

THINK-TANKS IN EUROPE

The Romanian Academic Society was born in 1995 out of the wish of a few Romanian intellectuals, formerly opponents of the Communist regime, to start the life afresh after communism. Conditions were poor back in 1995: Romania was lagging behind its Central European neighbors, without having succeeded a first swing in government, which meant we were stuck with a successor Communist party for the first years of transition. Coal miners had descended to Bucharest, not to defy the government, but to protect it and beat peaceful demonstrators, destroy the University and opposition newspapers offices. The old Romanian Academy was the best symbol of Romania's continuity with the Communist past: despite the fact that only Communist Party members could become members of the Academy in the previous two decades, the institution only expelled two members from its ranks after 1989: the Ceaușescu couple - but they had already been eliminated by a firing squad shooting at close range. Despite the violence and the lies surrounding the Romanian Revolution, a majority of voters endorsed Ion Iliescu and his regime.

No wonder the first impulse of intellectuals was to educate voters. The prevailing logic of those days was that ordinary people were perverted by Communism, but intellectuals for some reason were not, so it was their task to transform this homo sovieticus back into a normal democratic citizen. To this end we had to teach ordinary people the norms of democracy and civic values. Unsurprisingly, the first program of SAR was

called Education for Democracy and thousands of new voters, high school students for most part, were taught politics and democracy alongside voting procedures.

This 'educating the people' phase soon reached its limits. Eventually democrats won. It then turned out they were not prepared to govern the country. Executives, experts in public affairs, competent bureaucrats were all in short supply. Effective communicators were almost non-existent. Those were the years when SAR organized its Academy for the Members of Parliament. It held the first summer school for public executives, where professors were shipped from abroad to teach in a few days the essentials of public policy – starting with the very definition – to a group of confused civil servants, soon to be fired anyway by the postcommunists returning to office in 2000. The 'educating the political elites' phase started in 1997 and it is still not over.

But this too was not enough. With the development of its center for public policy SAR tested the limits of the domestic public policy expertise and of its own foundations. Designed to educate, it lacked original research, it lacked its own competent policy scientists – as generalist intellectuals seldom qualify – and above all it was not prepared initially for effective advocacy. So the need arose to educate ourselves, and starting with 1998 SAR engaged in research, struggled to repatriate or connect with the best young policy experts, and developed a highly successful advocacy strategy. This reached its peak with the regular series of publications Early Warning Reports, initiated in 2001, to become in 2004 Policy Warning Reports, and a string of successful campaigns, from the unification of the political opposition to the adoption of a flat tax in 2005.

With serious work on institutional reform in Romania and other South East European countries SAR came to the point where it understood better the main obstacles to successful transformations and started to discern in a more critical way the strategies and institutions Romania was importing without much assessment from the EU and other major donors. We are now at

the stage where SAR is playing a role in assessing the transformation assistance and transformation strategies in order to increase the compatibility between domestic driven reforms and the international support. There is a fair amount of donor education going on as part of this new phase we are now in.

Times have changed exceptionally fast. Extraordinary illusions have been nourished in Eastern Europe in the past decade concerning European integration. While the dream seems nearly fulfilled for 'new Europe' and postponed indefinitely for 'wider Europe' its contents have seriously changed under the test of real politics. The reprimand of new Europe's policy stand in the Iraq conflict by core European members is just one signal of what Eastern Europe countries become by integration with Western Europe: modest contributors, whose opinions are weighted by the contributions to the budget of the Union and their lack of experience as members. As to wider Europe countries, as Europe is first and foremost concerned on securing its borders against immigrants from these countries, governments, regardless if democratic or authoritarian, are likely to be the main dialogue partners, not civil society.

New Europe must therefore develop its European voice and become a permanent and competent actor in European affairs in order to promote its views and also the furthering of europeanization to wider Europe. This means creating a well-coordinated coalition of think tanks, able to play a role as competent and self assertive actors in European affairs, able to propose policies, not only react to them, and to advocate them in Brussels. This is the task that SAR wants to assume for the following years, creating and coordinating such a coalition of regional think tanks, able on one hand to promote reform best practice throughout the region, and on the other to advocate in Brussels for the profound transformation of the region with European involvement. The strategy of SAR is therefore to create a supra-regional, supra-national think tank which can

grant more authority and expertise to national initiatives and become a voice in European affairs. As European enlargement stopped at the border of transformations which have succeeded prior to European involvement, both the experience of successful transition countries and their commitment to continue enlargement further to the Western Balkans and Western FSU countries may prove invaluable assets. The aborted or failed transformations in Wider Europe countries needs instruments that Europe, with its limited arsenal of programs, is clearly lacking. It needs regional expertise and mobilization of domestic civil societies. Both can be summoned more easily by a think-tank than a supranational bureaucracy. It is time for think-tanks in Europe.