunities for cooperation with authorities and public institutions. This creates a specific situation where the main target audiences of think tanks are international organizations, civil society, media or the general public rather than political institutions.

With very few exceptions, independent researchers are excluded from every stage of the public policy cycle. According to the interviews, think tanks do try to influence government, but that government is not particularly responsive to their attempts. Communication between government and think tanks varies depending on the field of expertise: outcomes of analysis in economics might be interesting for officials, while issues of human rights, public administration, or environment are not (Ryabava 2020). For instance, all respondents agreed that the leading economic think tanks (IPM and BEROC) have relatively successful records of cooperating with ministries. Another partly successful example is international relations, where the "Minsk Dialogue" actively cooperates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

Even in the somewhat more successful cases, there can be no question of cooperation playing out between partners. Rather, think tanks provide governmental with expertise, which the latter may use or not according to its own internal logic. The window of opportunity for cooperation exists only in cases when positively minded high-rank officials are ready to listen to independent researchers. As

well put by one respondent, think tanks resemble Belarusian enterprises, which produce a lot but lack markets for their products. In general, contacts between think tanks and the government have the form of person-to-person communication or consultation and communication during public events (Kazakevich 2015).

Funds for Official Political Science: Limited Opportunities for Limited Means

The official public R&D sector and all research activities in Belarus are characterized by a high level of dependence on the state, which may be observed in different contexts, including legislative regulation, institutional and funding hierarchies. At the same time, Belarusian authorities demand that research should be profitable, i.e. generate additional income. With only minor contributions from the private sector, Belarusian research is mainly supported via the state budget (Chulitskaya et al. 2017).

According to the National Statistics Committee (Belstat), the GDP share allocated for research was 0,59% in 2019, a bit less than the 0.6% allocation in the previous year. That share has been decreasing since 2010, when it amounted to 0.67% GDP (Belstat 2020). Kazakevich, Haroshka (2019) claim that “starting from 2008 Belarus is living through its ‘black’ decade in the field of research and development”, with decreasing funding.

The biggest share of R&D goes to research in the hard sciences. Their primacy may also be observed in the thematic priorities of research proclaimed by the Belarusian government for the period 2016 - 2020 (approved by Presidential Decree N 166, 22 April 2015). Humanities and social sciences are not mentioned as targets at all (Chulitskaya et al. 2017). According to expert estimates, social and economic sciences and humanities in 2017 received only 4,5% of all R&D spending (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019). In absolute numbers, average annual budget spending on social and political research amounts to \$15,9 million. The share of public spending on social research is 4,21% and on research in humanities --1,24% (Kazakevich 2015).

State dependence is also obvious at the institutional level, as the research budget is prepared by the State Committee on Science and Technology (SCST) - ranking as the Ministry of Science and Technology - in cooperation with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and several other ministries, then to be approved by the President. The same committee (SCST) controls the budget's implementation (Chulitskaya et al. 2017).

There are two major ways of budget support for science and research in Belarus: via funding particular institutions (institutional support), and via state programs (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019). In the case of institutional support, HEIs further distribute receipts according to their priorities, with research not necessarily on top.

The guiding document in the sphere of national science is the State Program of Scientific Research (SPSR). Programs are approved by the Government for a period of five years. The latest list was adopted in 2015 and contains 12 programs (Council of Ministers 2015), among which only one (the 12th) is devoted to social sciences and humanities. The program is entitled “Economic and Humanitarian Development of the Belarusian Society.” It is divided into six subprograms, but none of them includes PS.⁵ The program mentions goals that might be considered as relevant for political research, although they are formulated very broadly - for instance, “developing theories of Belarusian stateness and nation-building” or “preservation and empowerment of the national identity in globalization processes” (Council of Ministers 2016). The total budget of the 5 years- program is 598.312 mio. Belarusian rubles (approx. \$260 mio.). Seven state-run institutions are listed among program implementers, including three NAS research centers, the Ministry of Education, but only one university (BSU) (Council of Ministers 2016). Open sources do not contain any information on the budget distribution among these agencies. Redistribution procedures, while formally competitive, actually benefit the same state-run institutions, who formulate priorities and also implement them. *De facto*, support via state programs means institutional support of state-run research institutions (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019).

One organization, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), dominates in the field of science and research and in the implementation of the State Programs on Scientific Research. NAS responsibilities include the redistribution of public funds for research through the Belarusian Republican Foundation for Fundamental Research (BRFFR). The Foundation redistributes these resources usually for a two-year period according to officially approved national research priorities (Council of Ministers 2015). From an institutional perspective, NAS representatives dominate the BRFFR governing structures (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019). 26 out of 39 members of the Scientific Council and 4 out of 10 members of the Supervisory Council are from NAS (BRFFR official website).

The Foundation distributes funds of some \$3 to \$5 million per year via open calls, which is, according to experts, almost the entire budget allocated for research. Meanwhile, NAS representatives belong among the main grant recipients (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019). In general, BRFFR activities are not transparent, and there is no information on the grant amounts or recipients. According to the information on the BRFFR official website (respondents from state-run universities agree), competition for the Foundation grants is high, with state-run research centers and universities as the main competitors. Information about open calls is, in principle, published. However, as one of the

⁵ Description of subprograms of the State Program “Economics and Humanitarian Development of the Belarusian Society”. Available at: <http://research.bsu.by/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Struktura-GPNI-na-2016-2020.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2020).

respondents mentioned, one should know where to look for it and to whom to address questions about the calls.

The Academy of Sciences as the main institution in the field of science and research may thus be viewed both as monopolist in the distribution of budget funds and as the main recipient of these funds. The conflict of interest is obvious and creates unequal conditions in the competition for funding (Kazakevich, Goroshko 2019; Chulitskaya et al. 2017).

As regards funding the main institutions of official political science, all state-run universities receive institutional support money from the national budget. They in turn display a centralized budgeting structure. Faculties receive money from, but also contribute money to the university budget, should they receive any additional funding for education and research. Financially, faculties heavily depend on university administrations, which set the rules of the game.

Although Belarus took the lowest positions among Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries regarding international academic cooperation (Chulitskaya et al. 2017), the very opportunity of such cooperation – not least as an additional source of funding - might be evaluated differently by faculty members and university administrations. While in some HEIs academicians are encouraged by the latter to apply for such programs, in others they are either discouraged or not permitted to apply. There are political (or perceived political) limitations for participating in international projects, because of which some academics from state-run universities prefer either to refrain from participating or to take additional precautions, such as involving themselves on a personal rather than institutional level, or participating informally.

In general, because of the perceived or real political risks, state-run universities display a fear of international cooperation. Projects might be interpreted as promoting pro-Western concepts or ideas perceived as “alien” by the Belarusian authorities. One respondent from a state-run university stressed that any initiative to participate in an international research project would not be welcomed until there were an official invitation, followed by a positive evaluation on the part of the university administration which would weigh “political pros and cons.” In addition, respondents mentioned lack of interest or even mild sabotage of applications for international research program by the Ministry of Education, which might be requested to provide official confirmation and support.

In the rare cases, when state-run universities receive international project funding, the process of project management is complicated. As a rule, the university administration is not very supportive. There are all sorts of bureaucratic concerns, and project initiators are held personally responsible for all project-related issues, including management and reporting, which are considered as unnecessary

additional workloads by the staff, demotivating from participation in externally financed projects altogether.

At university level, there may be specialized programs for funding the teaching staff's international mobility. However, respondents mentioned that the volume of funding is usually moderate (one visit to another country per year), and that faculties compete intensely for the scarce means. Mobility funding is generally a big problem. Theoretically, mobility-related expenses (participation in conferences, seminars, workshops and such) could be reimbursed by the universities. But respondents emphasized that in practice it is almost impossible to obtain such support, and expenses must be borne either by participants or by the host party. Faculties might potentially apply for research funding by business enterprises, and university administrations could encourage such attempts. However, where PS research is concerned, this opportunity does not seem realistic.

At the level of PS departments, issues of funding are not included in the competences of department heads who – as one respondent mentioned – may not even know their department's budget. Departments merely receive orders from above (faculty or university administration) and have no tools to influence or even to get access to the faculty or university budget. One of the respondents described the situation in the following way: “The rules [of budget distribution] are known to the sub-departments of the Rector's office, which are competent in every sphere.”

Research funding in the one state-run think tank, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Research, also follows the rules of centralized institutional funding. BISR as an institution receives annual funding from the national budget, whose amount is not publicly revealed. However, according to its official website, BISR employs at least 15 researchers and three management members. According to Presidential Decree No 49 of 12 February 2019 establishing the Institute, its staff holds positions of civil servants (although the Institute may also hire other staff without this status). According to the decree, government and Presidential Administration are responsible for materially and financially supporting BISR work. In the case of research institutions affiliated to ministries, the same approach towards budget support may be observed: It is institutional, but not performance-based in character, and thus may be insufficient.

To sum up: every official PS-related institution receives centralized institutional support from the national budget, and is thus controlled and co-opted by the state. Faculty and department budgets consist predominantly of these funds, with some share from additional sources - first of all, students' tuition fees. International projects might provide additional funding, but in reality, international political science projects are scarce, due to the general lack of research internationalization in Belarus and to numerous political obstacles. In general, the funding situation of PS research at state-run

universities may be described as limited opportunities for limited means. In contrast, the financial situation of the one state-run think tank (BISR) is stable by reason of granted budget support.

Funding of Alternative Political Science and Research

In general, Belarusian independent think tanks face the same problems as other Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs), including a hostile political environment, repression, and diverse internal problems (CSO Meter 2019). Another important component of that political context are extremely unfavorable conditions for foreign funding (and any other donor support in general) and practically no mechanisms of domestic (state or private) funding (Chulitskaya et al. 2020).

As a result, Belarusian organizations and think tanks often opt for a different type of legal entity (institution)⁶. While an institution is easier to register (it merely must be declared), this type of legal entity imposes certain restrictions on the organization's activities (Chulitskaya et al 2020). Some think tanks therefore register abroad and direct funding to foreign bank accounts.

As far as financing is concerned, only the first period of think tank development in Belarus was successful. In the early 1990s, these institutes — partly due to their pro-Western image — received different types of support from Belarusian political and business players “who challenged the old Soviet system” (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015). Domestic businessmen provided think tanks with material help (computers and other office equipment, reimbursement of business trips and rental expenses). Political elites gave administrative and, in some cases, material support as well (for renting offices). However, after the political situation deteriorated, domestic support became impossible.

External influence was a second defining characteristic of think tank institutionalization in Belarus, whose presence may still be observed today. Democracy promotion policies and programs provided emerging Belarusian CSOs, including think tanks, with a financial, political and ideological basis (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015). Financial support came first and foremost from US-based foundations (the George Soros Open Society Foundation, Eurasia Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Democratic Institute [NDI] and the International Republican Institute [IRI]), different German Foundations and other international and national Western donors (Bigday, Kryzhanousky 2015). Main changes in US donor support occurred after the Soros Foundation's official expulsion from Belarus in 1997, when other foundations reduced the volume or reshaped conditions of their Belarusian programs.

External support remains today the primary and, in reality, the only source of funding for independent think tanks and research in Belarus. According to experts' rough estimates, the 2015

⁶ Institution – *uchrejdenija* (учреждения) in Russian.

volume of support for all independent research organizations may have amounted to between \$1.5 – \$2.5 million. That number includes organizational expenses of all kinds. A functioning Belarusian think tank has an annual budget of around \$80 thousand to \$100 thousand (Kazakevich 2015, interviews). It should be mentioned that support for research has since been considerably reduced. As a rule, data on financial support for the independent research centers are classified and not included in any publicly accessible databases.

External help comes in different ways: 1. Through research projects (for instance, European framework Programs for Research and Technical Development); 2. As infrastructural/ and institutional support; 3. As support of advocacy and/ or informational campaigns.

In addition, various international organizations provide targeted support for research or related activities. For instance, German foundations (the Konrad Adenauer Foundation [KAS], the Friedrich Ebert Foundation [FES]) actively support different kinds of research and popularizing events (particularly for the “Minsk Dialogue” Initiative).

From an institutional perspective, the international donor support programs in some cases directly influenced the development of the Belarusian research centers’ sector. Thus, PACT, a US-headquartered non-profit international development organization, from 2012 till approximately 2016 had a program focusing on Belarus which prompted a qualitative and quantitative growth in the think tank sector due to a strong agenda about how think tanks should operate. At the same time, as respondents felt, the think tanks’ own initiatives, intentions and ideas were also valued in the program.

As part of its program, PACT created a think tank umbrella organization, the Belarus Research Council (BRC). Formally, BRC was established in 2012 as a network of “Belarusian think tanks, analytical centers and individual researchers that regularly meets to discuss achievements, share research findings and coordinate research plans” (PACT website). BRC also initiated and conducted at least three annual ratings of Belarusian think tanks. It created a specialized online platform www.thinktanks.by, which is the only currently active component of PACT’s program, publishing information related to independent think tanks and research. BRC itself *de facto* suspended its activities after 2016. While this attempt to unite the Belarusian research CSOs was positively assessed by some respondents, absence of external support made the umbrella Council expire.

A serious challenge to the financial (and organizational) sustainability of Belarusian think tanks in recent years arose by a turn in donors’ support approach. One respondent mentioned that, in his opinion, previously a shared vision had existed among international donors that the sector of the independent research needed a general institutional support program, and donors’ programs were designed accordingly. However, after the 2014 events in Ukraine inaugurated a new round of

liberalization and warming of Belarus–West relations, donors started to focus on projects which involved Belarusian official institutions and organizations, while financial and institutional support for civil society decreased in volume and changed in form (CET, Lawtrend 2018). Another respondent mentioned that big international donors focus on supporting those independent think tanks whose activities thematically coincide with their own missions. The EU Delegation to Belarus, for instance, supports a “green” economy, and organizations that work in this field benefit.

Today, support is mostly provided through short- or mid-term projects (up to three years), and research is not supported separately, but merely as a part of such projects. In addition, targeted support of research activities has become rare. According to one respondent, while previously research would be the main focus in supporting think tanks, the situation has now changed dramatically, and research only counts as one element among think tanks’ donor-funded activities such as advocacy, education and staging of events. As a result, the general institutional sustainability of think tanks is decreasing.

Despite their dependence on external funding sources, representatives of Belarusian think tanks maintain that they are free in setting their research agenda. They choose and formulate research topics according to their own interests and competences. At the same time, respondents also admitted that due to insufficient funding or unstable financial conditions, there are situations when they have to apply for support under any calls for proposals, regardless of their own specialization or interests.

Due to the decrease in external support, some previously active institutions (e.g., the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies - BISS) have practically disappeared or substantially reduced their activities. The most successful trajectories up to now have been of those think tanks and centers that a). receive institutional and not just project support, or pursue a sufficient number of projects; b). possess their own well-established and recognized sphere(s) of expertise; c). have their own target audience and a stable demand for research results from national or international institutions.

Compared to official political science, independent think tanks are organizationally and financially less sustainable. The business sector is just not interested in independent political expertise or research. As a result, alternative political research organizations are left with no choice but to seek support from external sources. That makes them especially vulnerable to any changes in democracy promotion programs, and to domestic political developments. However, all representatives of think tanks claim that they are free in formulating their research agenda within the framework of projects supported by the international donors.

Institutional and Financial Intersections Between Official and Oppositional Political Science and Research: Hybrid Think Tanks

Previously, several important dividing lines separated the two types of political science and research in Belarus. Most essential was a political division, with official political science practically co-opted by the authorities and thus supporting the non-democratic political regime. In turn, alternative think tanks, being dependent on international donors, were promoting democracy. Funding-wise, this has been reflected in domestic financial support for official and external support for alternative political science.

However, from 2014 (or even earlier) an erosion of the political division may be observed. Independent think tanks cooperate with public institutions, and their positions and activities cannot be identified anymore as politically oppositional or purely pro-democratic. One of the most interesting examples here is the “Minsk Dialogue”. Another case of such transformation occurs when state-run institutions (such as NAS and BSU) support think tanks that identify themselves as independent, e. g. via the Center for History and Geopolitics (affiliated to the Institute of History of NAS), or the Foreign Policy and Security Research Center, formally not affiliated but *de facto* supported by BSU. These think tanks might not necessarily focus on a pro-democratic agenda, but on issues of Eurasian integration or Belarus-Russian relations which are part of the official Belarusian foreign policy agenda.

“Minsk Dialogue” posits itself as “a space for international dialogue and regional cooperation” (official website). Among the expert community, it has a dubious reputation: On the one hand, the initiative is internationally recognized and has good professional relations with well-known pro-Western political experts who participate in events organized by the “Minsk Dialogue”. On the other hand, together with the economic policy think tanks IPM and BEROC, it has well-established connections with the government, closely cooperating and allegedly even affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Published research findings are often in line with MFA positions. President Lukashenka attends the “Minsk Dialogue” annual conferences. This makes the initiative vulnerable to criticism and generates lack of trust in the expert community and the Belarusian political opposition.

Erosion of the division between official and alternative think tanks and the appearance of think tanks of a new (hybrid) type may have been caused by the changes in international donor support policies towards Belarusian civil society. In 2014 and later, an increase in support to state-run projects and institutions coincided with a certain decrease in support to the independent sphere (CET, Lawtrend 2018). Western foundations, for instance, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) which had predominantly supported conservative oppositional parties, intensified cooperation with state-run universities and institutions (BSU and NAS) and also with think tanks that closely cooperate with Belarusian official institutions.

Despite some government support (e.g., provision of offices or some other minor material help), the hybrid think tanks still largely depend on external funding. A look at events organized by the “Minsk Dialogue” yields a predominance of international donors (confirmed by respondents).

Conclusion

It can be argued that a non-democratic political system and its institutional configuration directly influence political science and its development in Belarus. A sharp division between authorities and political opposition causes the division of PS into official and oppositional/ alternative disciplines. Hierarchical and non-inclusive high education and R&D policies make official PS institutions highly dependent on the authorities. Oppositional/ alternative political science think tanks are *de facto* excluded from public policy processes, with their participation limited to consultations and provision of information. Meanwhile, in recent years, a new (hybrid) type of PS research institutions, intending to bridge the official/oppositional division, has emerged in Belarus.

When it comes to funding, Belarus represents a case of different practices for official and oppositional/ alternative PS. State-run universities, including official PS, are provided with limited but sustainable centralized funding from the state budget. However, this way of funding leads to the universities’ profound dependence on the authorities and lack (if not a total absence) of academic self-governance, which result in co-option of academia into the state.

In line with the former Soviet approach, research – as compared to teaching - is of secondary importance for state-run universities. Funding opportunities provided to the state-run universities through government-controlled institutions (BRFFR, in particular) focus, first of all, on institutional support. The topics of state research programs, which provide the operational basis for official PS researchers, are formulated solely on the basis of the authorities’ vision of the “usefulness” of research for the state, while longer-term interests of the public are not considered. In the case of another type of official PS institution – state-run think tanks –, the authorities approach research from a top-down perspective which is based on own short-term interests without any consideration of societal relevance.

Official PS in Belarus follows a technocratic and policy-oriented logic where academic staff and researchers act predominantly in line with conventional policies and paradigms. The official discipline’s design leaves practically no space for value-oriented intellectuals within academia or state-run think tanks. Those intellectuals who try to escape this paradigm are forced to create their own practices of balancing between teaching and attempting to conduct value-based research. The only alternative for them is to leave their universities and either find a new place within alternative think

tanks or go abroad (although the latter is not a very popular solution). If none of those options are possible, the researchers have no choice but to completely change their careers.

Oppositional PS is mostly governed by the short-term political logic of external donors who support think tanks. Domestic funding is practically non-existent. We observe that changes in the international support programs for civil society in Belarus (and think tanks in particular) affect the entire sphere of alternative research. While Belarusian researchers in think tanks intend to pursue a value-oriented agenda and to formulate their own research aims, their total dependence on the international funding makes them susceptible to co-option by external actors. Without foreign funding think tanks risk either to disappear altogether or to limit their research to organizing events or implementing other donor-supported activities. However, we may also argue that think tanks have been and still remain a space of at least relative research freedom for Belarusian intellectuals.

While trying to overcome existing political divisions, hybrid think tanks still depend on external funding as their main and ultimate source of support. The latter circumstance again puts them at risk of external co-option. At the same time, they also have to follow the policy-oriented research logic of Belarusian authorities, and the risk of their co-option by the state is increasing. It is at present quite unclear to which extent intellectuals in such hybrid think tanks may be able to observe value-oriented standards.

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