

Think Tank Diplomacy: A Critical Review of Non-State Influence in Romanian Foreign Policy Making

Andreea-Alexandra Bădulescu^{1*}
Gheorghe Hurduzeu²

Abstract

Romania's membership in the European Union and NATO has increased the visibility of think tanks as contributors to the country's diplomatic and economic policy. These institutions connect academic research, public dialogue, and government decision-making by offering expertise that helps shape national strategies. Yet, their real influence on policy outcomes remains insufficiently explored.

This paper presents a focused analysis of five major Romanian think tanks: the European Institute of Romania, the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, the New Strategy Center, the Romanian Center for European Policies, and EUROPULS. The research examines their structures, publications, engagement methods, and connections with public institutions. While each focus on a specific set of policy areas such as European integration, national security, or governance reform, they often rely on similar tools. These include publishing policy documents, participating in consultations, and contributing to public or institutional debates.

However, the level of their influence varies, often depending on external factors such as their funding sources, the strength of their institutional networks, and the transparency of their operations. By highlighting both their roles and limitations, the study offers insight into how think tanks contribute to the shaping of Romania's policy agenda. It also opens space for further research into how knowledge-based institutions can support democratic governance and informed decision-making in transitional political contexts.

Keywords: *think tank, diplomacy, foreign policy, document analysis*

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1. Introduction

Think tanks have emerged as significant actors in the global policy landscape. They play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, informing decision-makers and bridging the gap between academic research and governmental action. Often referred to as the intellectual infrastructure of modern democracies, these institutions generate knowledge, provide policy recommendations and facilitate dialogue on critical societal and geopolitical issues (UNDP, 2003). Their functions extend beyond research to include advocacy, media engagement and participation

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, adulescuandreea19@stud.ase.ro

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, gheorghe.hurduzeu@ase.ro

* Corresponding author.

in formal and informal diplomacy (Stone, 2007; Conley, Tyler et al., 2016). While think tanks are a well-established phenomenon in Western democracies, where they are stable fixtures in policy communities, their evolution in post-communist societies has been more complex.

In countries such as Romania, think tanks operate within a landscape characterized by rapid political transformation, institutional instability, and shifting relations with international partners, including the European Union and NATO. Studying think tanks in this context therefore offers valuable insights into how knowledge is institutionalized, how civil society contributes to policy innovation and how expertise intersects with diplomacy in emerging democracies. Therefore, the study of Romanian think tanks is both timely and relevant for understanding the broader dynamics of policymaking and democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe.

Romania, like many post-communist states, has gone through major political and economic transformations since 1989. The transition to a democratic government, the shift to a market economy and the country's accession to NATO (2004) and the European Union (2007) have fundamentally altered its policy landscape. In this evolving political and economic environment, think tanks have emerged as influential intermediaries, shaping and reflecting Romania's strategic orientations in diplomacy and economics.

However, there is still a gap in understanding of how these organizations truly influence the policymaking process. Although they publish research, organize events and take part in public dialogue, the extent of their actual impact on policy decisions is not clearly documented. Most accounts of their influence are based on isolated examples rather than thorough analysis. This aspect makes it difficult to assess how think tanks contribute to shaping Romania's path in a meaningful and sustained way.

Despite the growing visibility of the Romanian think tanks, there is still a gap in understanding how they operate. There is a lack of a systematic assessment of the content they produce, the strategies they use to engage with decision-makers, and the extent to which their ideas are reflected in public policy. The issue is particularly relevant in post-communist democracies, where institutions from civil society must continuously demonstrate both their legitimacy and their ability to make a meaningful impact within policy circles.

Despite the fact that research conducted by scholars like Stone (2007) and Haas (1992) have emphasized the function of think tanks as policy entrepreneurs and

norm entrepreneurs, there is an absence of studies that apply these frameworks to the Romanian context.

Romania's geopolitical position in Eastern Europe, combined with its involvement in international alliances such as the EU and NATO, makes this context even more urgent. In this environment, understanding how organizations that operate outside of the government contribute to the national strategy becomes essential, especially if the country faces external security threats and governance issues.

This study focuses on five of the most influential think tanks in Romania: The Romanian Diplomatic Institute, the European Institute of Romania, the New Strategy Center and EUROPULS. By closely examining their published reports, policy briefs and strategic documents from 2015 to 2024, the research evaluates how these institutions have contributed to shaping both economic and diplomatic policy.

The goal of this paper is to offer a critical perspective on how these think tanks influence public policy in Romania. It aims to show how they are emerging as significant actors in policy processes, taking on roles that go beyond advising and stepping into the space of active participation in the development of national strategies and diplomacy.

One important limitation of this study is that it focuses on just five Romanian think tanks. Although these organizations are among the most visible and influential in the country, they do not reflect the full range of voices, perspectives, and areas of expertise found across Romania's broader research community.

The analysis relies entirely on documents that are publicly available, such as policy papers, reports, and media articles. As a result, it does not account for informal interactions, behind-the-scenes consultations, or other forms of influence that may shape policy decisions. While this approach allows for a closer examination of key outputs, it offers only a partial view of how think tanks operate within the national policy environment.

The paper is organized into four sections, each building on the last to develop a coherent analysis, the first section examines the academic work related to think tanks, focusing on how these institutions shape policy decisions, contribute to public diplomacy and support soft power. The second section addresses the research methodology, explaining the qualitative framework guiding this study. The third section focuses on results and discussions, offering a comprehensive overview

of each think-tank. It examines their core interests, their methods of influencing the decision-making process and their relationships with state institutions as well as the varying degrees in how they position themselves and interact with the political landscape. The final section presents the conclusions. It revisits the study's main insights; outlines how Romanian think tanks contribute to shaping diplomacy and economic strategy and considers the broader relevance of these findings. It also suggests areas for further exploration, as well as acknowledges the limitation of the study.

2. Literature review

Think tanks have long been regarded as key intermediaries between research and political decision-making. They translate complex information into actionable policy advice. Serving as bridges between academia, government and civil society, they offer expertise that can shape and legitimize governance agendas. As Stone (2007) and McGann (2016) argue, the modern think tank operates at the intersection of knowledge and power, a space where research is as much a tool of persuasion as it is a tool of analysis. The United Nations Development Program (2003) defines think tanks as institutions that conduct research and advocate on matters of public policy, thereby contributing to the intellectual infrastructure that is essential for democratic governance. However, despite this seemingly clear definition, scholars consistently emphasize the difficulty of establishing universal parameters for what constitutes a think tank. Medvetz (2012) famously described them as 'fuzzy, mutable, and contentious', reflecting their ability to adapt to political environments, funding constraints, and evolving policy demands.

The diversity of these institutions has given rise to a variety of typologies. McGann (2016) and Pautz (2013) categorize think tanks into three groups. The first group are universities without students. These are academic but policy-focused institutions. The second group are contract researchers. These are organizations that produce studies for governments or companies when they are commissioned to do so. The third group are advocacy think tanks. These are political or ideological entities that seek to influence public opinion. Meyer (2010) adds another dimension, describing think tanks as 'knowledge brokers': institutions that facilitate the flow of knowledge between experts and policymakers. This dual role as generators and brokers of expertise underscores their importance in contemporary governance systems (Conley, Tyler et al., 2016).

In recent decades, literature on think tanks has moved beyond domestic policy analysis to explore their role in diplomacy and global governance. Conley, Tyler et

al. (2017) conceptualize 'think tank diplomacy' as an emerging practice in which think tanks act as informal diplomatic actors. They facilitate dialogue, conduct independent analyses and serve as channels of communication between governments and international institutions. This concept is closely linked to Joseph Nye's (2008) idea of 'soft power', which is the ability to influence international outcomes through attraction, persuasion and shared values rather than coercion. Nye (2008) asserts that non-state actors, including think tanks, are pivotal in projecting a nation's cultural and intellectual influence. Bajenova (2023) builds on this by applying Bourdieu's theory of capital to European think tanks, demonstrating how they accumulate social, academic, and political capital to strengthen the EU's public diplomacy and legitimacy.

Similarly, Burlinova (2022) examines the role of NGOs in international relations, emphasizing their significance in fostering trust and legitimacy in diplomatic communication. In a fragmented global information environment, she argues, NGOs and think tanks act as reliable intermediaries between governments and the public, especially during periods of geopolitical tension. This echoes Mapendere's (2006) argument that Track 1.5 diplomacy is the space where state and non-state actors converge to facilitate dialogue in contexts where official diplomacy is limited or ineffective. Through research partnerships and multilateral forums, think tanks contribute to this ecosystem by sustaining informal communication channels and reinforcing cooperative norms.

The growing body of literature on NGO diplomacy also highlights how these organizations act as agents of advocacy and the diffusion of norms. In the landmark study, 'NGO Diplomacy: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organizations in International Environmental Negotiations' (Betsill et. al., 2008), the authors demonstrate how NGOs exert influence through agenda-setting, negotiation and monitoring. Atad (2023) builds on this by examining public engagement with governmental and NGO diplomatic messaging. They conclude that NGOs often enjoy higher credibility among audiences due to their perceived independence from state interests. A similar dynamic applies to think tanks, whose legitimacy often hinges on their ability to maintain analytical integrity while engaging strategically with policymakers and the media.

In policy studies, the concepts of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1993) remain fundamental to explaining how think tanks influence policymaking. According to Haas (1992), expert networks shape policy outcomes by providing decision-makers with shared causal beliefs and principled knowledge, particularly in complex technical areas.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993), meanwhile, argue that think tanks often act as nodes within advocacy coalitions, aligning with actors who share policy goals and ideologies. This long-term coalition building explains how influence can persist even when governments change. Voß et.al. (2017) take this one step further by introducing the concept of instrument constituencies. This is a term used to describe groups of actors, including think tanks, who actively promote certain policy tools or instruments. They contend that think tanks not only influence policy content, but also the mechanisms through which policies are implemented.

However, this influential position is not without its contradictions. Stone (2007) cautions against viewing think tanks as neutral conveyors of knowledge, emphasizing that their proximity to political power often influences their research agendas and institutional behavior. Her work reveals the strategic nature of policy analysis, whereby think tanks act as both advisers and advocates within policy networks. This dual role blurs the line between independence and partisanship, as their legitimacy depends on aligning with dominant policy narratives and maintaining access to decision-makers.

The relationship between think tanks and diplomacy can be understood through the lens of public diplomacy, which is defined as the process by which states and non-state actors engage with foreign audiences to influence their perceptions and preferences (Melissen, 2005). Bajenova (2023) demonstrates that European think tanks fulfil a dual function in this context, strengthening internal EU cohesion by facilitating expert discussions and projecting the EU's values and policies externally to reinforce its image as a normative power. Similarly, Burlinova (2022) demonstrates how NGOs and think tanks act as intermediaries of soft power, particularly when addressing transnational issues such as climate change, security and human rights. Their ability to translate institutional narratives into accessible discourse is crucial to the architecture of global communication.

The literature also draws attention to the evolution of think tanks in post-communist contexts. According to Howard (2003) and Muntean et al. (2010), the development of civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, including the emergence of think tanks, was a reaction to, and a product of, democratization. Romania, in particular, experienced the gradual establishment of independent research institutions, as decades of centralized control had stifled civic participation and policy debate. In the early 1990s, organizations such as the Romanian Academic Society (SAR) played a pioneering role in establishing platforms for critical policy analysis and public discourse. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) notes, these institutions became instrumental in promoting governance reforms, advocating transparency,

and supporting legislative changes such as the Law on Free Access to Public Information.

Matei (2010) provides further context for the emergence of Romanian think tanks within the framework of public management reform. Her study emphasizes that the post-accession period required a new type of institutional actor capable of mediating between European policy frameworks and domestic governance structures. Think tanks fulfilled this role by conducting sectoral analyses, advising ministries and disseminating information about EU best practice. However, as Popovici (2018) notes, their ability to influence policy outcomes is limited by the government's reluctance to engage with them and their unstable funding models. The lack of long-term institutional partnerships often means their contributions are limited to the consultative level rather than the decision-making level.

Scholars of Romanian civil society have identified a paradox whereby there is a high level of associational activity, but a low level of political impact (Voicu et al., 2012; Howard, 2003). This phenomenon is also described in *Social Movements and Civil Society in Post-Communist Romania* (Miroiu, 2009) and suggests that, although civic organizations, including think tanks, generate valuable research and advocacy, their influence on policymaking is undermined by institutional inertia and weak accountability mechanisms. Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) argues that this reflects a broader pattern of governance reform, whereby policy innovation is driven by external compliance rather than internal demand. Consequently, the sustainability of think tanks depends on their ability to balance donor-driven agendas with national policy relevance.

The intersection of diplomacy, advocacy and expertise has brought think tanks and NGOs into the sphere of international influence. As discussed in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* (2019), the diversification of diplomatic actors in the 21st century has blurred the traditional distinction between official and unofficial diplomacy, resulting in a 'multi-actor environment' in which knowledge-based institutions, private foundations, and civil society organizations play a role in shaping global norms and political discourse. In this context, think tanks act as epistemic entrepreneurs, combining analytical credibility with strategic communication. By engaging in cross-border dialogues, they become actors in what Bjola and Kornprobst (2018) describe as 'networked diplomacy', a form of transnational interaction where legitimacy comes from expertise and reputation rather than formal authority.

This evolution has been accompanied by an increasing focus on NGO diplomacy, which is defined as the ability of non-state actors to meaningfully participate in international negotiations and agenda-setting. In 'NGO Diplomacy: The Influence of Nongovernmental Organizations in International Environmental Negotiations' (Betsill et.al., 2008), it is shown that NGOs have acquired an increasingly institutionalized role in shaping multilateral agreements. This is primarily achieved by supplying data, monitoring compliance, and acting as moral voices in global governance. These functions overlap substantially with the roles that think tanks play in diplomacy, particularly with regard to norm diffusion, mediation and policy innovation. Burlinova (2022) builds on this argument, emphasizing that NGOs and think tanks are pivotal in 'horizontal diplomacy', where influence stems from their credibility and perceived impartiality. Her study shows that, in regions such as Europe where state actors face challenges in terms of legitimacy, NGOs act as trusted intermediaries in dialogue processes, particularly with regard to human rights and the integrity of information.

Atad (2023) provides empirical evidence of this trend in her analysis of public engagement with government and NGO diplomatic communications. She found that citizens perceive NGOs as more trustworthy and effective communicators due to their independence from political agendas. This perception gives NGOs and think tanks a unique advantage in public diplomacy, enabling them to shape policy narratives and influence public opinion in ways that formal diplomatic channels cannot. As noted by Burlinova (2022), the credibility of NGOs becomes a form of soft power in itself, anchored not in coercion or wealth, but in knowledge, trust and moral authority.

In the European context, Bajenova (2023) provides one of the most thorough analyses of think tanks as agents of EU public diplomacy. Using Bourdieu's concept of capital, she argues that European think tanks accumulate and deploy different forms of capital, academic, social and political, to strengthen the EU's legitimacy at home and its reputation abroad. By producing policy analyses, organizing transnational events and maintaining partnerships with global counterparts, these organizations contribute to what Bajenova terms the EU's 'discursive soft power'. Bajenova's research provides a valuable framework for understanding how think tanks in member states such as Romania internalize and project European policy values. They act as intermediaries, translating EU norms into local contexts while also promoting national perspectives within European policy debates.

This dynamic of translation and mediation is particularly relevant in the context of Romania, where the consolidation of think tanks is intertwined with the broader

process of Europeanisation. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) and Matei (2010) emphasize, Romania's integration into the European Union required institutional reforms and the establishment of epistemic infrastructures capable of interpreting and implementing EU policy frameworks. Think tanks such as the Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) and the European Institute of Romania (IER) were established to address this need by conducting research, providing training and advising government officials. However, while these state-affiliated institutions benefit from access to decision-making circles, their autonomy is often constrained by political dependencies (Străuțiu, 2011). By contrast, independent organizations such as the Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE) and Europuls enjoy greater flexibility, engaging in civic advocacy and public communication, though they face recurrent funding instability.

Post-communist literature provides valuable insights into these institutional asymmetries. Howard (2003) and Voicu (2012), for example, argue that the legacy of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe created a dual deficit: a weak civic culture and an overly centralized policymaking process. This has resulted in a paradoxical situation where, although civil society organizations are numerous, they are politically marginal. Similarly, Miroiu (2009) observes that the persistence of hierarchical decision-making structures limits the uptake of think tank research in policy, even when their analysis is of a high quality. In Romania, these structural constraints are exacerbated by the lack of long-term funding mechanisms and the dominance of donor-driven agendas, which can distort priorities away from national policy needs (Matei, 2010; Popovici, 2018).

The difficulty of translating expertise into influence raises broader questions about the operation of think tanks within systems of governance. Stone (2007) highlights the 'myth of neutrality', observing that think tanks' credibility is frequently linked to their association with dominant ideologies or political networks. In post-communist settings, where institutions of trust are still developing, this alignment can empower think tanks while also compromising them. If they are too closely aligned with government structures, their analytical independence may erode; conversely, if they remain too distant, their access to policymakers diminishes. This delicate balance reflects the 'reform paradox' of transitional governance, as described by Mungiu-Pippidi (2010), where external models of good governance coexist with entrenched domestic practices that are resistant to change.

Theoretically, the influence of think tanks is best understood through frameworks combining epistemic and institutional perspectives. Haas's (1992) epistemic community model explains how expert networks shape policy by disseminating

shared norms and causal beliefs. However, in the case of Eastern Europe, the dynamics are often more transactional than normative. Sabatier's (1993) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is more effective in explaining how think tanks maintain their influence by developing long-term relationships with political figures, donors and media outlets. These coalitions frequently transcend the public–private divide, bringing together academic, governmental, and civil society actors around specific policy themes such as EU integration, regional security, and anti-corruption.

Voß et. al. (2017) further refines this understanding by introducing the concept of 'instrument constituencies', which highlights how think tanks influence policy by promoting specific instruments or methodologies, as well as ideas. In Romania, for example, the IER and IDR have played a significant part in advocating for evidence-based policymaking and institutional training as instruments of Europeanisation. Meanwhile, advocacy-oriented think tanks such as CRPE have championed participatory governance and policy transparency as accountability mechanisms. These examples demonstrate that the influence of think tanks operates across multiple levels, conceptual, procedural and communicative, each of which is shaped by distinct power relations and institutional dependencies.

A growing body of literature also links think tank activities with the projection of national and regional soft power. Nye (2008) defines soft power as the capacity to influence preferences through attraction rather than coercion, a concept to which think tanks contribute by crafting narratives that bolster the international credibility of states or regions. Bajenova (2023) posits that, through transnational knowledge exchange, think tanks act as 'identity entrepreneurs', presenting Europe as a realm of rationality, expertise, and democratic legitimacy. Similarly, Burlinova (2022) highlights how NGOs and research institutions promote international trust-building by sustaining dialogue and combatting disinformation. These insights resonate strongly in the Romanian context, where think tanks such as the New Strategy Center (NSC) have become key players in regional diplomacy, focusing on Black Sea security, NATO cooperation, and hybrid threats. Through conferences, joint reports and partnerships with Western institutions, these think tanks contribute to what Conley Tyler et al. (2017) refer to as 'Track 1.5 diplomacy', providing informal opportunities for state and non-state actors to exchange ideas.

This intersection of security, diplomacy and knowledge production demonstrates how think tanks have expanded beyond their traditional research remit. The NSC's involvement in defense and foreign policy discussions mirrors broader European trends, as outlined by Bjola and Kornprobst (2018), whereby policy institutes serve as 'translators of complexity' in an increasingly unpredictable geopolitical climate.

Their role in articulating coherent strategic visions highlights the importance of expertise in maintaining diplomatic credibility. Although more bureaucratic in structure, the IER and IDR contribute similarly by providing analytical inputs for Romania's participation in EU and NATO frameworks and by aligning national policies with regional priorities.

Another important theme in the literature concerns the democratizing role of think tanks. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) and Matei (2010) point out, these institutions foster a culture of professional policy-making and public accountability, particularly in emerging democracies. Howard (2003) and Miroiu (2009), for example, argue that such organizations are essential to overcoming the legacies of authoritarianism by promoting transparency and civic participation. However, both authors also caution that donor dependency can inadvertently lead to elite capture, whereby think tanks serve the interests of political or economic patrons rather than the public good. Understanding this tension between autonomy and access is crucial for grasping the evolving role of think tanks in Romania and similar contexts.

The Romanian case thus embodies broader theoretical debates about the nature of civil society during post-communist transitions. According to Miroiu (2009), in *Social Movements and Civil Society in Post-Communist Romania*, the gradual maturation of civic organizations has led to an increasingly diverse associational landscape, but institutional fragility remains. The coexistence of donor-driven advocacy groups and state-affiliated institutes creates a fragmented policy landscape. As Voicu (2012) and Popovici (2018) emphasize, influence is unevenly distributed, with a small number of organizations monopolizing access to decision-making processes. This can result in a concentration of expertise that marginalizes smaller voices and limits the pluralism of policy debate.

Despite these challenges, there are clear signs of progress. For example, Matei (2010) identifies an incremental process of institutional learning, whereby policy communities begin to adopt the practices of evidence-based governance. Think tanks now act as 'translational nodes', mediating between EU conditionality and domestic political realities. For instance, CRPE has built partnerships across the Western Balkans and Moldova, using policy research to promote democratic convergence. Europuls, which has offices in Brussels and Bucharest, has become a conduit for Romanian civic participation in European affairs, facilitating dialogue between citizens, officials, and EU institutions. These developments reflect what Bajenova (2023) terms 'multi-level diplomacy', whereby expertise crosses borders to reinforce both national and supranational legitimacy.

Ultimately, the literature highlights the importance of critically reflecting on the limitations of think tank influence. Stone (2007) and McGann (2016), for example, caution against overestimating their policy impact, emphasizing that visibility does not necessarily equate to influence. Measuring effectiveness remains a methodological challenge; media citations, policy references and public events only offer partial indicators of impact. Atad (2023) and Burlinova (2022), however, suggest that influence must also be understood in relational terms, as the ability to shape discourse rather than merely decisions. In Romania, the combination of limited institutional absorption and politicized policymaking restricts this process. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2010) observes, governance reform requires sustained political will and civic engagement, as well as analytical output.

To summarize the information presented above, the literature portrays think tanks as complex, hybrid institutions that operate at the intersection of knowledge, power and diplomacy. They simultaneously act as policy analysts, advocates, and diplomatic actors, translating expertise into influence through formal and informal mechanisms. In Romania, their evolution mirrors the broader trajectory of post-communist democratization, characterized by innovation, fragmentation and gradual institutional consolidation. Whether state-affiliated or independent, these organizations have become vital contributors to Romania's participation in European and global governance. As governance challenges become increasingly interconnected, their ability to navigate the tensions between autonomy and access, and between expertise and advocacy, will determine their long-term significance in both domestic policymaking and international diplomacy.

3. Research methodology

Research questions/Aims of the research

The research process is guided by a core question: how do Romanian think tanks contribute to the formulation of diplomatic and economic policy? The aim is to go beyond surface-level observations and examine the actual ways these institutions produce knowledge and participate in national shaping strategy. By focusing on five of the most active and visible think tanks in Romania, the study seeks to uncover how their work influences both public discourse and government action. The goal is not only to map their activities but also to assess their relevance in Romania's broader policy environment, especially in the context of this analysis, the research hopes to bring clarity to the role of expertise and independent thought in shaping policies that affect the country's position on the international stage.

Research methods

This study utilizes a critical qualitative approach, centered on the in-depth analysis of the institutional outputs produced by five key Romanian think tanks: the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, the European Institute of Romania, the New Strategy Center and EUROPULS.

The primary method is document analysis, which is a well-established tool in public policy research for evaluating institutional materials such as policy briefs, strategy papers and analytical reports (Bowen, 2009). This research was based on an empirical foundation built through a systematic process of data collection and classification. The author compiled a body of documents directly from the official websites of five selected Romanian think tanks.

For the purposes of this study, primary data were collected directly from the official websites of the selected think tanks. Data gathering was carried out during August 2025 to ensure consistency and accuracy in reflecting the most recent published materials. This approach provided a reliable foundation for the comparative analysis by drawing on official and up-to-date sources.

This dataset included policy briefs, analytical reports, position papers and strategic publications from 2015 to 2024. Each document was recorded in a detailed Excel file, which served as a centralized repository for managing the material. After the initial compilation, the documents were reviewed and sorted into seven thematic categories. This classification was guided by the frequency with which certain topics appeared and their prominence across different publications. This approach enabled a structured comparison of institutional priorities and the identification of recurring themes over time. Organizing the content in this way ensured analytical consistency and created a solid foundation for understanding patterns of output and influence within Romania's think tank landscape.

This analysis seeks to understand how each think tank positions itself within Romania's policy ecosystem and how it articulates problems, proposes solutions and engages with state institutions and public opinion.

While no interviews were conducted in this stage, semi-structured interviews with policymakers, analysts, and think tank representatives are envisioned for future research, to enrich the analysis with stakeholder perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

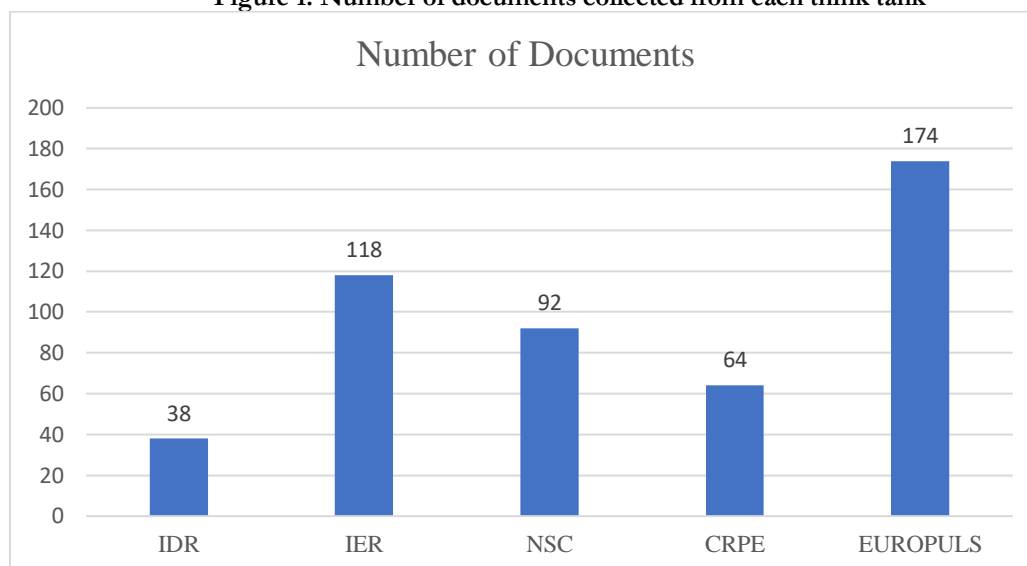
The critical, multi-source approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of how Romanian think tanks influence policymaking, not only through content, but through positioning, visibility, and alignment with institutional agendas.

4. Results and discussion

This study examined the role and influence of five key Romanian think tanks in shaping the country's diplomatic and economic policy agendas between 2015 and 2024. Specifically, the study aimed to assess the engagement of these organizations with policy processes and public discourse. To this end, the research employed a qualitative methodology based primarily on critical document analysis. Reports, policy briefs, strategic studies and public communications produced by each think tank were systematically reviewed, compared and categorized.

This research draws on a carefully curated set of primary materials collected directly from the official websites of five leading Romanian think tanks. A total of 118 documents were analyzed from the European Institute of Romania (IER), including strategic and policy studies, working papers, policy briefs, expert opinions, interviews and additional relevant publications. The Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) contributed 38 entries, including policy papers, thematic analyses, editions of the IDR newsletter and edited volumes.

The New Strategy Center (NSC) provided 92 documents, all of which were taken from its most recent body of studies and analyses, published in 2023. The Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE) provided 64 policy-oriented publications reflecting its ongoing focus on European integration, governance and civic engagement. EUROPULS presented the largest dataset, comprising 174 opinion articles, analytical commentaries, and thematic reports. Together, these sources formed the empirical basis of the study, enabling a structured, comparative analysis of the thematic priorities, institutional roles and modes of influence of each think tank within Romania's policy landscape.

Figure 1. Number of documents collected from each think tank

Source: Author's own computation

The Romanian Diplomatic Institute (RDI) is a public institution linked to the MFA which aims to enhance Romanian diplomacy through training, continuing education, research and by being part of international networks. Its activities are divided into four areas: training diplomats and people directly interested in international affairs, conducting research and offering expertise on various regions and themes. Since 2005, it has taken over the responsibilities of the former Diplomatic Academy and the Romanian Institute of International Studies "Nicolae Titulescu". Over time, it has run courses for diplomats, conferences and roundtables, covering subjects such as foreign policy, international security and global crises. It also contributes to the research process and knowledge production by publishing the collection of Romanian Diplomatic Documents, thematic volumes and analytical publications. It operates with a team of professionals and stands out for its apolitical character, becoming an important platform for modern Romanian diplomacy (IDR, 2025).

The European Institute of Romania (EIR) is a public institution under the coordination of the MFA. Its mission is to provide expertise on the European affairs to the public administration, business, civil society and social partners. The Institute focuses on four areas: strategic studies and analysis, training, translation and revision of European documents and public communication and debate. The EIR was founded in 2000 to support Romania's accession to the European Union. After the accession, the Institute shifted its focus on supporting Romania as a member state.

Since 2006, it has been funded from the state budget and its own revenues. The EIR is independent of any political and ideological influence (IER, 2025).

The New Strategy Center (NSC) is a Romanian think tank that specializes in security, defense and foreign affairs policies. It operates in three key areas: policy analysis, public debate and international partnerships. The NSC focuses particularly on the Balkans and the Black Sea region, as well as energy security, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, military modernization, defense procurement and domestic developments relevant to national security. The organization promotes the idea of a national policy consensus in the field of security, advocating for the need of coherent policy and long-term strategies that transcend ideological differences and changes of government (NSC, 2025).

The Romanian Center for European Policies (CRPE) is a leading Romanian think-tank specialized in European affairs. Since 2009, it has conducted applied research in public policy, run advocacy campaigns, organized public debates and offered training and civic engagement programs. Its areas of expertise include democracy, governance, foreign relation, agriculture, rural development, education and active citizenship. In 2012, CRPE became the first Romanian think-tank to establish a branch in the Republic of Moldova. The organization supports the development of evidence-based public policies focused on the real interests of citizens. Through its projects, CRPE contributes to the decision-making process at the national and European level, bringing concrete data and relevant stories from communities to the forefront (CRPE, 2025).

EUROPULS-European Expertise Center is a non-governmental organization founded in 2010 in Brussels by Romanian experts in European affairs. Its activity is dedicated to promoting European integration in Romania and strengthening a European public space through research, publishing articles and organizing public events. EUROPULS is the initiator of the annual EUROSAT forum, the most important European debate event in Romania. The organization is politically independent

The organization is politically independent and aims to explain European processes in an accessible way, encourage dialogue on European issues and support Romania's assumption of a mature role within the European Union (EUROPULS, 2025).

Thematic priorities and policy focus

The five think-tanks examined in this study demonstrate a broad, yet distinct range of thematic specializations that reflect both Romania's national priorities and its regional and international engagements. The European Institute of Romania (EIR)

focuses primarily on European integration, public administration reform, the multiannual financial framework, and Romania's participation in the institutional development of the European Union. The Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR) addresses traditional foreign policy themes such as diplomatic history, regional security, and multilateralism, while also publishing on contemporary issues like cybersecurity, the geopolitics of energy, and the impact of global crises.

The New Strategy Center (NSC) emphasizes defense and security strategy, with a strong concentration on the Black Sea region, hybrid threats, and strategic partnerships, especially with NATO and the United States. In addition, it regularly analyzes developments in the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean, and broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The Romanian Center for European Policies (CRPE) covers a diverse array of policy areas including good governance, rural development, agriculture, youth civic engagement, social inclusion, and justice reform, while also maintaining a strong focus on Moldova and the Eastern Partnership. EUROPULS, on the other hand, concentrates on EU institutional affairs, democratic resilience, climate policy, and disinformation, and plays an active role in communicating European developments to Romanian citizens. Across all institutions, overlapping interest areas such as EU enlargement, green transition, and the resilience of democratic institutions demonstrate a shared concern with Romania's strategic positioning in an evolving European and global order.

The analysis involved categorizing the think tank publications by recurring topics and compiling the results into a structured table to highlight dominant thematic trends across institutions.

Tools and mechanisms of influence

When analyzing the influence of Romanian think-tanks, it is important to distinguish between the tools they use and the mechanisms through which their tools produce an impact. These tools refer to the tangible output and activities that enable the dissemination of knowledge and public engagement. These include policy briefs, analytical reports, training sessions, workshops, conferences and public debates, with communicate expertise. Mechanisms, on the other hand, describe the broader processes that convert these outputs into influence. These mechanisms operate through agenda-setting, participation in consultative bodies, expert networks, partnerships with media institutions and media visibility. While tools are instruments of communication, mechanisms are the relational and institutional pathways that enable think-tanks to shape narratives, foster policy dialogue and establish their expertise in domestic and international arenas.

Table 2. Thematic categorization of the documents produced by each think tank

Romanian Diplomatic Institute	European Institute of Romania	New Strategy Center	Romanian Centre for European Policy	EUROPULS
International Security and Geopolitics	European Integration and Enlargement	Black Sea & Regional Security	European Integration, Institutions, and EU Policy	European Union Policy and Governance
Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Analysis	Security and Geopolitics	Cybersecurity & Information Warfare	Disinformation, Propaganda, and Strategic Communication	Security and Defense
Human Rights and Normative Frameworks	Digitalization and Technology	Energy Security	Climate Change and Sustainability	Democracy, Human Rights, and Active Citizenship
China and Authoritarianism	Climate Change and Sustainable Development	Elections & Political Transitions	Civic Participation and Youth Engagement	Digital Transition and Innovation
Regional Conflicts and Maritime Security	Economic Policy and Recovery	China & Geopolitical Influence	Justice, Governance, and Anti-Corruption	Climate, Environment, and Energy
Strategic Technology and Cybersecurity	Governance, Democracy, and Rule of Law	Emerging Technologies in Warfare	Foreign Affairs, Regional Stability, and Strategic Partnerships	Romania in the EU
Historical and Thematic Studies	Transatlantic and Global Relations	Balkans & Southeast Europe	Agriculture and Rural Development	Foreign Policy and Global Affairs

Source: Author's own compilation based on documents, reports, and institutional information retrieved from the official websites of the analyzed think tanks (2015-2024)

The Romanian think tanks examined in this study employ a range of tools and mechanisms to exert influence on policy debates and decision-making processes. Common instruments include policy briefs, strategic reports, expert analyses, public roundtables, and conferences designed to facilitate dialogue between researchers, officials, and civil society actors. While institutions such as the European Institute of Romania and the Romanian Diplomatic Institute tend to adopt a more formal and technical style, with outputs geared toward public institutions and diplomatic training, others like CRPE and EUROPULS blend academic research with accessible communication strategies, making their work more media-friendly and oriented toward public advocacy. The New Strategy Center combines in-depth

strategic studies with high-level security forums and international cooperation initiatives, reflecting its emphasis on defense expertise and geopolitical foresight.

Across all five organizations, publications serve as primary vehicles for framing issues, offering policy recommendations, and shaping institutional priorities. Training programs and expert panels contribute to capacity building, particularly within the public sector and youth engagement initiatives. Events such as the EUROSFAT forum or NSC's regional security conferences provide platforms for agenda-setting and public diplomacy, helping think tanks position themselves as relevant actors in Romania's policy ecosystem. These mechanisms not only disseminate knowledge but also build credibility, visibility, and access to decision-makers, thereby reinforcing the strategic role think tanks play in influencing both domestic governance and Romania's external orientation.

Patterns of influence and impact

Regarding the patterns of influence, the Romanian think tanks demonstrate a nuanced mix of policy engagement, strategic relevance and operational limitations. Notable instances of influence include the European Institute of Romania's strategic studies that informed policy decisions regarding Romania's position within the European Union. The Romanian Diplomatic Institute has contributed consistently to the professional development of diplomats and has shaped institutional security.

The New Strategy Center has played a visible role in national and NATO-related defense dialogues, particularly through its advocacy on Black Sea security, cyber threats, and hybrid warfare. Its analyses have been referenced in discussions involving Romania's defense procurement and strategic partnerships. Similarly, the Romanian Center for European Policies has influenced debates on justice reform and social inclusion, particularly through its policy work on rural development and the Republic of Moldova's European path. EUROPULS has contributed to framing public discourse on EU reforms, digital governance, and climate policy, primarily through civic engagement initiatives and media-friendly research outputs.

It is difficult to assess the degree of influence exerted by think-tanks, as much of their impact occurs through informal and indirect channels. In this study, influence is not understood in terms of direct causality, but rather as an interpretive measure derived from visibility indicators, such as participation in policy consultations, participation in policy consultations, references in government reports and engagement in public discourse. Think-tank's ability to influence debates and shape policy agendas is therefore inferred through their sustained presence in expert

forums, partnerships with international organizations and frequent citations in the media. While these indicators provide useful insights, they cannot fully capture the subtler dynamics of policy influence, such as building trust with decision-makers or diffusing ideas through elite networks. Therefore, the findings presented should be interpreted as evidence of influence patterns rather than as definitive measures of policy impact.

Challenges

Romanian think tanks operate within a dynamic yet constrained policy environment, which is shaped by a series of structural and strategic tensions that determine their ability to exert influence and maintain credibility over time. A central challenge they face is striking the right balance between maintaining access to decision-making processes and preserving intellectual autonomy. Those closely affiliated with public bodies, such as the European Institute of Romania and the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, benefit from their formal proximity to government actors. This connection enables direct input into policy formulation and greater visibility in strategic forums.

However, such proximity can also limit their ability to critically assess government action or engage with politically sensitive issues. By contrast, independent think tanks such as EUROPULS and the Romanian Centre for European Policies have greater freedom to adopt critical perspectives and actively participate in advocacy and public discourse. However, they often have limited access to official policymaking venues and rely on external, project-based funding, which introduces financial unpredictability and can distract them from their long-term goals.

The issue of intellectual autonomy remains one of the most significant challenges for Romanian think-tanks, especially those in close proximity to government institutions. A key indicator of autonomy is the proportion of public versus private funding in an organization's annual budget. While publicly funded institutions such as the Romanian Diplomatic Institute and the European Institute of Romania benefit from greater institutional stability and policy access, they face limitations in maintaining critical distance. Conversely, independent organizations such as EUROPULS and CRPE primarily rely on external grants and project-based funding. While this provides independence, it also creates financial fragility and dependence on donor priorities. This duality reflects a broader tension between institutional sustainability and intellectual freedom. In the Romanian context, enhancing transparency in funding structures and diversifying revenue sources could bolster independence and credibility, fostering a healthier balance between research integrity and policy relevance.

Another layer of complexity emerges in the attempt to reconcile scholarly objectivity with the pursuit of advocacy. While these organizations aim to inform and improve policy through evidence-based research, their visible presence in the media, civil society and reform initiatives may lead to perceptions of partiality. This is particularly significant in a post-communist context, where civil society is still developing and public confidence in non-state actors is consolidating.

Integration within broader diplomatic frameworks

Romanian think tanks have become increasingly prominent in the wider diplomatic landscape, particularly through their engagement in informal diplomacy and their role in shaping perceptions that align with Euro-Atlantic values. These organizations operate in the space between governmental institutions and civil society, often serving as facilitators of dialogue, producers of strategic knowledge and amplifiers of Romania's international positioning. A prime example of this is the New Strategy Center, which has become a key platform for regional security cooperation. By organizing conferences that bring together policymakers, military professionals and academics, the center creates informal environments for policy dialogue reflecting the principles of Track One and a Half diplomacy. These gatherings facilitate structured yet flexible exchanges that complement traditional diplomatic processes.

At the same time, Romanian think tanks reinforce the country's alignment with key international frameworks, such as the European Union and NATO. Institutions such as the European Institute of Romania and the Romanian Diplomatic Institute provide the analytical expertise that supports Romania's participation in European governance structures and multilateral coordination. Separately, organizations such as the Romanian Centre for European Policies and EUROPULS utilizes policy studies, civic engagement campaigns and public advocacy to defend democratic standards and European integration. They address issues such as disinformation, judicial reform and sustainable development. In doing so, they echo and reinforce core transatlantic principles such as institutional accountability, cooperation in security policy, and commitment to democratic resilience.

Through these combined efforts, think tanks in Romania influence not only domestic policy, but also extend the country's soft power abroad. They do this by translating technical expertise into accessible narratives and fostering Romania's

presence in international debates, they enhance its image as a reliable and proactive contributor to the Euro-Atlantic community.

Synthesis of key insights

A comparative analysis of Romanian think tanks reveals a diverse and evolving landscape characterized by differences in institutional affiliation, thematic focus and access to policy-making arenas. Organizations such as the European Institute of Romania and the Romanian Diplomatic Institute are structurally positioned within the state apparatus, facilitating direct engagement with government strategies, though this can limit their ability to critique or take an independent position. In contrast, think tanks such as the Romanian Centre for European Policies and EUROPULS operate independently. They are more agile in engaging with civic issues and public advocacy, though they frequently encounter constraints related to funding stability and limited proximity to state actors. The New Strategy Center occupies a distinctive position by blending a high degree of policy expertise with a focus on regional security and defense. Its ability to work across national and international platforms enhances its reach in technical and strategic circles.

This diversity reflects a pluralistic ecosystem of policy knowledge in Romania, where think tanks play varied yet interconnected roles. Their influence is shaped not only by formal access, but also by their credibility, their capacity for strategic framing and their ability to connect with broader audiences. The tools they use, ranging from evidence-based reports and stakeholder consultations to public dialogue and international partnerships, demonstrate the variety of ways in which they engage with public policy.

A content synthesis of the documents analyzed from the dive selected think-tanks reveal recurring thematic clusters reflecting Romania's regional priorities, as well as the Euro-Atlantic ones. Of the 486 documents collected an overall of 40% of the documents focused on the topic of European integration and governance reform, while 25% concentrated on security and defense. Around 20% addressed diplomacy, economic policy and institutional modernization and the remaining 15% covered themes such as sustainability, social inclusion and digital transformation. The distribution indicated that Romanian think-tanks tend to align their research agendas with national strategic objectives and transatlantic commitments. Furthermore, the analysis suggests a gradual diversification of focus, with newer publications increasingly emphasizing green transition, digital governance and

disinformation resilience, thereby reflecting the evolving nature of Romania's policy challenges within a globalized context.

As contributors to the formulation of more informed and transparent decisions, Romanian think tanks bring comparative insight and thematic depth to the policy process. Their role extends into diplomacy, where they strengthen Romania's alignment with Euro-Atlantic frameworks and encourage informal diplomatic exchanges. They also promote democracy by raising civic awareness, countering disinformation and demanding institutional accountability.

5. Conclusions

This research has examined how Romanian think-tanks contribute to the development of the Romanian diplomatic and economic policy frameworks during the period 2015-2024. Focusing on five key organizations the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, the European Institute of Romania, the New Strategy Center and EUROPULS, the study has revealed both the shared practices and unique characteristic that define each institution's role. These think tanks have demonstrated their capacity to offer policy expertise, engage decision-makers and shape public opinion through a variety of outputs and strategic actions. Collectively, they represent a growing community of policy actors that help bridge the gap between research and governance, particularly in a national context still consolidating its democratic and institutional maturity.

The findings point out to a layered landscape in which the influence of these organizations is shaped by their proximity to government, their thematic priorities and the communication strategies they employ. While their contributions remain significant, the analysis also shows that access to decision-making does not always translate into measurable policy change.

Moreover, constraints such as limited funding, political sensitiveness and dependence to institutional networks continue to challenge their long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, the role of think tanks in Romania's policy sphere is becoming increasingly visible, both as sources of expertise and as instruments of soft power. This conclusion highlights the importance of further reinforcing their independence and capacity in order to ensure that they remain relevant actors in the formulation of policies that respond to both domestic priorities and international responsibilities.

Recommendations

This study leads to several key recommendations aimed at enhancing the role and effectiveness of Romanian think tanks in the policymaking process. First, it is important for these institutions to adopt a more transparent approach regarding how they are funded, who they collaborate with, and how their research is conducted. Such openness can strengthen their legitimacy and build trust among both decision-makers and the general public. Secondly, think tanks should prioritize clear and accessible communication, ensuring their findings reach not only policymakers but also civil society and media outlets. This could involve simplifying technical language, using visual tools to present data, and engaging more actively in public dialogue.

Another important step would be to encourage more collaboration between think tanks at the national level as well as with international partners. By sharing knowledge and working together on joint projects, they can amplify their influence and broaden their reach. It is also recommended that government institutions create more formal opportunities to include think tank expertise in policy development, such as through advisory boards, working groups, or consultation forums. Finally, long-term support from universities, civic organizations, and international donors can help think tanks remain independent and focused on producing high-quality research that supports democratic governance and strategic decision-making.

Acknowledging limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a select group of five Romanian think tanks, which, although prominent and diverse in scope, do not represent the full spectrum of policy research institutions active in the country, by concentrating on the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, the European Institute of Romania, the New Strategy Center and EUROPULS, the analysis offers depth but may overlook the contributions of smaller, regional or emerging think tanks.

Additionally, the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents such as reports, policy briefs and media coverage, which may not fully capture the influence or the engagement with the policymakers. The absence of interviews or insider perspectives also limits the ability to properly assess internal dynamics, strategic intention and the reception of their work within the government circles. As a result, while the findings offer meaningful insights of patterns of influence, they cannot provide a comprehensive or a definitive picture of the entire Romanian think tank landscape.

Despite their growing visibility, Romanian, think-tanks are hampered by ongoing structural and operational limitations that restrict their ability to influence public policy in the long term. Their influence is often diluted by short-term project cycles, agendas driven by donors and limited receptivity to policy among government institutions. Furthermore, the absence of a stable framework for evidence-based policymaking hinders the implementation of their research findings and opinions. Political polarization and low public trust in non-state actors further complicate their efforts to maintain legitimacy and continuity. Additionally, limited investment in institutional development, staff retention and longitudinal data collection hinders the professionalization of policy research. These constraints highlight the impending need for institutional reform and capacity-building measures to enhance long-term collaboration between civil society, academia and the state. Ultimately, Romanian think-tanks' lies not only in their analytical output, but also in their ability to establish credibility, transparency and independence.

Future research directions

Future research could expand the aim of this study by including more Romanian think-tanks, particularly those operating at a regional level or within specific policy niches. Interviews with policymakers, researchers and stakeholders from these institutions could provide deeper insight into the informal dynamics and perceived credibility of these institutions.

Comparative studies with think tanks in other post-communist countries could also help identify regional patterns, shared challenges and best practices in influencing public policy. Additionally, future work might explore the digital strategies of think tanks, examining how online communication, data visualization and social media shape their public outreach and policy impact. By diversifying sources and methodologies, future research could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how knowledge-based institutions contribute to democratic governance and diplomatic engagement.

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