Think Tanks in Non-Democracies

A case study of Azerbaijan

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List of Abbreviation

ALDA – European Association for Local Democracy

BINA – Alliance for Municipalities Development

CoE – Council of Europe

CSO – Civil society organisation

ENP – European Neighbourhood Policy

IBG – International Budget Group

IMF – International Monetary Fund

MSF – Multiple Streams Framework

NBG – National Budget Group

NGO – non-government organisation

OBP – Open Budget Partnership

OSI – Open Society Institute

SOFAZ – State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan Republic

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

WB – World Bank

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Abstract

This thesis argues that think tanks nurture public policy debate, which enhances the overall legitimacy of civil society in non-democratic settings. A focus on think tanks also emphasises the importance of civil society as a non-confrontational forum rather than an antagonist of a non-democratic regime.

Empirically, the thesis draws on the work of think-tanks in the areas of local self-government and budget transparency in Azerbaijan between 2003 and 2014. The case studies are analysed through a matrix of think-tank strategies and activities, which is a development of Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework.

The findings show that, although think tanks had a very limited impact on immediate public policy change, the process they led through interaction and policy education activities in the agenda-setting process, nurtured an alternative public policy debate. These positive effects of the non-confrontational activities of the civil society in Azerbaijan have important implications for democracy promotion policy and the concept of civil society, in general.

INTRODUCTION

As I entered a café in Baku in the summer of 2016, I was met by Mr Farda Asadov, once a Director of Open Society Institute (OSI) Assistance Foundation-Azerbaijan. After the office was shut down in 2015 he was mainly engaged in academic work as an historian of the Medieval Arabic world. He was on the top of my list of interviewees for my thesis. He said the following about his office's work in the 2000s:

> …For couple of years, OSI funded a policy papers writing project. This field was always under-financed. We did not offer institutional grants for the think tanks, unfortunately. Therefore, it stimulated individual work, rather than collective intellectual process. In addition, pressure for policy impact from the headquarters was disturbing. They were pushing for a more assertive strategy and for policy results, which was impossible given the limited leverage of civil society upon the state. I could not convince them that the issue of the preservation of a culture of dialogue and an intellectual environment was important in Azerbaijan given the increasing government aggressiveness towards civil society…

The theme of this thesis was inspired by my ten-year experience in international development in Azerbaijan where I had a chance to observe and analyse missed opportunities for democracy promotion work in an environment of increasing repression and the shrinking space for civil society. However, in spite of the unfavourable context, a small but vibrant civil society, represented by committed professionals continued working, in both confrontational and non-confrontational modes, up until 2014. However, their stories were left untold, partly because of the rigid assessments and unrealistic targets of the international democracy promotion community. The purpose of thesis is to inform the theory of civil society and the practice of democracy promotion by highlighting the untold story of one of the types of actors in the civil society of Azerbaijan: think tanks, which were engaged in non-confrontational policy-debate-nurturing activities for many years. The significance of a think tank as a civil society actor must be associated with the specific activities it undertakes.

Driven by the criticism of the dominant approach to democratization which for many years tended to emphasize the more confrontational functions and actors of

civil society, while neglecting other, less confrontational actors and functions, I argue that think tanks can help nurture policy debate, thereby, boosting the legitimacy of civil society in non-democracies. They can do so, even though think tanks may have only insignificant immediate impact on policy. While most of the research on think tanks is focused on measuring their influence on policy change in democracies, this thesis is not about the direct power of think tanks in Azerbaijan. Instead, it seeks to draw attention to the importance of the process of policy debate and its long-term implications for social and political change. In this regard, looking at the activities of various actors contributes to a better understanding of the scope of civil society in non-democracies. The case-study of Azerbaijan is a vivid example of a country where the limitations of the mainstream theory and practice of democracy promotion was apparent. The empirical work of the thesis is focused at the concrete activities of think tanks in two areas of "good governance" during the period 2003-2014: local self-governance and budget transparency. In the realm of local self-governance, think tanks produced a series of policy papers and assessment reports and undertook capacity-building and advocacy activities to help the government to meet Council-of-Europe standards. In the budget transparency domain, massive educational, policy and monitoring efforts were undertaken in order to design and implement the Open Budget Index surveys and activities. Through a more elaborate description of think tank activities in Azerbaijan I will: (i) explore the activities of think tanks in the multiple streams framework of the agenda-setting process; and (ii) analyse what implications these activities may ultimately have for civil society functions in non-democratic context. In doing so, I take inspiration from the policy network approach, which focuses on process rather than outcome. I will show that Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), though designed for the democratic context, can be also used to describe the agenda-setting process in non-democracies too. Further, I propose an enhanced analytical matrix, which makes the framework more suitable for the analysis of the activities of the actors.

Below, I will briefly clarify the motivation, which I will elaborate in more detail in the first chapters of the thesis. From the 1990s until circa 2014, the international

democracy promotion community used transitology as its leading paradigm in the post-communist area. This paradigm tended to assume a linear, mechanistic understanding of socio-political change from an authoritarian regime to democracy –through the path of liberalization, transition, and consolidation (Carothers, 2002: 5–21). Importantly, this understanding of the regime transformation favoured more confrontational civil society functions (such as human rights, media-rights, election monitoring, monitoring of public spending, etc.) and actors which could drive democratisation, while dismissing the role of non-confrontational activities and actors (think tanks, for example).

Years after the collapse of Soviet Union, it became clear that civil society was hardly in a position to seriously challenge the government and fulfil the high expectations placed on it. In countries like Azerbaijan, civil society has been always subject to rigid assessments by academia and practitioners along the "weak-strong" continuum. Unrealistic goal setting and indicators ignored the power context in the country and among emerging actors. Meanwhile, the inability to accomplish the expected political change, not only undermined legitimacy of civil society, but also distorted democracy promotion approaches. Eventually, high expectations led to overall disappointment with the accomplishments of civil society in the post-communist area among academia, practitioners and the broader public. Together with a number of other international political factors, this contributed to the global decline in the prestige of democracy, in general, and civil society, in particular.

Contrary to this approach, this thesis suggests supplementing the impact-oriented approach of democracy promotion with a process-oriented approach for the non-democracies. This will open alternative creative avenues for democracy promotion workers. One of such avenue is support to the local think tanks which were long under recognised. One of the reasons the international democracy promotion underestimated think tanks as an actor in civil society might be the Western assumption that think tanks matter only if they are in position to exercise immediate influence on policy change. Indeed, most of the literature on think tanks is focused on measuring their influence on the policy change. This impact-driven

assessment left no room for think tanks operating in non-democracies where they aim mainly at process-oriented activities, in the hope of incremental change at some time in the future. Meanwhile, the importance of immediate outcomes does not mean that longer-term processes, such as agenda-setting should be neglected. In this regard, Azerbaijan represents an illustrative case study where, in spite of the shrinking public space (Ismayil and Remezaite, 2016), a small but vibrant civil society has existed since the 1990s and executed a wide range of activities in human rights, education, capacity building, and service provision. The mainstream regime-change approach tended to overlook the nuances of the social processes in Azerbaijan and ignored some important elements of civil society development. The democracy promotion community's focus on mainly confrontational functions of civil society constituted an incomplete image of Azerbaijani civil society. There were vocal, active human rights defence, media and election monitoring related CSOs, but so were civil society actors, which performed less confrontational activities and were unfairly neglected.

The goal of the thesis suggests a number of theoretical, empirical and practical tasks. The theoretical task will be implemented by integrating think tanks into the concept of civil society to present it as a fluctuating forum with various actors with different functions. The empirical task of the research will be accomplished through the exploration, description and interpretation of the written documents and oral testimonies. The practical goal is expected to be achieved through dissemination of the findings of the research and informing policy of the international democracy-promotion strategizing.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter One states the problem and explains the motivation of the researcher by criticizing the leading theoretical approach to social change in international democracy promotion. Through discussing democracy promotion challenges and various perspectives on civil society, the chapter presents its definition of civil society, which informs the argument of the thesis. Chapter Two reviews think tank studies and chooses the policy network approach as the analytical framework for the thesis, which as it is argued, can be an effective tool for exploring the activities of the think tanks, irrespective of the

political regime, especially if a researcher goes beyond the goal of assessing influence, and instead, focuses at the process of the work of the actors. Chapter Three presents the epistemological and methodological perspective of the thesis. The very goal of the research is to highlight marginalized voices and allow them to be seen as meaningful actors in social processes. Chapter Four provides an analytical bridge to the empirical findings by a brief discussion of the role of the epistemic community in Soviet Union, on the one hand, and an operational context of the think tanks in Azerbaijan, on the other. Chapter Five examines policy issues in focus, namely local self-governance and budget transparency in which think tanks were engaged consistently from 2003 through 2014. The chapter presents them as a part of "good governance" theme advocated by the international development community in the 2000s and examines the policy issues across the MSF. Chapter Six applies the proposed activities matrix and analyses the categories of the identified strategies and activities that local think tanks deployed during the attempts to influence the agenda-setting process across the MSF. Chapter Seven discusses the implications of the findings with regard to how the function of the think tanks may contribute to enhancing the legitimacy of civil society and how it can embrace the new resilience paradigm of the development work.

Chapter One. The Function of Civil Society in Non-democracies: From Regime Change to the Policy Process

Introduction

This chapter is driven by a critique of the effect of the transitology paradigm on democracy promotion work which prevented it from exploring alternative process-oriented avenues for civil-society support in the non-democracies of the Post-Soviet area.

From the 1990s until recently, the transitology school guided democracy promotion work in the post-communist area by emphasizing the confrontational function of civil society and confrontational actors, while neglecting other functions and actors in civil society. I argue that this approach delegitimized and disempowered civil society in the non-democracies because the failure of civil society to meet the ambitious targets it set. Civil society was not in a position to fulfil this function due to various reasons: weak institutions of the emerging states, limited resources, and the repressive nature of the governments. Eventually, scholars started expressing disappointment with the accomplishments of civil society and its changing nature (Green & Leff,1997: 63-87; Geremek, 1992: 3–12). However, this was connected to assigning civil society an inherently confrontational role, which it found difficult to fulfil due to the asymmetrical power context. While in democratic countries, civil society can play a significant role through broadening participation among various societal groups, in non-democracies, the range of roles and actions available for civil society is limited. Along with many other factors, this disillusionment with civil society led to the decline of democracy promotion work and a shift towards "easy" countries, at the expense of more "difficult" cases (EU Security Strategy, 2016).

By discussing the importance of different conceptions of civil society as having implications for transitology, which, in turn, informed democracy promotion in the post-Soviet area, the chapter proposes a concept of civil society which will underpin the argument of the thesis. It argues that including non-confrontational activities and actors would ameliorate some of the problems of transitology and point towards some new policies for democracy promotion: especially in the

context of the new, "resilience" paradigm which has recently become ascendant in the democracy assistance industry.

1.1. Civil society as an engine of democratization

This thesis argues that engaging civil society in the policy agenda-setting process may offer an alternative avenue for democracy promotion. In doing so, democracy promotion can engage with the long ignored, and less confrontational segment of civil society. An emphasis on the non-confrontational functions of civil society can complement the conventional oppositional functions of civil society. Guided by this argument, in this section I will review the normative and non-normative notion of civil society and propose a conception of civil society that will be useful for the purpose of this thesis.

The notion of civil society played a key role in democratization studies, as it re-emerged in the works of dissidents and in Western academia during Perestroika at the end of the 1980s in the USSR and other communist countries. Before that, for centuries, civil society concept had been one of the most contested in the theory of the modern Western state from Aristotle, through Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Tocqueville to Gellner (Ehrenberg, 1999). The liberal approach to civil society is, in a nutshell, based on the freedoms and rights of individuals. It is presented as a space between the state and the individual. The important point here is that the state and civil society are in opposition to each other. Fundamentally, the role of civil society is to watch the state to prevent despotism (Fine,1997: 7-28). By analysing civil society of nineteenth century America from the perspective of individualism, Tocqueville emphasised the importance of associational life as a setting to exchange ideas and fulfil interests. Civil society for him was meaningful in the very relationship among people, but not so much as a forum for producing knowledge (Tocqueville, 2000). This aspect is particularly relevant to what this thesis argues: namely, the importance of networks and relationships resulting from the activities of local think tanks. Later, Gramcsi emphasized the nature of civil society as an agent of change by bringing into focus individuals who are reflective of their situation. In other words, he suggested that civil society was a seedbed where critical intellectuals could develop (Fonseca, 2016). This is also relevant to

the argument of the thesis in terms of the role local think tanks play for civil society by generating experts and expertise on certain policy issues, which can be translated into an agency of change (a group of reformers, policy advisors, for example) once there is a window of opportunity. In the works of contemporary scholars, an autonomous civil society was presented as founding "the public sphere" (Habermas, 1992: 452-7). Habermas suggested a theory of communicative action where participants in civil society take part in a cooperative search for truth (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas, the strength of an argument is the only factor that influences the course of a discussion. "New social movements" should be seen as agents of communicative rationality which bring change to the public sphere. In this, he links the ability of civil society organisations to bring about change with their ability to generate rational knowledge (Flyvberg, 2001; Habermas, 1984). Again, this neutral notion of civil society as a public realm where people equally participate in the debate, with joint activities "in search of truth" makes Habermas very relevant to the argument of the thesis in terms of supporting the usefulness of a neutral, not necessarily confrontational civil society notion, especially when we have to deal with the non-democratic context. Foucault, on the contrary, refrains from equating knowledge and power. While knowledge can shift power, it does not necessary make a person or an organisation influential. It is the understanding of how power works that is essential for action and influence and civil society is specially positioned to build this understanding (Foucault, 2003). This function of civil society emphasized by Foucault is potentially significant for the implications of the thesis, in terms of how local think tanks are able to empower civil society as the actor capable of framing discourse, and hereby legitimizing or delegitimizing government policy.

As we can see from the brief review on the notions of civil society, in Western tradition, it is used to contain less confrontational features and functions, focusing more on associational life, social capital nurturing, knowledge creation and relationship generation. In other words, traditionally, the civil society/public space notion was more value neutral, as a connecting, though autonomous, realm between a citizen and a state. However, starting from the 1980s, as a result of the

merging of civil society theory and the theory of democracy, a subordination of politics to civil society took place (Gideon Baker, 2003) and the concept of civil society and its activities embodied a notion of political opposition. In other words, civil society was not any more a value in itself: its main value was assessed against how effective it was in contributing to democratisation. As Gideon Baker (2003) argues, the idea of civil society re-emerged in 1980s as a way of articulating a form of political action. This new approach to civil society served two purposes. First, it was an attempt to suggest an alternative political philosophy based on self-organisation as opposed to statist authoritarianism. Second, it aimed at bringing excluded forces into politics. At the same time, he argues, a theory of civil society as a value-free, democratic end in itself can be seen as a critique of statist features of liberal democratic politics itself. The death of civil society as a value-free space was an unintentional result of the liberal cultivating of the idea of civil society as an instrument of democratisation rather than as a democratic end in itself (Baker, 2003: 90). Baker's conclusion with regard to the evolution of the idea of civil society very much overlaps with the critical line of the thesis with regard to conceptualizing a civil society as a driving force in the democratization project of the 1990s, which drew on the notion of a civil society where both confrontational and non-confrontational actors would find their place.

In the 1990s, Cohen, Arato and others described civil society as self-reflexive, creating a 'public sphere', the boundaries of which it must protect from the interventions of economic power and the state (Cohen & Arato, 1994). This definition assumes that civil society is in a position to protect itself or anyone from the power of the state. However, the experience of the post-Soviet suggests that the capacity of civil society to challenge and protect depends very much on the power relationship between the government and civil society. Belief in the emancipatory role of civil society has characterized much of the scholarship on that subject and was based on the widespread acceptance that civil society activism is not merely conducive to democratization (Putnam, 2000) but that it is a driver, and a mechanism, of the democratic process itself. As a result of the merging of civil society theory and democratic theory, the concept of civil society

and its activities embodied the notion of political opposition. The very perception of civil society as oppositional and confrontational provided theoretical ground for the post-communist opposition movements, which used the normative idea of civil society to frame their struggle as the creation of a protected societal sphere separate from the party-state. Eventually, that definition of civil society, as taken on board by both the democracy promotion community and political science, suggested a zero-sum logic, drove very high expectations for what civil society could do for democratization in non-democracies, and made the former partially accountable for the democratization project in general. Ten years after the collapse of the communist bloc, the social dynamic and nature of societies in these countries changed. While some countries have chosen the path of consolidation of democratic state-building motivated by the perspective of EU accession, other states, after a short period of democratic opening-up, regressed to the consolidation of the more non-democratic regimes. Civil societies in the Eastern European countries became less active as they gained access to the EU, while the civil societies in the post-Soviet realm were getting weaker and weaker in terms of the capacity to influence any political change, as the governments were increasingly consolidating their power.

All these processes inspired a wave of academic disappointments with the accomplishments of civil societies on the one hand (Green & Leff,1997; Geremek, 1992) and the rise of non-normative concepts of civil society on the other (Durac and Cavatorta, 2015). Below, I introduce types of civil society suggested by Cavatorta and Durac in their work on civil society in the Middle East, which are meaningful for the discussion of the cases beyond that geographical region. So, the first approach suggested by Cavatorta and Durac (2015) is a civil society as a "neutral" element. This builds on the theoretical work of Encarnacion (2006), who argues that civil society should not necessarily possess a normative liberal democratic nature. The approach focuses primarily on activism in civil society *per se*, its values, and the demands that it makes on the authorities. It claims that civil society can be both strong and 'uncivil' at the same time (Kopecky and Mudde, eds., 2003). In this approach, activism is a mere indication that people are involved

in issue-based activities aimed at changing the traditional decision-making process. So, Encarnacion's approach revives the definition of civil society as merely a space between the state and the individual, in which voluntary groups are formed to pursue specific public interests. Apparently, this concept of civil society allows the scholar to focus on the analysis of the actors, their activities, goals and strategies, rather than more narrowly assessing civil society's contribution to democratisation.

The second approach emphasized by Cavatorta and Durac (2015) sees civil society as an authoritarian regime tool, implying that civil society is a creature of the regime used for its own purposes, such as: diverting attention from political authoritarianism; meeting its commitments to international institutions; gaining access to financial resources; or creating a feedback mechanism with society to adjust government policies (Heydemann, 2007: 1–37). The approach argues that, through the formation of a more or less enabling environment for the operation of civil society, the state maintains control over that society through close monitoring and filtering, constraining the activities of independent CSOs, creating government-organized non-governmental organizations, or simply through exercising selective repression. In its turn, civil society accepts the rules of the game and chooses to avoid upsetting the government. The ultimate result of this situation is that political change does not occur: there is no motivation for the government to reduce its control over society, and civil society itself is incapable of challenging its own 'creators' (Heydemann, 2007: 1–37). Another author, Jamal Amaney (2007), describes civil society as mirroring its political context, in which associations operating under semi-authoritarian conditions not only cannot contribute to democratisation, but the proliferation of civic associations (driven by clientelism) might actually make things worse.

These pessimistic views of civil society in a restrictive context overlook the constructive role that civil society can play, even in a politically unfavourable environment. Despite all the negative characteristics that civil society may acquire in a politically restrictive context, the very existence of the structures of civil society provides an organizational infrastructure, and a shelter for those who sincerely

believe in democracy, helping them not only in working for it, speaking for it, and travelling, but also to make their living and build networks domestically and abroad. The reality is that there may be groups of perhaps less effective but independent organizations, activists and movements who attempt to organize grassroots activities, perhaps not extremely confrontational but quite challenging for the regimes, and this deserves attention and study even if it has not brought political change. So, civil society as a regime tool approach overstates the extent to which civil society organizations are no more than artificial creations of a regime, and tells only a part of the story since non-confrontational civil society actors can maintain real independence without being co-opted or provoking repression.

Another approach, which Cavatorta and Durac (2014) define as "activated or activist citizenship" tries to incorporate the possibility of change by broadening the definition of civil society itself. This conceptualization of civil society captures the whole complexity of who "expresses" themselves in a society in the context of authoritarian regimes and how they do so (Fumagalli, 2012). In fact, advances in technology have inspired new modes of engagement, ranging from the writings of nonconformist bloggers to individual oppositional behaviour (Hoffmann, 2012). One of the proponents of this approach, Asef Bayat, proposes to go beyond the conventional notions of opposition such as political parties, and introduces the notion of non-movement, because it places at the centre of activism daily acts of resistance which add up over time (Bayat, 2009).In other words, opposition extends to everybody who is opposing injustice, corruption, brutality, or absence of the rule of law through simply manifesting alternative behaviour patterns.

As we can see, scholarship has gradually come to an understanding that narrow concepts of civil society do not help to understand the processes going on in non-democracies, and how the specific environment impacts the mode of functioning of civil society, the emergence of new actors, and how the actors interact with the government and other segments in the civil society. A brief review of the recent approaches to civil society suggests that civil society is interpreted through assigning it various functions: as a driver of democratization; as a producer of civil activism; or as a legitimizer of a political regime. While admitting that each of the

perspectives and the identified roles highlights valid nuances of the relationship between civil society and state, the current thesis proposes not to extrapolate from one function to the whole of civil society. A one-sided approach makes it difficult to study various civil society functions in different contexts and their dynamics, because there are multiple contextual factors that determine the function of civil society in a given historical time frame. Even "imperfect" civil society structures and actors can nevertheless contribute to the pluralisation of a society: when the window of opportunity opens for democratization, such structures may provide social resources, at the very least.

This thesis goes beyond presenting civil society as a rigid structure, and instead, defines it as a fluctuating process and a forum where different participants, with both confrontational and non-confrontational activities, play multiple roles, such as; watchdog, service provision, advocacy, and nurturing public debates about the options for a country's future. This perspective on civil society's multiple roles allows each of them to be considered to understand their contribution to the pluralisation of society. For the purposes of analysis, I am interested in just one of these dimensions of civil society – its capacity to nurture policy debate - which, as I argue, acquires a special significance in non-democracies. This is because the epistemic community represented by individual experts, think tanks, and research institutions as the actors in state-civil society dialogue on policy issues could promote not only evidence-based policies, but also values-based perspectives on the future of the country, and hereby inspire civil actions. By building institutional partnerships, formal and informal individual social ties, and through organizational networking, they stimulate the flow of information and ideas among various stakeholders, even beyond policy-makers. The mechanisms of public-private dialogues could contribute to nurturing policy learning, the proliferation of interaction among civil society structures, and private and public actors, and contribute to pluralisation, which at some point could be instrumental for democratization. This whole process contributes to the intangible impact – enhancing legitimacy of the civil society per se.

In the following section, I will review the basic theoretical assumptions of transitology and the implications it had for democracy promotion policy, which apparently used the most mechanistic interpretation of transition. This interpretation favoured mainly the confrontational notion of civil society as a leading force in democratization and discouraged the exploration of other actors in civil society in the post-Soviet realm, partly by the focus on comparisons to liberal democracies rather than an analysis of the unique features of post-communism.

1.2. Transitology and Democracy Promotion: Academic Debate and Policy Implications

Transitology made the greatest initial impact on the how political scientists theorised regime change and transformation in the post-communist area. However, it is important to distinguish the two kinds of transitology: the kind that involves academic discourse and the kind that embodies policy implications with regard to the question of how to reach a liberal democracy through democracy promotion. Below, I first briefly review the academic debate, and then discuss democracy promotion as an embodiment of the policy implications of transitology.

In political science, the school of "transitology" studies a process of change from one political regime to another, most commonly from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Originally, transitology evolved from studies of the regime change in Southern Europe and in Latin America of the 1970s and 80s, and later it embraced post-communist studies. Stretching the theoretical assumptions of the Latin American and South European cases to the post-communist countries became known as the "transition paradigm". One of the most influential works in transitology is considered to be Dankwart Rustow's "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model". Published in 1970, it criticized the modernists (such as Seymour Martin Lipset) who emphasized social and economic pre-conditions for democracy. Rustow argued that a consensus between elites on the new rules of the game is the only necessary precondition for democracy. Referring to Sweden and Turkey, he suggested a general route for democratic development. According to Rustow, it contains the following four phases: formation of "state-ness"; political struggle, which by reaching a deadlock opens a window of opportunity; the

decision phase, during which the elites form a consensus to adopt democratic rules; and the habituation phase, during which democratic rules become a habit (Rustow, 1970: 337-363). Rustow's work laid a conceptual foundation for other scholars, later known as "transitologists". Among others, these are Lawrence Whitehead, Philip Schmitter, Larry Diamond, and Thomas Carothers, many of whom also publish on foreign aid, work for think tanks and provide policy advice with regard to US foreign aid and democracy promotion.

Based on the insights originally developed by democratic theorists such as Dunkwart Rustow, Juan Linz, Robert Dahl and Robert Putnam, the "new" transitology starts from the influential volume by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986): Transitions from "Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies". Together with other transitologists, a collection of conceptual tools was developed to address transition issues, many of which referred to the comparison of Latin America and South Europe regime change case-studies to the post-communist area (Przeworski, 1991a;1991b; Lijphart & Waisman, 1996; Gerskovits,1998; Schmitter & Karl,1992; Linz & Stepan, 1996). However, the framework and concepts that it offered with which to understand democratization went beyond the cautious conclusions suggested by the original version of transitology by stretching the paradigm beyond Latin America and South Europe. So, starting from the mid-1980s, the above-mentioned work by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, and the follow-up project "Democracy in Developing Countries" that Larry Diamond started in 1989 with his colleagues Linz and Lipset led a lively debate about the process of democratization, its causes and consequences (Lipset, et al., 1993: 154-175; Diamond, 1999). Diamond's major argument was that without significant improvements in governance, sustainable economic growth was impossible (Diamond, 1988; 2008). Another book which was a widely used textbook for "transition" courses in American classrooms was the book entitled "Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation - Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe" by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996). In this book, these distinguished authors, who originally studied the politics of the post-authoritarian transformation of Spain and Latin America, engaged with regime change in the post-communist world. The book contains the

first systematic comparative analysis of the process of democratic consolidation in Southern Europe and South America, and it is the first book to ground post-Communist Europe within the literature of comparative politics and democratic theory. Guided by survey data from the fourteen countries, they distinguished the major types of nondemocratic regimes and described paths to democratic transition and tasks of democratic consolidation for each type.

While some scholars say that it is more appropriate to talk about transitology as a methodological approach rather than transitology as a paradigm per se, most scholars in the field refer to the "transitional paradigm" as a collection of assumptions summarized by Carothers (2002) as the following .First, it assumes that any country after the collapse of authoritarian regime starts moving towards a liberal democracy. In doing so, they pass through certain stages: liberalization as a result of the crack inside the ruling elite in the authoritarian regime; a new government/power-sharing arrangement is formed as a result of the election and there follows the establishment of democratic institutions; the consolidation of the democratic rules of the game. The second assumption gives decisive significance to elections as the generator of democratic reforms. The third assumption is that socio-political, economic or cultural conditions are not a major factor in the outcomes of transition. The fourth assumption is that the third wave of democratization was built on pre-existing coherent functioning states, which needed only some modification of state institutions (Carothers, 2002).

Thus, the assumptions evolved around a quite mechanistic perception of the socio-political processes of regime change: specific stages in transition towards the end-goal of liberal democracy, where free and fair election is instrumental to the start of democratic reforms while other social conditions are not a major factor in the outcomes of transition. However, soon it became clear that various countries of the post-communist area arrived at different outcomes. As Levitsky and Way (2002) noticed, although some hybrid regimes such as Mexico and Taiwan underwent democratic transitions in the 1990s, others such as Azerbaijan and Belarus moved in a definitely authoritarian direction. With regard to the unfolding of the process of democratization as consisting of three phases, Carothers (2002) referred to

Taiwan, South Korea, and Mexico as the most encouraging cases of democratization, to argue that their political evolutions were defined by the opposite phenomenon – extremely gradual, incremental processes of liberalisation not with the soft-liners in the regime but with an organized political opposition pushing for change across consecutive elections. Apart from the timeline, it turned out that even competitive elections in some countries did not guarantee institutionalization of the rule of law, bureaucratic integrity, accountability, and public debate (Schedler, 2002). The emphasis on negotiated transitions between elites as leading the transition to democracy was not the case in the post-communist area, where the process of regime change was not evolutionary, but revolutionary as a result of confrontation between the old elite and new forces (McFaul, 2002: 228), which was also acknowledged by Linz and Stepan (1996) in their analysis. Academic debate on transitology often made unhelpful comparisons between the Latin American and post-communist transition processes. Spain started the process of economic reform in the 1950s, which essentially prepared many other socio-cultural-political systems for further democratization after Franco's death (Wiarda, 2001), so it was a case of the importance of structural conditions. Other scholars also pointed out that a mechanistic prescription of transition largely ignored the legacy of the structural factors (McFaul, 2002; Evans, 2011; Stark; 1992). McFaul and Evans in their works argued for the role of the unequal balance of power and structural factors in the outcomes of the transition in Russia. Back in 1992, David Stark noted (1992: 4):

> We are watching neither the "institutional vacuum" nor the "transition" to hypothesized end states of democracy and market economy, but a transformation of pre-existing links - the metamorphosis of organizational forms and networks of affiliation…The introduction of new elements typically combines with adaptations, rearrangements, permutations and reconfigurations of existing organizational forms… The new does not come from the new - or from nothing - but from reshaping the existing, including organizational forms and habituated practices. It is thus a mistake to assume that western capitalist institutions and practices can be replicated according to conscious and rational design.

Thus, assumptions of transitology were unhelpful when faced with the reality of post-communism and thinkers started proposing to view transition as an open-ended transformation (Cohen, 2000: 21). In response to the growing pessimism

with regard to democratization globally around the 2000s, Diamond (2008) stated that one of the main reasons behind the worldwide fall in confidence in democracy was the emergence of so-called "electoral authoritarianism" in which regimes, despite calling themselves democracies, rigged elections, repressed the opposition, and expanded executive power, leading to destructive societies where people gain wealth by taking advantage of power. While transitology gave a prominent role to the strategic interaction between leaders of the regime and the opposition; and civil society and political parties were described as coming into play at a relatively late stage in the transition process, with international actors playing almost no role (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), critiques also noted a prevalence of external factors in post-communist transitions compared with cases of Southern European and Latin American regime change, such as democracy promotion, and the possibility of EU accession etc. (Brown, 2000; Janos, 2001; Steves, 2001). Others pointed out the role of mass movements and protests in the collapse of the Eastern bloc (Ekiert and Kubik, 1998).

Following academic debate, democracy promotion also addressed systemic change in post-Communist context. As one definition of democracy promotion reads: "Democracy promotion can … be characterized as a set of actions of non-domestic actors who intentionally try to overcome authoritarian power by supporting domestic actors who share the same objective" (Beichelt, 2012). A milder version of this definition would replace "overcome authoritarian power" with "influence the nature of the political regime". According to both definitions, democracy promotion is a soft power through which actors hope to spread a certain type of political regime. Certainly, political analysts and policy-makers require simplification and schematization of the ideas and models which normally in academia are subject to more nuanced deliberation and (re-) framing. Given that some prominent American thinkers from transitology were also embedded in various foundations and think tanks, and in the broader American political landscape as opinion makers and advisors, they were likely to face pressure to simplify the ideas of regime change to the format of policy briefs, commissioned reports and essays for congressional testimony to inform the design of aid programmes (Tőkés, 2000). Thus, the number of government agencies with newly

funded democracy programmes grew rapidly after 1989, reaching a peak of $10 billion a year in the past thirty years (Carothers, 2015). In other words, to respond to the US federal bureaucracy's demands for policy advice, policy advisors had to reduce the complex and quite diverse transition literature to mechanistic models for practical democracy promotion work. The rigidity of bureaucracies is surely one of the reasons why the democracy promotion approach was not fine-tuned to post-Soviet countries, in spite of often critical ongoing debate in the academic literature. Guided by the assumption that democracy could succeed anywhere by simply emphasizing the centrality of free and fair elections, democracy promotion in the 1990s highlighted three main lines: (i) support for the processes and procedures key to democratic process; (ii) strengthening and reform of key state institutions (executive and legislature); (iii) support for civil society (Carothers, 2002). With regard to civil society, democracy promotion programmes were driven by assessment against rigid targets, indicators, and evaluation against ambitious goals and expectation of regime change from civil society. Hereby, its focus was naturally on more confrontational civil society activities and actors, while neglecting the need to nurture a broader variety of civil society actors. As Carothers noted (2015): "The heightened attention to monitoring and evaluation often produces artificial and reductionist programme indicators, rigid implementation frameworks, and unrealistic goals - all things that work directly against key lessons from experience about the need for flexible, adaptive programming." Eventually, along with a number of other political factors, the approach has contributed to: (a) confusion in the democracy promotion community with regard to its overall goals and approaches; (b) global disillusionment in the role of civil society; and (c) as a result, steadily contracting funding for international democracy promotion in the post-Soviet countries, especially for those countries, which have regressed to more non-democracies.

Although international democracy promotion had become less blunt ten years later, it found itself confused in the absence of new, ready-to-go "social change" prescriptions. So, in the mid-2000s, transitology was refined. Sequentialism argued that when pushed in countries poorly prepared for it, democratization often leads to bad consequences such as illiberal leaders and wars. Therefore, democratization

can start only after specific preconditions are met: the rule of law and a well-functioning state. Only then should "mass political participation" be encouraged. In this way, they recommended that democracy promotion work should focus on the rule of law and a well-functioning state (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005: 273) rather than elections. In this way, the functional aspect of the governance was emphasized rather than its ideological aspect. Sequentialism was widely supported by "realist" politicians in the established democracies since it allowed them to continue nurturing good relations with autocracies. This approach also empowered the governments in the non-democracies to claim that their reluctance to open up public space was actually a part of a long-term democratization plan (Carothers, 2007: 13). However, the main problems with sequentialism were that it first, assumed that democratizing countries would not perform well in ensuring rule of law and effective state-building; and second, it assumed that autocrats would voluntarily act as the generators of rule of law and effective state-building (Carothers, 2007), which would be aimed at benefiting the people of the country rather than oligarchs and their networks. So, in the context of global disappointment with the accomplishments of democratization, gradualism was suggested as a more suitable perspective since it assumed building democracy slowly in certain contexts but without postponing it indefinitely (Carothers, 2007: 14) in an unfavourable geographical location or broader regional political context.[1] In 2014, Philippe Schmitter also published an update of his original work, which explicitly stated that transition from an authoritarian regime can lead to four possible outcomes (Schmitter, 2014: 71-86). The first and most probable outcome seemed to be a return to some form of autocracy, although eventually ending up consolidating some type of democracy.[2] The second possible outcome is the formation of a hybrid regime which satisfies only formal procedural conditions for political democracy. This outcome is a sort of intermediate position which is followed up by either progressing to democracy or regressing back to autocracy. A

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[1] Azerbaijani leaders and the government affiliated scholars abroad and inside the country frequently refer to the non-democratic neighbour countries such as Iran and Russia, as well as ongoing territorial conflict with Armenia, as an excuse for its heavy-hand policy in domestic politics.
[2] Schmitter refers to the examples of Spain and Portugal in Europe, Ecuador and Bolivia in South America, Turkey in the Middle East, Thailand in Asia, and Nigeria in Africa.

third option, "unconsolidated democracy" is the most deceptive outcome, according to Schmitter. That is because, despite all the minimal procedural conditions for democracy, there is no competition between political forces. As a result, this outcome cannot bring the benefits that democracy offers. Finally, the fourth possible outcome is a consolidated democracy which has adequate rules, institutions of civic freedom and fair competition (Schmitter, 2014: 71-86).

While the outcomes of the transition may be useful for the democracy promotion worker to analyse a given host country, Schmitter's observation with regard to the role of political parties is noteworthy for the purpose of the thesis. He notes that political parties rarely contributed much to the death of autocratic regimes, but as soon as a transition became likely, they immediately moved in (Schmitter, 2014: 71-86.) In other words, until a formal opening is seen, political parties and movements can be dormant. By drawing inspiration from this observation by Schmitter, the thesis claims that once there is a window of opportunity (opening up for substantial reforms, change of the ruling elite, a free and fair election, or even a revolution), think tanks with policy related expertise and competence may step in as one of the key policy reform champions and change agents. At the same time, forums, alliances, networks created and relationships nurtured during the period of non-democratic regime may be a great social resource to engage various stakeholders in policy-making after the political opening up.

Transitology in all its manifestations impacted upon democratization discourse and practice. Having reviewed critiques of the transitology literature, it can be observed that over the course of years, the scholars in this field have been refining their ideas, moving towards a more evolutionary path and more sophisticated pre-conditions and outcomes of the socio-political change. While it is not a goal of the study to find out why the policy manifestation of transitology was more simplistic and mechanistic than the academic debate that inspired it, it is noteworthy that the transitional paradigm was likely a subject of manipulation by Western politicians and misunderstanding by democracy promotion workers: originally cautious conclusions were transmogrified into the mechanistic models supported by democracy promotion funding, with urgent pressure to report on "tangible"

indicators and ambitious goals. It is, therefore, no surprise that Jordan Gans-Morse, having reviewed pieces on transitology in 2004, found that out of the 131 articles in the sample, only seven directly utilized and advocated a transitological approach to the study of the post-communist region or compared post-communist cases to transitions in Southern Europe, Latin America, or other "Third Wave" democracies (Jordan Gans-Morse, 2004).

1.3. Rethinking democracy promotion and the resilience paradigm

Recently, an understanding has been formed that a series of complex operational problems for international democracy support requires a rethinking of the overall approach to international support for civil society, and discussion of innovative forms of technical assistance (Carothers & Brenchmacher, 2014: 62). It is clear that for any form of non-democracy, the standard menu with its focus on institutions was not so useful, especially while the independent segment of civil societies and the media continued to shrink under increasing repression and legalized restriction. However, alternative perspectives on the functions of civil society were dismissed, and subsequently, unconventional, less confrontational avenues for support of civil society by democracy promotion communities were virtually ignored. As Carothers (2015) put it:

> Perhaps, democracy workers should have been searching for "ways to encourage new entrants into the stagnant political scene, to help citizens translate their anger at corruption and disempowerment into serious pressure for reform, to create positive links between socioeconomic advocacy campaigns and political reforms, and to assist social movements that reach a wide base.

Since the Resilience 2014 Conference in Montpelier, France, resilience has been described as a new paradigm for development. Following the conference, on 28 June 2016, the "EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy" (EUGS, 2016) was presented, where resilience referred to building state and societal resilience in its neighbourhood as one of the key strategic priorities of the EU. Resilience is defined in the EUGS as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EUGS 2016: 23).

This objective is also reflected in the revised EU Neighbourhood Policy, the overall objective of which is to support the stabilisation of Europe's Neighbourhood and its resilience (European Commission, JOIN, 2017: 18). The resilience paradigm has also become an integral part of another donor – USAID. Its mission statement defines resilience as "the ability of people, households, communities, countries and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth". In short, resilience is the ability to prepare for shocks—including natural and manmade disasters- to respond effectively to crises and to build back better than before (Staal, 2013). USAID, together with The Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation, launched an initiative in 2014- the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP) - to co-invest in innovative and scalable solutions to building resilience. It states, "our future will be defined by three drivers: increasing complexity, global inter-connectivity, and surprise", so "resilience is about having the capacity to persist, adapt, and transform in the face of change."(GRP 2014). To deliver these outcomes, the GRP put forward the following approaches, among others: to embrace complexity by identifying root causes of complex development challenges; to recognize constant change in terms of uncertainty and dynamism of the future; to enable inclusive decision-making in terms of empowering marginalized groups to help to develop sustainable solutions; to promote flexibility and learning in terms of approaches that need to be adaptive and responsive, constantly learning from what does and does not work (GRP 2014). EUGS states (2016: 23):

> The EU will strengthen the resilience of states and societies by supporting good governance, accountable institutions, and working closely with civil society. Our support will target in particular the EU's surrounding regions in the East and the South, spanning from Central Asia to Central Africa.

This objective is also reflected in the revised EU's Neighbourhood Policy, the overall objective of which is to support the stabilisation of Europe's Neighbourhood and its resilience. For example, the implementation of the ENP Review 2017 emphasized (European Commission, JOIN, 2017: 18) a differentiated approach and greater ownership as the key principles of the policy.

As this thesis assumes the possibility of multiple trajectories of post-communist development on the road to democracy, which may include regression and stagnation at various times, an important lesson to be learned from the transformations in the post-communist area is that during those periods of stagnation and regression, democracy promotion workers should be in position to tailor country-specific strategies, and, if necessary, to consider a process-oriented approach. Understanding of the non-linear social developments in non-democracies among the democracy promotion community would stimulate am understanding of the local context: specific actors, power relations and emerging processes. Subsequently, this can inform meaningfully tailored democracy promotion support work aimed at maintaining the heat in the oven until a window of opportunity is there for them to enter the political realm. This implies that democracy promotion workers should be aware of the need for small but significant steps that may create space for political competition. Importantly, even if the efforts do not bring immediate tangible outcomes, the nurturing of various capacities of civil society (read its actors), such as debate nurturing capacity, which is the focus of my research, contributes to enhancing the legitimacy of civil society in the eyes of various stakeholders. This can be a feasible approach given the power relation within any non-democracy may be not straightforward: one government agency may be more rigid on cooperation issues and impose new barriers to external assistance, while other agencies may continue to cooperate with foreign aid providers on selected policy issues. On the other hand, nurturing also non-confrontational activities and actors in civil society may create additional entry points for non-democracies to open up: through permitting public-private dialogue mechanisms, allowing criticism, permitting the establishment of associations, etc. Thus, since local think tanks, as the actors in civil society and the policy agenda-setting process in general have not been on the radar of the international democracy promotion community, this thesis aims to fill the gap by arguing the potential of the less confrontational activities and actors in civil society, which can offer an alternative approach to democracy promotion work in non-democracies, in the context of the new resilience paradigm in the democracy promotion industry.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the problematic influence of the democracy promotion community's notion of a confrontational civil society as a key element of the democratization. Therefore, democracy promotion in these countries overlooked the potential of non-confrontational activities and actors, such as think tanks. Meanwhile, civil society in the post-Soviet region was overloaded by a number of emancipatory and confrontational functions it was not in a position to fulfil. Aside from regime change, civil society actors in many countries were not even able to protect "a self-reflexive civil society" from being undermined by state bureaucracy. This was damaging both for the legitimacy of civil society and for the nature of democracy promotion work. The notion of civil society as the main engine of the political change from authoritarianism to democracy overlooked the potential of the long-term, process-oriented perspective relative to the short- and medium-term impact-oriented approach to democracy promotion. The role of the local epistemic community in general and think tanks in particular in civil society has been underemphasized in international democracy promotion.

Despite criticism of the transition paradigm in 2000s for its characterisation of social processes as simplified, mechanical, and predictable (Carothers, 2002; Grugel,1999), democracy practitioners have been guided by the measurement of transition against an ideal model. In doing so, the analysis of civil society invariably led to the subsequent rigid placement of post-Soviet civil societies along a "weak - strong" continuum, which barely helped to understand: (a) how the interaction between the authoritarian state and civil society works; (b) what diverse actors are involved in civil societies; (c) what their roles and the nature of their activities are; and (d) how those actors may at some point in the future contribute to democratization once a window of opportunity opens.

While civil society and its actors may differ from those in the established democracies, this is not a sufficient basis on which to announce the decline of civil society in Eastern Europe and the failure of civil society in the post-Soviet zone.

The dynamic of civil society changes depends on the context in every particular time-frame, and calls for careful study of its functions and actors. Therefore, this thesis avoids the measurement and assessment of the impact of civil society on democratization or any other sort of political change. It is also not driven by measurement of the impact of local think tanks on the policy process. The underlying idea of the thesis is to suggest the importance of broadening our perspective on the functions of civil society, especially in non-democracies, by drawing attention to the role of think tanks in civil society.

The recently more prominent non-normative approaches to civil society (which are largely pessimistic) tend to generalize one aspect of civil society (usually negative) in any politically restrictive regime to the whole of civil society. Therefore, this chapter suggests moving away from the rigid definition of civil society as a fixed institution (with a confrontational function or any other). Specifically, it suggests an analytical, neutral notion of civil society which will drive the research: civil society as a dynamic forum, where various actors fulfil various functions including service delivery, watch-dog, advocacy, education, policy debate nurturing, etc. In this perception of civil society, scholars and democracy promotion workers, especially in the context of the new resilience paradigm, could stretch their attention and support to the less confrontational actors, such as think tanks, which irrespective of their immediate impact, can be an additional source of expertise, nurture relationships among various stakeholders, and offer new venues for debate.

The significance of the think tank as a civil society actor must be associated with the specific activities it undertakes in society. Incorporating think tanks' activities into the study allows an understanding of the nuances of the development of civil society in non-democracies. In doing so, in my argument I take inspiration from the policy network approach, which focuses on process rather than outcome and on relationships rather than a power elite model. I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Theorizing Think tanks' Activities in the Agenda-setting Process with the Multiple Streams Framework

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter One, the motivation of the thesis is to address the tendency to overlook less confrontational activities and actors in civil society in the implementation of democracy promotion, which was informed by the confrontational notion of civil society in the post-Soviet area. This thesis draws attention to local think tanks as one of the non-confrontational actors in civil society, which can potentially offer an alternative avenue for democracy promotion work in times of resource scarcity. Support for these actors and policy debate in non-democracies has promising long-term implications. Differentiating actors and their activities in the policy process contributes to defining the scope of "change agency" in civil society. In doing so, the policy process, and specifically, agenda-setting, provide a useful entry point to analysing activities and their long- and short-term implications, irrespective of the immediate policy influence of the actor.

In Chapter Two, I argue that the significance of the think tank as an actor must be associated with the specific activities it undertakes in civil society. Incorporating think tanks' activities into the study allows an understanding of the nuances of the development of civil society in non-democracies. A focus on the activities of the think tanks is theoretically important because through that we can understand how they nurture the agenda-setting process and policy debate; how think tanks bring together stakeholders; and what implications their activities have for civil society. Furthermore, activities are empirically more tractable than concepts like impact on policy change. I take inspiration from the policy network approach, which focuses on process rather than outcome, on relationship rather than a power elite model. The network approach appeals since, by embracing non-formal actors, it suggests that actors' influence has more to do with the ways in which they interact in various policy networks. In this regard, the policy networks approach could help to illuminate the ways in which think tanks seek to influence policy agendas.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the approaches taken in think tank studies, which is followed by a discussion of the policy network approach and, in particular, the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) of Kingdon: a framework for investigating agenda setting. Finally, a new matrix is proposed to analyse the activities of think tanks, which ascribes specific categories of activities of think tanks to the streams of the MSF. This will structure the later empirical chapters of the thesis.

2.1. **Think tank studies: conditions of influence vs the debate-nurturing process**

As the level and sophistication of the interaction between CSOs and government increases, citizens' influence on the policy process is also likely to increase worldwide. Both in open and closed societies, policy-makers need at least reliable information. Demands for information that can be used in policy-making have fostered development of independent policy research organizations, commonly known as think tanks. However, I argue that think tanks offer not just an information-providing function, but also the potential to provide an important function of civil society by participating in the agenda-setting process. In this section, I introduce approaches to studies of think tanks trending in the field.

The term 'think tank' was first introduced in the US during WWII to name a place where military and civilian experts were situated to develop military strategies, while after the war, the term was applied to contract researchers. Use of the term was expanded in the 1950-60s to describe groups of experts who formulated policy recommendations, mainly in international relations. By the 1970s, the term was applied to institutions beyond just foreign policy and defence, but also relating to political, economic and social issues (Ladi, Encyclopaedia Britannica). The North-American origin of the think tank phenomenon informed significant dilemmas with regard to definitions of think tanks, and especially the notion that think tanks require independence from the state to be free-thinking. However, this characteristic of think tanks makes little sense, as in Germany and France, for example, most think tanks are funded from the state budget and affiliated with

various parties. In other words, having originated in North America, think tanks have become remarkably diverse globally. Some aspire to function on a non-partisan and non-ideological basis and claim to adopt a scientific approach to social and economic problems. Others are ideologically motivated, as in the Anglo-American world. Some think tanks are academic in style, focusing on research and affiliated with universities; others position themselves as advocacy organisations. The specialisation of think tanks can also differ, relating to environmental policy, foreign policy, economic policy, or the problems of certain social groups (Stone, Denham and Garnett, 1998). However, one of the major functions of the think tank remains to influence or inform policy through intellectual argument and analysis rather than direct politicization. With this purpose, think tanks collect, synthesize and create information products directed to various audiences, such as media, interest groups, bureaucracy, and the general public. Think tanks may operate within the government, or be unaffiliated, not-for-profit, or profit-making entities. While some observers regard think tanks as more intellectual variants of pressure groups (Grant, 1995), this categorization is not adequate, since think tanks, unlike pressure groups, do not engage in protest actions, and they tend to address multiple policy issues while pressure groups focus on a single issue (Stone, et al., 1998). Until recently, the major part of the literature on think tanks discussed developments in Western think tanks. Starting from the 1990s, however, several volumes have been published which focus on think tanks beyond the Western world. Mainly due to the "think tank Initiative" project, several comparative, cross-regional, large-n studies have been published since 2012. At a global level, the focus of studies on think tanks is on the role of global think tanks in promoting a certain agenda or ideology, such as the market economy and liberalization (McGann and Johnson, 2005). At the institutional level, scholars attempt to explain the conditions for think tank influence on public policy, the ability to attain policy influence, to achieve policy change, and to impact knowledge production and the policy agenda. Methodologically, the literature on think tanks primarily consists of three types of studies: (i) case studies of think tanks in a single country, which form the major part of the literature; (ii) comparative case studies of think tanks in two or

more countries; and (iii) cross-country large-n regression studies, forming a minor part of the literature.

Studies which focus on the exploration of think tanks in closed political systems are not extensive, be they through single case studies, comparative analysis or large-n regression analysis. Most of the few studies on think tanks in developing countries focus: (a) on explaining how certain contextual factors shape the strategies of think tanks; (b) on conditions for improving the influence of think tanks on decision-making; and (c) on measuring the impact of think tanks on policy decision-making. Moreover, available studies on developing countries have not produced stable evidence on the impact of contextual factors on the work of think tanks as have case studies of open political systems (Court and Young, 2003). Studies show that the same contextual factors may define think tanks' modes of operation in different ways. The mixed findings from cases of restrictive political systems in comparison with more consistent findings from open political systems can be associated with the different focuses of the studies: studies in restrictive political systems focus more on the capacity of think tanks to influence policy change, i.e. more at organizational level, while case studies in open political systems focus mainly on measuring think tank culture in relation to level of democracy (Braun et al., 2010). The most frequently used variables in the studies on think tanks are level of democracy, regime change, source of funding and periods of crisis, as I briefly review below.

It is an expected finding that more open political systems are more supportive of think tank development in comparison to closed political systems through creating space for active participation in the political arena, first of all (McGann and Johnson, 2005), and "allowing evidence to be freely gathered, accessed and communicated" (Court, & Young, 2003, p 14). However, it does not mean that in the more politically restrictive regimes, think tanks do not have their own function: for example, in China think tanks frequently play a technocratic role by being affiliated to the governments' ministries (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, and Datta, 2010). Correlation of think tank proliferation with level of democracy is not straightforward: democracy can drive think tank proliferation, but it is not a

necessary or sufficient condition. Sometimes, think tanks can emerge because of a shortage of democracy; active and vocal think tanks may contribute to democratization, but they may also be instrumental in legitimating the existing regime and government (Datta, Jones and Mendizabal, 2010). Decision-making by a narrow elite group allows think tanks to target a small number of specific individuals rather than many power-holders (Braun, et al., 2010). However, it is problematic to generalize the controversial findings described above that "centralization increases think tank influence" in all countries' contexts.

Regime change is another catalyst factor that proliferates the creation of think tanks (Datta, Jones, and Mendizabal, 2010). However, the nature of the transition and the direction of the political shift affect opportunities for think tanks. For example, in the post-communist realm, after the fall of communism, policy-focused CSOs were created, but the influence of CSOs grows inversely to the power of the state, and depends on relationships with state officials (Grugel, ed., 1999). In other words, the concentration of power as an aspect of political context impacts think tanks' operation in different ways, depending on the country's level of development and the nature of the political system. For instance, highly centralized regimes create in-house think tanks to conduct a fixed research agenda of interest to the state (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, and Datta, 2010: 12). While this tactic is certainly not exclusive to restrictive regimes, the function and mission that in-house think tanks hold in restrictive regimes may be fundamentally different. This was the case in Azerbaijan, where in 2007, the government established the Centre for Strategic Studies (SAM) under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the main function of which was to introduce western scholarship into the policies of Azerbaijan and to rationalize government positions on various international and domestic issues to the international audience, rather than preparing evidence-based policy recommendations to the government.

Periods of economic and political crisis also have ambiguous impacts on think tank influence level. Such periods may produce a window of opportunity caused by the policy-makers' demand for a solution to an urgent problem (Braun, et al., 2010: 89). At that time, think tanks may be able to push forward relevant research.

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Stakeholder support for policy change is also important (Court and Young, 2003). However, while a crisis may produce a window of opportunity in one country, in another, it may produce mixed effects. For instance, engagement of foreign advisors by the government (especially in developing countries) may impose new difficulties for local think tanks' strategies in agenda-setting (Kimenyi and Datta, 2011). Another key external context factor influencing the work of research CSOs/think tanks is the source of funding. Scholars observe various effects of the donor factor. Donors' financial support may shift research attention to donors' priorities, which may not always be relevant for the host country's context (Young, 2005), or may reshape popular belief in country priorities. For instance, the economic inequality vs strengthening government structures debate in South Africa is an example of such a phenomenon (Hearn, 2000). On the other hand, Carapico finds that external funding may challenge the host government as the 'knowledge producer,' leading to increased political risk for research CSOs that have accepted donor funds (Carapico, 2010).

The most recent study on the influence of context on think tanks applied mixed methods of large-n regression analysis and case-study surveys, and was performed by a group of scholars for the Results for Development Institute (Brown, et al., 2014). The study presented comprehensive coverage of the topic in a sample of 380 think tanks worldwide. However, the authors admit that the survey results indicate limitations for the quantitative study: particularly, generalizations drawn based upon a regression analysis did not adequately capture the detailed relationships found in the case-study part of the research. Testing of the relationships hypothesized in the research between political competition and government effectiveness and capacities of think tanks revealed limited associations between variables. Another hypothesis that diversity of communications channels would widen in more democratic contexts was not shown to be the case. The authors admit that the results from the survey contradicted the results from the case-study part of the research, which revealed: a) that think tanks reported adapting their decision-making to accommodate

context; and b) a clear impact of political competition and government effectiveness on think tank strategy (Brown, et al., 2014).

The mixed findings of studies from politically restrictive contexts not only suggest that different methodologies can lead to contradictory results, but also perhaps that studies with too rigid approach miss the complexity of the policy-making process and nuances of influence such as the timing of the policy-making stages (which can cycle over and over on the same issue), the level of sensitivity of the issues, "policy champions" within the government, etc. Generally, studies show that think tanks can be successful when they show evidence-based knowledge or an innovative approach during the agenda-setting stage of the policy process (Jones, et al., 2009: 16). Their effectiveness increases when they are intentionally embedded in the process of agenda setting; despite a radical policy agenda, changes may need to be placed carefully in the political context (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Also, the timing of action matters: in the initial stages of the debate (Raustiala, 1997) and in the technocratic phase of decision-making are the best periods for the epistemic community to pursue (Peterson and Bomberg, 1999).The nature of the issue also matters: issues involving natural systems such as the environment, for instance, increase the influence of the epistemic community in general on policy-making more than issues with regard to social systems. If a policy issue is complex, or new, and decision makers are unhappy with the current policies, not only think tanks but broader epistemic community has more chance of influence (Haas, 1990; Radaelli, 1999). Availability of political opportunities and structures ensures that they have access to top decision-makers (Drake and Nicolaidis, 1992).

To sum up, while most think tank studies look at the conditions of influence and impact of think tanks on policy change, think tanks' contribution in sustaining a process of policy debate nurturing in non-democracies is largely disregarded. With regard to their effectiveness, it appears that think tanks and donors frequently regard the top-level result of their work, namely, adoption and implementation of policies, as the only criterion justifying the purpose and existence of local think tanks. At the same time, there is no guarantee that evidence-based knowledge

will ultimately influence policy change (Jones, et al, 2009). By focusing largely on impact on policy change, which is a major measurement criteria for the scholars, the ways in which activities of the think tanks can nurture a process are left neglected. Usually, the effect of research on policymakers' choices is nuanced and non-linear, because irrespective of the quality of policy analysis, the policy choices of policymakers may be motivated by political contestation, institutional pressure or vested interests (Court and Young, 2003: 13). However, this should not imply that discourse nurturing and the process of agenda-building are meaningless. As the role of think tanks is becoming more and more vocal worldwide in exercising influence in shaping local, national and international policies on a wide range of issues – human rights, local economic development, gender issues, sustainable development, corruption reforms, institutional accountability and many others, - the sources of the think tanks' legitimacy can boost the legitimacy of civil society in general. Even "unsuccessful" activities of the epistemic community cultivate ideas and qualitative debates, create venues for counterweights, and foster networks and interactions. Thereby, built on the performance and moral sources of their legitimacy, they contribute to the overall legitimacy of civil society and strengthening its position in the dialogue with the government.   While most countries in the post-Soviet region may not have strong philanthropic traditions or opportunities, encouraging tax and CSO funding legislation, think tanks in those countries are primarily funded by governments, political parties or international donors. Many think tanks in those regions have established a highly visible presence and participate actively in their country's policy debates, even in politically restrictive countries like Azerbaijan (Galushko and Djordevic, 2018).

2.2.   Policy Network Approach: Multiple Streams Framework   (MSF)

Studies of think tanks employ various approaches in explanation for the role of think tanks. Early studies of think tanks tended towards a macro-level focus, most of which adopted the "elite power" approach. This approach emphasized think tanks as the key components of the power elite where decision-making is concentrated in the hands of few groups (Critchlow, 1985). The problem with this approach is that it neglects the role of smaller, less known institutions. Think tanks

are largely presented as consensus-building organisations for power elites to develop ideologies to turn problems into manageable matters of public policy (Domhoff, 2009). In contrast to the elite-power approach, the pluralist (or network[3]) approach in studies of think tanks emphasizes competition between think tanks for access to the political system, arguing that think tanks help to create a more open, participative and educated population, and represent a counterbalance to the influence of bureaucratic, corporate interests on policy agenda. The pluralist approach comes from the post-positivist epistemology for which policy rhetoric and subjectivity are inescapable. According to this perspective, policy analysts occupy the chaotic space of opinions, beliefs, positions, and claims in society where they produce arguments, interpretations, frames, and recommendations that contribute to deliberation and decision-making (Kingdon 2013; Majone, 1989; Yanow,1996). Pluralists argue that think tanks contribute to a more informed, knowledge-based policy process that can enlighten decision-making (Weiss, 1992). Apart from the actors, the network approach also considers their relationships (Adam and Kriesi, 2007).It is the interactions of various groups in various realms of policy-making (from agenda-setting to policy evaluation), which drives policy-making forward, determining its tempo and content. The very focus on interaction makes the network approach relevant to the thesis with regard to the question of how think tanks in Azerbaijan have attempted to influence policy process. Pluralists employ various network concepts, suggesting that think tank influence has more to do with the way in which think tanks successfully interact within various policy networks. Policy networks include a range of concepts such as "policy community", "policy subsystems", "advocacy coalitions", "epistemic communities", "discourse coalitions", "multiple streams". Within this approach, the advocacy coalitions concept places greater emphasis on the view that analysis has a long-term enlightenment function in changing policy, and highlights the role of beliefs, values, and ideas as a neglected dimension of policy-making (Sabatier, 1987). Discourse coalitions emphasize language and political symbolism (Stone & Denham, ed., 2004) putting the focus on how a policy problem is defined and the discourse through which the problem is understood. The epistemic community concept

[3]Since pluralists employ various network concepts, it is also called the network approach.

focuses on the specific role of knowledge and experts in the policy process (Haas, 1992). The multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 2013) focuses on the process of agenda-setting, presented as relatively independent problem, policy and politics streams. The pluralist approach usually stresses informal participation in decision-making offered by networks (Stone, 2002). All network concepts include a mix of interests, leaders, politicians, bureaucracies and business, but also give consideration to the role of academic analysis, think tanks, media, and intellectuals. Rather than concentrating on formal decision-making procedures, the approach is assumed to embrace non-formal actors. In this regard, the policy networks approach could help this thesis to illuminate ways in which think tanks seek to influence political agendas and how networks involve think tanks as the agents of change.

For the purpose of the thesis, the advocacy coalition concept will be omitted, as a complicated model more suitable for multi-level advanced democracies with hundreds of actors, as the author of the concept, Sabatier, acknowledges himself (Sabatier, ed., 2007), and which is, therefore, not suitable for the not democratic context. The epistemic community concept is too broad for the purpose of this study since it may include all sorts of academic educational institutions, while I focus on the specific actor of local think tanks. Instead, the thesis suggests applying the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) since, first, it is an agenda-setting process related framework, a natural setting for the activities of local think tanks. Second, despite MSF originally being designed and referred to the USA context, it is a very flexible framework, relatively easily adaptable for application in non-democratic contexts. Basically, a researcher using the conceptual forms of MSF can operationalize the variables or specify the meanings of the concepts in the individual context. Apart from its flexibility, what makes Kingdon's MSF particularly meaningful for the thesis is that it focuses explicitly on the process of agenda–setting by considering two factors as crucial in agenda-setting: (i) participants (policy entrepreneurs); and (ii) process (streams). In the same way, the thesis stresses the importance of the process and actors in considering civil society functions. A specialist in American politics, Kingdon's most significant book is

"Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies," (1984) in which he presents MSF to better understand policy process and how issues enter policy agendas. MSF is an enhanced version of the Garbage Can Model of organizational choices developed by Cohen, March, and Olsen in 1972. The original Garbage Can Model is designed for a pluralist environment with multiple actors, objectives, and views, and contributed to the basic understanding of how decisions are made in an ambiguous environment. The MSF extends this concept to the state level and explains how and why certain policy issues move onto a government's agenda while others do not.

Despite critiques of Kingdon's work as being theoretically unstable, the work has retained a prominent place in the policy process literature (Pragati Rawat and John Charles Morris, 2016). Agenda-setting is about how the interests and vision of various groups become the interests of public policymakers (Cobb, Ross, & Howard, 1976). This process focuses on the relationship between society and policy makers where "signals" from society actors (media, constituents, special interests, etc.) come into play to alert and inform the policy maker (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), stimulating a network of interconnecting mutual influences (Cobb, Roger, and Elder, 1971).In this process, some groups and/or individuals have more power to contribute to the agenda and different issues have different characteristics that impact on their chance of ending up on the agenda (Denham, 2010). Agenda setting rests on the argument that whether an issue becomes a matter of public concern depends upon the meaning that someone attaches to it (Elder, Charles, Cobb & Roger, 1984), i.e. upon certain beliefs and values. In other words, facts yet need to become facts as a result of judgment, attaching meaning to the scope of indicators. Agenda-setting is a natural realm where the think tanks are most vocal. An aspect of agenda-setting which makes it a useful realm to place this thesis in is that it implies a process-oriented nature: agenda is a fluid process which involves defining and redefining. The work of think tanks in this process may assume a level of conflict in terms of the social contract (Cobb, Roger; Elder, Charles, 1971) because think tanks come to the scene to shape meaning. It may imply threatening and/or questioning legitimacy of the

government. At the same time, this very function of think tanks strengthens the overall voice of civil society and, thereby, enhances the credibility of the latter in the eyes of citizens, especially in non-democracies, not least by the very fact of their expertise on public policy issues.

In Kingdon's elaboration, agenda-setting consists of three relatively independent streams: the problem stream, policy stream, and politics stream, the joining of which gets the issue onto the government agenda. For that to happen, a window of opportunity needs to be there and there must be policy entrepreneurs working on the issue (Kingdon, 2013).The *problem stream* refers to issues which require public attention. The stream is about framing issues and problems; presenting evidence and eventually constructing a convincing, visible case to draw attention to. It may be expressed through various indicators, such as: how actors identify and monitor potential problems; focusing events, which capture wide attention from media and become attached to particular problems providing a powerful impetus for action or change; the capacity of institutions to deal with problems; and feedback (Jones et al., 2015). The next stream is the *policy stream,* which refers to policy solutions developed as a result of certain activities by those interested in these options before they reach the decision-maker's agenda. This stream is about value acceptability conforming to existing value constraints, technical feasibility, and resource adequacy. This stream takes place within communities of researchers, parliament experts, evaluation and budget offices, and interest groups to make them acceptable within policy communities (Kingdon, 2013). The *politics stream*, according to Kingdon, refers to public opinion, election results, demands from interest groups, and change of government. The stream is about shifts in the public mood, public protests and campaigns by interest groups, party ideology referring to the orientation of the political parties within relevant institutions. Noteworthy is that Kingdon asserts that mood does not refer solely to public opinion, but rather the perceived climate of opinion by elites (Kingdon, 2013).

When at least two streams join at critical moments (i.e. when simultaneously, a problem is recognized, a feasible solution is available, and the political climate is

positive for change), it constitutes a *policy window* and the issue enters the policy agenda. The joining together of these three streams (coupling) relies "heavily on the appearance of the right entrepreneur at the right time" (Kingdon, 2013).In other words, the coupling of streams is determined by the presence of policy windows and the actions of policy entrepreneurs. This process is very dynamic: if the problem does not meet a proper solution at the right time, nothing will happen (Kingdon, 2013). In its turn, a policy window may not stay open for long, and *policy entrepreneurs*, the actors promoting ideas to push the issue onto the decision-making agenda, must act quickly. Policy entrepreneurs are people, such as elected politicians or leaders of interest groups, with the knowledge, power, position and luck to be able to exploit windows of opportunity. Policy entrepreneurs become crucial to the process of linking solutions and problems (Kingdon, 2013). They are active in both the problem stream (by getting recognition of the issue) and in the policy stream (by suggesting solutions) through coupling (linking) strategies, such as for example, bargaining or communication framing (Kingdon, 2013). Kingdon's portrait of policy entrepreneurs as the agents of change - people who make connections across various groups and engage with proximate policymakers - has been influential, and is relevant to the thesis with regard to how the identified activities of think tanks in the agenda-setting process contribute to the "change agency" in the society in general.

With regard to the usability of the concept for the purpose of the thesis, the following is noteworthy, based on the analysis of the application of MSF. Kingdon separated the 'streams' of MSF analytically to describe a separation of responsibilities in the US political system, where a huge number of actors with different aims are involved in the process. The streams metaphor also captured the idea that, in the US, fast agenda-setting contrasts with the slow process of solution production, in which "ideas float in the policy primeval soup", going through a process of 'softening' to make them more technically and political feasible to a policy community (Kingdon, 2013). Further, the concept rejects the idea of a linear policy process in which a policymaker identifies a problem to solve, the bureaucracy produces a range of possible solutions, and the policymaker

selects the best choice. Rather, these three acts are treated by the concept as streams which are able to occur in any order. Moreover, solutions may need to be produced in anticipation of a policymaker's attention to a problem. In fact, rejection of the linear policy process implicitly makes room for various non-bureaucratic actors to be engaged at various points of the policy process throughout the streams. Consequently, think tanks, together with other CSOs, can be these non-bureaucratic actors in problem-framing through introducing particular vocabulary within policy debates, and framing the ultimate trajectory of the policy (Thompson & Dart, 2004). It is the perspective of this thesis that think tanks (local not-for-profit research organizations) are a part of the civil society serving as a potentially "important catalyst for ideas and action" (McGann, 2002) in both open and closed political regimes.

Thinking about the usefulness of the MSF framework for exploring and analysing think tank activities in non-democracies, it is noted that the flexibility of MSF remains its key feature, which means that attempting to apply it in a non-democratic context may be worthwhile, since the value of the model across countries with varying political systems has not been definitively established (Jones et al., 2016). However, what MSF misses is the activities of the actors: Kingdon treats streams as if they are an objective process and does not deeply discuss relevant actors and activities in each stream. This is the gap that this thesis fills, by introducing a matrix of strategies and activities across the streams of Kingdon. It is argued that in this way, the emphasis is placed on what actors do across the streams rather than implying that the streams work objectively. Further, the very activities think tanks are engaged in inform implications for the function of the civil society.

2.3. MSF and Activities of Think tanks: Towards Enhancing the Theory

To operate meaningfully and to gain attention for ideas, think tanks engage in a set of activities, which can be described as strategies and tactics. However, while MSF contributes to knowledge on the non-sequential nature of the policy process, it has a gap in terms of differentiating individual actors and their strategies. The most

recent attempt undertaken towards differentiation of the agents of the streams was by Howlett and Mukherjee (2015), who ascribe epistemic community, instrument constituencies (think tanks); and advocacy coalition to the streams of problem, policy and politics correspondingly. However, assigning specific actors strictly to the corresponding streams contradicts the very metaphoric spirit of the MSF theory: after all, all of these agencies can be engaged throughout the streams. The role of think tanks can be prominent throughout the steams, especially in problem and policy streams. Generally, the problem stream remains important and relevant throughout the policy process (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2015). That is, first of all, because framing influences subsequent policy deliberations and activities at later points in the policy process. The framing can also be attached to the already available solution in the policy stream, which may ensure coupling and opening up a policy window later. With regard to the politics stream, advocacy coalition of think tanks may be equally vocal. In other words, in a certain context, think tanks are able to lead and to inform the activities of other actors, and even define the main direction of the policy process which follows thereafter, because "the effects of epistemic involvement are not easily reversed" (Adler and Haas, 1992: 373).

Most strategies that have been implicitly or explicitly indicated in policy process approaches are described in "policy entrepreneur" related literature (Najam, 1999; Mintrom, 2000; Roberts and King, 1996; Brouwer and Huitema, 2017). These studies can be roughly divided into three main categories: (i) studies that focus on what happens when policy entrepreneurs act; (ii) studies that concentrate on why they act; and (iii) studies that primarily aim to understand how they act (Stevenson and Jarillo-Mossi, 1990). Another perspective comes from civil society theory in terms of the roles and activities of the civil society actors they employ as policy entrepreneurs (Najam, 1999). Studies which explore the strategies of various policy entrepreneurs have mainly focused in water management systems. Keck and Sikkick (1998) identified several tactics that could be employed to exercise political influence: (i) generation of politically usable information to use where it will have most impact; (ii) making sense of a situation by calling up relevant symbols and narratives; (iii) leveraging upon powerful actors to influence a situation; and

(iv) holding powerful actors accountable in compliance with declared principles and commitments. Brouwer and Huitema (2017) compiled a comprehensive table of the strategies examined by various scholars on the subject of policy entrepreneurs, by grouping them into four categories: (i) support seeking strategies, which include demonstration, rhetorical persuasion, and exploitation of focusing events; (ii) linking strategies including coalition building, issue linking, and game linking; (iii) relational management strategies including networking; trust-building; (iv) and arena strategies including venue shopping and timing. Taylor et al., (2011) focuses on project-champions who employ numerous strategies, including: (i) using social networks to build coalitions of support; (ii) building and using relationships with executives and politicians to gain their support; and (iii) working in tandem with executive champions. Roberts and King (1991: p 149) in their paper, describe policy entrepreneurs' activities, which they group into several categories: (i) generation/brokering of ideas; (ii) selling of ideas through efforts for lobbying and attracting media attention; (iii) problem framing and problem definition and disseminating; (iv) demonstration projects to prove that their ideas are feasible solutions to the problems; (v) cultivating relationships with bureaucratic insiders, high-profile elite groups, and elected officials; and (vi) administrative and evaluative activities. Another author, Mintrom (2000: 275), suggests that through networking, policy entrepreneurs come to know the 'world views' of the various actors in policy processes, and create contacts that help them to build credibility. From the perspective of civil theory, Najam (1999) identifies five roles and activities in relation to civil society organisations which can be exercised during various components of the policy process such as agenda setting, policy formulation; implementation and evaluation: (i) monitoring activities with the purpose of keeping the policy-makers accountable; (ii) advocacy activities with the purpose of influencing directly on policy options; (iii) innovation activities, the purpose of which is to offer alternative policy options; (iv) service providing activities with the purpose of providing direct service to the vulnerable and marginalized; and (v) capacity building activities, with the purpose of enhancing the skills and knowledge of the relevant communities.

Despite the various descriptions of policy actors' functions and descriptions of how they actually perform, they are either stated in very general terms (as in the MSF), or in the form of a heavy "laundry list", as in the "policy entrepreneurs" literature. Moreover, none of them consider the activities of the specific actor in the context of the MSF of Kingdon. Meanwhile, analysing activities of the specific actor in the context of the multiple streams of the agenda-setting process emphasizes the meaning of the interactions and relationships among the stakeholders throughout the streams, and its implications not only for socialization of ideas, but also for the civil society function. To fill this gap in MSF and to go beyond a mere descriptive, ethnographical text based on empirical findings, the thesis suggests an analytical matrix for a range of the strategies that think tanks have been using in Azerbaijan across the multiple streams of agenda-setting in the attempt to influence issue-based policy change. This thesis proposes a two dimensional matrix where one axis is represented by the corresponding MSF stream, and the other axis defines the strategies and tactics of the think tanks that have been identified from the field-work. For the exercise to be conceptually and analytically useful, it is important that the number of categories along the axes: be manageable; be defined enough to be meaningful; and be broad enough to cover the considered range of options. Therefore, the strategies are: (a) problematizing strategies which are assigned to the problem identification stream; (b) softening-up strategies which are referred to policy formulation; and (c) interaction strategies which are related to the politics stream (see Table 1).At the same time, it should be noted that assigning specific strategies and activities to each stream is conditional, and does not imply that some of the strategies cannot be applied across the stream: for example, problem stream related strategies can be applied in the policy or politics streams to strengthen the policy proposal with additional statistical data.

Table 1. Analytical Matrix: Multiple Streams Framework and Think Tank activities

MSF Streams purposes	Actors in focus	Problematizing Strategies	Softening-up strategies	Interaction strategies
Problem stream: Construct a convincing case through defining and framing the problem	Think tanks	- data collection; - dramatizing the issue; - raising awareness about the problem.		
Policy stream: Building consensus on policy solutions	Think tanks		- case-building; - capacity-building	
Politics stream: Working the favourable political environment through getting recognition of the problem among broader interest groups	Think tanks			-Venue creation & cooperation; - networking;

Another reason to focus on the activities of think tanks in the agenda-setting process is that the aspirations of think tanks and their donors to push for top-ranking results (such as eventual policy change) eventually distorts their goals and strategies, and may lead to a disregard for the issue of the quality of the process through which the think tanks work in the first place. The specific relationship type of the think tank with policy-makers undoubtedly leads organizations to act and exercise influence in different ways. The politics and policy process in any country is complicated and it is rare to find one-to-one correspondence between think tank analysis and a policy adopted by government. In this context, this thesis implies that the influence of civil society actors, and specifically think tanks, on public policy is certainly softer, involving raising issues in the minds of policy makers, opening up doors for discussion, linking stakeholders, etc. (Driscoll, Christiansen and Jenks, 2004). This kind of influence is difficult to evaluate. Sometimes, influence can be of an educational nature (for both policymakers and the rest of

civil society) rather than impacting through immediate policy change (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2002). The democratic literature assumes that think tanks can only contribute to a certain part of the policy stream, partly because they cannot compete with the many other actors in an open political system. In non-democracies, the problem is that confrontational actors in the civil society are likely to be excluded from any policy dialogue with the government. In this type of political system, think tanks as the representatives of the non-confrontational segment of civil society can contribute to the policy process at all points. Incorporating think tanks' activities into the study allows understanding of the nuances of the development of civil society in restrictive political regimes. Whether responding to the agenda of others or opening the doors for new issues; whether having an instrumental or sensitive focus; whether in the mainstream or on the margins, the significance of the think tank as a civil society actor must be associated with the specific activities it undertakes in society. By looking at the activities of local research organisations in Azerbaijan in the period from 2003-2014, this thesis also contributes to the understanding of the scope of "change agency" in non-democracies. It must be noted that the current thesis is not about the power influence of think tanks in Azerbaijan. Through a more elaborate description of think tanks' activities in Azerbaijan it will: (i) explore the interactions and activities of think tanks with various stakeholders in the multiple streams of the policy process; and (ii) analysing what implications these activities may ultimately have for civil society functions in non-democracies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed approaches to the study of think tanks and argued for the importance of a focus on their activities in the agenda-setting process. This focus is significant because it is what think tanks do that informs their function in civil society.

Think tank studies have largely two foci: (i) the conditions of proliferation of think tanks; and (ii) the conditions of influence of think tanks in policy change. The

greater part of the literature referred to case studies of countries with an open political system, where scholars observe mainly the relationship between a vibrant think tank culture and political freedoms. Research examining think tanks' work in non-democracies is limited and the findings do not show clear results. In a nutshell, the findings imply that all think tanks are different; context informs think tanks' strategies; and they exert influence in different ways.

In this context, think tanks' contribution to sustaining a process of policy debate nurturing in the non-democracies is largely disregarded. So, this thesis will contribute to this theme by stressing the meaning-assigning and interaction-nurturing functions of think tanks for civil society. Given the argument, the thesis naturally builds on a network approach, which places emphasis on informal relationships between actors and leaves space for the "agents of change" to influence policy debate. Among the various network theories developed for a democratic context, Kingdon's MSF suits best the politically restrictive context, since it is more flexible and makes room for non-bureaucratic actors in the policy process throughout the streams.

However, the MSF did not elaborate on the activities taking place across the streams. So, this thesis suggests a new analytical matrix which integrates a typology of strategies and activities into the MSF to study the work of think tanks in Azerbaijan. The suggested enhancement of the MSF can provide a tool for exploring the activities of think tanks irrespective of the political regime, especially if a researcher goes beyond the goal of exploring only the amount of policy influence of the actors and instead focuses on the process of the work of the actors.

Chapter Three. Exploring and Analysing Activities of Azerbaijani Think tanks

Introduction

This thesis theorizes the role of non-confrontational activities in civil society of non-democracies. It does so by focusing on the activities of local think tanks in agenda-setting in Azerbaijan between 2003 and 2014 in the field of good governance. It argues that, in spite of marginal impact on policy change, through their activities which perform policy debate nurturing function, local think tanks contribute to the boosting legitimacy of the civil society.

The previous chapters have placed this research in the body of the literature on civil society, transitology and think tanks and have suggested a theoretical perspective and analytical matrix to be used in studying the activities of think tanks. The goals of the Chapter Three are to provide a justification for the case selection and to discuss other methodological aspects. The chapter argues that first, the case-study of Azerbaijan illustrates the importance of a broader perspective on civil society that can help make democracy assistance more meaningful. Second, it is argued that the commitments of Azerbaijan before international institutions and expectations of oil revenues stimulated interest in "good governance" issues, such as budget transparency, accountability, public investment management, spending, and monitoring. This, in turn, inspired donors' interest in these issues and the subsequent rise of the local think tanks in the economic domain at the beginning of 2000s. Third, it argues that constructivism is doubly relevant approach for the thesis: through the argument of the thesis and the data collection method. Constructivism asserts that perception is a source of political behaviour and legitimacy. This is fundamental to the argument of the thesis about significance of think tanks as an opinion-making and a problem-framing actor in civil society. Moreover, this perspective allows me to compliment legitimately my field-work with my past work experience as a development worker into the knowledge production process.

The chapter starts with the rationale for case selections with regard to the country, think tanks and policy issues, and how these are related to the research questions.

Then it continues to a discussion of how a constructivist perspective is related to the thesis argument and methodology.

3.1. Rationale for Country Case Selection and the Research Questions

Azerbaijan is chosen as an illustrative case study to support the thesis's invitation into the broader perspective of civil society function. Focus on Azerbaijani think tanks, local non-for-profit research organisations, which have not been previously a subject of any quantitative or qualitative research, provides an opportunity for a theory building beyond the description of the neglected case. The argument which feeds a wider discourse about civil society is inspired by the widespread trend of democracy promotion in the post-communist camp over the last twenty five years which was more readily supporting more confrontational activities of civil society, ignoring other less confrontational activities. As elsewhere, civil society in Azerbaijan has been burdened with the function of democratization and regime change. Meanwhile, the activities and authority of civil society in Azerbaijan has been restricted by preventive legislation, arbitrary law enforcement, implausible procedures, administrative burden, and prosecution. Under such circumstances, measuring the ambitious impact of the civil society and setting high level assessment indicators do not seem plausible and useful, either for understanding the nature of civil society in Azerbaijan or for designing meaningful democracy assistance programmes. In this regard, Azerbaijan is a good case to explore the potential of non-confrontational activities of civil society in non-democracy, when virtually all space for confrontational activities and political opposition has been shut down.

State-civil society relationship

Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in some of its successor states transition failed, in others, democratization was the consequence of a relatively weak state rather than the work of civil society. In other countries, such as Azerbaijan, there was no intention whatsoever to initiate democratic transition from the very beginning, when after a short rule of democratic government, power was hijacked by the ex-Soviet nomenclature in 1992. They maintained control over all

administrative and financial resources of the country using the networks inherited from Soviet times. At the same time, the ruling elite supported their state-building strategy by claiming that their hesitation to open up public space was actually part of a long-term democratization plan. This was summed up by the famous quote of Heydar Aliyev, a former USSR Politburo member, who in 1992 seized power in Azerbaijan from the democratic government: "Democracy is not an apple you can buy in the grocery", implying it is a long-term process. However, this saying did not prevent him and his son, who succeeded him in power in 2003, from continuously shrinking the public space in the country over the last twenty five years through centralizing administrative and financial resources and implementing repressive policies. Between 1995 and 2006 FDI and bonuses from oil companies significantly empowered the Azerbaijani political elite and its power structure (Bayulgen, 2005), and major international oil and transportation projects became the country's and its ruling elite's main assets. Subsequent privatization and structural adjustments benefited mainly the former nomenclature that eventually established oligarchic control over the respective economic sectors and consolidated their power by the mid-2000s in Azerbaijan. Three characteristics are essential to understand post-Soviet Azerbaijan: the clientelistic nature of the government; endemic corruption; and a marginalized opposition and interest groups (Guliev, 2013). Maintaining these characteristics served the purpose of retaining power within a single family. A patron-client network characteristic provides institutional infrastructure for power to penetrate society and state and helps in allocating access to resources. Corruption in this set-up is a pillar of the patron-client network and plays a triple role in Azerbaijan: (i) it smoothens wealth inequality; (ii) it serves as a means of co-optation; (iii) it holds the networks of loyalty together. Thus, by the function of correcting inequality of distribution of oil revenues, and by benefiting practically everybody in the country to various degrees, corruption has become a pillar of a certain level of welfare and the state. Azerbaijani domestic politics is also exercised within the patron-client network and characterized by competition among the patronage network clusters for resources. On top of the pyramid is the president, the function of whom is to maintain the regime by appointing or dismissing officials from official positions (Aves, 2010).

With regard to Azerbaijan's state-civil society relationship, many state officials in Azerbaijan continue to perceive non-governmental organizations as anti-governmental. The government's anxiety about civil society organisations (and especially recipients of international democracy assistance) can be attributed to the close affiliation of some CSOs with the partisan political groupings of the 1990s and the legacy of the Soviet period, which presented the state as a single organizing authority which determines the public good (USAID, 2005). Thus, any claims by the outsiders to speak in the public interest were perceived as weakening the legitimacy of the ruling elite, leading many state officials to see unauthorized consultation with civil society as implicit recognition of the weakness of the state. By 2005, although thousands of CSOs had registered in the country, only hundred fifty–two hundred were considered effective actors on the national or local stage, among which ten-fifteen could be characterized as durable (USAID, 2005). While CSO registration was de facto suspended until 2005, even after that period, the issuing of registration and taxation remained areas where government limited opportunity structures for the civil society sector. The registration process remained arbitrary and politicized. Meanwhile, failure to register had important financial, logistical and psychological consequences for organisations. Nevertheless, later when the registration obstacle was removed, operational problems for CSOs remained.

A wave of repression and hyper sensitivity of non-democracies towards the democracy support work after the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, literally prevented development workers from operating in Azerbaijan. Laws and regulations restricting access to external funding for domestic CSOs have multiplied around the world, including in Azerbaijan. In December 2013 for the first time in twenty years, the whole civil society sector was affected by draconian amendments to CSO laws and massive criminal prosecutions aimed at ending the remaining influence of civil society in Azerbaijan (Ismayil and Remizaite, 2016). This was related to the dramatic drop in the oil price on world markets in 2013 and the geopolitical crisis between the West and Russia. With the goal of eliminating a threat to its legitimacy, the government repressed and sought

to demolish the existing structures of the civil society on the one hand, and the creation of controllable alternative structures for CSOs, on the other (Gahramanova, 2017).In addition, governments started harassing local organizations that accept external support as "foreign agents" seeking to undermine their legitimacy and discourage other actors from cooperating with international donors. Azerbaijani leaders and government-affiliated scholars frequently refer to non-democratic neighbours, such as Iran and Russia, as well as ongoing territorial conflict with Armenia, as an excuse for its heavy-handed policy in domestic politics.

In spite of the generally unfavourable conditions for civil society since the restoration of independence until 2014 Azerbaijani civil society was represented by a variety of actors, among which was a reasonably consolidated community of think tanks, which although lacking in power, remained a reputable opinion-maker in a society. The case of Azerbaijan is illustrative in terms of how expectations of a large amount of revenue to the state budget in 2005 informed the strategies and activities of certain segment of the civil society in Azerbaijan. The period of 2003-2014 was chosen for the study because in Azerbaijani this period was marked by: (i) the increased oil revenue to the country; (ii) relatively mild repression levels; (iii) commitments of the government before international institutions on good governance reforms; and (iv) the start of development work in Azerbaijan by international development institutions. These factors largely inspired a rise of the local think tanks with economic profile.

Azerbaijan in the work of other researchers

Individual clusters of civil society actors in Azerbaijan, let alone the category of the less confrontational activities was neglected by the scholars studying Azerbaijan's political and social system. After a consolidation of the authoritarian regimes in this area became apparent, the paradigm of authoritarian resilience and survival appeared as the main academic lenses. Azerbaijan as a case-study attracted academic interest only in terms of specific topics such as energy policy and politics, foreign influence (Flegel, 2014); the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia; its political-economic structure as a rentier state (Guliyev, 2005);

governance of oil resources and international institutions (Pleines & Wöstheinrich, 2016); the historical overview of the dynamic of development of the country(Cornell, 2015); strategies for authoritarian control (Pearce, and Kendzior. 2016); the dynamic of the relationship with greater powers in the region (Robins, 1993); and democratization problems (Cornell, 2001) including in the context of the colour revolutions (Gahramanova, 2009); some of the works provided an overview of civil society (Ayca, 2010; Aliyev, 2015). In other cases, Azerbaijan was referred to as a standalone assessment of civil society as a whole (Sattarov, Faradov and Mamed-zade, 2007) rather than focusing at the individual clusters of the actors. Several authors have studied public policy-making in Azerbaijan by focusing on elite level policy-making and description of the political system, which provides comprehensive analysis of the political context. The work of Andreas Heinrich (2010) addresses the influence of resource-based economic development on the relationship between political and economic elites and the policy outcomes of those interactions. He describes the mechanisms through which energy sector-related developments and elites influence policy outputs and political stability. Hannes Meissner (2012) examines the oil elite in policy-making in Azerbaijan and suggests that, despite the oil elite and the ruling elite overlapping in Azerbaijan, on closer examination, competition between different clientelistic networks appears driven by rent-seeking interests. Farid Guliyev (2012) provides comprehensive and dynamic account of the structure of Azerbaijan's post-independence elite.

Apart from the topics stated above, the country has not been a part of any recent large-n analysis on think tanks, nor has it been used as a standalone case study on local think tanks/research organizations. Thus, by choosing Azerbaijan as the case-study, the thesis expects to enrich the pool of case-studies on think tanks' role in civil society and, generally, to inform international democracy promotion practice in non-democracies.

Generalizability

There is much that is specific about Azerbaijan, such as, for example, when the regime was preparing for a surge in oil revenue and was sensitive about some aspects of its international reputation, which gave impulse to the development of

local think tanks with economic profile. Nonetheless, Azerbaijan has much in common with a set of post-Soviet republics, which share a number of features in terms of political tradition and geopolitical situation. The combination of preparation for an oil boom and a concern for international legitimacy is perhaps less common, but there may well be other political and economic factors (which are not in the focus of the thesis), which open up an opportunity for civil society organisations to nurture debate on the basis of evidence and expertise in spite of a restrictive political context. Why local think tanks emerged in Azerbaijan in the mid-2000s, and not in Kazakhstan, for example, which also enjoyed enormous oil revenues, is a question to be explored elsewhere. Thus, the case-study is generalizable in terms of the approach to civil society, but less so, in terms of emergence of the local think tanks in individual countries. The function of civil society differs depending on the (dis-) enabling environment, together with the actors and activities in every specific historic timeframe. The process-oriented approach assumes studying the civil society landscape in the individual country before identifying the entry points for the democracy assistance work: in other non-democracies, other functions can be more relevant.

Theoretical relevance and research questions

The case-study of Azerbaijan with its focus at the local think tanks activities and interaction and learning it nurtured fits multiple streams framework which emphasizes the relationships between the actors responsible for policy decisions and other groups (Jordan, Halpin and Maloney, 2004). While senior policymakers delegate some of the responsibility for policymaking to the midlevel bureaucrats, the latter formally and informally seek information and advice from the broader groups, outside of the government. During this process, groups exchange information and expertise to influence the government (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). In this regard, Azerbaijan forms an illustrative case of informal interaction between experts from civil society and mid-level bureaucrats on various issues of public policy within the period of interest for the thesis, i.e. 2003-2014. This thesis emanates from the assumption that think tanks can act in different ways in an attempt to influence different aspects of the policy process be it problem framing,

formulation of policy, implementation or monitoring and evaluation. All their activities eventually contribute into the enhancing legitimacy of civil society in the dialogue with the policy-makers irrespective of its ability to influence immediately policy change. By focusing on the activities of the local think tanks in Azerbaijan in the agenda-setting process, the main research question of the thesis about the role of the think tanks in non-democracies is operationalized into three sub-questions which guide the discussion of the thesis:

- What activities/strategies do think tanks employ to pursue their objectives in policy process in Azerbaijan?
- What are the implications of the identified activities and strategies?
- In which way do the identified activities and strategies of think tanks contribute to civil society legitimacy?

As I discuss throughout the thesis, the case of Azerbaijan can inspire theorists and practitioners to think beyond the immediate impact of civil society on policy or socio-political change. I suggest a process-oriented approach in evaluating civil society in non-democracies: I argue that it is a debate-nurturing function that certain actors perform in civil society which contributes into the boosting legitimacy of the whole civil society. While in Azerbaijan policy debate nurturing can be relatively hard job in comparison with the more open or less repressive countries in terms of policy change impact, the quality of policy debate nurturing work of the local think tanks may be not less meaningful.

3.2. Rationale for Local Think tanks Selection

Starting from the early 1990s, the national independence movement fed the structures of political opposition and civil society in Azerbaijan. In spite of an ever-shrinking public space, civil society organizations have continued their work in human rights, election observation, advocacy, education, service provision, community building, and public policy, representing a small, vulnerable, but still energetic civil society. As the last reason for optimism and hope for meaningful political process were crushed brutally in the October 2003 Presidential elections

following the death of H. Aliyev, many intellectuals started leaving opposition political parties and moving to the civil society sector and establishing not-for-profit research organisations. So, right before the first oil revenues started to flow into the state budget, groups of researchers started coming together into civil society organisations in an attempt to influence state decision-making on good governance issues, which became urgent in 2005.Moreover, the membership of Azerbaijan within international institutions such as the Council of Europe and subsequent commitments of the country before such them allowed newly established local think tanks to set up relevant research and advocacy agendas and shop for relevant venues for policy issues. Thus, expectations of oil revenues and Azerbaijani commitments before international organisations raised the importance of "good governance" related issues such as budget transparency, accountability, public investment management, spending, and monitoring.

Different types of research organisations in Azerbaijan emerged among which were profit, not-for-profit, affiliated with government agencies, and independent. The Azerbaijani government created in-house think tank to conduct a fixed research agenda. While this tactic is certainly not exclusive to restrictive regimes, the function and mission that in-house think tanks perform in non-democracies may be fundamentally different. This was the case in Azerbaijan, where in 2007, the government established the Centre for Strategic Studies (SAM) under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the main function of which was to introduce Western scholarship into the policies of Azerbaijan and rationalize the government's position on various international and domestic issues to the international audience, rather than preparing evidence-based policy recommendations to the government.

For the purpose of the study, officially affiliated think tanks (either with the government or a political party) were deliberately excluded from the focus of the research because affiliation hypothetically suggests adjusting their policy advice to the political incentives of those actors. The independent think tanks within the focus for this research are unaffiliated with any political actor because they wanted to be perceived as non-partisan, or because independence from a party was a part

of their mission to seek the best policy and to be objective source of information to all stakeholders. However, this does not mean that experts within these think tanks were not frequently perceived by other stakeholders in the policy process as "oppositional" due to their former or current background and political sympathies. This thesis is particularly interested in the nurturing of policy debate by local think tanks and in theorizing the function of civil society in the particular unfavourable circumstances of the non-democracy which marginalizes public from policy debate. So, the selection of the local think tanks and associations for the purpose of the thesis was guided by the following criteria:

- ➢ Non-affiliation with the government.
- ➢ Engagement of the organisations in policy issues on budget transparency and local self-government consistently over the last 10 years.
- ➢ Good professional reputation and recognition of their work by various stakeholders expressed in the reference by other stakeholders to the experts.

Based on the suggested criteria, the following think tanks and alliances have been identified to cover the period from 2003-2014: Economic Research Centre, Public Finance Monitoring Centre; Support for Economic Initiatives; Centre for Economic Development; Entrepreneurship Development Foundation;[4]Support to Free Economy. Most of the above listed think tanks (along with the individual independent experts), became the founders and/or members of two major think tanks alliances in focus of the research, which conducted work in the area of local self-governance and budget transparency in Azerbaijan: The Alliance for the Development of Municipalities (BINA); and The National Budget Group (NBG). Since the activities of these two alliances are the main focus of the study, below a brief description of their work is provided. The National Budget Group (NBG), established in 2006 with the support of the Soros Foundation, was an alliance of nine organisations and experts on budget transparency working to combine and coordinate the resources of member organizations. It was the only group in the

Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS), which worked to popularize budget issues among a broader society. Their major tasks included increasing and disseminating state budget information; contributing to improving budget legislation and public participation in the budget process to influence the public decision-making process; promoting accountability in the budget process; and increasing the effectiveness of budget execution. NBG was involved in the activities such as monitoring funds for social spending at the state level; capacity-building of the NBG team to establish a professional budget training team; promoting public participation for transparency in education; raising awareness of budgetary terminology among the public; monitoring of public investment projects; monitoring the allocation of regional subsidies; and promoting awareness and participation in the budget process among the youth.

Another civil society research organisations alliance - BINA, the Alliance for Municipalities Development, was established in May 2009 with the support of Oxfam, by seven think tanks and other CSOs operating in the field of better local self-governance in Azerbaijan with the mission to support decentralization and democratic processes. The Alliance primarily aimed at developing and implementing sound strategies for better local self-government (primarily village municipalities)and coordinating the efforts of and promoting collaboration among the local CSOs in order to strengthen the organizational and institutional capacity of municipalities. The activities of the Alliance included holding round tables on a range of local self-governance issues, training journalists to report on municipal problems, monitoring the current situation with regard to local self-governance in Azerbaijan, identifying issues and developing policy papers, and advocating on behalf of policy proposals.

3.3. Rationale for "Good Governance" Policy issues selection

This thesis uses the "good governance" agenda as a setting to explore the activities of the local think tanks in Azerbaijan. Below, I briefly introduce the "good governance" and its relevance to the Azerbaijan case study. As local self-governance and budget transparency issues were named by the think tanks as the

examples of two most important issues they worked on with different degrees of success in terms of policy influence, these two policy issues have been selected for the case study.

Good governance has become the mantra of the development aid community over the last twenty years, appeared as a model of the "most successful" countries to set good governance standards and criteria for effective economies or political agencies. The concept focuses on the obligation of governments to address the needs of constituencies. The issues of self-governance and state budget transparency were the major topics of the "good governance" concept, and a part of democratic reforms expected from Azerbaijan by the international community. In the "good governance" narrative a local self-government is perceived as the most important means to increase civil engagement in order to attain the best results for the people. It aims at promoting more interactions within the government, and at empowering citizens and community councils. In December 1999, the first municipal elections were conducted in Azerbaijan, leading to the establishment of 2,669 municipalities, the number of which was subsequently reduced by forty percent due to the advocacy and policy proposals of the local think tanks, to enhance the efficiency of municipality institutions. The administrative and territorial divisions of districts, settlements, and town districts form the basis for municipal territorial divisions; a number of laws have established a legal basis for local-self-governance in the country. At the same time, the legal framework in Azerbaijan remained incomplete and failed to promote an effective and coherent system of local self-government. A type of parallel power was created, where a body for "local self-government" was elected by the community and "local executive authority" was appointed by the national president. The situation was complicated by the fact that the division of responsibilities between the two bodies was unclear. The existence of the local executive authority as a parallel, and in some case duplicative form of local government, remained the primary problem in this situation. Moreover, the constitution of Azerbaijan contained problematic provisions relating to municipal government. The initial constitutional pronouncements regarding municipalities were included in the Law of the

Azerbaijan Republic on the Status of Municipalities, defining "local self-government" as a "non-government system of organizing citizens' activity that grants to its citizens the ability to resolve important local issues independently and freely."(Law No. 698-IQ). In other words, municipalities were defined as a mere non-governmental organisation rather than as a self-governing authority. Meanwhile, in December 2001, Azerbaijan undertook a range of commitments with regard to local self-governance in the country by joining the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CoE)[5] conduct regular monitoring visits to all member states to evaluate the implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. After these visits, the Congress sets out conclusions and adopts recommendations which governments are required to follow. Ultimately, the work of the BINA alliance managed to keep the issue of local self-governance on the agenda, and after a long break, the CoE resumed their regular monitoring visits to Azerbaijan, and drew their monitoring reports from the annual evaluation reports of BINA.

Another part of good governance, which the thesis focuses on, is the issue of State budget transparency, which refers to the extent and ease with which citizens can access information about and provide feedback on government revenues, allocations, and expenditures. Budget transparency is a prerequisite for public participation and accountability. A budget that is not transparent, accessible, and accurate cannot be properly analysed; its implementation cannot be effectively monitored, nor its outcomes evaluated. Budget transparency and oversight over how resources are allocated and spent are powerful discouragements for officials to misappropriate funds, and for the ruling elite to manipulate the budget. In other words, eventually, budget transparency helps to reduce corruption.[6]Given the

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[5]This is a pan-European political assembly, the 648 members of which hold elective office (they may be regional or municipal councilors, mayors or presidents of regional authorities), and representing over 200,000 authorities in 47 European states. Its role is to promote local and regional democracy, improve local and regional governance and strengthen authorities' self-government. It pays particular attention to application of the principles laid down in the European Charter of Local Self-Government.
[6]"Budget Transparency Initiative: Budget Transparency: What, Why, and How? Using Budgets to Empower People", World Bank, available from:

technical nature of budgets, transparency requires that the information contained in budgets be presented in simplified form and actively disseminated to citizens. Moreover, such information must be distributed in a timely manner so that citizens can provide feedback and inform policy formulation. Two decades ago, a transparent and inclusive budgeting process was considered risky by leading international development institutions. For this reason, public budgets were supposed to be drafted and managed exclusively by the finance ministry. The situation has now changed, and all major international institutions now promote financial transparency as good practice. There is also the growing acceptance that active engagement of civil society in budget processes contributes to a transparent and inclusive budget process, which is seen as essential to facilitating investment, ensuring efficient outcomes, and holding government accountable for managing public resources. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are now champions of open fiscal systems and practices. Thus, the international tendency to engage civil society in budget processes on the one hand, and the expectation of massive oil revenues in the mid-2000s on the other hand, informed the research interests of Azerbaijani local think tanks and encouraged monitoring, policy and advocacy activities with regard to the state budget transparency issues to ensure public awareness (if not control) over effective spending of funds by the government. Due to the consistent work on the Open Budget indicators, Azerbaijan became the first country in the post-Soviet realm to pilot the Open Budget Index in 2007, which has become one of the most influential sources of information today on the situation with regard to the budget transparency worldwide.

3.4. Key concepts

In this section I will explain the empirical application of the concepts I used in the research and how they are related to each other.

3.4.1. Civil society and non-confrontational activities

When a civil society in the post-Soviet realm is mentioned, discussion is frequently limited to the conclusion that it remains institutionally weak due to the unfavourable Soviet legacy, restrictive state policies, or a certain kind of political culture. In other words, the case of Azerbaijan's civil society is frequently framed as a "failed civil society," which assumes non-fulfilment of certain expectations with regard to the assumed function of the civil society, namely - leading democratization and driving regime change. These functions frequently assumed confrontational, oppositional nature of the function and activities of the civil society in the post-Soviet area. That may include protest mobilization; demonstrations; pointing and shaming; calls for strike, boycott; harsh criticism, and other forms of calling for action.

However, the fact that there has never been a particularly enabling environment for the civil society and oppositional parties, or that political culture is different to the West, does not imply lack of dissent, activity or alternative discourse in Azerbaijan over the last twenty five years since independence. Behind the schematic assessment of the civil society along the weak-strong continuum, interesting processes, actors and activities have gone unrecorded. First of all, these are the less or non-confrontational activities, which can be described as a consensus seeking, engaging tactics aimed at spreading knowledge, sharing findings, raising awareness about various problems, nurturing policy education, interaction and cooperation among various stakeholders who may not necessarily share similar social vision, but are concerned about the future of the country. Acknowledgment of these activities as not less meaningful than conformational activities requires revision of the perception of the civil society beyond the oppositional function. Therefore, this thesis defines civil society as a fluctuating process and forum where various participants, exercising both confrontational and non-confrontational activities, play multiple roles: watchdog; service provision; advocacy; and nurturing public debates. This perspective on civil society's multiple roles allows each of them to be considered as a contributor to the pluralisation of society.

For the purpose of the thesis the strategies that were revealed during the research were categorized as: (a) problematizing strategies which are assigned to the problem identification stream; (b) softening-up strategies which are referred to

policy formulation; and (c) interaction strategies which are related to the politics stream. Each of these strategies encompasses certain activities which comprised the function of debate-nurturing: data collection; dramatizing the issue; raising awareness about the problem; case-building; capacity-building; venue creation and cooperation; and networking. Through a more elaborate description of think tanks activities in Azerbaijan, this thesis: (i) explores the interactions and activities of think tanks with various stakeholders in the multiple streams of the agenda-setting process; and (ii) analyses implications these activities may ultimately have for civil society functions in non-democracies.

3.4.2. Agenda-setting and the Nurturing of Policy Debate

This thesis points to the importance of the activities of the actors as easily tractable evidence of the nurturing of debate. In other words, the focus is switched from the immediate policy change impact of the activities to the features of the process these activities nurture and their implications. The setting the argued function of the civil society evolves in is the agenda-setting process. Agenda-setting is defined as a broad process of influencing the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002: 1-18) expressed in awareness, attention, concern, and leading to various outcomes.

While not all CSOs have aim to influence policy, they do bring together actors with shared normative values for realizing a particular social vision. It is with this goal that think tanks interact with other actors in the problem, policy and politics streams of agenda-setting. The policy process is a constantly evolving process of the dialogue held by various actors. In this process, think tanks, by definition, are the actors articulating a particular social vision. In the case of Azerbaijan, the local think tanks I study were advocating for strong local self-governance, accountable government, and a transparent budget as the pre-conditions for an economically and politically sustainable state. In this process, whether an issue becomes a matter of public concern depends upon the meaning that certain actors attach to it: facts become facts as a result of judgment, attaching meaning to the scope of indicators. In this regard, agenda-setting is where the think tanks are most vocal in

defining and re-defining policy issues. For example, they decide how to determine causality between the problem and the solution which implies that a certain problem is a sphere of responsibility of the state. Mainstreaming certain terminology frames a discourse in a certain way.

3.4.3. Legitimacy of civil society

"Legitimacy is generally understood as the right to be and do something in society - a sense that an organization is lawful, admissible, and justified in its chosen course of action" (Edwards, 2000: 20). The debate-nurturing function of think tanks in this process of agenda-setting has implications for legitimacy: both on that of the government, and on that of the civil society. The local think tanks are in a position to challenge the moral legitimacy of the government by raising issues that the government would want to hide, cover, understate, hereby strengthening their own moral legitimacy. In the second case, the debate nurturing function of think tanks strengthens the overall voice of civil society and, thereby, enhances the performance legitimacy of the civil society in the eyes of citizens not least by the very fact of their expertise on public policy issues.

Broadly speaking, the state-civil society relationship is a sphere where the struggle for legitimacy, that of state or civil society, manifests itself. In Azerbaijan, where at least a part of the civil society represents challenges to the monopoly of the state in its definition of public good and policy determination, the government perceives any unauthorized activities or uncontrolled venue of discourse as a challenge to its own legitimacy, and attempts to de-legitimize the most vocal representatives of the civil society, for example by undermining their moral authority by shaming them for their foreign funding sources. In this context, the issue of legitimacy for CSOs is closely linked to their missions and the strategies by which they seek to accomplish those missions. Civil society organizations are legitimate when their roles and activities are accepted as appropriate to their contexts. Influence over policies and institutions may have different sources of legitimacy such as moral, performance, political or legal legitimacy (Brown, et al., 2001). Moral legitimacy, which draws upon claiming moral superior values depends on CSO ability to make

a case that persuasive in terms of the values of critical stakeholders. Performance legitimacy draws upon claims for expertise and knowledge, alternative data, interpretations which may boost or downgrade performance claims of the CSOs. Legal legitimacy regards to the compliance with legal expectations, mandates, and usually is raised by the government agencies charged with regulating activities of civil society actors (Brown, et al., 2001). Moreover, these bases refer to the aspects such as the sensitivity level of the issue; other stakeholders' interests in the issue; and the short and long-term cost of action on the problem, all of which can affect legitimacy of the organization. In other words, the state-civil society relationship is a realm where permanent negotiation is going on with regard to the legitimacy of actors, issues and methods.

3.5. Manifestation of Constructivism in the Study

The current thesis bears the features of exploratory, descriptive and interpretative categories of the case study. It is guided by a general exploratory question regarding the activities that think tanks use to pursue their objectives in policy process. In this case study, a prior fieldwork and a small-scale data collection was conducted before the final research questions and propositions were formulated. This initial work helped to prepare an analytical framework for the study and determine the focus. Next, the research proceeded with the description of the nature of the think tanks and their activities. Finally, by discussing implications of the identified activities of think tanks, the study presents the interpretative feature. Constructivism in the thesis comes not only as a worldview of the author, but also as related to the (a) argument of the thesis with regard to the interpretative function of civil society; and (b) as a data collection exercise in the explorative and descriptive aspect of the study. Below, I will look into these aspects of constructivism as they manifested in the thesis.

3.5.1. Constructivism as the role of think tanks in civil society

Constructivism as a function of think tanks is manifest in the topic of the thesis, first of all, through the debate-nurturing activities of the think tanks. Framing conditions into problems, determining causality of problems and solutions, mainstreaming

certain vocabulary and terms all exhibit the constructivist function of think tanks. For example, a choice of the term "self-governance" over "decentralization" in the vocabulary of the policy papers of the think tanks was informed by the reluctance to unnecessarily irritate the government who put all its resources at the strengthening centralization of the state. At the same time, the government assimilated some of the vocabulary of "good governance" such as "budget transparency", "public investment monitoring and evaluation", "accountability", "citizen participation" and other due to its commitments before the international political organisations and financial institutions. Through bringing data from other countries, think tanks were able to make comparisons and frame certain conditions as problems which needed the urgent attention of the government. For example, by drawing causality between poverty in the regions and the unsatisfactory quality of work of the local municipalities, think tanks were able to build a case linking these two factors and urge the government to support the local self-governance more efficiently.

Perceptions of what is legitimate are another explanation of why issues are framed as problems in the agenda. In this regard, the ideological element of the policy ideas became obvious when think tanks point out the discrepancy between the observed situation and the perceived ideal situation. As perception of certain facts is a primary source of political behaviour and public policy process plays a key role in it through defining problems and framing assumptions (Saurugger, 2016), think tanks are in position to impact the legitimacy of both the government and the civil society through revealing problems, drawing conclusions about causality, and introducing concepts. In this regard, contrary to the idea that there is a sound mechanism of detecting problems and prioritizing, rational cost-benefit analysis and powerful actors (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015: 5), Kingdon's MSF also embraces constructivism in terms of explaining the question of what makes people pay attention to certain issues and not others, by proposing a framework, which combines structure (institution), agency (transfer of ideas), and timing, through the concept of "windows of opportunity". In this sense, the public policy arena is understood as the result of interaction between individuals whose interests are

based, not only on a rational cost-benefit calculation, but also on something that is embedded into the specific social context, values and norms (Saurugger, 2016) that brings legitimation to the problem. Think tanks are one of the transferors of these values and norms into the policy sphere by creating a common understanding in the social context: through unavoidably ideological lenses (liberal in our case-study) they present conditions as problems, and construct causality. In the case-study, they did so by bringing comparative cases from various countries geographically, culturally, or contextually close to Azerbaijan.

Generally, social constructivism as one of the manifestation of the function of think tanks helps to emphasize the influence and diffusion of good governance discourse, and generally, democracy proliferation worldwide, which makes an authoritarian regime of governance a less obvious option to the people (Lynch, 2008). While the parameters of the political system are not irreversible, social interactions may have an impact once there is a window of opportunity, or they can even create this very window of opportunity. In other words, structures are not fixed, but are flexible constructions that interact with the norms and identities of agents and agencies. In this regard, as civil society is seen as an arena of engagement and social exchange in this thesis, and think tanks as one of the actors with the debate-nurturing function, social constructivism is a suitable framework for this thesis.

3.5.2. Constructivism as a data collection method

The research tracked the work of the think tanks through all streams of the agenda-setting process starting from the mid-2000s. The following tasks were implemented during the research: (a) the contextual factors of think tank functioning were described; (b) the policy issues, a process, the actors and the activities they were engaged in as connected to the example of two policy cases (budget transparency and local self-governance) were identified and described. The following information was acquired during the fieldwork:

(a) details about each of the policy case studies, namely, how think tanks came up with the policy ideas; what activities and strategies they used and why; what

partners and stakeholders were engaged; who were the policy actors/partners/focal points in media, civil society, government; what joint activities they were engaged in; what value added all actors provided into the process;

(b) interviewees' analysis and opinion on the dynamics of think tank functioning and socio-political environment impact; the outcomes of the projects and reasons for relative success and failure in policy influence; patterns of mutual influence*;* ties with the various stakeholders in society and policymakers; access and availability of data; demand in research; attention of the stakeholders to think tank outputs*;* civil society's integration into public policy process; accessibility of policy-makers; collateral/secondary networks and outcomes produced as a result of the process. The information was acquired from the following sources of data:

1) Written sources, including projects' annual and final reports; think tank policy papers, briefings and presentations; press releases; government white papers, resolutions, legislative acts on the issues; and speeches of the major incumbents on the issues, were reviewed and analysed;

2) Face-to-face interview in-depth semi-structured interviews notes with representatives of target think tanks and other actors engaged during the course of the project (journalists, midlevel government officials, other CSOs, Members of Parliament). In total, 23 interviews were conducted (see Annex I. List of Interviewees and their short bios). These included individual interviews with the main actors on the policy issue in focus, and included five groups of actors: (i) journalists; (ii) think tank members; (iii) members of the parliament; and (v) international donors. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Skype (if the interviewee was not available in the country).

3) Participant observation was performed both through the past work of the author in Azerbaijan while working for international donor organisations, and during the field visit made within the research term, where the researcher observed the audience during issue-based conferences and workshops.

The data collection methodology of the thesis involved questioning the binary distinction between the "researcher" and the "object" of the research, manifested in the auto-ethnographic approach which comes as a complementary method in addition to fieldwork to bring my own experience, observation, and knowledge gained during the years of the work in international development industry into the research. That helped to bring the unique insights of the researcher who was once a participant of the process into the research. In combination with the field-research, the purpose of which was to acquire and record new knowledge, auto-ethnographic reflexivity (Adams and Ellis, et al., 2015) allowed me to benefit from being once an insider and to provide a more comprehensive picture of the process and meanings. The method revealed aspects of the topic that would otherwise remain concealed to 'external' eyes. Auto-ethnographic reflexivity focuses on the consequences narratives have for the resonance it brings (Ellis, 2004: 22). This relates to the ultimate objective of the thesis at resonance to open up conversation and inform international democracy promotion approach and programmes in a meaningful way. Through participant observation and interviewing I aimed to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it and complement it with my own reflexivity. The emphasis of constructivism on agency makes it relevant for exploring various civil society actors, since regime institutions, actors, and norms are seen constitutive of each other. Like constructivist works that highlight marginalized and ignored voices, this research aimed at bringing to light the unrecorded work of the actors who were long ignored. The interpretative nature of constructivism means the researcher cannot escape his or her own view in trying to see the situation as unbiased observer (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). This stance of constructivism, that the scholar's understanding is shaped through reflection on personal experience and relating it to new and previous knowledge, makes this perspective relevant to the spirit of the current thesis. Namely, the fact that I have long experience in the development field, having worked for various international development organisations such as USAID, Oxfam, GIZ managing democracy assistance and economic reform support projects in Azerbaijan enriched my research. This work involved dealing with multiple stakeholders from the civil society realm, government, the international donor community and

research institutions, during which the author observed the dynamics of civil society development, and witnessed political issues, challenges, and metamorphoses that civil society actors faced at various times after the restoration of independence. A constructivist perspective allowed me to bring my own knowledge and reflexivity to the established theoretical concepts, with the purpose of highlighting the activities of an academically neglected actor of civil society: local not for profit think tanks. My established reputation as an insider in the civil society ensured that I had the trust of certain categories of interviewees. Interviewees did not feel a need to be too detailed in their explanations, since they knew that I understood the context and the subject. Neither did they complain or attempt to impress me, as frequently happens when a researcher is a foreigner and there is a certain expectation of her. At the same time, the attitude of the interviewees towards me was grateful, as to someone who was recording a scope of the work they had been engaged in for many years, and which, otherwise, would be left unrecorded, lost and forgotten. As one of the interviewees sadly said: "You have come to excavate the ruins of our civil society under which our work is buried…" (Aslanli, Interview, Baku, August 2017).

The major problem encountered during the research was the avoidance of the state officials to participate in the interviews. Field visits overlapped with a time in which the government shut down any unauthorized communication with external contacts, due to the geopolitical circumstances. In other cases, premature death of the main state focal point in the work on budget transiency prevented me from interviewing him. However, analysis of the primary and secondary written sources, observation of the proxy indicators (such as, for example, participation of the representatives of the relevant state agencies in the workshops and other events organized by the think tank alliances) helped in gathering information on the selected cases and in triangulating with the interview information. This also included a review of the documents such as organizational designs, research papers, information on the demonstrated impact on policy, and mission statements, as well as examination of communication materials, papers, press coverage, events and a review of annual and final project reports. Thus,

acknowledging the problems associated with the retrospective process tracing over the quite long period of the history (ten years) such as loss of sources, death of actors, the disappearance of infrastructure as a result of repression, the exile of the actors, and the restrictive political environment, it was still possible to retrieve part of the information and documents, which informed understanding about how the think tanks were operating in agenda-setting realm of the policy process in Azerbaijan within 2003-2014.

3.6. Limitations of the methods

In this paragraph I will summarize some limitations of the study and the characteristics of design and methods that might have influenced the interpretation of the findings from my research. I will reflect on my methods, which have been eliminated for my research; issues of internal and external validity; my positionality; and challenges during the data collection.

During the design of the project, a number of methods have been analysed to select the one that is most adequate to the purpose and research questions of the thesis. Process tracing was the method closely considered but eventually left out. Process tracing is a popular qualitative method which is used for tracing causal mechanisms from causes to the outcomes. While the method has a good potential for the attempts to reconstruct the past process its main goal is "to help to greater understanding of the causal dynamics that produced the outcome of a particular historical case and to shed light on generalizable causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes within a population of causally similar cases" (Beach, 2017: 1). In other words, since my research was not about the power influence of think tanks in Azerbaijan, which, in this case, would have its goal to measure the influence of activities of think-tanks on the particular policy change, a process tracing as a main method for my research was ruled out. Instead, the research had a goal to elaborate the process as represented by the scope of activities of think tanks during which it explored the interactions and activities of think tanks with various stakeholders in the multiple streams of the policy process; and analysed implications these activities may ultimately have for civil society functions in non-

democracies. Therefore, guided by the purpose of the research, auto-ethnographic and field research approaches were considered as more appropriate and mutually complimentary. In this way, I was able to incorporate my own experience, expertise and memories into the new findings of the field research, which enriched the study.

Speaking of internal and external validities as the conventional categories referring to the degree of confidence of the argument, I would like to note the following. First, the study is certainly does not have strong internal validity since I did not test or measure any causal relationship. Though I analyse the impact of the think-tanks on the policy change, my major focus was at the actors' activities, interaction among various stakeholders in the realm of agenda-setting and implications as constitutive of each other rather than measuring causal mechanisms. Second, referring to extend to which results from the study can be generalized to other situations, groups or events, it needs to be noted that the external validity of the study is only partial. On the one hand the approach to civil society and the proposed analytical framework of the enhanced multiple streams framework in this research can be applied to other societies irrespective of the nature of political regime, and to any actors participating in the agenda-setting process (such as media, scholars, middle level officials, donors, etc). At the same time, there are certain constraints on generalizability in terms of the role and type of the activities of think tanks in various contexts, as well as issues they work on.

My positionality in the research is significant due to my ten-year experience in the international development industry in Azerbaijan, during which I have accumulated expertise in public affairs of Azerbaijan; and understanding of the development assistance scope of work in this country; as well as actors and stakeholders. On the one hand, my positionality as a former project manager, civil society actor and academician in various times, allowed me to have a broader, multidimensional perspective to the situation. On the other hand, being once a part of the context makes it hard to ignore one's own perspective and opinion, and detach oneself completely from the research participants and knowledge one already had before empirical research. In this regard, certainly, my educational and work background

as well as ideological worldview had significant impact on my research and conclusions. While my positionality may pose a question on my ethical position, especially on the part of positivistists, it shall not be ignored that I am coming from constructivist perspective, which has fundamentally different views about how legitimate is the scholar's position for research; if it is possible to do research, shape research questions, methods outside of ideological worldview; if it is feasible to separate a researcher and the object of the research. However, being aware of the risks, and in the attempts to mitigate them, I invested time and energy in defining the goals of the research to make them as clear as possible; and in conceptualising the argument reasonably.

The most challenging factor during the research was the process of establishing knowledge over the quite long period of time on the topic which was not previously researched. In this regard, loss of available data, limited access to certain group of the interviewee, self-reported data was challenging. The interviewees reported loss of computers with the hard drives containing data; death of the project partners and focal points; web-sites shut down due to the lack of resources to sustain them; not comprehensive reports depositories of the donor organisations. Field research overlapped with time of the government shutting down to the external contacts, which led to the failure to have desirable interviewees from the government. All these did not facilitate the process of establishing knowledge because self-reported data if not verified could lead to exaggeration and selective memory. Bearing aware of these risks, I mitigated them through triangulation of information: where possible I drew evidence from various interviewees, reports, YouTube videos, articles, legislative acts, policy papers, briefers, and newspapers.

Conclusion

Studying Azerbaijani civil society is worthwhile for several reasons. First, this is a case where the narrow interpretation of civil society and the mechanistic approach to democracy promotion and civil society assistance was unsuccessful. Second, in spite of the continuously shrinking public space, a small but energetic civil society

continued to function in various spheres, implying that even in non-democracies, there is some space and some independent actors. Third, local think tanks emerged, functioned, and nurtured policy debate and networks among various actors in agenda-setting process, in way that sets Azerbaijan apart from other non-democracies which did not see the same phenomenon. So, it adds to the pool of the case-studies on civil society. The nature and scope of the activities of Azerbaijani think tanks may not be as ambitious as in the established democracies or even in partially democratic countries, but they can help us understand the life of civil society in non-democracies, its functions, and its political implications.

Guided by the overarching research question about the role of think tanks in non-democracies, the thesis revolves around a number of issues, namely, (i) how think tanks in Azerbaijan have attempted to influence policy process; (ii) what activities and strategies they employed to pursue their objectives throughout the multiple policy streams of the agenda-setting process; and (iii) what implications the identified activities of the think tanks may have for civil society's functions.

The key concepts I used in answering these questions are civil society and its non-confrontational activities; agenda setting and debate nurturing; and the legitimacy of civil society. This thesis theorizes that the debate nurturing function and related activities of think tanks contribute to the overall legitimacy of civil society, which carries a particular functional significance in non-democracies. To illustrate the argument, the case study of Azerbaijan focuses on the debate nurturing activities of the local think tanks in good governance policy issues (local-self-governance and budget transparency) in the period of 2003-2014. This thesis argues for a broadening of perspective on civil society, to see it, not as an institution constructed for good with strict divisions between the economic and political spheres, but rather as a fluctuating process and a forum where different participants constantly play multiple roles. The roles include capacity building, service provision, monitoring, advocacy, and maintaining public policy discourse in the society.

This thesis is inspired by a constructivist epistemological perspective, which highlights marginalized and ignored voices more than any other ideological perspective, by allowing think tanks to be seen as a meaningful actor in the social process. Constructivism is central both to the argument of the thesis, namely, in the constructivist function of the think tanks, and to the method of data collection. A constructivist understanding of collective perceptions of certain facts as a primary source of political behaviour makes it relevant to the argument of the thesis about the significance of think tanks as an opinion-making and a problem-framing actor in civil society. Constructivism as a data collection method manifested itself through combination of participant observation, interviews and auto-ethnographic reflexivity. This combination allowed me to blur the border between myself as a researcher and the participants of the research by taking advantage of me having once been in the shoes of a donor in Azerbaijan. This allowed me to legitimately incorporate my past experience, memory, and observation into the knowledge production process. Moreover, compliant with the constructivist perspective in terms of the practical resonance of the findings, this thesis can potentially contribute to democracy promotion though increasing awareness about the nuances of the civil society functions in non-democracies. At the same time, being aware of the potential risks of being once a part of the context, loss of data, self-reporting, selective memory, exaggeration I applied a spectrum of methods which allowed me to mitigate risks of bias.

The next chapter refers to the legacy of the evolving role of the epistemic community in the USSR and analyses the context of the local think tanks in Azerbaijan. The chapter, not only provides a bridge to the analysis of the empirical information gathered, but also supports the main argument of the thesis with regard to the implications of think tank activities for the broader society.

Chapter Four. Research Centres in USSR and The role of Asymmetrical Power Context in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan for Non-confrontational Profile of the Local Think tanks.

Introduction

The purpose of the Chapter Four is twofold. On the one hand, it presents a history of research centres in the USSR to support the overall argument about the potential role the local think tanks can play in non-democracies. On the other hand, the Chapter explains how the asymmetrical power context in post-Soviet Azerbaijan influenced the functioning of civil society and, in particular, its less confrontational segment.

The reference to the role of the research institutes of the Academy of Sciences in the USSR in this thesis serves to strengthen the overall argument about the role of non-confrontational activities of civil society in non-democracies. Scholars usually come to the broad conclusion that the Soviet policy-making system represented only a small group of elite individuals in decision-making. In such a totalitarian state, there could not be research institutes independent of the government. Only in the final years of USSR, a more systematic role of the research institutes was registered in the policy process (Stryuk, 2000). However, behind this straightforward conclusion, the role and dynamic of the Soviet epistemic community was not sufficiently articulated and was, therefore, forgotten, which means it does not inform scholarship about the potential role of the broader epistemic community in contemporary non-democracies for civil society and state-building. Certainly, the restrictiveness of the Azerbaijani regime is far from the totalitarianism of USSR. The merging of government structures and oligarchies in Azerbaijan produced ruling elite which monopolized public discourse by hijacking all administrative resources. The Azerbaijani government naturally tends to constrain the public sphere, retaining pluralism to an extent which does not

threaten its own grip on power and its monopoly on the definition of the public good. The attempts of genuinely independent non-governmental actors to hold debates on vital topics are perceived as potentially destabilizing, because the prospect of any political conflict is perceived as threatening. However, starting from the mid-2000s, and up until the massive crack-down on the civil society in 2014, the local think tanks continued their work in a difficult environment.

The second part of the chapter deals with the operationalization of the non-democratic context. Inspired by the Mc Gann and Weaver's work on the environment for think tanks (2002: 20)[7], the chapter analyses a number of relevant (dis-) enabling factors: (i) political/institutional; (ii) legal; (iii) funding; (iv) ideological; (v) intellectual supply and demand; and (vi) technology.

4.1. The think tank tradition in USSR

Scholars distinguished two major periods of development of Soviet think tanks and their role in process of policy-making: 1956-82 and 1982-89 associated with the time in office of various First Secretaries of the Communist Party and marked by an ideological shift which created the need for new ideas and a new framework for policy-making (Sandle, 1998: 202). However, it worthwhile to note also the period preceding the 1950s since the organized system of research expanded during the early Soviet years. While in 1917 there was only one institute within the Academy (the Caucasian Historical-Archaeological Institute), the forms of new institutions which emerged in the 1920s were a result of a blending of foreign, native and revolutionary influences, so by 1927 there were already eight institutes. Between 1927 and 1933, 29 major organizations appeared in the Academy (Graham, 1975). The system of scientific research that emerged in the Soviet Union by the 1930s was based on three pyramids: the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the republican academies, the educational institutions, and the governmental ministries. However, the full members of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR

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[7]The operationalization of the systemic factors influencing the rise and functioning of think tanks have been inspired by the table of McGann and Robert Kent Weaver (2002) analysing the environment favourable for proliferation of think tanks such as political environment; the legal environment; the funding environment; intellectual/ideological and cultural environment; labour supply & demand environment; think tank environment; technological environment.

occupied the most prestigious academic positions in the Soviet Union. The Soviet planners looked at the new types of research organizations developing in the West and attempted not only to catch up but actually to anticipate Western trends. In the process they promoted the idea of specialized research institutes, and downgraded research in the universities to a low status (Graham, 1975).

The period after Stalin, 1956 was marked by the thaw started by Khrushchev. The Academy of Sciences with its institution staff doubled forming a sort of a bridge between the party state and universities, and the Party was trying to engage expert knowledge for policy-making. The later period was marked by the struggle between reformers led by Andropov, who wanted to take Khruschev's reforms further and the conservatives led by Suslov, who wanted to retain the Stalinist status quo. Interestingly, while universities were under stricter political control than the institutes of the Academy of Sciences, they remained more conservative. At the same time, certain institutions developed a more autonomous position with regard to the state and closer relationship with the party leaders (Sandle, 1998). Gradually, participation of consultants from the institutes in the policy-making process stimulated creation of Soviet research centres, which eventually, initiated the process of opening up the political-ideological realm to influences from the "outside". It was the need for economic reform in the first place that required the Soviet leadership to explore new approaches to Soviet economic development. So, a group of economists was set up which had important input into discussion and policy formulation. While the group was not independent, the individuals within this group later formed the core of the policy coalition of political leaders, media figures, bureaucrats which emerged after 1985 during Perestroika (Burlatskiy, 1988).

Two economic centres were prominent at that time: Academic City in Siberia and the Institute of World Economy & International Relations (ИМЕМО) created in the mid-1950s. They were financed from the state, staff salaries were high. Being highly specialized bodies and enjoying a monopoly on expertise, they became haven for young and innovative scholars, who were producing research reports, proposals, and analytical studies. Georgi Arbatov, the Kremlin's top specialist on

U.S., an adviser to the Soviet leadership and a director of Moscow's Institute for the Study of the United States and Canada, noted that consultants had a central role, as they were writing memoranda, speeches, and decisions for bureaucracy (which, of course, were subject to revision by apparatchiks) (Arbatov, 1992).Moreover, the institutes also contributed to the intellectual climate by publishing ideas and proposals in a number of outlets. While censorship limited the ability of the institutes to contribute to policy, a gradual relaxation of the control of the Communist Party made the policy process more open to influence from outside. Further, this allowed the creation of the network of centres across the USSR (Sandle, 1998). The abolition of the "democratic" elements of the Khrushchev regime and the proclamation of "developed socialism" free from dissent by Brezhnev in 1968 meant of the protection of internal politics and resistance to "voluntarism and subjectivism". However, some centres, such as those in Akademgorodok (Academic Town) in Siberia survived because of its remote geographical location and continued to shelter critical-minded scholars who were able to disseminate ideas through specialized departmental journals with restricted readerships.

In the 1970s the Soviet leadership was unofficially searching for a solution of social and economic problems. Eventually, this attracted research centres into consultation in the policy-making process. Although the range of policy alternatives was narrow (and unpublished), the research institutes widened the scope of policy alternatives under Andropov (Dror, 1984). The so-called Novosibirsk Report, a confidential seminar paper by the Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, contained radical reform proposals (Cohen, 1989). Many scholars consider this report one of the first signs of perestroika. A classified paper prepared under the direction of Tatyana Zaslavskaya of the Novosibirsk Institute of Economics addressed the crisis in the agriculture of the Soviet Union. An outline of a proposed research project to study the social mechanisms of economic development in Siberian agriculture, the report was sharply critical of current conditions. Organized in April 1983 by the Sociology Department of the Institute of Economics and Industrial Engineering of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the conference

discussed the report. Mikhail Gorbachev discussed this report within the higher echelons of the Soviet Communist Party, and it is believed that this report was the basis of Gorbachev's criticism of administrative methods the economic management at the 27th Party Congress in March 1986, which initiated Perestroika and Glasnost (Nelson and Kuzes, 2003).Gorbachev's call for "new thinking" in 1986 brought the research institutes into the centre of political discourse and the policy-making process. Alexander Yakovlev a former chief of Party ideology, who was appointed a head of IMEMO (ИМЕМО) in the 1980s, was considered to be the intellectual force behind Gorbachev's Perestroika; and IMEMO played a leading role in fostering a set of values and norms among the policy-making elite. While Glasnost was meant to be an instrument of selective openness to stimulate economic reform, it fostered further critical thinking, and eventually broadened the scope of acceptable topics for public discussion. The head of IMEMO acted as a policy entrepreneur, and the institute had relevant expertise as well as access to channels of political leadership (Checkel, 1993: p 287). The dominion of reformists in the party leadership fundamentally transformed the relationship of research centres and media with the Party leadership and bureaucracy: a policy coalition of party reformers and Academy of Science institute experts emerged (Cohen,1989). Thus, Perestroika and Glasnost provided an enabling environment for think tanks' work: relative intellectual freedom, access to the political leadership, as well to information from abroad, and funding.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as the funding of the Academy of Sciences was reduced, researchers started creating their own specialized analytical centres (Bruckner, 1996: pp.1-4), all over the post-Soviet space. National governments pursued economic reforms and institutional restructuring, which presented opportunities for policy advice. However, the legal framework for the creation of think tanks in the Western model in most of the post-Soviet nations was emerging very slowly. Conditions in Azerbaijan were less favourable for incubating not only Western-style think tanks, but also think tanks similar to those in Russia. Part of the reason for this was that decision-making in the USSR was always heavily concentrated in Moscow, although the constituent republics had their own duplicated structures and institutions. In Azerbaijan, the leading role in

terms of the policy-making, advisory cadres was played by the Institute of Oriental Studies. In 1988, during Perestroika, which gave impulse to the formation of the national popular fronts across USSR, The Temporary Incentive Centre of the Popular Front in Azerbaijan was organized (mainly comprising academicians and employees of the research centres and the Academy of Sciences). The Centre engaged in discussion of the ways of getting the country out of the economic crisis, and the programme it developed was inspired by the text of similar programmes of the Baltic countries' Popular Fronts, largely reflecting the model of the social democracy exemplified by the Nordic countries. Liberalization and pluralisation were seen as the way to save the state, and the Swedish model was perceived as the most acceptable (Interview with Zardusht Alizadeh, August, 2016). In 1989, The Strategic Planning Group was created at the Central Committee of the Party in Azerbaijan. However, the group was not effective in influencing policy making, neither during Mutalibov's nor during Elchibey's presidencies after the collapse of USSR. Heydar Aliyev, a former Politburo member, after hijacking the power in 1992, dissolved the Group and kept only three advisors: on economic issues, foreign affairs and political issues.

As the desk-top research shows, the broader epistemic community in USSR was able to evolve at various times in the USSR (during totalitarianism, thaw, and perestroika) into the networks of research centres which eventually fed the advisory body of the reformers during Gorbachev's time. While the formal institutional structure was not changed substantially over time, as Gorbachev expanded the consultative process in the country during Perestroika and Glasnost, the value of the technical advice was enhanced. Certainly, while the epistemic community in the USSR widened the scope of debate, it is not possible to assess its policy impact, given the control of information monopolised by the Party. Nevertheless, reference to the case of the USSR draws attention to the importance of interaction and venue creation even in the most restrictive political context, which years later was inspired by the opening of the political opportunities. Moreover, the nurtured structures and communities not only grasped the window of opportunity but also, to certain extend, informed the window of opportunity for

radical political and economic reforms in the society. The case of USSR also implies that, while Azerbaijan with its non-democratic regime is very far from totalitarianism of USSR type, nurturing and supporting local think tanks as a part of the non-confrontational segment of the civil society activities may provide a necessary pool of expertise, network, trust and communication resources for the prospective times of political opening in Azerbaijan, when the government will be ready for the meaningful political reforms.

4.2.   Factors in the Functioning of Think tanks in Azerbaijan

In the post-Soviet period the conditions in Azerbaijan were far less favourable for incubating Western style think tanks: decision-making was previously heavily concentrated in Moscow; new ideas were not solicited by the local party elite from the society; advisory groups set up in the early years of the post-Soviet period did not play a role; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which started in 1988 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, distracted attention from broad policy development. Research organizations started emerging in Azerbaijan mainly in the mid-2000s, among which the most vocal and influential were those specialized on economic and public administration policy issues. These think tanks were concentrated mainly in the capital, Baku, due to the fact that all infrastructure, government, donor organizations, and embassies were accumulated there, making the ability to participate in policy discourse and advocacy activities greater. However, before getting into the complexity of the policy issues local think tanks were engaged in the mid of 2000s and activities they deployed, in the next section I will explain what non-democratic context means in Azerbaijan and how it influences the functioning of the national think tanks in Azerbaijan.

4.2.1. Structure of the political system in Azerbaijan

The structure of the political system is a critical factor both in the level of activity and type of think tanks in any given country. Features of the political system in both authoritarian and democratic regimes influence think tanks (Mc Gann and Weaver, 2002).One of the most important features of the post-Soviet period in Azerbaijan was the inheritance of almost all structures of the Soviet state. The

National Assembly (Milli Mejlis) of 125 members is elected from single-member constituencies: the president appoints the cabinet of ministers and heads of local government, in co-ordination with parliament. The authority of the presidential administration, especially since the coming to power of Heydar Aliyev in 1992, vis-à-vis the parliament and the government, is enormous. This makes access to the institution of presidency vital to the development of channels of influence for think tanks.

In the mid of 2000s, while expecting considerable oil revenue inflow, the government gradually consolidated all financial and political structures. During this time the image of the country in the international arena, and the need to access loans made the government more or less open to cooperation with the expert community outside of the government and even adopt some of the local experts' proposals. However, starting from 2010, the government started shutting down its communication channels with the civil society in the face with the Arab spring, then the war in Ukraine, and the consequent worsening of the relationship between Russia and the West. The political system of Azerbaijan which had been balancing on two chairs (the Western one which provided financial stability, and the Russian one, which assured its political stability) faced an urgent need to take a side. The first manifestation of this political challenge was an assault on civil society, namely, on its liberal segment in 2013-2014. This was implemented by amending the legal framework.

In 2013, the Constitution of Azerbaijan was amended to lift limits on presidential term and age, as well as to introduce four positions of deputy prime minister. The amendments aimed at re-consolidating the power of the president and redefining the medium-term development strategy in the face of the critical challenges stemming from a fall in oil prices in 2013, high inflation, and the crisis in the financial sector (Human Rights House, 2013).Eventually, civil society questioned the subsequent presidential election held in the autumn of 2013, and the eligibility of Ilham Aliyev as a candidate, since the amendments should not have been applied to him retrospectively. Civil society became very vocal in questioning the very legitimacy of the regime. Legal expert Erkin Gadirli from "The Republican

Alternative" movement said the current president would have no right to take advantage of lifting limits to the presidential terms, since:

> The current president took his oath with his hand on the constitution that bans a person from serving more than two consecutive terms. That means the recent amendment does not extend to Ilham Aliev, and only the candidate elected in 2013 will be entitled to avail of it. (IWPR, 2009)

The following economic crisis, combined with the international political turmoil associated with the Arab Spring, and later, Ukrainian Maidan worsened the environment for civil society in Azerbaijan (Ismayil and Remezeite, 2016). More precisely, a set of international and domestic developments boosted the regime's level of perceived threat. Following the Arab spring, Azerbaijan was overwhelmed by the protests against corruption and unemployment including on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, the government's foreign public relations campaign associated with hosting Eurovision and the European Games faced challenges as the civil society (in cooperation with the international civil society) used the opportunities to raise international awareness about human rights violations in Azerbaijan. Soon, the government discovered that some of the civil society campaigns were funded through the projects financed by the international NGOs (Civicsolidarity.org, 2012; Freemuse.org, 2015). This drove the conspiracy theory in the government that the West plans to provoke turmoil in Azerbaijan. Thus, in 2013-15, under the pretext of enhancing accountability in the work of civil society organisations, the government introduced legislative amendments claiming that some of the local CSOs were spending grants on the activities irrelevant to their mission. However, the most popular charges were on the grounds of tax evasion. Since most cases were ambiguous, the prosecutions and investigations were eventually halted (but not necessarily closed) (Ismayil and Remezeite, 2016).By 2016, the formal structures of the civil society (at least, its vocal, liberal part) in Azerbaijan was almost demolished, and many civil society actors escaped from the country. At the end of 2016, the government decided to support alternative, controllable venues for civil society to attract opinion-makers, moral authorities, and experts that survived on the ruins of the civil society. For example,

one such forum is the NGOs Coalition of the Open Government Partnership, which replaced the infamous Anti-Corruption Coalition, previously a creation of the government. The opening and shrinking of the space in the political system, together with power elite re-structuring, has a direct impact of the functioning of civil society and the very nature of it activities, whether confrontational or non-confrontational.

4.2.2. The legal system

The legal system, as the instrument of a political system, determines the operational rules for think tanks' functions. Countries with laws which are not conducive to the establishment and operation of not-for-profit organisations are less likely to have an independent think tank sector (Mc Gann and Weaver, 2002).Azerbaijani law bans civic organizations from engaging in political activity, and the vague language of the legislation allows the government to apply it arbitrarily to specific civil society organisations making them subject to prosecution. Grounds of registration and taxation also give the government additional leverage to prosecute and reject the applications for registration of CSOs whose agendas are perceived by the government as dissident. Those who could not get registered were functioning using the infrastructure of the registered organisations or personal accounts. In this case, their ability to build their own institutional capacity was restricted, as the registered entities could only hire experts from the unregistered entities on a short-term basis to carry out parts of projects. Also, registration is required in order to obtain tax-exempt status. Finally, unregistered groups have difficulty in acquiring legitimacy in a cultural context where legality is associated with authority (Russell, Lubin, Ismayilov, 2005).

There are also other manifestations of the government's distrust of CSOs such as a series of tax disadvantages that affect the financial viability of CSOs, the need to pay twenty seven per cent of the consolidated payroll to the government's Social Insurance Fund, and the lack of tax incentives for charitable contributions. Moreover, that enhanced government control over unregistered organizations, enabling arbitrary prosecution, and application of disproportionate sanctions. This

is despite the European Court of Human Rights' statement in 2009that 'a mere failure to respect certain legal requirements on internal management of NGOs cannot be considered such serious misconduct as to warrant outright dissolution' (ECtHR, Appl. No. 37083/03).

However, these disadvantages were overshadowed by the legislative amendments of 2013. In spite of arbitrary law enforcement, local think tanks were able to function up until 2013, when the government decided to crackdown upon the civil society. Starting from 2013 through 2015 the government tightened its control over the local and international non-governmental organisations through adopting 26 legislative amendments, which restricted the foreign funding of civil society activities in Azerbaijan. Additionally, legislative changes imposed additional responsibilities on the civil society organizations, and the penalties for their failure to comply with the new requirements became more severe. The new rules apply to all not-for-profit organisations operating in Azerbaijan: local and foreign. In the nutshell, these changes made local civil society organisations and foreign NGOs operations subject to bureaucratic sanctions: (i) the new legislation introduced a set of rules for local civil society organisations to register the NGOs' grant agreements with Ministry of Justice; (ii) foreign donors became obliged to obtain the right to give a grant in Azerbaijan from the local executive power, and submit information about the donations they granted to the NGOs; (iii) the foreign non-governmental organisations must sign a separate agreement with the government to be able to fund their local counterparts; (iv) CSOs must register information about donations they receive with the Ministry of Justice; (v) NGOs may face disproportionate penalties for non-compliance; (vi) the Ministry of Justice is authorized to conduct inspections of CSOs activities (Yusifli, 2016).

The amended Law on Grants states that foreign institutions must obtain an authorization for each grant they plan to provide in the territory of Azerbaijan. In other words, non-profit organizations working in Azerbaijan may receive grants only from those international NGOs that have signed the agreement with the Ministry of Justice to establish their branch in Azerbaijan. After that, for each grant, the foreign donor must submit a financial and economic justification for that grant

to the Ministry of Finance which decides whether the proposed grant is financially and economically useful. Furthermore, local civil society organisations can start grant-related activities only after it receives a notification from the Ministry of Justice confirming the registration of the grant.

The central problem here is the unrestricted power that state authorities possess in choosing which foreign/local civil society organisation may work in Azerbaijan. These provisions allow the government to filter politically undesirable grants on the grounds of the state's involvement in areas of relevance to public policy. Obviously, these and other provisions also raised the cost of action for the civil society by disempowering them to address the real concerns of the society. The legal framework determines accessibility of funds and eligibility of the civil society to access these. Access to funding is essential to the sustainable operation of any civil society organization, including think tanks.

4.2.3. Access to funding

The rise of local think tanks in the former Soviet Union was stimulated financially by various Western organisations. Moreover, the rise of think tanks as an alternative and critical voice of the public policy has caused criticism from ruling groups that think tanks were pushing a hidden agenda (Telgarsky and Ueno, 1996); and gave an excuse for their leaders to repress critical organisations by labelling them as "foreign agents". Activists and organisations in Azerbaijan have been attacked for having received external funding (Kiai, OHCHR Report, 2013). Before 2013 international organisations were functioning more or less freely in Azerbaijan providing limited but stable financial support to the civil society actors. Certain restrictive provisions in the law with regard to the access to funds of the unregistered organisations were not enforced or enforced only rarely and arbitrarily. This approach changed in 2013 with the critical statement by Ramiz Mehdiyev, a head of the Presidential Administration. In an interview to the local news portal, Mr. Mehdiyev accused international as well as local CSOs of supporting anti-government forces in nurturing instability in the country. R. Mehdiyev expressed his concern about the activities and grants signed off by

the international donors by accusing local representatives of international organizations of acting outside their mandates and funding "activities of a suspicious matter" disguised under humanitarian or education projects: "they [international donors] announce specific grant projects, however in reality they allocate financing for completely different disrupting purposes." (Balcancaucaso, 2013)New legislation even further reduced limited access to funding sources and made the specialization of local think tanks challenging. Most organizations lack a diversified support base and experience of how to market their skills. As a consequence, many think tanks and other CSOs in Azerbaijan are primarily preoccupied with surviving from project to project. The main sources of income in Azerbaijan for CSOs were international agencies, government contracts, and corporate contracts. Much of the support of local think tanks in Azerbaijan came from: Western foundations such as the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation, hereafter OSI), Marshall Foundation, and German foundations; public international aid organizations such as USAID, the Norwegian Embassy, and the Swiss Embassy; international non-governmental organizations such as Oxfam, the International Open Budget organization, and Centre for International Private Enterprise, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF.

Farda Asadov, a former OSI Director in Azerbaijan, stressed that the field of policy research was always under-financed. OSI funded "a policy paper writing" project for only a few years, while not offering institutional grants for the think tanks. As a result, OSI support stimulated only individual work from experts rather than any sort of collective intellectual process. He estimated the financial support to the National Budget Group by OSI at around $90,000 plus additional fundraising of NBG from other sources. According to Mr Asadov, apart from insufficient funding, pressure for immediate policy impact from OSI headquarters dominated over the urgency of preserving a culture of dialogue and nurturing the intellectual environment which he thought was more important given increasing government aggressiveness (Farda Asadov, Interview, August 2017):

Donor finance in Azerbaijan has generally been allocated without coordination with other donors. Specifically, the realm of capacity-building in policy research and support of think tanks has never been a priority for the major donor organizations in Azerbaijan. Individual donors usually demand tangible results from investments, or agree to finance specific, stand-alone activities which support their own agenda (such as research, publications, and conferences). They are less willing to allocate funding for institutional development, overhead expenses or infrastructure for local think tanks. This is associated with the greater interest of donors in specific policy reforms than in the development of think tanks per se.

The dynamic of general assistance funding to Azerbaijan has been contracting since the 2000s and always remained the least per capita in comparison with other countries of the South Caucasus. Moreover, the structure of the aid differed. Until 2003, the major part of the international assistance programmes to Azerbaijan was humanitarian, be it from the USA, EU or UN. This was the case until 2003, when the structure of the assistance became more diversified, accommodating technical assistance to various groups of actors, including the government. In other words, Azerbaijan had been receiving development technical assistance for civil society and the government for only ten years before assistance was dramatically reduced. The possible reasons for non-prioritisation of technical assistance by international donors are multiple. First of all, it is reluctance of the national government to embrace technical assistance beyond certain sectors, such as economic growth-related assistance or infrastructure support. Any type of democracy promotion aid was always unwelcome and met with suspicion. Another reason is the financial sustainability of Azerbaijan as a country, which raises questions for many donors as to why they should finance projects in a rich country. Finally, the geostrategic value of Azerbaijan and the interests of many great powers in the country (Coffey and Nifti, 2018) make any technical assistance, including democracy promotion aid to this country very sensitive and any potential destabilisation undesirable. Putting this into simpler words of one of the interviewees, "none of the great powers would wish to see a crowd protesting on the streets of Baku." (Kanan Aslanli, Interview, August 2017).

Apart from the controversial democracy promotion policy of the donors and their limited commitment, access to funding in Azerbaijan for the civil society organisations which was always limited, was also restricted by the introduction of the new, harsher legal procedures in 2013-2015 as was discussed in the previous section, which made functioning of the international donors and local CSOs in Azerbaijan not viable. The complex rules require both the foreign donor and the local organisation to go through a long process to register their grant agreement. The Cabinet of Ministers approved the new rules of grants registration more than a year after the previous rules were cancelled in 2013. That forced many donor organisations to leave Azerbaijan, and many CSOs to cease operation. At the same time, fines and penalties for non-compliance harshened: an organisation may be fined up to 8,200 Euros if it receives funds without registering the grant agreement; moreover, representatives of the organisations involved in these violations are also subject to additional penalties (Yusifli, 2016).

In spite of the criticism of the government of the cynicism of civil society who allegedly was acting as a foreign agent being bribed by the grants, the issue was more than just financial sustainability of the civil society organisations. It was an ideological struggle between the proponents of "open society" and authoritarianism.

4.2.4. Ideological environment

The ideological environment is another factor which defines the substance of the functioning of think tanks. The collapse of communism had important ideological consequences for the countries of the former-USSR in terms of the alternative socio-economic paradigms. Ideological choices were naturally framed by neo-liberal ideology in a three-pillar concept (free market, good governance, and democratization) as a solution to the problems such as unemployment, poverty, income disparities, black markets, and criminal networks. Although the concept was always presented as non-ideological and non-political, it assumed economic liberalisation targeting a corrupt and inefficient state administration (Demmers, Fernandez, and Hobenboom, 2004).

The concept of "good governance" was specified in the World Bank's (WB) World Development report of 1997, which included the chapter "The State in a Changing World" (World Bank, 1997); and the IMF adopted a technocratic version of Good Governance by approving the Partnership for Sustainable Global Growth, which included such aspects as rule of law, efficiency, accountability of the public sector, and corruption control (IMF Interim Committee, 1996). The WB suggested imperatives such as consultation with the affected group, direct participation of users in designing, implementing and monitoring of public goods and services, monitored decentralisation, and developing local mechanisms of accountability and competition. The concept, as advocated by the donor community, represented an instrumentalist, managerial and technocratic approach to development, aiming at the creation of an environment favourable to the implementation of prescribed economic reforms (Demmers, Fernandez, and Hobenboom, 2004). Following the WB and IMF, many development organisations became involved in funding projects on transparency of government, effectiveness of public resource management, and an enabling regulatory and economic environment for private sector activity.

The WB's approach was refined in 2002 by emphasizing that there is no unique path to poverty reduction, and social cohesion was emphasised in Poverty Reduction Strategy papers (PRSP). PRSPs were expected to be adopted in the developing countries to demonstrate commitment to addressing poverty (IMF, PRSP) and Azerbaijan was no exception to this. Since the work of IMF and WB was guided by a technocratic, non-political view on the question of governing the country on the one hand, and Azerbaijani government undertook a number of commitments on good governance, on the other, the topic naturally constituted the public policy agenda where civil society could become vocal. While before, the focus of the civil society had been mainly the human rights issues in Azerbaijan, with the start of oil revenue inflow in 2004, corruption, transparency and accountability, and public investment became burning issues *(*Rovshan Agayev, interview, August 2016*).*

However, economic liberalisation in most cases anticipates interference with the interests of the local oligarchs. So, the think tanks in Azerbaijan operated in a highly politicized environment: anything that challenged the government policy and the interests of the oligarchs was, and is, viewed as political, and the government uses this situation to make concessions where it is in their interest, and to crack down on CSOs where it is not.

The Azerbaijani government attempted politicizing the "public good" discourse (since economic liberalisation in most cases anticipated interference in the interests of the local oligarchs, which they tried to present as protection of the "national interests"), while the international donor community, on behalf of the WB and IMF, was more in favour of the "de-politicization" approach, being concerned with the improving state's effectiveness in provision of goods and services more than with democracy, per se. The local think tanks readily picked up a de-politicised view of the good governance theme to mitigate the risk from the state and to engage them in constructive dialogue where possible. On those occasions where they did not manage to do this, the venue they created (issue-based CSO association, coalition) did not last for long. Kanan Aslanli, one of the key experts of the National Budget Group, the civil society initiative to popularize budget issues, took the view that one of the reasons that NBG did not survive for long was probably that the government perceived it as a politicized initiative, since some of the members of NBG held high-ranking positions in opposition parties. Had this not been the case, he believes, NBG could have done more, and could have been more effective (Kanan Aslanli, Interview, August 2017).

Despite the difficulties, the findings from the field show that a research agenda of the think tanks on good governance issues and the activity planning process of the respective donor organizations were mutually influential in Azerbaijan: donors consulted with the local think tank community when they were defining their tactical goals, while think tanks managed to maintain a quite effective connection with the grass-roots communities to keep up their awareness of the issues on the ground and to inform donors' activity plan, at least partially (Interviews with Rovshan

Agayev in August 2016 and 2017; Farda Asadov in August 2017; and Zohrab Ismayilov in June, 2016).

4.2.5. Demand from the policy audience and Intellectual supply

Policy audience demand and intellectual supply are the other factors that determine the functioning of think tanks. A growing need for expert advice increases demand for think tanks work, and underpaid university faculties make it easier to attract qualified staff to think tanks (Mc Gann and Weaver, 2002). At the same time, low demand from the private sector for people with analytical skills, and brain drain to other sectors of economy or abroad, damages competitiveness of think tanks.

During the late years of perestroika in the USSR, in the context of conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's public interest concerned the history of the nation and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. So, the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences and other social science universities fulfilled the function of raising public awareness on the nation's history. They were engaged in publishing books, and articles about issues that had previously been censored or distorted by Soviet propaganda. Members of the Academy of Sciences and universities played key roles in leading the popular uprising in Azerbaijan during the Perestroika years and many representatives of the epistemic community of that time eventually led the government for nine months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, before the ex-nomenclature hijacked power back in 1993. Consequently, most people who had participated in the national independence movement, in the early years of independence moved either into a political opposition realm, as leaders of political parties and party functionaries, or into civil society, working in the field of human rights defence, education, election monitoring, research, and other areas. The research capacity of the institutes was very weak, since academics were unable to use Western research social science methodologies, and many academic institutions in Azerbaijan remained in a state of stagnation and continued with Soviet practices. Until the end of 1990s, the government was only interested in the energy sector and, when needed, they turned to international experts instead of

locals. Low demand for analytical work from the private sector, and a brain drain to other sectors of the economy, such as the hydrocarbon industry damaged the rise of think tanks in the early years after independence (Shiriyev, 2005). At the same time, the government invested in foreign lobbyists and western institutes to fund research on Azerbaijan. In many cases, these were a means of burnishing the image of the government of Azerbaijan abroad, and an attempt to justify the internal and external policies of the Azerbaijani government (Bruckner, 2015). In 2007, the government set up a think tank in Azerbaijan, affiliated with the President's Office - The Centre of Strategic Studies (SAM) - which had a strong tendency to orient their work towards an international audience rather than the internal one.

When it became clear that political process in Azerbaijan would remain flawed in the years ahead, and especially after the dubious transfer of political power from president Heydar Aliyev to his son, Ilham Aliyev in 2003, intellectuals started quitting the political opposition realm and moving into the research sphere by establishing their own, sometimes, one-man run research centres. However, the key factor in the rise in local think tanks by the mid-2000s was the expected inflow of large amounts of money from oil, which raised not only the issue of oil industry transparency but also the issue of government budget transparency, public investment monitoring etc. (Interview with Rovshan Agayev, Zohrab Ismayil, August 2016). This sphere also became of interest for international donors. In 2008, the Open Society Institute launched, "Assistance Program to Analytical Centres", aimed at supporting quality political research and the institutional development of local research centres. The European Neighbourhood Policy framework of the EU also increased its funding for sector-specific research such as conflict resolution. Thus, by 2014, the Go-Think tank Report listed fourteen Azerbaijani think tanks.

4.2.6. Technological environment

The technological environment has transformed the flow of information since the 1990s by making collaboration among stakeholders and across borders, collection

of data and dissemination of results easier and less expensive for think tanks (Mc Gann, 2002). The growth of IT made it more difficult for authoritarian governments to control alternative virtual debate venues and flows of information (although it made it easier for them to target audiences for repression). The Internet's penetration rate in Azerbaijan reached 61 % by the end of 2014, compared to 27 % in 2009 (International Telecommunication Union, 2009, 2014).According to Osman Gunduz, the head of the Azerbaijan Internet Forum, significant milestones were achieved in providing the country with better and cheaper Internet services; however, in comparison to its neighbours such as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and others, Azerbaijan lagged behind, not only in providing its users with fast internet connections, but also in keeping costs down. Poor telecoms infrastructure along with low ICT literacy, expensive computer equipment and high tariffs for satellite connections remain key obstacles to ensuring greater access across the country (Freedom House, 2015). In the beginning, the government did not engage in extensive blocking of online content, and relies mainly on legal and economic pressures to discourage critical media coverage. Websites that have been blocked in the past included satirical websites, petitions, and other content criticizing the government. However, later, the government started blocking access to the independent media resources such as Meydan TV, Radio Liberty (Freedom House, 2015). In spite of these limitations, the internet remains a more open platform for information-sharing and political dissent compared to independent broadcast or print media outlets, which have been forced to shut down or continue their work online over the last ten years. Facebook in Azerbaijan continues to serve as one of the few remaining venues for exposing corruption and the on-going restrictions, as well as sharing relevant information.

Since the media in Azerbaijan had gradually become unable to provide a space for meaningful debate, the more or less free access to social media transformed the flow of information from the mid-2000s onward by making the cooperation and dissemination of the work of think tanks more efficient and less expensive. Representatives of the think tanks regularly share their observations, analysis, vlog and blog posts on Facebook. In other words, the parameters of discourse

nurturing have changed over the past decade in Azerbaijan. While before 2013, experts had access to wider outlets and channels of communication such as TV programme and a variety of newspapers, after 2013, an intensive crack-down on independent media made those channels unavailable for the local think tanks. Thus, most experts nowadays publish on the portals of their organisation's websites, on Facebook, through blogs, and by recording and posting on YouTube their regular shows or comments. For example, after the only popular TV talk show, Economic Forum was denied access to a private TV channel in 2013, it turned to setting up its own YouTube channel.

Conclusion

The Chapter Four revolved around two arguments. The first is that reference to the role of the epistemic community in the USSR can be useful, as an example of the non-democratic context. The second is that the unfavourable environment of Azerbaijan for think tanks does not suggest a straightforward connection between the rise of think tanks and regime type. The chapter drew two following main conclusions.

First, the history of research centres in the Soviet Union teaches us a great deal about the role and means of functioning of the local epistemic community in non-democracies and its contribution to the political liberalisation and reform during windows of opportunity. It is not possible to assess with certainty the impact of the educational function of the new ideas and reformist discourse over the communist ideology. However, the complexity of social reality implies that most probably a mixture of political strategy and the links between institutes and key political figures made it possible to feed new ideas into the policy process. It is clear that, after 1986, a more open public sphere, more prone to dialogue, was created that made it possible for individual experts and research centres to survive and to use the media to disseminate their ideas more broadly. During this time, the network of liberal scholars and party reformers who had emerged under Khrushchev became

the central figures of the policy process during Perestroika: economists from different centres became close advisors to the leadership.

Second, the analysis of the environment for national think tanks across the (dis)enabling factors in Azerbaijan shows that there is no straight forward connection between the rise of thin ktanks and regime type. Think tanks may emerge and function when there is social demand only from the donor community in the country and a certain level of access to the print and electronic media, even under contextual conditions which are far from perfect. The experts (and knowledge) flow from one structure into another: the members of the broader epistemic community came from the national independence movement into politics, from politics into civil society by establishing think tanks, and from civil society sometimes into the government structures, playing a role in diffusing ideas and, thereby, maintaining debate on good governance.

The cases of the USSR and Azerbaijan imply that, while the parameters of discourse nurturing may change over time in the country, the networks, venues, and channels of communication do not disappear and may represent a social resource when politics opens up. In the following chapter, the policy issues of budget transparency and local self-governance will be described to understand the complexity of the policy domains within which local think tanks embarked their activities.

Chapter Five. "Good Governance" Policy Issues in Azerbaijan

Introduction

I theorize the importance of the non-confrontational activities of civil society, particularly in the non-democratic context, which generally increases the cost of confrontational action for disempowered civil societies. I argue that public policy and agenda-setting can potentially offer fields for less confrontational activities and local think tanks as one of the overlooked civil society actors in non-democratic states. Moreover, as I showed in the previous chapter, the evolving role of the epistemic community in the USSR provides an interesting perspective on the potential function of local think tanks, their various venues and activities they nurture for potential social resources once there is a political opening. I also discussed specific factors that (dis)enable the rise and functioning think tanks, with the conclusion that, even in a far-from-perfect context, local think tanks have a role. Bringing in the case-study of Azerbaijan also bolsters the argument about the importance of going beyond assessing immediate impact and focusing on the process instead. By emphasizing the activities of local think tanks in the field of good governance, and specifically, local self-governance (LSG) and budget transparency (BT), with which think tanks were engaged consistently from the early 2003 up until 2014, the thesis aims to emphasize the meaningfulness of analysing activities in order to understand the dynamic of civil society and the role of its actors in non-democracies.

However, before I move on in Chapter Six to analyse the activities of think tanks using the suggested integrated matrix, the current chapter will present policy cases using a classic Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). Hereby, I argue that, although developed for the US context, due to its flexibility, this framework is also applicable for policy-case analysis in a non-democracy. As will be seen in the chapter, MSF allows for both: introducing the scope and content of the policy topics think tanks were dealing with from 2003 to 2014; and exploring the role think tanks in non-democracies play through the streams of agenda-setting process, and their coupling. First, I review the features of think tanks in Azerbaijan, followed by a

discussion of the complexity of good governance issues in Azerbaijan. Second, I introduce case-study summaries and the policy processes that think tanks in the period of study generated.

5.1. Think tanks in Azerbaijan and the "Good Governance" theme

Genesis

Think tanks in Azerbaijan exhibit the mark of the process through which they originated. The most prominent think tanks were those with a focus on the economy. Civil society emerged out of the national independence movement of the 1990s, and comprised various organisations, individuals, and groups who specialised in human rights, education, community building and election monitoring, as well as in research. As the political space shrank after 1996, some political activists started quitting the political parties and founding civil society organisations dedicated to various missions. Budget cuts at the traditional policy institutes pushed staff to consider other alternatives all over the former Soviet Union (Bezlov and Stoyanov, 1997, 1-2). Establishing research organisations was one of those alternatives. In Azerbaijan, all research centres came together in the post-Soviet period, which allowed researchers to conduct studies and report findings freely. Almost all of the think tanks studied here were organized on a collegial basis: former colleagues from the national academy of science and universities came together to form an enterprise independent of political parties and the government. They started functioning as not-for-profit organizations, although some had additional commercial tax accounts to function as consulting firms. Some of the research organizations were created around a prominent political figure (in the past or current at that time), who established a CSO to fulfil projects, or carry out consultancy. For example, a founder of the Economic Research Centre had been a prominent member of the steering board of one of the key opposition parties in Azerbaijan. Others were spin-offs from larger think tanks. For example, Support for Economic Initiatives was established by a group of experts who had been affiliated with ERC in the past, but then decided to build their own think tank specializing more narrowly in economic and financial issues.

The established not-for profit groups mainly worked with the support of international donors or international companies located in Azerbaijan.

Motivation

After emerging in the late 1990s, think tanks became more visible and vocal in the mid-2000s as the agenda of the international donors in Azerbaijan changed from humanitarian aid to development assistance, and more funds became available for research groups. It thus became feasible to sustain research organisations. Both internal and external factors drove the creation of think tanks. The internal factors included the availability of economists, the disintegration of the older research infrastructure, the emergence of political ideologies, and the call to advocate and monitor specific changes and processes in the political economy and society. More generally, there was, as discussed in previous chapters, the integration of Azerbaijan into the international political community and the expectation of oil revenue inflow, and therefore, an urgent need to monitor public expenditure and carry out public administration reform to embrace participatory decision-making: all with the purpose of eliminating opportunities for corruption.

The Role of the West

Among external factors, the most important was the availability of some funds for the think tanks' activities, and the agenda of the international community to support Azerbaijan in fulfilling its commitment to democratic reform. With the inflow of donor funds, one-man entities started turning into real organisations with core and part-time staff. Some of the donor organisations started providing capacity-building support, namely training on the methodology of research, writing policy papers, and designing an advocacy strategy. Sometimes, these training courses were specifically thematic: for example, the provision of an alternative inflation calculation method to the Economic Research Centre (ERC) by USAID through World Learning in 2005 equipped this organisation for the years ahead. The ERC emerged as the only CSO which provided alternative inflation figures, which contrasted with the inadequate numbers from the State. Their figures were referred to, together with the official ones, by all reputable outlets, such as the WB, IMF,

Economist Intelligence Unit, etc. This led the government to adjust their own inflation figures.

In spite of the fact that most of the donors limited their assistance to operational grants only (i.e. for the conduct and/or advocacy of policy papers or research), and did not provide sufficient institutional grants, there was a general sense that Western donors had a profoundly positive impact on think tanks in Azerbaijan. Since these were often the dominant public policy organisations and opinion-makers, the impact of the assistance of international doors was greater than would be suggested by simple counts of think tanks or funds expended. Unfortunately, although the grants to local think tanks were useful they, often constituted only a modest share of the total think tank expenditure in Azerbaijan. Frequently, local think tanks would join with other organisations to share the costs of office rent and equipment because of the chronic lack of support for institutional development.

Legal structure

Originally, most economic think tanks functioned as a not-for-profit group in order to be eligible to receive foreign funding. Previously, think tanks, like other not-for-profit civil society organizations, worked primarily through grant schemes, but after the 2013 clampdown on civil society, most of the think tanks had to shut down their organisations and start functioning on an individual contract basis with various donor organizations. The 2013 clampdown stimulated individual experts from the various think tanks (structurally dissolved) to come together into informal thematic alliances devoted to the problems such as entrepreneurship, public finance, energy, etc.

Goals and Objectives

As noted in the previous chapter, it is clear that local policymaker interest in think tanks' services always remained more or less modest throughout the post-Soviet period. Understandably, think tanks usually chose to define their objectives loosely to be able to accommodate scarce available funding or to respond to the agenda of international donors. For example, the mission of the Centre for Economic Initiatives is given as "From the governed society to the self-governing society",

which expresses its vision (sei.az) and the objective is formulated as supporting "progressive socio-economic initiatives" through fulfilling a number of tasks such as to provide:

> support for the implementation of social programs; assistance to economic liberalization and private sector development; educational activities with regard to the social problem solution; advocacy for the updated economic education; monitoring of the investment projects and socioeconomic; learning experience of the advanced countries; assistance to the dealing with the social welfare; organize support to the vulnerable groups of population (Charter of SEI, Baku, 2006).

The objective set by another think tank, the Economic Research Centre, sounds less ideological, stating that "a main mission of the think tank is to support sustainable economic development and good governance" through preparing policy papers and conducting research and "to work towards strengthening social dialogue and increasing participation of the public in policy-making." In this statement, the organization places emphasis on the strengthening of dialogue between civil society and the government (ERC Objectives, 2012). The goals of the think tanks extended well beyond those of a conventional research institute in terms of downplaying their academic focus and becoming actively involved in policy advice, monitoring, assessment and evaluation activities. Comparing the mode of working in 2019 with the period in focus (2003-2014), interviewees noted that less funding was available after 2014, and that this affected the mode of working, which become less strategic and more spontaneous, episodic and ad hoc than it had been in the middle of the 2000s. Some think tanks have already been frustrated in their attempts to be more immediately influential, while others remain more optimistic with the slow incremental changes they have been able to achieve over the last ten years stating that: "there are a few areas we have been advocating for ages, and eventually, last year, for example the government picked up the idea of result-based budgeting" (Agayev, Interview, 2019); "we could at least open the door for the debate, and make sure that the issue of local self-governance is not forgotten and not written off" (Azer Mehtiyev, Interview, 2017); and "we never expected a huge policy changes; we aimed mainly at incremental changes at best; we worked to invite the policy-makers to discuss the public

issues, in the first place." (Abil Bayramov, 2017). One of the interviewees noted that recently, the government has started to recognize the harshness of the clampdown on civil society in 2013-2014, and is even getting softer in terms of trying to invite experts from civil society to collaborate. Allegedly, the government even plans to withdraw some of the ruinous legal restrictions it imposed in 2013-14. This can be explained by the reduction of oil prices in the market and the cadre problem within the government. Generally, no new think tank in the economic sphere has emerged since the 2000s, and this partially reflects the brain drain from the country (Abil Bayramov, Agayev, Interview, October, 2019). The shortage of experts has affected the whole of civil society, and not only the government. As was discussed in the previous chapter, legal restrictions, taxation, administrative and operational costs, and the willingness of policy-makers to cooperate has shaped the work of the think tanks.

Governance

The governance structures of think tanks can be identified as formal and informal, with the role of an executive director, board of trustees, executive director, project officer and others. Think tanks in Azerbaijan normally consist of: two-to-three key researchers, one of whom may also perform an administrative role as a director; accountant (full or part-time), part-time IT support, project based advocacy officer, and other experts. A common staffing strategy is to control costs by keeping a small permanent staff and drawing from a large group of short-term experts as needed. The organisation's core staff (people in their 40-50s) are committed to the entity, despite uncertainty. Only the key staff perform operational and strategic planning, although consultations may involve other stakeholders.

Good governance

As Azerbaijan became a member of various international organisations, it had to undertake various commitments. Among these, "good governance" commitments were the most comprehensive. "Good governance" has become the major buzz term in the development aid realm over the last twenty years. It appeared as a model reflecting the "most successful" countries in setting good governance

standards and criteria for effective economies or political organizations. At the same time, as non-governmental organisations, such as Transparency International, Human Rights Watch, together with the global media were exposing violations in human rights and weak governance, the responsibilities of governments became more apparent. So, after the end of the Cold War, international organisations such as the WB, the IMF and others started linking loans to the political and administrative performance of developing countries. Political conditionality has been characterised as "the first international attempt to change states' domestic behaviours in peacetime" (Uvin and Biagiotti,1996: 377-400). Like many other countries in the post-communist area, Azerbaijan was a recipient of international assistance, and as it became a member of a number of European institutions, it was expected to fulfil a range of commitments. The issues of local self-governance and state budget transparency were the major topics of the "good governance" concept as a part of the democratisation reform expected from Azerbaijan by the international community.

However, donor organisations saw the government as the major entry point for reform. A few international donors considered alternative non-governmental actors as a potential contributor to the policy-making process, such as Oxfam GB, Oxfam Novib, the Open Society Institute, Revenue Watch Institute and a few embassies.[8] Despite the shortage of resources and high administrative costs, several influential civil society alliances functioned in Azerbaijan, such as the Municipalities Development Alliance-BINA (7 CSOs), National Budget Group (9 CSOs), Healthcare CSOs Alliance (12 CSOs), Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) CSOs Alliance (120 CSOs), and Millennium Goals Alliance (10 CSOs), to name those related to the good governance issue. All of them were engaged in more or less similar types of activities, which can be described as non-

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[8]Until 2003, Azerbaijan was mainly a recipient of humanitarian aid, due to various reasons. Development work prevailed starting from 2003, within the global framework of poverty eradication and good governance. Aside from this, until 2003, Congress, via the 107th Amendment to the Freedom Act, had prohibited any technical assistance to the government of Azerbaijan. From 2003, the Amendment was waived, and USAID started its work with the government on various development projects in the area of public expenditure management, WTO accession support, and institutional and legislative support. The scope of work on the policy realm, engaging local partners including think tanks, started only in 2009.

confrontational, in the attempt to represent alternative discourse in society on burning public policy issues.

Below I will provide an overview of the policy issues in local self-governance and budget transparency in Azerbaijan using the MSF of Kingdon, to understand the complexity of the problems with which the local think tanks within two alliances (the Municipalities Development Alliance (BINA) and National Budget Group (NBG) were involved from the mid-2000s through 2013, and to demonstrate that the flexibility of the framework allows it to be applied to the analysis of policy process in non-democracies. I will then proceed to the actual policy case study summaries, structured along the multiple policy streams, and highlighting the main ideas that think tanks advocated for, cause-effect framing, the actors involved, and the impact on policy change.

5.2. Overview of local self-governance problems in Azerbaijan

The public administration system in Azerbaijan consists of two types of authority: local executive bodies, which are unelected representatives of central institutions appointed by the President (DPADM, UN, 2004); and municipalities, which are elected local self-governance bodies. As an institution of self-governance, municipalities have been established in Azerbaijan since 1999: over 30 pieces of legislation have been adopted, including normative acts (presidential decrees, decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers, etc.), and the European Charter of Local Self-Government has become an integral part of the legislation of the Azerbaijan Republic (IFES, 2002). By ratifying the Charter in 2002, Azerbaijan undertook a number of commitments with regard to local self-governance (Wienen and Mosler-Tornstrom, 2012). Further, in accordance with Recommendation 126 of the European Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of The Council of Europe, the law adopted the notion of local self-governance from Article 3 of the European Charter, and towards the end of 2006, municipal associations were founded (CoE Recommendations 126-138, 2003). Yet, a range of commitments remained unfulfilled. The definition of local self-government in law and the status of municipalities is ambiguous. According to the constitution, the self-governance

system is characterized by parallelism, as local policies are carried out by both local executive committees (which are representatives of the central government) and by municipalities (elective bodies), which only have a very limited role. In practice, municipalities are subordinated to local executive committees. Moreover, the imprecise division of the competences and responsibilities of municipalities and local executive committees creates further problems. As Article 1 of the law on the "Status of municipalities" states, local self-governance targets local affairs, which gives citizens a chance to address local issues independently and carry out certain actions within public affairs as identified by the Constitution (Article 144). Yet this notion does not allow for the stipulation of municipalities in the legislation, either as institutions with real power or as a part of the overall public administration. Such an ambiguity around the status of municipalities is reflected in the limited authority of these bodies. All of the functions that are usually referred to as "regular competences" of municipalities (utilities, renovation of the territory, certification and registration of citizens living in municipal territories, social services provision, water supply, etc.), are carried out, in fact, by the local state executive committees (Presidential decree of the Azerbaijan Republic of June 16, 1999 No. 138). The real scope of competence of municipalities is confined to maintaining municipal roads, delivering social assistance to people not covered by state social programmes, maintaining cemeteries and organizing funerals. Together with the weak financial potential of municipalities due to paltry state transfers and the ineffectiveness of the tax collection mechanisms available to them, the lack of a procedure for consultation with municipalities and slowness of property transfers from the state to municipalities, in particular as regards to land, do not suggest good prospects for improvement.

There is also a lack of clarity in the law on the status of municipalities regarding the procedure for supervision of municipalities, and notably on local governments' obligation, as provided by Article 146-IV of the Constitution, to report to the parliament about their own operations, which is not carried out. The government, for its part, was under no circumstances motivated to undertake any meaningful actions to eliminate the problems of municipalities. On the contrary, central

government representatives would readily criticize the mal-functionality of the municipalities, their incompetence and the corruption of these institutions. At the same time, the government did not consult representatives of the three national associations of municipalities as part of the decision-making process within the field of local self-government, and these associations did not have any active role in practice in representing municipal interests at a national level (Wienen and Mosler-Tornstrom, 2012).Despite the apparent failure of the Azerbaijani government to meet its commitments before the CoE, the latter did not undertake any follow-up monitoring visits to Azerbaijan beyond 2003 (R. Agayev, Interview, August 2017).

5.2.1. Local Self-Governance Policy Case Study Summary

Problem Stream

The problem stream is a realm where the actors attract the attention of the audience or of their target group, focusing on events such as crises by pointing out strong statistical indicators, or alarming findings from a survey or monitoring. As Rovshan Agayev, the leading expert of Support for Economic Initiatives, stated (Interview, October, 2019):

> We started this work in local self-governance in 2003 when there was no oil revenue yet but a huge disparity existed in economic development of the regions in the country. Scarce resources were wasted in a situation of no civil control, no public participation in the process. Our logic was that if the municipality as an elective body can turn into an institution which will be able to control resources and also share responsibility for public expenditure, it will generally reduce corruption opportunities in the country.

In December 2004, The Law on Municipalities was adopted, which changed the notion of local self-governance. Previously, the notion had implied the status of a mere non-governmental organization, but the new definition reflected the one in the European Charter (Law of Azerbaijan on Municipalities Statute). This provided

more or less fertile ground for the think tanks to continue their work on further incremental changes. The main objective from the very beginning was to achieve gradual changes on the broad front of required reforms towards turning municipalities into meaningful institutions able to perform their functions: "our primary goal was to invite the government and all stakeholders to a dialogue to discuss problems; find optimal and possible solutions." (Abil Bayramov, Interview, August 2017).

Due to massive media coverage and advocacy work, opinion was shaped among policy-makers with regard to the need to expand the scope of functions of the municipalities and increase their financial resources. In terms of capturing government attention, specifically in the problem stream, the major voices came from think tanks and local municipalities. Experts within think tanks collaborated mainly with relevant members of village municipalities to gain first-hand data for further policy work. The media played a role in the dissemination of studies and survey results, choosing issues based on real life in specific municipalities to illustrate local self-governance problems. For example, journalists covered: the issue of disempowerment of the municipalities in relation to powerful owners of resorts and hotels (Rustəmova V., 2008); poor IT equipment which prevented municipalities from offering services online (Habiba Abdulla, 2008); the actual preparedness of municipalities to provide public utilities management services to their constituencies; and the need to form land auction commissions in each municipality (Xalil, 2009).

The role of international donor organizations was primarily in making funds available for civil society actors working on public administration issues and community building. Another aspect of support by the donor organisation was provision of methodological training: for example in how to conduct surveys and interviews, write policy papers, design advocacy strategy, and conduct advocacy campaigns. As for the role of the legislative and government bodies, at the beginning of the process, they were not meaningfully engaged in any dialogue or collaboration.

A two-fold framing process was used by think tanks in their policy and advocacy work: on the one hand, the strengthening of municipalities approach was presented as the cornerstone of effective public administration reform, which would be key to poverty eradication in the long run. While the government partially accepted the linkage of poverty eradication and public administration reforms, they did not perceive the latter as a direct and major cause of the former (Abil Bayramov, Interview, October, 2019). "Municipality strengthening" was presented as in the interest of the government in order to improve its international image through meeting its commitments in democratic development (Agayev, Interview, August 2017). The commitment of Azerbaijan before international institutions to undertake local self-governance reforms served as an additional reference point of think tanks in their policy recommendations. The framing of local self-governance was largely informed by the respective donor organizations and international organizations of which Azerbaijan was a member, such as CoE, and non/semi-governmental organisations such as Oxfam, GIZ and others. The European Charter of Local Self-Government of the CoE[9] served as the main source of reference for terminology, frames and policy recommendations. Another example is the international strategy of Oxfam in the mid-2000s, which informed its activities in Azerbaijan promoting local self-governance as a part of its broader concept of "a right to be heard"[10]. Furthermore, Oxfam also linked poverty eradication work to its local self-governance support, as guided by the Millennium Development Goals for essential services, which would be achieved through the realization of the rights of people to accessible and affordable healthcare, education, water and sanitation. It was declared that, together with its partners and allies, Oxfam would "demand that national governments fulfil their responsibilities for equitable delivery of good quality health, education, water and sanitation, especially for women and excluded groups; support civil society organizations and alliances to hold governments accountable for the delivery of these services." (Oxfam International Strategic

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[9]The European Charter of Local Self-Government was adopted in 1985 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and is the most important multilateral document defining the fundamental principles of the functioning of local governments.

[10]Unfortunately, the Azerbaijan related Oxfam "country change" document is not a public document and cannot be referred to.

Plan, 2007-2012). This perception represented a global re-conceptualisation of poverty beyond mere income poverty. It was started by the WB and IMF, which introduced Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) in individual countries. Poverty came to comprise broader phenomena such as a lack of opportunities, low capabilities, and low levels of security and empowerment (Levinsohn, 2003). The Azerbaijani Poverty Reduction Strategy of 2001-2004, was based on a policy, which would: maintain macroeconomic stability; improve and strengthen the health care and education sectors; improve municipal services; and strengthen the social protection system (IMF, 2003). These commitments from Azerbaijan gave the think tanks additional reason to link these frames into a single causal logic (better local self-governance – better service delivery - less poverty). Nonetheless, Azerbaijani government officials did not perceive the strengthening of local self-governance as the main way to eliminate poverty (Abil Bayramov, October, 2019). Informed by situational analysis from the field and good governance agendas, the topic of "strengthening the municipalities" was presented as a reform which would help the government to achieve its poverty eradiation function. Moreover, references by local think tanks to pre-existing ideological frames and concepts promoted by various donors and international institutions, combined with the commitments of Azerbaijan before them, legitimized the activities of local think tanks on local self-governance and policy research.

At the stage of problem formulation, local self-governance problems were distilled into an issue-based agenda. Clusters of ideas regarding various pending issues were included: for example, the absence of mechanisms for land leasing, the issue of the large number of impractically small municipalities; dubious inter-budget transfers; the vague scope of functions for municipalities; limited access to credit; and difficulties in property tax collection at the municipal level. All these issues will be described in more detail in the policy stream, where the think tanks presented policy solutions based on international best practice, the Azerbaijani context, and the country's international commitments.

Policy stream

The policy stream is where various policy experts such as government officials, independent experts, scholars and politicians generate various policy solutions, which then await adoption. In the policy stream, the government of Azerbaijan started to demonstrate interest in various events which were organized by think tanks within the framework of the poverty reduction strategy. Once think tanks started putting out policy papers and concrete proposals on local self-governance, a broader spectrum of actors became involved in their activities. The Ministry of Justice as the prime focal point for local self-governance affairs, several members of parliament, and members of municipalities associations not only became the main advocacy targets for think tanks' activities, but became a part of the *de facto* broad informal expert community on local self-governance: "I think now there is better understanding of the function of the municipality as an institution among the government, municipal workers and their constituencies as a result of our activities, but there is no political will whatsoever to turn them into a real authority" (Agayev, Interview, August 2017). While senior decision-makers in the government were never particularly interested in strengthening local self-governance beyond turning it into a subordinated branch of executive power, mid-level officials participated in the process, and occasionally collaborated with think tanks on policy papers. Frequently, such cooperation would be kept low profile, and the contribution of individual state officials would not be credited to them as co-authors of the policy work (although they may have earned honorariums). Nevertheless, such cooperation helped mid-level officials to show their chiefs their awareness of the specific problems related to municipality issues, and to look constructive in terms of proposing policy solutions when required:

> Being professionals, mid-level officials are often in latent confrontation with higher-level officials who are often appointed irrespective of competence. Professional pride motivates some of them to leak certain items of information to attract public attention. The motivation for the members of parliament is to enhance their own contributions to the parliament. CSO activity seems appealing to the state officials,

especially once they are convinced in the professional credibility of the people. (A. Mehtiyev, Interview, August 2017)

Having prepared the Concept of Municipality Strengthening (Mehtiyev, Ibadolgu, 2007) which introduced main problem areas and goals, think tank experts started producing policy papers on each aspect of the problem, think tanks focused their work around the following thematic goals (SEI, Report, 2010):

- Improve the transparency and impartiality of the auction process through: the introduction of mechanisms for raising awareness within the community about land auctions; simplification of the land legalization mechanism; and improving the mechanism of land price assessment.

- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of governance, reducing the number of small municipalities through amalgamation into larger units based on administrative-territorial criteria.

- Improve the effectiveness of financial support to municipalities, through implementation of targeted budget transfer from the state budget instead of non-targeted endowment.

- Eliminate ambiguity in the scope of the functions of municipalities in terms of the division of labour/authority by determining the municipality's administrative entity (village, settlement, town) as the single governance entity, and a self-governance body.

- Improve the accessibility of credit for municipalities through establishing a Municipality Development Fund.

- Enhance the financial capacity of municipalities through improving the taxable base of physical entity property tax.

With the above-noted goals, a number of policy papers were drafted which included international practices and made reference to the relevant domestic and international legislation, as well as surveys of target groups and the results of public debates. All policy papers were targeted at the relevant policy-makers and scholars with an interest in the topics. Policy papers can be grouped into three broad themes: (a) those aimed at improving the financial capacity of the

municipality institution; (b) those focused on improving functions; and (c) those aimed at the enhancement of administrative structures. Below I briefly review these policy papers to understand their purpose, structure and proposals and summarize what is common in all these papers.

Among the policy papers related to improving the financial capacity of the municipalities, the following are noteworthy: "Improving the mechanism of the funds transfer from the state budget to the local budget" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2009); "Increasing accessibility of credit resources for the local self-governance in Azerbaijan" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2010a); and "Strengthening Financial Capacity of Azerbaijan's Municipalities: Improving the taxable base of physical entity property tax" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2010b). Work on the issue of inter-budgetary transfers involved extensive interviews and surveys with members of municipalities across the country, with the purpose of: identifying the real situation regarding the criteria for budget subsidy transfer to the local budget; determining the real needs of the municipalities; and gaining feedback from municipalities on how the system might be improved. This research revealed ineffective mechanisms of transfer which were far from transparent or guided by precise criteria, and which were so small that they did not allow municipalities to carry out their functions in full. While the legislation stipulated targeted and non-targeted financial support, the research showed that, in reality, municipalities received only minor non-targeted financial support based on vague criteria, and that they did not receive any targeted transfers at all. Following on from these findings, a policy paper was developed which analysed and evaluated three alternative mechanisms of inter-budgetary transfers: (i) the introduction of additional criteria to increase non-targeted transfers; (ii) the execution of targeted transfers from the state budget; and (iii) the application of shared taxation. The experts suggested the second option as the most feasible for the government to adopt in the short-term, while believing that in the long-term, the introduction of a shared taxation system should occur, in addition to targeted and untargeted budget transfers.

Another policy paper in the area of improving the financial capabilities of municipalities focused on "increasing accessibility of credit resources for local self-

governance in Azerbaijan" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2010).The authors examined the situation and obstacles which municipalities faced in accessing credit. Their paper suggested three possible ways of dealing with the problem: (i) to amend legislation in a way that would increase the access of municipalities to credit; (ii) to set up a Municipalities Bank; and (iii) to establish a Municipalities Development Fund. The experts suggested the third option as the most feasible. There were also problems in the collection of local taxes by the municipalities: particularly regarding the taxation of property with inventoried value. The research revealed that there were significant obstacles to the collection of physical entity property tax. The main reason was the lack of inventory value of real estate subject to taxation. This practice was most common in rural communities, where more than ninety per cent of real estate had no inventory value. Thus, in order to address the financial capacity problems of the municipalities, the policy paper "Strengthening the Financial Capacity of Azerbaijan's Municipalities: Improving the taxable base of physical entity property tax" was prepared in 2011 (Mehtiyev, Agayev and Aliyev, 2011). It recommended possible legislative amendments to improve the collection of local taxes, which remained one of the largest sources of local income. To solve the problem, it was recommended that tax legislation be improved via three alternative mechanisms: 1) by organizing an overall inventory of physical entity property; 2) by implementing physical entity property tax based on a property's market value; and 3) by implementing physical entity property tax based on the size of a property. After assessment of each alternative, the policy paper suggested calculating legal entity property tax as a local tax instead of a state tax, and applying the mechanism to levy property tax based on the market value of buildings and property per square metre.

A second group of policy papers was aimed at clarifying the functions of municipalities. Among these papers, the following two are noted: "Improving the mechanisms of determination of the functions of municipalities in Azerbaijan" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2009a); and "Recommendations on the improvement of the mechanisms of auctioning and leasing of municipal lands" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2009b).The issue of overlap in the functions of central government and local

government remained permanently in the focus of local think tanks, as addressing this was the foundation for turning municipalities into meaningful agencies. Thus, multiple discussions and round tables were organized to research international best practice with regard to determining the scope of functions for municipalities and for discussion of possibilities for integrating some of these practices into Azerbaijani legislation. Relevant potential services which municipalities could provide were discussed with representatives of the municipalities. Extensive research informed a policy paper entitled, "Improving the mechanisms of determination of the functions of municipalities in Azerbaijan" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2009), which proposed three actions for policy makers: (i) to eliminate ambiguity in determining the scope of functions of municipalities and clarity on this issue; (ii) to carry out division of authority under the condition of determining a municipality administrative entity (village, settlement, town) as the single governance entity; and (iii) to carry out division of functions to self-governance authorities by giving municipalities the status of a self-governance body. In this case, actions were not suggested as alternatives but as three consecutive steps to be taken by the state.

Among the functions assigned to municipalities were land auctioning and leasing. Since these were a key source of income for municipalities, experts from think tanks conducted monitoring together with the State Committee of Lands and Mapping. The former examined the legality of the leasing procedure, while the latter monitored the nature of auction arrangements. Subsequently, the experts produced a report entitled "Recommendations on the improvement of the mechanisms of auctioning and leasing of the municipal lands" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2009). This paper analysed the problems which arose from the auctions, tracked the gaps in the legislation that caused them and proposed mechanisms to improve the auction and leasing of municipal lands. The follow-up recommendations were based on international best practice in the methodology of municipal land and property assessment for the purpose of auctioning and leasing. The report recommended: expanding channels for awareness-raising in the general population about auctions; simplifying legalization regarding land ownership; and improving the mechanisms of land price assessment.

The third category of policy work focused on enhancing the administrative structures of the municipality. An initial study found that one of the reasons for the inefficiency of the municipalities was that there were a great number of small municipal entities. The work revealed that the large number of small municipalities was increasing administrative costs, dividing financial resources, and did not permit effective human resource management. Additionally, this reduced accountability to the state and civil society. Originally, the issue of amalgamation of municipalities was administered on a voluntary basis and regulated by the respective law. International best practice was studied with regard to a plausible size for municipality entities, with a focus on Greece and Turkey, and a proposal was made with regard to how the number of small municipalities could be reduced using a command-administrative (obligatory amalgamation if they do not meet set criteria) rather than voluntary (where municipalities initiate amalgamation among themselves only if they wish it) principle. It is worth noting that recommendations were also supported by pilot programmes. Two *rayons* (provinces) were selected for piloting based on the determined criteria: one of the regions was in a mountainous geographical location; while the other was on a plain. The selected regions were analysed based on the population per municipality, annual budget, scope of work of the municipality, and territorial borders. The research led to a policy proposal suggesting three alternative mechanisms: (i) to enlarge municipalities according to administrative-territorial criteria; (ii) to enlarge municipalities guided by population size; and (iii) to pursue voluntary amalgamation of small municipal entities into larger ones. Having analysed all three options, the policy paper suggested that the state implement the first mechanism. In pursuing this option of the amalgamation of municipalities according to administrative - territorial criteria, the experts pointed to the need to make certain legislative amendments, set up new norms for representatives (proportional to population), and introduce indicators to prevent growth in the number of small municipalities.

All policy papers are structured around four logically connected parts: problem statement; alternative options; assessment of the alternative options; and results

and recommendations. As is apparent from this structure, researchers use various forms of communication in the text. First, there is an argument to convince an audience that the problem is there and the proposed solution is the best available, using evidence and reason. Second, description visualizes situations by bringing in statistics, survey results, or observations. Third, narration typically tells stories of best practice from other relevant countries. For example, in the policy paper proposing to reduce the number of very small municipalities, experts provided comparative statistics on the proportion of small municipalities in various countries (number of municipalities per 100,000 people), statistics regarding the current administrative expenditure of the state, and references to cases from Turkey, to use various sets of indicators for establishing a municipality. Moreover, the methodology for assessment of each proposed option considered both the process and the results. While assessing the process, a number of indicators were considered, such as obstacles to implementation, speed, feasibility, and additional costs. Indicators for clarity, timeframe, cost, and political possibility were applied (Mehtiyev, et al, Baku, 2008). In its turn, indicators included the municipalities' increased financial resources and efficiency of human resources management. Further, these indicators were operationalized into categories of administrative costs, income potential, property potential, municipalities' services, etc. Additionally, on the example of the pilot regions of Azerbaijan, experts demonstrated the recommended mechanism of amalgamation.

The above policy papers informed a discourse structure on the issues of local self-governance reform in society by distinguishing concrete issues, goals, and suggesting constructive solutions. In this regard, the issue-based policy papers allowed the think tanks to be perceived not only as a criticizing watch-dog, but also as a constructive counterpart proposing solutions and inviting the policy-makers to dialogue. Interestingly, think tanks extensively used international best practice as a reference point to show contrast with the situation in Azerbaijan without using confrontational, excessively criticizing vocabulary. Part of the proposals informed The Situation Assessment Reports which BINA prepared at various times by assessing the local self-governance situation in Azerbaijan against the European

Charter's recommendations and requirements. This allowed BINA to enhance its professional legitimacy both in the eyes of the government and the CoE monitoring groups. The recommendations from the monitoring covered issues of the status of municipalities, their financial capacities, administrative supervision over municipalities; relations between municipalities and local state executive committees; property provision; municipal associations; issues related to municipalities workers; training; problems with the status of Baku; and public participation and accountability (BINA, 2007). The commitments of Azerbaijan to the CoE allowed BINA to refer to the respective provision of the European Charter of Local Self-Governance in its every policy paper. For example, in the paper on "Strengthening Financial Capacity of Municipality in Azerbaijan" (Aliyev and Agayev, 2011) they referred to the Charter's provision before going to analysis and recommendations:

> According to article 9 paragraph 1 of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 1985), "local authorities shall be entitled, within national economic policy, to adequate financial resources of their own, of which they may dispose freely within the framework of their powers. In this view, one of the factors conducive to effective exercise of basic powers and responsibilities at local level is to allocate them adequate financial resources. A central authority shall ensure local authorities' access to the financial resources within the limits of the law."

While government plans to undertake policy reform were beyond the control of BINA, they aimed to engage various stakeholders in the discussion, in the first place hoping for future incremental changes. From the very beginning, local think tanks deliberately distanced themselves from "politicizing" the issue of local self-governance. For example, they refrained from using the expression "decentralization reforms" to avoid the creation of antagonism on the side of the government, which was working hard on the opposite task - strengthening the centralization of governance (Abil Bayramov, Interview, October, 2019): "We tried to produce policy papers with recommendations acceptable for the government. We avoided radical proposals. Likewise, presentations avoided sharp rhetoric. Confrontation was not our purpose. We aimed at inviting the policy-makers to discussion." (Abil Bayramov, Interview, October, 2019). In this regard, all

interviewees thought that they had managed to open the door to quality issue-based discussion on local self-governance problems. Having policy papers refer to the international commitments of Azerbaijan and international best practice empowered the think tank community to expand its opinion-making capacity into attempts to create alternative/additional venues for structured and informed dialogue with the government, as will be discussed below in the politics stream.

Politics stream

In the politics stream, policymakers have the motive and opportunity to turn a solution into policy. While some studies show that a government may emerge as the primary policy entrepreneur in merging streams and creating a window of opportunity to put forward their agenda (Young, Shepley and Song, 2010), this case study was certainly different. The factors that normally play a role in the politics stream in democracies, such as public opinion, elections, and change of government, are obviously not applicable to Azerbaijan, at least for the period within the focus of this research.

With regard to the politics stream, think tanks managed to restore and/or create new venues for the discourse on local self-governance. First, they re-vitalized the role of the CoE as a relevant venue for Azerbaijan which local think tanks could use for their advocacy work and to pressure the Azerbaijani government on public administration reform. They managed to do so by visiting the CoE in Strasbourg in 2009 and by sending to the CoE their situational assessment reports on local self-governance in Azerbaijan. Thus, they eventually returned Azerbaijan to the focus of the Local Governance Congress of the CoE, and the latter sent its representative to Azerbaijan in 2009 for the first time since its monitoring visit in 2003. The ensuing CoE reports were also informed by the Annual Monitoring Reports of BINA. It is noteworthy that in 2009, this tactic did not cause any alienation of the government in terms of interpreting it as a potential confrontational act on the part of think tanks. Abil Bayramov, a BINA coordinator, said (Interview, October, 2019):

At that time, the government was not so aggressive, they simply expressed their disagreement with the general tone of the CoE Monitoring Report at the presentation workshop by stating that "not everything is so bad, there are also improvements"... If it happened nowadays, the reaction could have been different. Generally, comparing that time and nowadays, I agree that in comparison to the times ten years on, think tanks were more influential, more productive, able to bring concrete policy issues. Issues we discuss nowadays are more spontaneous, ad hoc.

Second, with the support of Oxfam, local think tanks created a new venue for policy research and debate by establishing an alliance of CSOs (BINA) dealing with local-self-governance matters. Hereby, not only was a new actor created, but also a new venue was established with the purpose of bringing together the voices of individuals, organizations, and policy-makers concerned with self-governance. The creation of the alliance also assisted in strengthening the voice of the local-self-governance community, enhancing its professional legitimacy as the consolidated voice of both experts and beneficiaries in the area; and of course, ensuring higher visibility for their activities. Meanwhile, BINA undertook a broad range of activities, including organizing debates, networking, presentations, research, surveys, capacity building, monitoring and advocacy, which will be considered in detail in Chapter 6.

The creation of a new independent alliance, unsanctioned by the state, was never welcomed by the government in Azerbaijan, which had been creating legal and administrative obstacles to the legal registration and operation of new alliances. Therefore, the new alliance of CSOs on local self-governance created in spring of 2009 allegedly created concern in the government. An internal struggle over control of the alliance during the election of the coordinator among fifteen CSOs led to its break-up shortly after its establishment. This was immediately followed by the establishment of two separate alliances. From these two alliances, BINA (which is the focus of this case study), with eight member organizations, positioned itself as a structure which was more independent from government control. The other alliance did not last long and dissolved one year later. Eventually, the government accepted and implemented two policy proposals: the simplification of the municipalities' property assessment based on the square metre count of the

property; and reduction in the number of small municipalities. On May 25, 2009, a law on "changes in the registry of the municipalities of Azerbaijani Republic" was adopted and the number of municipalities was reduced from 2,757 to 1,718. Thus, as a result of the activities of the think tank community, the government eventually decreased the number of small-size entities by forty per cent (Azadliq, May, 2009). However, while according to the law, municipalities could unify on a voluntary basis, the government opted for command-administrative methods and the selected municipalities were unofficially instructed to unify "voluntarily". Thus, relevant municipalities applied to parliament to approve their amalgamation. As a result, the number of municipalities with a population of less than one thousand was sharply reduced. This process took place only in village municipalities, mainly in northern and southern parts of Azerbaijan. However, a follow-up study conducted by the think tanks showed that, because the policy proposal had only been partially implemented, it had not led to the expected positive results from amalgamation. Such issues were both technical in nature and contained in the legislative gaps (no substantial legislative revision took place) (SEI Report, 2010):"We prepared the assessment in the aftermath of the amalgamation. Our conclusion was that it was not enough just to unify them without clarifying their responsibilities and improving the financial capacity of the municipalities (Abil Bayramov, Interview, October, 2019).

It is noteworthy that in both cases of policy proposal adoption, the government selected the less threatening proposals, which did not jeopardize their grip on power (Abil Bayramov, Interview, October 2019). At the same time, the process of external (CoE) and internal (BINA) monitoring at least did not allow the government so easily to wipe the local-self-governance issue off the agenda of the pending public administration reforms. At the same time, the local self-governance sphere remained a sensitive realm where it would be difficult for the government to withdraw any meaningful reform once it had been accomplished through legislative amendments. This could be one of the reasons for the reluctance of the government to undertake any meaningful public administration reform which would empower any other power except central power. In this regard, the realm of budget

transparency, as discussed in the next section, was different, since it assumed less risky changes such as the introduction of procedural habits and mechanisms.

5.3. Overview of the context of budget transparency issues in Azerbaijan

Another vital aspect of the good governance theme is budget transparency, which refers to the publication of information on how governments raise, spend, and manage public resources. More specifically, it refers to the public circulation of information about how the government raises taxes, borrows from banks and international organizations, spends, invests, and manages public assets and liabilities. Budget transparency is considered a prerequisite for meaningful public participation and accountability. It is assumed that CSOs can help improve budget policies by providing information on public needs through their connections with citizens. CSOs also can play an important role in holding the executive accountable for how it uses public resources. When CSOs and others lack access to budget information or opportunities to engage in budget processes, it opens the door for the executive to choose inappropriate programmes and engage in corruption (IBG.org). It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the case of local self-governance, in the field of budget transparency, the local think tank community in Azerbaijan has been involved mainly in monitoring, evaluating, advocating and educational work rather than purely in policy work. The budget transparency issue has evolved along two key lines in Azerbaijan: (i) transparency of the State Budget; and (ii) transparency of oil revenue. In spite of the fact that the transparency of oil revenue is not the focus of this study, these two issues are interlinked in terms of understanding the legacy of the formation of the expert community and its further engagement with budget issues. People who formed the expert community on budget transparency topic, including think tanks, coalitions, and independent experts, eventually launched the Open Budget Survey in 2006. However, they started their activity earlier, in 2003, in the OSI funded Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Community Monitoring Project. The interlink of these two processes supports one of the arguments of the thesis with regard to the cumulative effect

that the activities of the expert community may have (this will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 7). Thus, the issue of oil revenue management was key to the establishment of one of the first monitoring initiatives, and below, I briefly introduce the project.

In 2003, representatives of civil society in Azerbaijan expressed concern about the negative effects of one of the largest projects of the modern oil industry: the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Based on this, a project for monitoring the construction of the BTC oil pipeline became the first of its kind in Azerbaijan, in 2003-06, and this later provided an impulse for the process of monitoring budget and revenue transparency as a function of civil society. It developed the required skills and networks to carry out this function, which became instrumental in the creation of other public monitoring platforms and for the establishment of think tanks specialized in economic topics (Asadov, 2005).

The first monitoring projects simply collected complaints from the community and gathered evidence about how British Petroleum (BP) was solving these problems (Gulbrandsen and Moe, 2007). Talks with the company were held by the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation (OSI-AF), one of the largest funds supporting civil society in Azerbaijan at that time, speaking on behalf of, and in constant collaboration with, local CSOs. These efforts led to the conclusion of a bilateral memorandum in 2004 about monitoring the BTC pipeline. The participants in the process set its objectives, among which were to develop the monitoring skills of representatives of the CSOs and to establish a culture of dialogue with the oil company (Asadov, 2005). Accomplishing these tasks was intended to: (i) create the first experience of complex problem-solving; (ii) set an example of successful interaction through the development of professional skills and the ability to reach compromises; and (iii) lead to professionalization of the culture of dialogue (Asadov, 2005).

The BTC monitoring project was the first experience in the South Caucasus of building dialogue between the industry, the government, and civil society; it contributed to the experience and capacity building of the expert community,

specifically in terms of its monitoring function, which became valuable in holding the government accountable in its expenditure. Besides this, it consolidated voices on specific transparency issues (Asadov, 2009).Later, the experts joined the NGO Coalition for Transparency in Extractive Industries of Azerbaijan and became a vocal civil society group (Aaronson, 2011). They operated as a part of the Multi-Stakeholder Group (MSG) established under the government under Azerbaijan's commitments as a signatory to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). For several years, the MSG was quite an efficient platform for dialogue between government, civil society and extractive companies (Aslanli, 2018). The EITI Coalition drafted the law "On the Oil Fund" (2011) to offer a sound legal framework for the management of oil and gas revenue. Prior to this, there was no law regulating the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan Republic (SOFAZ), which was established in 1999 as a sovereign wealth fund and currently manages USD 35 billion. Civil society representatives in the Coalition also recommended that the government limit transfers from SOFAZ to the state budget, as the absence of any ceiling on such transfers has undermined fiscal policy (Aslanli, 2016). To play their role in EITI, the public monitoring function required civil society to have instruments and skills in the first place, such as a methodology for monitoring large projects, access to information about the project, working professionally with project documents, and readiness for dialogue about the results. These skills had been acquired during previous budget monitoring projects at the beginning of the 2000s, and were applied in EITI.

Finally, The National Budget Group (NBG) of Azerbaijan was established in 2006 by nine civil society organisations and several independent experts, with the goal of promoting budget transparency and budget analysis. It became the only platform which focused exclusively on the state budget and public finance. The section which follows will analyse a budget transparency case study across Kingdon's MSF by highlighting the issues and the messages used to talk about budget transparency in the problem stream; what the motivation of the policymakers was; and how political balances and choices factored in the politics stream.

5.3.1. Budget Transparency Case Study Summary

Problem stream

The expectation of a massive influx of oil revenue from the oil industry by the mid-2000s became a major trigger for the interest of the public and expert community in the issue of transparency in the state budget, and contributed to building the monitoring and research capacity of the national expert community. Both policy-makers and CSOs were motivated to undertake budget transparency related actions, although on different grounds. On the one hand, the risk of misappropriation of oil revenues was widely recognized in society. Thus, informing people about the effects of oil projects (on the ecology, social environment, and institutional development of the public sector) was assumed by the donors to have transformational effects on social and political attitudes. The significance of the accessibility of public information and participation in the management of natural resources was not merely related to a required level of transparency and government accountability. As Farda Asadov, a former director OSI-A, put it in his interview: "it was the creation of a working mechanism for public scrutiny over public expenditure management that we considered essential, first of all" (Asadov, Interview, August 2017). The local office of the Open Society Institute (OSI) emerged as one of the major funders of budget transparency related activities. Mr Asadov stated that (Interview, August, 2016):

> The purpose of OSI was to contribute into an alternative intellectual realm. We were doing brainstorming, analyses of our problems, with the facilitation of the experts from headquarters who shared best practices with us. In 1999, OSI was engaged in education and Internet access projects- Aznet. Starting from 2000, human rights and transparency issues became a priority. Finally, the OSI was pushing for a more assertive strategy and for policy results, while this was impossible given the limited influence leverages of civil society upon the state

Speaking of the context of establishing NBG, one of the former coordinators of NBG Emil Omarov said (Interview, August, 2017):

> 2000 was the year when the world started paying attention to the issue of transparency: the Africa Transparency Movement and International Budget Group was established, civil society was more and more getting involved in budgets all over the world. Azerbaijan was not an exception: the years between 2003 and 2007 were the golden years for economic experts in civil society work – through MBG and EITI, civil society contributed a lot."

The former OSI Project Manager, Galib Abbaszadeh, noted (Interview, August, 2017):

> OSI played the role of connector with international contacts, in providing capacity building, organizing and sponsoring conferences. NBG was selected as a partner representing civil society within the Open Government Partnership. Its mission was to monitor budget accumulation and expenditure, budget investment policy, and state construction projects. Cooperation with the Ministry of Finance (State Budget Division), which was drafting the budget, was good in 2007-8, but not so positive with the Ministry of Taxes, Parliament, or Economic Committee…

On the other hand, the government was eager to demonstrate to the international community, and especially lending institutions, that it was a trustworthy partner and had the required transparency infrastructure. With this purpose, Azerbaijan became engaged in a hydrocarbon transparency initiative started by the British government in 2002, the EITI, to enforce the declaration and certification of money received as revenue by national governments from natural resource extraction. This initiative was made possible partly because of "Publish What You Pay", an international movement founded by international civil society institutions and supported by a range of influential international organizations. The Azerbaijani government announced that it was joining the initiative at the first EITI summit in London in 2003 (Meissner, 2015). Asadov said: "From 2000, with inflow of oil revenue, OSI supported creation of a multi-stakeholders group in EITI. The process was difficult. The issues discussed there were public expenditures and revenues. Companies and government resisted, of course." (Asadov, Interview, August, 2016). Having successfully passed the pilot and development phases of EITI implementation in Azerbaijan in 2003–2005 and 2005-2008 respectively, in February 2009, Azerbaijan became the first compliant country and full member of

the EITI. Thus, Azerbaijan's EITI implementation came under international scrutiny. Moreover, the Azerbaijani government had to fulfil certain commitments before EITI: specifically, to facilitate the establishment of a multi-stakeholder group (EITI.az). Eventually, within the MSG, the established NGOs' Coalition for Transparency in Extractive Industries of Azerbaijan became a vocal civil society group.

In parallel with the Transparency in Extractive Industries group, civil society comprehended the need to monitor public spending. So, when in 2006, the first significant lump sum was allocated from the Oil Revenue Fund to the Azerbaijan State Budget, in conditions which were restricted by legal, institutional, and political barriers combined with a general lack of publicly available information on budget, a group of experts became involved in a new mission: budget transparency activities. A number of donor organizations, such as OSI, Oxfam Novib, Oxfam, the EU, and Revenue Watch Institute/Natural Resource Governance, became the main donors for budget transparency activities in Azerbaijan. In this context, the National Budget Group (NBG) was established in 2006. The sensitivity of the Azerbaijani authorities towards the activities of CSOs remained quite high: especially given that, at this stage, the government had started receiving direct profits from the extracted oil and the operation of the pipeline: "SOFAZ (State Oil Fund - A.G.) was very cooperative in the beginning, until the chair, Samir Sharifov, moved to become the Minister of Finance. After 2006, the government reduced engagement, which caused a certain amount of radicalization within the civil society and in its relationship with government" (Asadov, Interview, August, 2017).

The NBG's establishment overlapped with International Budget Transparency launching a major civil society initiative to promote greater transparency in government budgets: the Open Budget Survey (OBS) in 2006 and the associated Open Budget Index (OBI).[11] The NBG was linked to the International Budget Group and became actively engaged in the survey process in Azerbaijan. The

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[11]Launched in 2006, the Open Budget Survey (OBS) is the world's only independent, comparative assessment of the three pillars of public budget accountability; transparency, oversight and public participation. https://www.internationalbudget.org/open-budget-survey/

issues reflected in the indicators later guided the monitoring activities of the NBG. The Open Budget Survey evolved around three pillars of budget accountability: (i) budget transparency, rated by the answers to 109 survey questions covering eight key documents over the annual budget cycle; (ii) public participation, evaluated using sixteen questions introduced in the 2012 survey that rated opportunities for direct public participation in budget preparation and implementation; and (iii) the strength of oversight, using fifteen questions on the strength of the legislature and the supreme audit institution. It included some questions on assets and liabilities which focused on eight key reports centred on the budget; the pre-budget statement, executive budget proposal, citizen's budget, in-year review, mid-year review, year-end report, and auditor's report. The first OBS was prepared and published in 2006, and Azerbaijani experts from the NBG actively participated in refining the indicators, being the first participating country in the post-Soviet zone. The survey was implemented by independent budget experts based in each of the countries surveyed, under the oversight of the International Budget Partnership. Each survey was peer reviewed by in-country experts, and reviewed by IBP experts, and a draft was made available to each government for comment. The first survey revealed that in Azerbaijan, the government provided minimal budget information to citizens. There was no pre-budget statement, or in-year, mid-year or end-of-year reports, and no auditors' reports were made available to citizens. The legislators received the budget at least six weeks before but less than three months before the budget year started. In terms of obtaining non-financial information on spending programmes, such as the number of beneficiaries, for example, no highly disaggregated non-financial information was available. Public hearings on budget, macro-economic or fiscal frameworks were not held. Independent auditors could be removed by the executive power without the final consent of the legislature. The resources for independent audit were not sufficient to fulfil the mandate (Open Budget Index, 2006).

None of the actors in Azerbaijan seemed to disagree that there were problems of transparency in the country which needed to be adjusted in line with international standards. However, the motivation for problem recognition was different among

the actors. While for civil society, this was an inseparable part of the democracy-building process to hold government accountable generally, for the government, the main motivation was to improve its image in the international arena and meet loan conditionality for large infrastructure projects (Gillies, 2010). In other words, all actors were on the same page in terms of the plausibility of budget transparency as a cornerstone of the democratic image of Azerbaijan, and in fact, recognized this as a pressing problem (Flegel, 2012).

NBG also worked on a number of policy problems, among which was that of improving Azerbaijan's financial policy and governance (within the project "Your Money-Your future" (2012-2014), funded by Oxfam and the EU). A number of policy papers were produced which analysed the problems of Azerbaijani financial governance, and offered efficient budgeting mechanisms (see list of budget transparency related policy papers for 2007-2014). One of these, prepared in 2014, focused on effective planning and accounting mechanisms, through results-based budgeting, was picked up a few years later by the government. The study discovered a number of problems in financial governance in Azerbaijan. First, in Azerbaijan, the system of "budget planning" inherited from the centralized system had continued, and was not based on strategic assessments and objective planning of public needs. The system was instead based on projections made from plain calculations of the past year's indexed budget spending, which considered future possible inflation impacts. Second, medium-term budget planning, which was successfully tested in the advanced countries, as well as in several developing countries, was not implemented in Azerbaijan, and the budget indicators covered only one year ahead. Third, budget planning and budgeting were not based on the strategic planning of the government's individual agencies. Fourth, Azerbaijan did not use the practice of results-based budgeting, which would refer to the expenditure results of the previous programmes. It also showed that the use of quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess the effectiveness of budget expenditures had no relevant legal mechanisms. Finally, the research found that Azerbaijan had no experience in the application of programme

classification and its integration into the budget to ensure that programmes produced effective results (Agayev and Aliyev, 2014).

Policy stream

To enhance the budget transparency records of Azerbaijan along the indicators of OBS, the National Budget Group organized its activities around their policy recommendations. The advocacy strategy that was developed by NBG in fulfilling its mission included activities on awareness-raising, work with youth, journalists and universities, analysis of the budget, communication with the government, and dissemination of outputs to all relevant government agencies (Fidan Bagirova, Interview, August 2017). The NBG's work included a broad range of outputs. It carried out a review of the impact of oil revenue on Azerbaijan's economy, assisted civil society organizations in conducting professional monitoring of public investment projects, prepared alternative models for petroleum revenue management; and identified new priorities for economic diversification (Aslanli interview, August 2017). There were also SOCAR (State Oil Company) and SOFAZ (State Oil Fund) related studies, and the Oil and Gas Management and Social Tension methodology was developed in 2010. The NBG issued annual budget reviews, including sectoral reviews for health and education (İbadoğlu, Mehtiyev, Ağayev, 2009). Together with regular macroeconomic analysis, it informed society at large on the budgetary issues at stake and explained complex matters and figures through graphs and plain language. A number of public investment project investigations were launched which provided cost-benefit analysis of the relevant projects, and a summary of the results were then disseminated through video reportage on YouTube to raise public awareness on government spending efficiency and transparency.

Based on analysis of the problems, the policy paper "effective planning and accounting mechanism through results-based budgeting" (Agayev and Aliyev, 2014) presented proposals for the government which included four main actions. The proposal emphasized the need: to develop legal mechanisms that link strategic and budget planning; to establish a mechanism for the integration of budget expenditure indicators with budget programmes; to include application

mechanisms for programme classifications in budget legislation; and to ensure the transition to a results-based budgeting mechanism. It emphasized that it was necessary to use interim and final indicators, as well as indicators of efficiency and quality, allowing evaluation of the implementation of budget programmes. The proposal comprised three parts. The first section provided an overview of effective budget management mechanisms that had been used and successfully tested in various countries' practices, and explained the nature and character of these mechanisms. The second section of the study described the current budget management system in Azerbaijan, its advantages and disadvantages. The third section of the study provided information on public finance management reforms in Russia, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Estonia,. Finally, the findings were summarized and recommendations for reforms that were considered feasible in this area were developed.For the first time, the language and issue of results-based budgeting was reflected in a reform document published by the government in 2016 known as a "Strategic Road Map". The paper was produced with the participation of wider civil society experts, and was motivated by the dramatic decrease in oil revenue after 2014. It states, in part related to results-based budgeting:

> Global macroeconomic trends and their potential impact because of unpredictable external shocks, the potential for future generations, and the effectiveness of integrated fiscal management are of vital importance to the country. The four main components to be considered for this purpose are: the transfer of oil revenues to the state budget, the creation of a mechanism for spending and investment discipline, the strengthening of the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, and the implementation of a cost-effective, result-based budget mechanism. (Road Map, 2016)

Further, the document described the measures to be taken with regard to the establishment of the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework and results-based budget mechanism, and the Ministry of Finance was assigned as a leading implementer of this assignment, together with other relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Economy, State Oil Fund, and the Ministry of Taxes. Later, the government internalized the vocabulary of results-based budgeting (in Azerbaijani "nəticəəsaslı büdcə"), into other official documents, and in 2018, two more results-based budgeting related decisions were taken to facilitate the transition to this

approach (CabMin Decision No. 571, 2018; Decree No. 235, 2018). Additionally, a separate division was established within the Ministry of Finance assigned to transition. The experts are cautiously optimistic: "the government consulted with us as independent experts. We had a closed-door workshop where we once more presented our arguments... It is only an attempt so far. The future will show if it will become reality" (R. Agayev, Interview, October 2019).

The Budget Office of the Ministry of Finance was a key advocacy target in the work of the NBG. The government participated in the events held by the NBG even at top management level and was providing feedback on the work of the NBG. Experts noted the years between 2005 and 2010 as the most favourable for the NBG's activities: there was a decent level of attendance on the part of the government at events held by the NBG; cooperation with several opposition members of parliament was established and regular; and focal points at the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Taxes, State Statistics Committee, and Chamber of Accounts were open to collaboration.

> The monitoring reports of NBG were not politicized, so attendance at our workshops was good. Budget organizations were very much interested in getting the feedback of our experts on their budget drafts. Cooperation depended on the political will of the individual minister. The Citizen Budget Guideline was picked up as a guideline by the Ministry of Finance in 2013. However, after 2012 the relationship with the government started breaking down (Galib Abbaszadeh, Interview, August, 2017).

Speaking of the motivation of government officials in their participation in NBG events Zohrab Ismayilov, a director of the Public Finance Monitoring Centre think tank, noted in an interview, that:

> The government was concerned about the country's low rating in various international survey indexes, and in this context, there was demand for think tanks' work. We worked with media, which spread the work of NBG. So, the Minister of Finance was interested in ensuring its positive, cooperative reputation by joining the dialogue and explaining budget-related issues (interview, August 2017).

At the same time, the government tried not to demonstrate openly that they were benefitting from the process of civil society engagement, in order not to disrupt the

perception of the monopoly of the government on defining the public good. Nevertheless, members of parliament were actively using the comments and proposals from the NBG to inform their own speeches, reports and internal policy briefs and articles:

> We were considered as opinion-makers, and various stakeholders, such as CSOs, diplomatic corps, international organizations, and government, willingly participated in the events and forums organized by us between 2008 and 2010. The media referred to the opinions of our experts in their work, as well as drawing on our ideas. (Zohrab Ismayilov, Interview, August 2017).

In communication with the government, the NBG's experts mainly used personal contacts and networks such as ex-colleagues or ex-university classmates to gain access to formally unavailable papers, drafts and data (Aslanli and Agayev, Interviews, August 2017).

Politics stream

While massive oil revenues in non-democracies naturally turned into a solid pillar of the welfare re-distribution model, the establishment of the NBG with a mission of budget transparency improvement faced resistance from the Azerbaijani government. Some of the organization's experts also remained members of opposition political parties, which could have given another reason to the government to see the purpose of the initiative as something other than the improvement of state policies and service delivery (Aslanli, Interview, August 2017).However, irrespective of the motivation of some of the experts, budget transparency is a sensitive issue for any regime, and especially an unaccountable one. As Rovshan Agayev, a leading expert for SEI, noted: "a good governance concept is often precarious for the officials because it assumes the participation of non-state actors, and transparency, which makes corruption more difficult…. In pursuit of "white elephant" projects and the delivery of costly outputs, the government is not interested in efficiency and in work against indicators" (Agayev, Interview, August 2017). The experts tried not to "politicize" issues by loudly criticizing the government, but instead chose to present the government with problems which needed fixing in the very interest of the government itself. For

example, the proposal on the amalgamation of municipalities was frequently presented as a way to optimize the administrative costs of government. Generally, reforms in local self-governance were promoted as in the interest of the government, assuming it wants to improve its score in the international ratings and its image among the international community on democratization.

Local representatives of donor organizations were key actors in linking local civil society groups to international initiatives and networks. While experts referred to the NBG as a purely domestic initiative inspired by international budget transparency movements (Aslanli, interview, August 2017), and especially the International Budget Group, Fidan Bagirova, one of the coordinators of the NBG, noted that (Interview, August, 2017): "Through OSI New York's support, NBG was linked to the International Budget Group and Open Budget Initiative". One of the NBG coordinators, Emil Omarov, stated (Interview, August, 2019):

> I was responsible for the international connection of NBG. For example, International Budget Group was publishing our works in the international network. OSI supported NBG initiatives in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and our experts provided capacity-building support to them: methodological support, which we learned from Africa and European experience.

The gathering together of the leading experts in the country in the single working group of the NBG and the following massive advocacy performed by the NBG strengthened their voice and reputation in society and with government. The government became interested in the Open Budget Survey through its aspiration to improve the score, and thereby the image, of the country through the Open Budget Index (Aslanli, interview, August 2017). The Ministry of Finance became involved in OBI scores and started examining the reasons why Azerbaijan lagged behind. The government finally decided to publish the Citizens' Budget Guide in 2012 using the NBG recommendations and the draft of the guide. The Citizens' Budget is a non-technical explanation of the state budget. Before the government picked up the proposal, the NBG was the only agency regularly publishing the Citizens' Budget, which used to cause heated debates between the government and the NBG. Generally, as a result of close collaboration among the NBG, the Ministry of Finance and other stakeholders, the Azerbaijani government started to

publish more budget-related documents than before. Among others, the most important was the Executive Budget Proposal, which became available to the public, although only as a fifty-page summary. Also, the government made available the "Enacted Budget", a quarterly in-year execution report, and the year-end report, as well as the audit report from the Chamber of Accounts. Starting from 2012, the government also started publishing the Citizen's Budget. At the same time, the Pre-budget Statement and Mid-year Review for the secondhalf of the year remained unavailable, since there was neither a legal instruction nor a practice of preparing these documents (Aslanli, Asadov, Bagirova, Interviews, August 2017). Among other impacts of the budget transparency work accomplished by the NBG, the following was noted during the interviews. First, the developed Road Map Strategy led to the introduction of the so-called "Golden Rules" in money transfers from the State Oil Fund (SOFAZ) to the budget. Second, the Chamber of Accounts started publicizing budget feedback reports. Third, the government started publishing a list of investment projects which had previously been classified information. At the same time, the Cabinet of Ministers started publishing investment project budgets, although this practice was soon discontinued (K. Aslanli, F. Asadov, Bagirova, Interview, August 2017).

All of these actions had a positive impact on the budget transparency situation and improved the country's position in the Open Budget Index. Moreover, the Open Budget Index process in Azerbaijan engaged numerous CSOs, and the NBG planned to spread the process beyond the capital. However, the political window began to shut after 2010, due to the international turmoil associated with the Middle East and Ukraine, which contributed to the rising aggressiveness of the state against civil society in Azerbaijan and the shrinking of public space. This affected not only the relationship of think tanks with executive bodies, but also with parliament. While before, partnership with parliament had been built mainly through the few opposition MPs, after 2010, no opposition parties were let into the parliament (Aljazeera, November 2010). As a result, think tanks continued working with the so-called "pocket opposition" (sanctioned by the government, and therefore, controllable by the government) in the parliament, and some

independent MPs. There was permanent pressure to censor disseminated policy papers and reports by stressing positive aspects and reducing criticism. The atmosphere within the government changed: dialogue and debate were not on the agenda of the government after 2010 (Z. Ismayil, interview, August 2017).

To sum up, budget transparency work was an example of the coupling of all three streams, where both think tanks and state officials made changes possible, improving the score of Azerbaijan in the Open Budget Survey steadily, from thirty per cent in 2006 to fifty-one per cent in 2015. However, since 2015, Azerbaijan has again decreased the availability of budget information: by failing to continue publishing the Citizens' Budget online in a timely manner; by reducing the information provided in the Executive's Budget Proposal; and by reducing the information provided in the Mid-year Reports. It still does not produce a Pre-budget Statement or a Mid-year Review; and the Executive's Budget Proposal contains only minimal budget information. Thus, the overall Open Budget score for Azerbaijan dropped to 34% in 2017 (Internationalbudget.org, 2017). At the same time, speaking of the motivation and timing of the government to pick up certain proposals such as those related to results-based budgeting in 2019, the experts noticed political and economic circumstances, namely the oil revenue dramatic decrease in 2015, which spurred the government to aim at more efficient spending in future. One of the experts emphasized that the economic crisis inspired the government to open up slightly to consultation with civil society experts in 2019: "it is also a fact that they became interested in cooperation with us. Formal decisions and structures have been created to implement the mechanisms we have been advocating for years." (Agayev, Interview, October, 2019). In other words, if the impact difference between local self-governance and budget transparency themes is compared, the procedures and the mechanisms advocated in budget transparency were easier to withdraw for the government. They could easily stop publishing certain reports, for example, because budget transparency involved mainly central government related reforms, while the local self-governance sphere was about the empowerment of the power source (elective municipalities) versus

central power (executive committees), which would be difficult to reverse once meaningful policy is adopted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I pursued a two-fold goal; theoretical and empirical. The empirical goal was fulfilled by reviewing the content and a scope of themes of local self-governance and budget transparency the think tanks dealt with from the mid-2000s up to 2014. The theoretical goal was fulfilled by demonstrating the possibility of applying a classic Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) to the description of policy process not only for democracies but also in non-democracies.

Unlike almost all policy process theories which were designed for dynamic, democratic-context countries, as the study demonstrates, it is possible to apply the MSF also to non-democracies, due to its flexibility (despite MSF also being developed in and for the context of the US, with its independent branches of power).The strength of Kingdon's model is that it provides a flexible conceptual framework to analyse agenda setting as a non-linear process, and thereby serves one of the goals of the study: to draw attention in scholarship and aid practitioners in the role that local think tanks may play at an early stage of policy-making process.

According to Kingdon (2013), the three streams flow along different channels and remain more or less independent of one another until, at a specific point in time, a policy window opens, and the streams cross. However, the findings from the policy case studies imply that, first, the way the streams function can differ depending on the political regime. The case of Azerbaijan implies that multiple streams can actually be highly interlinked in non-democracies, perhaps due to: (a) a more centralized policy-making process; and (b) a smaller number of actors, who are active across the streams due to the narrower public space in the non-democracy.

Moreover, think tanks were active throughout the streams: they were active in problem and policy streams, and in certain circumstances even influenced the

politics stream. In other words, think tanks in non-democracies can play a role in the process of agenda-setting, at least in the coupling (linking) of problem and policy streams. However, the coupling of these streams does not imply automatic coupling with the politics stream, which depends on the political will and incentives of the political elite in the case of Azerbaijan, and on the availability of mechanisms of policy influence. The nature of the policy theme also matters for coupling, opening opportunities and ultimate policy impact. As noted above, consideration of the long-term implications for control of power determines government openness to picking up a policy proposal. For example, introducing some procedural amendments in the field of budget transparency did not threaten any power control, and could be easily withdrawn (as happened later), while support for institutional empowerment of the local self-governance bodies would be difficult to undo once it had created a positive experience through having meaningful local self-governance. In other words, coupling to the politics stream was outside the managerial control of the think tanks in the context of the non-democracy. In this regard, this observation speaks for limitations in the argument with regard to the non-confrontational scope of the activities of civil society in the context of a non-democracy.

Nevertheless, the meaningfulness of both problem and policy streams cannot be underestimated. In the problem stream, think tanks played a key role in the process of defining certain conditions (for example, lack of access to budget information, and overlap in the functions of municipalities and regional representatives of central power) as a problem. The role of think tanks as actors is important also because the framing of any issue as a political problem makes certain policy alternatives in the policy stream appear more plausible and others unthinkable.

Certainly, the Azerbaijani government followed policy proposals mainly out of an aspiration to polish its image internationally (in the case of budget transparency), or to reduce the administrative costs of developing institutions in which it was not interested in any case (in the case of local self-governance). None of the policy

changes accepted by policy-makers threatened or jeopardized the power control of the government.

However, understanding the context and motivations of the policy-makers pushed the think tanks to frame the issues correspondingly, to reach at least some incremental changes. For example, the framing of local self-governance policy with regard to reducing the number of small municipalities as a way to increase efficiency in budget spending overall helped to couple policy, problem and politics streams. Reference to the experience of other countries enhanced the legitimacy of the suggested proposals, and permitted think tanks to avoid excessively criticizing vocabulary towards the policy-makers in Azerbaijan. Similarly, framing budget transparency issues as a problem, the adjustment of which, would improve Azerbaijan's ratings in international indexes, worked for the improvement of some budget transparency procedures. At the same time, a change in economic situation and the perspective of oil revenue reduction, apparently inspired policy-makers to consider more efficient budgeting in 2018, and use the vocabulary of results-based budgeting which the think tanks had been advocating for since 2014.

The review of policy cases using the multiple streams framework implies that it is useful to consider what actors do within the streams by focusing on the roles that various actors play and how they interact across streams. In this case, the matrix of the enhanced MSF, as the thesis suggests, may be more relevant as a framework to be used beyond political regime categories. In the next chapter, I will present an analysis of the specific activities which think tanks carried out in the local self-governance and budget transparency themes in Azerbaijan from 2003-2014, conducted using the proposed matrix of activities which is integrated into the classic MSF of Kingdon.

Chapter Six. Analysis of the Agenda-Setting Related Activities of Think Tanks in Azerbaijan in the Multiple Streams Framework of Kingdon

Introduction

As in case of the previous chapter, the purpose of Chapter Six is twofold: theoretical and empirical. While the previous chapter presented theoretically informed empirical findings from the policy cases using a classic Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), the theoretical purpose of Chapter Six is to offer an enhanced version of the MSF which would not only allow its use beyond various political regimes, but would also allow consideration of the specific activities of particular actors in various streams of the process. Thereby, the MSF would overcome its perception of policy streams as implicitly objective, and its overlooking of the activities of the individual actors in the streams. Kingdon presents the agenda-setting process as problem, policy, and political streams, which have the following characteristics. The problem stream is filled with perceptions of problems that are seen as "public" in the sense that government action is needed to resolve them. These problems usually reach the awareness of policy makers because of crises or through feedback from existing programmes that attract public attention. People come to view a situation as a "problem" based upon perceiving discrepancies with their understanding of how the state of affairs should be. The policy stream is filled with the outputs of experts and analysts who propose solutions. Finally, the political stream comprises any factors that influence politics.

Bearing this classic MSF in mind, the chapter suggests a matrix which integrates specific categories of the activities which were identified during the research into the classic MSF. The matrix looks like following. The problem stream includes the problematizing strategy, which accommodates data collection, dramatizing, and raising awareness types of activities. Policy streams include a softening strategy which accommodates piloting and capacity-building types of activities. Finally, the politics stream includes an interaction strategy expressed in various types of activities such as venue creation, cooperation, and networking. It should be noted

that analysis of the categories of activities does not follow a strict chronology of the accomplished work. Moreover, neither the categories of the activities, nor the streams imply a temporal sequence.

The empirical goal of the chapter is fulfilled by analysis of various activities and strategies of the think tanks in line with the claim of the thesis that it is the specific activities of actors in civil society that determines the role and function of that civil society. The activities in question were implemented by two alliances: BINA, the members of which were involved in a policy work on local self-governance guided by the commitments of Azerbaijan before CoE; and the National Budget Group (NBG), which was involved in work on budget transparency through improving financial governance. Distilling the activities of the think tanks allows the overall argument of the thesis to be consolidated with regard to the non-confrontational activities of civil society in non-democracies as a legitimate and meaningful activity. Drawing attention to the activities of a specific actor in civil society (think tanks in this case) allows us to look beyond the immediate policy impact of the actor, and further discuss how the debate nurturing functions and related activities of think tanks in agenda-setting contributes to the overall legitimacy of civil society in non-democracies.

6.1. Problem stream: problematizing strategy

Kingdon envisages a problem stream defining certain conditions as a problem. In this stream, what I call a problematizing strategy aims at demonstrating the significance of a problem, "to build acceptance of the problem" (Kingdon, 2013), with the purpose of getting people to recognize an issue as a problem. The case study shows that to prove that a problem was there, the local think tanks: a) referred to data from statistics, surveys, observation and evaluative studies; b) dramatized the problem by emphasizing cause and effect logic (e.g., poverty is an effect of poor governance); and (c) raised awareness about the problem among broader society. Below, I will discuss each of these instruments in more detail.

6.1.1. Data collection

The acquisition of data and the framing of it appropriately is key to identifying an issue as a problem. Local think tanks in Azerbaijan extensively collected and used quantitative and qualitative data in their studies. They provided facts and figures; collected evidence via interviews with state officials, analysed statistical data, and surveyed local sources such as members of municipalities, community members (not officials), and Members of Parliament. This was particularly the case with the local-self-governance reforms. As one of the experts emphasized: "We paid particular attention to the quality of the research and surveys in terms of its methodology to make sure that the references and reliability of the findings would be up to the best standards." (Agayev, Interview, August 2017). Given the conditions of unreliability and manipulability in official statistical data, the skills and competence of the think tanks to acquire and analyse not only direct data but also proxy data had great value. In this regard, methodological training provided by international donor organisations was very much appreciated by the interviewees (Interviews with Gubad Ibadoglu, Mehtiyev, Aslanly and Rovshan Agayev, August 2017). Apart from technical knowledge, data acquisition required excellent communication skills and an established reputation from the think tank experts, since a great deal of public information was obtained through personal connections. In general, acquisition of information from the government was a challenge for all think tanks. For example, NBG partner organizations - SEI, ERC, and PAAFE - faced obstacles when they launched monitoring of state programmes in five regions of the country within the project, "Your Money-Your future". Despite NBG facilitating the respective local project partners affiliated with the Public Partnership Platform that it was nurturing, when obtaining feedback from local authorities, those authorities either provided incomplete information or refused to respond (NBG, 2014). In other words, access to data (let alone the availability of data) in a non-democracy is a substantial challenge which leads researchers to use established connections and proxy indicators to acquire available but not accessible data (not publicly available), or to establish first-hand knowledge

through traditional data collection techniques such as surveys, interview and focus groups.

6.1.2. Dramatizing and Framing the Issue

Once data on the conditions is gathered, it is the interpretation of the data that transforms conditions into a problem. While any focusing event like a crisis or a disaster may provide a push to gain the attention of people in and around government (Kingdon, 1984: 99), it does not translate a condition into a problem unless actors exploit the event and relate it to the problem. In other words, dramatizing an issue and framing it through identifying a cause-and-effect logic is of ultimate importance for building a convincing case. In this regard, research became an important tool for framing and comprised the core activity of the local think tanks in Azerbaijan that informed the content of their subsequent advocacy. During the period from 2007-2014, approximately sixteen policy papers, research and/or studies account for each member organisation of BINA and NBG. Research performed by both alliances included policy papers, monitoring reports and briefs which were submitted to the government and to the wider public. For example, topics of research in the local self-governance area included: mechanisms for land leasing; the large number of small municipalities; inter-budget transfers; determination of the scope of authority for municipalities; access to credit, etc. During the work, the experts extensively studied international practices, and relevant local and foreign legislation. The experts were searching for models that could be adapted to the context of Azerbaijan. For example, central ideas in the local self-governance sphere evolved around strengthening local-self-governance institutions through improving their access to finance; clarification of the scope of their authority; and updating the status of the local municipalities. The policy papers were usually thirty to fifty-five pages long, including the executive summary, and encompassed collected, first-hand (acquired through monitoring or ad hoc survey) and secondary data (public), comparative statistical data from various countries, and legislative analysis, which was followed by recommendations and an assessment of the proposed policy options. Once the first draft of a policy paper was ready, it was distributed to the various relevant stakeholders with the request

to provide feedback. In parallel, the first draft of the policy paper was discussed during open-door workshops which attracted media, relevant stakeholders from civil society, government and legislative bodies. Once the feedback had been collected, refined and incorporated into the draft, the presentation of the final draft was formally organized, and the hard copies of the proposal paper were sent to the policy-makers, with a PDF version of the paper made available online. At the same time, briefs with summaries of the policy papers were distributed among the media.

Beyond idea generation, the think tanks were compelled to engage in problem framing and problem definition through establishing a clear link between the identified local-self-governance problem and the proposed solution. While originally, the concept developed in 2007 referred to decentralisation as the optimal way for government reforms to make municipalities financially meaningful and to solve the socio-economic problems of their constituencies, this term was abandoned in later papers as misleading for the government. The fact that the first programmes on local self-governance were funded by Oxfam-GB and ICC-Netherlands (with their poverty-eradication missions), the local self-governance issue was also presented (at least orally, in debate) as a public administration reform with the purpose of coping with poverty, rather than a decentralization reform, for example. The concept of local self-governance strengthening (Agayev, Ibadoglu, Mehtiyev, and Aslanov, Baku, 2007) was developed by the group of think tanks within the Public Advocacy Group established in 2006 (an informal predecessor of BINA) under the Oxfam-ICCC funded project "The Role of Local self-governments in Poverty reduction in Azerbaijan", who stated (the English grammar of the paper is unchanged) (Agayev, Ibadoglu, Mehtiyev, Aslanov, 2007):

> …Municipalities have been created but they possess extremely limited responsibilities. Currently, it is impossible to refer to any significant responsibility of local authorities in addressing people's socio-economic problems…..The current share of total municipal income amounts for less than 0.5 percent in the consolidated state budget, while this number was 15-20% in transition economies, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Poland in the late twentieth century and 20-45 percent in developed countries such as Denmark, Netherlands and Great Britain. Such being the case, there is an urgent need for the formation of local authorities with crucial impact tools and levers in public affairs, which

the citizen can trust as an official body. This requires, above all, the reinforcement of decentralization process in the country as being one of the priorities of the state's political and economic reforms in the short-run.

To describe the typical structure of the policy proposal, we can refer to one of the issues connected with the elimination of barriers to strengthening the potential of the village municipalities: the issue of a large number of too-small municipal entities which experts linked to inefficiency in resource usage. To address this problem, the policy paper "Mechanisms of Unification of the Municipalities: voluntary or administrative principle?" (Agayev and Aliyev, Baku, 2008) was produced. In the paper, first, a specific gap in the performance of local municipalities was identified by citing national and local data: the work revealed that the large number of small municipalities was increasing administrative costs, partitioning financial resources, did not permit effective human resource management, and were also reducing opportunities for accountability to the central state and civil society. Second, the experts had to convince the policy-makers that their solutions were preferable to others. So, international best practice was studied with regard to the plausible sizes of municipality entities, with a focus on Greece and Turkey, and proposals were made on how these practices could be applied to Azerbaijan. Three mechanisms were analysed as a result: (i) enlargement I lie with administrative-territorial criteria; (ii) enlargement guided by population size; and (iii) voluntary unification of small municipal entities into larger ones. Having analysed all three options, the policy paper suggested the first option. To implement unification of the municipalities in line with administrative - territorial criteria, the experts pointed to the need to make certain legislative amendments, set up new norms for the number of representatives per head, and introduce indicators for the law to prevent growth in the number of small municipalities.

Another policy proposal, which was eventually carried out by policymakers, was on the improvement of the property tax calculation mechanism (Mehtiyev, Agayev, Aliyev, Baku, 2011), which was supposed to be collected by municipalities. Because the property tax was calculated on an arbitrary inventory price, it was

complicated for municipalities to deal with. Think tanks proposed a simpler calculation based on the market price or calculation of the area of the property. The government accepted the proposal to calculate the property price by the area of the property. Thus, the experts chose a framing of the findings of the inefficiency of public administration and inadequate property tax calculation as hindering the tax collection function of the municipalities. In the work, experts reviewed international experience on the tax base for property tax, such as the cadastral value, inventoried/inventory value, size of property, etc., concluding that the inventoried value of property, which Azerbaijan used, was mostly applied in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) countries (Mehtiyev, Agayev, Aliyev, Baku, 2011: 33):

> Most countries, as a rule, apply the tax base calculated based on the market value of real estate. And in terms of social justice and economic efficiency, this base is the most successful mechanism. The authors of this policy paper, as well as a number of municipal experts and representatives offer the shift to the method of calculating property tax based on market value. During the process of alternatives assessment the experts gave the preference to the collection of physical entity property tax based on market value.

Apparently, the technocratic structure and deliberately dry language of the policy papers, together with reference to the best practices used in other countries to show the contrast, released experts from the need to use harsher, critical, challenging language in describing the problem. Rather than looking for the alienation of the policy-makers, the two alliances – BINA and NBG- tried to nurture a shared sense of problem ownership, which was considered a more useful way to get a problem recognized by policy-makers. For example, budget transparency was presented as an opportunity to improve the image of the government as a reliable partner in international projects, and as a borrower. In this context, the major source of problem definition was the Open Budget indicators as they were defined by the International Budget Group. Furthermore, development of the causal story, a relationship between the cause of the problem and the suggested solution, was important. Interviews suggested that experts tended to frame issues differently in their advocacy strategy depending on the current pre-occupations of specific policy-makers. For example, a shift in the discourse to one which considered "inefficient spending" was more appealing to policy-makers than a

corruption discourse. In other words, addressing "inefficiency of the budget spending" would improve Azerbaijan's image abroad and its position in international ratings, in turn affecting its borrowing capacity for grand infrastructure projects. At the same time, in the efforts to direct policy change and push for acceptance of their own problem definition, the alliances' members linked policy proposals with broader issues and problems such as, democratization, accountability and transparency, or efficient spending of oil revenues.

6.1.3. Raising awareness about the problem

To spread ideas to as wide an audience as possible, experts from both BINA and NBG employed a range of dissemination mechanisms; briefs, position papers, articles, and media interviews. Apart from sending the policy papers via post to the main target groups of the policymakers, messages were conveyed through many different channels; online, print and broadcast media, round table discussions, and informal and formal meetings. For example, for the purpose of "advocacy of the mechanism of municipalities amalgamation, the message was "small municipalities cannot be strong. To empower them, they need to be amalgamated into larger entities." The problem description for the policy paper stated that (Agayev and Aliev, Baku, 2008: 5):

> The conducted research showed that because of the small size of the municipalities, the administrative costs increase, financial resources get split, human resource potential is limited, the citizen control opportunities reduce. Therefore, the matter of municipalities' amalgamation requires solution.

The main target groups of the advocacy campaign were the President, the Regional Policy Commission of the Parliament, the Department of Work with the Local Self-governance bodies of the President's Office, the Centre on Work with the Municipalities at the Ministry of Justice, and the National Municipalities Associations. Secondary target groups were defined as parliamentarians, international organisations, the media, embassies, CSOs, political parties, the Ministry of Finance, and the Central Election Commission. Advocates on issues of local self-governance were defined as journalists, local communities, independent experts, the CSO, and BINA members. The methods of implementation were

described as access to the media, public meetings, workshop organization, engagement of famous public figures, nurturing personal contacts, distribution of information bulletins, establishment of networks and coalitions, official mailings, and maintaining contacts with members of parliament. In the local self-governance area, round tables covered various topics, including the role of civil society in strengthening municipalities, municipal credit mechanisms, inter-budgetary relations, enlargement of municipalities, evaluation of the activities of the Village Municipalities Association, mechanisms for sale and lease of municipal lands, the status of municipalities and the broadening of their functions, etc. (ERC, SEI, Aran, 2010).

Work with the media included press conferences, setting up a group of journalists with a focus on municipal problems, talk shows on TV, interviews with project experts for mass media, and regular press releases. For example, within only one project, members of BINA published 270 articles in electronic and print media (SEI, Final Report, 2010) as a part of the media campaign. Over the life of another project by NBG Your Money- Your Future", in 2012-2014 "thirteen articles were published in local online media on crucial issues such as state budget formation, oil and gas dependence, non-oil revenues and budget spending on education, agriculture, health, social protection and investment. Radio Free Europe was actively engaged in covering issues brought up by NBG experts before it was shut down. While space for independent journalism was shrinking and traditional print outlets were shut down, more independent channels on social media started emerging, whether permanent or project-based. YouTube channels started slowly taking their part in information dissemination (see the list of YouTube videos). They covered economics, social problems, and investigations on public spending. Below, I will describe in more detail a selection of the videos and programmes which were prepared.

A series of investigative reportages were produced as a joint project of PAAFE (one of the member organisations of BINA and NBG) and Radio Liberty. One of its investigations summarized in an 11-minute reportage (May 27, 2011) is devoted to the topic of "How budget money is spent in Azerbaijan: Reconstruction of buildings

in Baku". The video speaks about the massive restoration process for the facades of the buildings in Baku, which started in 2007. It refers to expert opinion stating that the sculptures on the facades of XIX c. buildings were spoiled by the unacceptable method of cleaning which the workers used, because the contractors, whoever they were, were not qualified to do the job. The economist further commented that there was no transparency in terms of who was the real contractor for the works since, there was no tender for the fifteen-million-manat work that the government allocated annually for the purpose of cleaning buildings and facing. Moreover, independent calculations showed that the total cost of the work with the most expensive facing stone should not cost the government more than eight million manats, while the government declared that it had spent fifteen million. When journalists enquired to the Baku government about the contractor for all this work, they received the response that the contractor was the Azdevlet Project Institute (an agency that was authorized to implement government construction contracts). However, this Agency officially responded that it had never received any contract from the government. Neither the construction workers nor the inhabitants of the building knew the true contractor. Economists explained that this type of situation created opportunities for corruption, and in this case, the project for cleaning the buildings was one way to appropriate budget funds.

A video episode investigating "How oil revenues is spent in Azerbaijan: School project in Ganja city" in August, 2010 was about a $2.6-million project to build a school in Ganja city. Journalists attempted to analyse the scope of work accomplished: they compared building costs across various regions of the country and found a 9-fold difference in costs among similar projects. As in the previous case, no tender process was conducted for construction contracts, and the economics expert reiterated that to carry out any project above AZN 50,000 (50,000 Euros) required tendering to be conducted, according to procurement law. Lack of tendering also affected the quality of the accomplished work: eight months later, the ceiling of the school collapsed. Another video from the series, "How oil revenue is spent in Azerbaijan" (July, 2010) investigated a $6.3 million state project on repairing the water canal from Alijanchay to Jayirli, Shakikand and Aran

villages of the Sheki region, which in fact did not solve the water problems of the villagers at all.

Continuing investigations of the efficiency of the way public money was spent to solve socio-economic problems, another video, entitled, "How 300 million manats were spent in Kura flood region in Azerbaijan?" (May 2011) explored whether the massive allocated funds addressed the needs of people who had lost their houses during the strong flood of 2010. The video showed the ground where new houses had supposedly been constructed, as well as interviews with people living in tents or semi-ruined old houses waiting their new houses to be built, and interviews with the representatives of the regional central executive power. The buildings built barely met the required standards. The video shows images of a protesting crowd from a few months previously, which were brutally crushed by the police. These images were commented upon by an economist, a representative of the civil society group "Kur", organized to protect the rights of many thousands of people who had suffered from the flood, saying that the complainers received regular threats. The video finished with the note that it was impossible to receive any clarification from the Ministry of Emergency Situations.

In addition to investigative videos, both alliances produced educational videos. For example, "33 questions on the Budget" ("Büdcə ilə bağlı 33 sual - MBQ-nin təqdimatı, prepared with the support of the World Bank and posted in June 2012, explains in images what key budget related terms mean. ANS TV provided air-time for a special programme called "Economic Forum" which was the only TV programme which discussed substantial socio-economic problems in the country, and thereby provided a venue for experts and other stakeholders to talk about the state's investment policy, implementation of pubic investment projects, accountability problems, and the importance of engaging civil society in the process to ensure better transparency. For example, a fifty-minute episode of "Economic Forum" broadcast in May 2010 on ANS TV, was devoted to the issue of the scope of authority of the municipality. The format of the programme included a facilitator, and three experts from various think tanks. Another episode of the Economic Forum programme broadcasted in March 2009 was devoted to good

governance, and accountability as one of its important concepts. The debate involved four experts and revolved around the questions of what accountability was, who was expected to be accountable, and how citizens could benefit from accountability. Experts provided examples of the impact that accountability could bring in various spheres of politics and the economy for both citizens and the government. They did that by pointing out how improving accountability mechanisms in state budget preparation can make it easier for citizen monitoring; or how municipalities can benefit from the accountability principle in order to be elected in the next round of elections. In another episode airing in March 2011, the financial situation of the municipalities was the main topic discussed by the three experts. They introduced the main sources of income for the municipalities and discussed difficulties with tax collection. After ANS TV stopped providing air-time for the programme in 2012, it continued its broadcast independently on YouTube with funds from USAID and other donors (see "Economic Forum"-2015 Economic Forum 2016).

There were about a hundred cases of the outreach of media journalists including print media, TV and radio to think tank experts. Think tanks acted as a source of expertise for media on the topic of municipalities' institution-building and budget analysis (interviews with the journalists: Aytan Farhadova, Hafiz Babanly, Vusala, Seadet Memmedova, August 2017). Ideas, problems, recommendations and proposals articulated during debates were synthesised into press release formats regularly. The relationship with the media was two-way: on the one hand, journalists appealed to the experts for comments on issues; while on the other hand, the researchers were using media channels to disseminate their outputs and messages. Aytan Farhadova, a journalist, stated at interview (August 2017) that:

> Usually when writing about municipalities or budget issues, I refer to the SEI experts – they have a broad range of expertise: macro economy, public administration and budget. They know regions and are aware of the problems on water, women, macro-economy.

For example, in one of the articles published in 2014 on municipalities, Aziz Manafli, a journalist, posed the question of who the municipalities were accountable to and how. He started by determining municipalities as an extensive

network which gave opportunity to the people to participate directly in local governance. However, he noted, these institutions had earned the reputation of a mere land seller, a broker between the people and the executive committees. He referred to the issue of municipalities' accountability, the mechanism for which is not stipulated in legislation. Throughout the article, he referred to experts' and government officials' comments (Modrn.az, August 21, 2014).

Interestingly, raising of problem awareness was also carried out through capacity-building activities for journalists. Since a non-democracy context provides little motivation for independent journalism, the profession frequently merely turns into an instrument for official propaganda. Therefore, the think tanks had a role in training a cluster of journalists with issue-based, thematic expertise: to broadcast their messages through the media required capacity-building among journalists, meaning that media workers needed to have an idea of the problems.[12] All these mutual interactions contributed to the professionalization of journalists on issues of local self-governance and budget analysis, thereby contributing to shaping issue-based discourse in society. Additionally, a web portal, www.Budget.az, was created to serve as an information resource for broader society.

Apart from the media, interviewees stressed the particular roles of international organizations and their projects, such as the EU's Twinning[13] project for example, in the advocacy process (Agayev, Interview, August 2016). Think tanks used these as leverage in their advocacy campaign to influence the Azerbaijani government. In other words, international organizations played the role of a communications channel between the government and local CSOs. Moreover, international organizations performed a facilitating function in establishing external links between alliances and the relevant international organizations. For example, OSI-AF Azerbaijan, through its New York office, helped NBG to establish a relationship with the International Budget Group[14], which then published the works of NBG.

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[12] Note: I will describe this aspect in more detail in the capacity building section of the chapter
[13] Twinning is a European Union instrument for institutional cooperation between Public Administrations of EU Member States and of beneficiary or partner countries.
[14] The International Budget Partnership (IBP) was formed in 1997 to promote transparent and inclusive government budget processes as a means to improve governance and service delivery in

Being a part of the broader network also contributed to the reputation of NBG in the country. In the same way, BINA became linked to ALDA, the European Association of Local Democracy, through Oxfam.[15] Thus, apart from the donor role, international organizations served in the role of a channel of communication between think tanks to both the external world and the national government.

To conclude the problem stream, it is noteworthy that problem definition is not an objective process. Certain problems are singled out, attracting attention and resources at the expense of others. Typically, this process reflects the viewpoints and interests of the relevant actors, their experiences and professional and cultural background. The importance of this stage of the agenda-setting process is that it sets a platform for how, and if, the problem will be solved later (Knaggard, 2016).Frequently, problem framing is connected to an already available policy solution (Kingdon, 2013). In other words, it may appear that it is a policy stream which accommodates research and provides recommendations and assessments of policy options. Nevertheless, frequently, problem definition occurs simultaneously with an attached policy solution. Through media channels, experts tried to bring their definition of the problems and the recommended policy solutions to the attention of policy makers and other stakeholders. Therefore, think tanks' activities at this stage and their role in turning conditions into problems are indispensable.

6.2. The policy stream: the strategy of softening up

The policy stream is best considered in conjunction with the problem stream, since it refers to the scope of the alternative policies available for a particular field, and may be influenced by a range of factors, such as political economy, institutional arrangements, feasibility, and the value acceptability of the proposals to policy-

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the developing world. IBP's focus on citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) was driven by pioneering civil society budget monitoring efforts in a small number of middle-income countries in the early 1990s.

[15]ALDA was established in 1999 at the initiative of the Council of Europe to coordinate and support the network of Local Democracy Agencies, which are locally registered NGOs acting as promoters of good governance and local self-government.

makers. At the same time, problems may not be formulated independently from solutions and the interests connected with these solutions. For example, with regard to local self-governance, the think tanks involved in advocacy and policy work originally took a liberal ideological stance, expressed in their organizations' mission statements or vision: "from the governed society towards the self-governing society," (SEI.az), "improving various social and economic policies of the government through policy research and design of policy recommendations… vision is an effective and sustainable civic engagement in all levels of public administration and, thus, greater access for citizens to relevant information through enhanced interactions between the government and civil society" (ERC.az). In other words, the poverty problem and poverty reduction was rather attached as an ultimate goal of local self-governance improvement, which came as a grand policy solution to poverty. Once a problem was framed and solutions were attached to it (or, vice versa, a problem was attached to the solution), policy change agents had to build acceptance for their preferred proposals through a softening-upof the position of policy–makers and other stakeholders (Kingdon, 2013).In other words, it is necessary to weaken the resistance of policymakers or interest groups towards a proposal or idea. Azerbaijani think tanks used the following softening-up strategies: (i) piloting; and (ii) capacity building.

6.2.1. Piloting

Frequently, building a convincing case assumes that problem and policy streams are coming together. To strengthen their arguments, policy change agents can be involved in initiating demonstration projects (Roberts and King, 1991; Mintrom, 2000). A pilot study or project is initiated as a preliminary test to evaluate feasibility, time, cost, and adverse effects prior to full-scale implementation. The findings from BINA's work suggest that experts considered it very important to use pilot projects as an important means to demonstrate the value of policy ideas and solutions to a pressing problem. For example, with regard to the issue of reducing the number of small village municipalities countrywide, it was particularly important to have a pilot project because the group of think tanks was independent, and the government might have thought they had a political agenda or were biased (Azer

Mehtiyev, Interview, August, 2016). Therefore, the think tanks were under particular pressure to establish a solid basis from which to argue for the policy proposal's feasibility. Two rayons (provinces) were selected for piloting based on pre-determined criteria: one of the regions was in a mountainous geographical location, while the other was on a plains area. The selected regions were analysed based on: the population of each municipality; annual budget; the scope of work of the municipality; and territorial borders (Agayev and Aliyev, 2007). Apart from pilot projects, it is important to demonstrate that the problem has a ready-to-go solution which has been applied in countries under similar political systems and has proved its efficiency. In this regard, reference to best practices from around the world and problems in a similar context served as an additional argument for the experts to demonstrate that the suggested policy solution offered the right response to the problem. Usually, lessons learned from countries with a context similar to Azerbaijan; or from a similar legacy (Baltic countries); or with geographical proximity (Turkey) were more appealing to the government.

Following the policy paper and pilot projects, the report of the Chair of the City Municipalities Association at the official government event mirrored the argument of the respective policy paper with regard to the problems faced by small-sized municipalities (Azertaj, 27.06.2007):

> Municipalities have also been established in small villages, using the broad opportunities provided by the law at the establishment of local self-government bodies. These municipalities today are in a difficult financial situation and are not able to solve the voters' problems and social problems, and their existence is on paper. The presence of such municipalities also contributes to the creation of additional polling stations during the elections, significant expenditure of public funds, and it does much harm to the village…There is another problem for small municipalities. These municipalities have to make contributions to the Social Security Fund, as they have a salary fund calculated in their budgets. In the background, there is an increase in debt due to the lack of funds to pay, and even as municipalities receive subsidies from the state budget, the funds are primarily transferred to the Social Security Fund. The number of voters in more than 900 municipalities in the country is less than 500. In European countries with extensive municipal experience, municipalities are established in settlements with at least 2,000

people. We believe that it would also be appropriate for us to make appropriate changes to the law to limit municipality status to the settlements with a population of at least 2,000.

Further, the reporter brought the issue of property tax estimation to the attention of the audience, by referring to the experience of foreign countries:

Municipalities are concerned about property tax receipts. Property tax as a source of finance does not exceed 8% of budget revenues in 2002-2004 and 2.6% in subsequent years. The experience of other countries shows that property tax is one of the main sources of local budget. There the property is calculated not at the cost of inventory, but at the average market price. To this end, there are appraisal companies operating in various countries. Perhaps this issue needs to be addressed again.

As we can see, BINA's policy papers inspired the speech of other stakeholders in terms of ideas and knowledge of the experience of other countries. Having a solidly built case supported by statistics, best practices, and implemented pilot projects helps the process of softening-up.

6.2.2. Capacity- Building

Capacity-building is a softening-up strategy which aims to socialise ideas among the stakeholders though policy learning. It is the process in which institutions, organisations or individuals get skills, knowledge, procedures to improve their competence. In other words, the purpose of Alliances was not only to monitor and advise policy-makers but also to provide education on the relevant issues to a broader spectrum of stakeholders. Capacity building activities performed by both alliances, BINA and NBG, included a broad range of instruments; workshops, seminars, conferences, roundtable meetings, individual consultations, etc., which were provided at local and national levels to government officials, local bodies of self-governance, journalists, CSOs, municipalities, and academia. Particularly noteworthy is their work on the professionalization of journalists writing on topics of local self-governance, budget transparency or public finance governance. For example, all interviewed journalists valued highly the quality of the training they had received and their role in the improving the quality of their own work. For example, Aytan Farhadova, a journalist, stated (Interview, August 2017):

I participated in the budget related training sessions. The sessions were of high quality, materials were distributed and discussion held. Those people (teaching experts from NBG – A.G.) cared about the cause. NBG, EITI provided training on laws, extractive industry agreement analysis; investigation of budget lines and budget expenditure issues, health budget, investigation on state tenders and procurement issues. We participated in competitions for best article on the topics set by Soros and Oxfam, Irex. In the period from 2005 through 2012 there were a lot of training sessions for journalists by both international organizations and local CSOs, such as OSI, OSCE, IREX, IWPR, RATI, EITI, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Transparency International, and Oxfam. All these activities set certain standards for journalism, formed a journalists' circle. However, from 2009 a prohibitive law was issued on non-disclosure of corporate information by the Tax Ministry to the public, which made our work difficult… There are only ten to twenty independent journalists left in the country including those who write from abroad. Few independent online platforms are left, such as Euroasia.net, Meydan Tv; Azadlig radio; Contact.az; Basta.info; Minval/az; Jam.news.

Another journalist, Hafiz Babanly, who specialised in economic topics at Turan News Agency, reinforced the words of Aytan Farhadova (Interview, Summer 2017):

Training is important for specialisation of journalists. In the period of 2000-2005 a group of journalists specialized in economy was shaped. However, starting from 2013 the environment for journalism has been shrinking. Press-conferences almost stopped over the last three years. Generally, companies and the government are much more closed now... During my work I usually refer to Gubad Ibadoglu, Rovshan Agayev, Samir Aliyev, Azer Mehtiyev – I think they are the only competent experts. For example, I worked with Zohrab Ismayilov on tender issues, Chamber of Accounts. During the training journalists learned what is tender, the role of the government and business and how journalists can track the transparency issue…BINA was also doing valuable work on self-government issues. I remember always high attendance level of journalists at their events… Discussions of EITI Multi-Stakeholder Group was also very lively and interesting…

Another journalist, Saedet Akifgizi, stressed local think tanks as a source of her ideas for journalistic investigations:

My editor from Radio Liberty provided feedback on improvement of the quality of my reportage. I usually refer to the experts Azer Mekhtiyev, Rovshan Agayev, Samir Aliyev,

> because unlike experts from the universities, they know the situation both on the ground and from around the world.

Capacity-building took place within the various projects. The project, "Your Money-Your Future" was one of the last projects of the NBG to be funded by Oxfam and the EU, and aimed at a partnership on budgeting. This project combined both budget transparency and local self-governance perspectives, and was typical of its kind in terms of activities. It can therefore provide an understanding of the logic and structure of similar projects and, therefore, I will briefly describe it below.

A broad range of stakeholders were selected for participation in the project: a survey identified thirty CSOs, ten journalists and ten village municipalities as the beneficiaries of various capacity-building activities and as participants in advocacy activities. The NBG experts developed a special module for municipality training with an emphasis on local budget formation, ensuring compliance with the budget categorization of Azerbaijani law and a municipality's accountability before the public. The following six training modules were also developed for CSOs and municipalities by ERC, PAAFE and SEI (NBG members); State budget analysis and calculations, Adoption of the State Budget and citizen participation, Monitoring of budget programmes, Gender issues in the state budget, Preparation for budget monitoring evaluation, and Advocacy strategies for the state budget. During the capacity-building activities, municipalities acquired experience of holding budget-related public hearings. They were informed about the budget categories as defined by national law, and budget documentation to be submitted to the Ministry of Finance to access additional funds. In addition, municipal workers received training on participatory budget drafting processes with a particular emphasis on gender. Training sessions were also provided to thirty seven CSO representatives, after which they were invited to contribute to the formation of a Public Partnership Platform, a multi-stakeholder consensus building initiative by NBG aimed at advocating for improving budget transparency policy and management (Budget.az). Activities associated with this process included an initial meeting with municipalities to define the projects, and holding public hearings in municipalities, during which budgets were discussed, to reach multi-stakeholder consensus on

the projects and budget forecast, through a Public Partnership Platform. Capacity building training sessions were also held for the representatives of media, which included the delivery of the six modules listed above and additional presentations on issues such as: Preparation for budget monitoring evaluation; Monitoring of budget programmes; and Advocacy strategies for the state budget. Noteworthy is the nature of the journalists interested in this type of events: those from Baku all represented independent media not affiliated with the government or oligarchs, such as RATİ Objective TV, Media Forum & Radio Free Europe, Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and Turan Information Agency. The rest were from local broadcasting agencies in the provinces. As a result of the activity, the representatives of municipalities were provided with knowledge of: how to elaborate the local budget for 2013 in accordance with the law; how a budget proposal for 2013 should be designed and published; and how a public hearing should be held. Four-day public hearings were organized at ten partner municipalities, which were attended by approximately thirty-to-fifty community members each, half of whom were women. The NBG experts facilitated the meetings and guided municipality chairs in case there were legal-oriented questions from the audience. In their turn, the chairs of municipalities gave detailed information about their budget in terms of amount, strategy of spending, etc. (NBG, 2014). All these activities contributed to creating a different experience of communication between municipalities and their constituencies, and to forming new normative expectations from each other.

At the same time, think tanks themselves were the subject of capacity building. For example, as a part of its strategy to enhance the impact of the NBG and civil society on the budget process, NBG representatives participated in capacity-building events designed for think tanks. In other words, capacity building was not only outward, but also inward. For example, within the project "Your Money-Your Future", the invited international consultants provided sessions on advocacy, research and data, objective setting, and the area of gender responsive budgeting, all with the purpose of familiarizing experts with concepts, tools and practices in the area (NBG report, 2014). With additional support from the Dutch Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, and RWI's capacity-building project, NBG organized a sponsored U.S. study tour for its members to learn about domestic budget processes and civil society participation in national budgeting. RWI developed the agenda to focus on budgeting at the government and non-governmental levels and to equip participants with information on the preparation and implementation of budgets. The donor organization provided: training in budget advocacy and monitoring techniques; networking with institutions for future collaboration and exchange opportunities; and raising awareness of Azerbaijan's NBG through publicity and domestic outreach. NBG also received thematic training: for example on how to incorporate gender aspects into the budget, and professional training such as on policy writing techniques from the Caucasus Research and Resource Centre (CRRC) of the Eurasia Partnership. The Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS) provided aThink tank Assistance project on capacity building. The Norwegian Institute of Foreign Affairs supported think tanks in the South Caucasus through training on policy papers in 2008-2012 (Aslanli, Interview, August 2017).

Further, experts diffused knowledge and skills by providing similar training not only for local CSOs, media, policy-makers and universities, but also beyond Azerbaijan, while the OSI attempted to facilitate local budget groups in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the experts of the Azerbaijani NBG provided capacity building support to them, including methodological know-how which they had learned from African and European practices (Aslanli, Interview, August 2017). Similar capacity building activities were undertaken by BINA in the area of local self-governance. BINA organized training for its own members: on gender issues in local self-governance; on policy paper writing; and on designing advocacy strategy for local self-governance. In addition to the traditional capacity building instruments described above, BINA used regional events and competitions to nurture interest in local self-governance problems. For example, during the Regional Municipalities' Development forums that BINA regularly held, a broad range of issues was highlighted, such as tax collection, budget management, HR management, and cooperation with foreign organizations. Another type of the event was the competition for "The Best Municipality" nomination to enhance motivation and

stimulate competitiveness among municipalities in fulfilling their functions. For example, these competitions were held in 2008 and 2009 in Aran-Karabakh and northern regions of Azerbaijan. The candidates were assessed against indicators which included level of institutional development, participation of the community, accountability and transparency, etc. (ERC, SEI, Aran, 2010). The competition nurtured motivation among the municipalities to attend training and accommodate certain practices and procedures.

Thus, through the community capacity building and organisational capacity building of the various stakeholders on the issues advocated on; and through demonstrating new tools, concepts and practices, the experts from both alliances were contributing to the diffusion of knowledge, and to policy learning in terms of helping the stakeholders to understand how these tools would help them to improve their own performance. All these were, eventually, supposed to help to spread the ideas and achieve softening, reducing resistance to new policy proposals among various stakeholders in the long term.

6.3. The politics stream: the interaction strategy

In the politics stream, the actors work out a favourable political environment through gaining recognition of the problem and solutions among broader interest groups. However, it should not be assumed that the best possible policy option is adopted automatically (Kingdon, 2013). The politics stream depends on national structural features. Different systems require different approaches: in democracies, public opinion, a change of government, elections, and the composition of the governing coalition matters. In non-democracies, external factors may play a more prominent role. In Azerbaijan, where institutional change of the political elite is unlikely in the foreseeable future, the politics stream can be analysed in terms of the factors that may change the agenda or lead to the adoption of a certain policy. These are exogenous and endogenous factors, such as the pressure of international actors on the one hand; and of the national elite, which is shaped by vested interests and expressed in the way the oligarchy and institutions enable or block certain policy options on the other. The empirical findings reveal two major

relational strategies through which the think tanks in Azerbaijan attempted to make their voice heard in the politics stream: (i) venue creation; and (ii) networking

6.3.1. Venue creation and cooperation

Think tanks are frequently dependent upon the actions and/or resources of other actors. A search for cooperation and connection to counterparts to realise their specific interests in policy change drives coalitions and alliance building, which are types of venue creation (Roberts and King, 1991) where actors can also potentially exercise influence. Apart from this, coalition and alliance building brings the advantage of additional legitimacy. This is the reason that in non-democracies, a government is frequently hostile to independent alliance-building initiatives. Likewise, in Azerbaijan, the government prefers to establish and nurture controllable spaces (alliances, coalitions, associations), through which it can channel its own messages or to refer to its support to strengthen government legitimacy in certain policy. Therefore, normally independent alliances are not registered officially, and operate via one of the CSOs, or a member of the Alliance, which acts as the formal operator of the project. Below, I will introduce the venue creation initiatives of the alliances in Azerbaijan.

By 2009, sporadic activities in local self-government which had started back in 2004 (sponsored mainly by GIZ and Oxfam) had gradually evolved into a group of think tanks with a profile in local self-governance work and expertise. Over the years, a connection between non-governmental organizations specializing in municipality development had been built up; a body of research and studies from various research centres had accumulated, and experts from various CSOs were regularly cooperating with each other, and participating in each other's events (as speakers for public debate events, for example). Work with the Municipalities Associations included close engagement of their experts in the process of developing proposals on the mechanisms for financing municipalities, for example. Eventually, at the beginning of 2009, cooperation, common goals and availability of donor funding inspired experts from the various research centres and think tanks to set up an alliance called "BINA - For the Development of Municipality" which

originally started with fifteen CSOs (thereafter reduced to seven CSOs), with a focus on public administration reforms.[16] The major purpose of the Alliance was to unite the relevant CSOs to enhance the collective, informed voice of reputable experts in civil society to promote the strengthening and development of the municipality as an institution (BINA Charter, 2009).

Sometimes, the strategic challenge in forming an independent alliance turns out to be not whether to establish it or not, but rather determining the most effective size and composition. Too broad or too narrow coalitions can frustrate the process. That was the case with both alliances mentioned. BINA was created originally as an alliance of fifteen organisations, and shortly after that decided to split into two alliances due to the past political conflicts of its members. Thus, selection of the individual members and organisations was absolutely essential: especially given the complexity of the policy work, the sensitive political context and the shortage of time to carry out the projects. After its establishment, BINA retained a close connection with local knowledge sources (municipality members, workers, and chairs) and began its operations with a survey on the expectations that these people had from Alliance (BINA, 2009). Issues of concern raised by municipality workers across the country included the financial resources of the municipality; clarification of their authorities and functions; learning from the experience of other countries; the allocation of funds from the Oil Fund for specific municipal projects; a change in the negative attitude of the government and society towards the municipality as an institution; the issue of property assessment; the introduction of direct election of the municipality chair by the constituency; capacity building for municipal workers; and the usage of IT in work by municipal workers. All these issues informed the policy and advocacy work of the Alliance, and its tight connection to the grassroots level enhanced its legitimacy and reputation. Experts also managed to establish a working relationship with at least ten members of the

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[16]Aran Humanitar Regional İnkişaf İctimai Birliyi; "Cəmiyyətin və Vətandaş Münasibətlərinin İnkişafi" İctimai Birliyi; "Demokratiyanı Öyrənmə" İctimai Birliyi; "Demokratik İnkişaf və İqtisadi Əməkdaşlıq" İctimai Birliyi; İqtisadi Təşəbbüslərə Yardım Mərkəzi; İqtisadi Tədqiqatlar Mərkəzi; Hüquq və İnkişaf" İctimai Birliyi; "Mülki cəmiyyətə doğru" Mərkəzi; Sosial Strateji Tədqiqatlar və Analitik Araşdırmalar İctimai Birliyi; "Vətəndaş cəmiyyəti uğrunda" Müstəqil Məsləhət və Yardım Mərkəzi became members at the founding stage, and later two more CSOs were admitted: Multimedia İnformasiya Sistemləri və Texnologiyaları Mərkəzi and Qadınlar Arasında Həmrəylik İctimai Birliyi

parliament, and held regular consultation meetings with them. The Regional Policy Committee at the Parliament was one of the key targets and the chair of the Committee highly appreciated the work of the think tanks' expert group and emphasized that the state had accommodated the policy on the amalgamation of the small sized municipalities into larger ones following the recommendations of policy papers from the think tanks (ERC, SEI, Aran, 2010).

Generally, the level of collaboration between the think tank community and policy-making in the policy process had a distinct pattern of advances and retreats. Think tanks' involvement and influence depended on the relative openness of the individual policy-makers, and the overall political will in each particular timeframe. At the same time, the government was very cautious in terms of openly admitting their ties to some experts in the think tanks, the reputations of which were associated with the opposition. In other words, think–tanks may have specific clients in the state agency or parliament which had little incentive to "advertise" the source of ideas or analysis, so the identity of the think tanks in certain policy initiatives remained publicly unrecognized. The think tank experts regularly received offers from the government for technical cooperation on policy work but under the condition of confidentiality on the part of the think tanks not to disclose the results of their analysis to the public. Collaboration with other CSOs and research centres allowed think tanks to benefit from their previous studies and engage their experts in preparing policy papers or as speakers at public debates. Work with the Municipalities Associations (although these are not independent structures) included close engagement of their experts in the process of developing proposals on mechanisms of financing of municipalities, for example. (Interview with Agayev, August 2016). Cooperation with international donor organisations was crucial in terms of funding, provision of networking opportunities for alliance members, advocacy support, and capacity building. Hard copies of policy papers and research briefs were sent out to international organizations. For example, translated copies of the assessment reports regarding the local self-governance situation in Azerbaijan were regularly sent to the Council of Europe's Local and Regional Authorities Congress to keep them informed about the current

situation in Azerbaijan. The reports also facilitated the work of the monitoring missions of the CoE to Azerbaijan by informing their own final monitoring reports. During official meetings with the diplomatic corps in Azerbaijan, members of alliances placed direct appeals to raise issues of local self-governance and/or budget transparency in their official talks with the Azerbaijani central government, to demonstrate the attention of the international community to Azerbaijan's reforms.

The creation of an alternative or additional venue, or "venue shopping" (Baumgartner, Frank, Jones, 1991) is another purpose of alliance building. "Venue shopping" is associated with the choice between the various possible venues where influence can potentially be brought to bear. It may lead to a new set of participants being involved in a particular policy issue. This may enhance the voice of advocates in unpropitious circumstances. However, the search for alternative venues is considered a sort of last resort, used by agents in circumstances in which there is very little support for their ideas. This is because usually, experts prefer not to risk relations with their regular partners (Brouwer and Huitema, 2017). However, when policy change appears blocked at one level, it might be effective to search for venues where the chances of getting support are the highest (Mintrom and Norman, 2009).

In the context of Azerbaijan, where policy-making is quite a closed process, local experts not only use every venue available, but also try to create them. For example, in 2009, BINA set out to Strasburg with its local self-governance evaluation findings. Eventually, as a result of the successful advocacy of the think tanks, after a four-year-break, in 2009, the acting chair of the Council of Europe's Local and Regional Authorities Congress paid a visit to Azerbaijan and held discussions with local experts (Abil Bayramov, Interview, August, 2017). Experts consulted the Chair on the status of Azerbaijan fulfilling its commitments before the Congress; on the objective and subjective obstacles to strengthening local self-governance; and requested that he use his authority to influence decision-makers in Azerbaijan (BINA, 2009). Further, regular assessment reports of BINA heavily influenced the monitoring report and recommendations of CoE on Azerbaijan (CoE

Res 345, 2012; Recom. 326, 2012). Further, the existence of a vocal and articulate local advocacy group in local self-governance attracted specialized international actors to provide technical assistance to Azerbaijani think tanks. For example, with the support of the LGI (Local Government Initiative), in 2009-2010, the project focused on increasing the capacity of the municipalities to provide the required socio-economic information to the community; The European Association of Local Democracy (ALDA) was also engaged in cooperation and technical assistance (ALDA-europe.eu).

The NBG is another example of venue creation. Established in 2006, the National Budget Group[17] with the support of Soros Foundation explained its successful work via restricted access to the alliance membership (Kenan Aslanli, Interview, August, 2017). The purpose of the NBG was defined as attracting public attention to the issue of budget transparency and its effective implementation, and to improving the quality of the budget process and economy of Azerbaijan through economic research and policy proposals. It determined six areas of work: improving the accessibility of budget information to citizens; improving budget related laws; ensuring transparency in budget implementation and its effectiveness; increasing citizen participation in the budget process and decision-making; participation in international initiatives on budget transparency; and regular macro-economic assessment and analysis (Budget.az). In 2010, they launched the National Budget Office project, which centred on the various activities towards systematization of the activities of the NBG. It included a range of regular activities such as preparation of assessment notes on the state budget process; issuing monthly, quarterly and annual macroeconomic monitoring and evaluation; developing the conceptfor the budget code; compilation of the Citizens Budget Guide; and research on an Azerbaijan-related Open Budget Index.

Apart from that, the NBG took part in a number of other activities. They worked out indicators on social, health, industrial and regional budget expenditure and

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[17]İqtisadi Tədqiqatlar Mərkəzi (www.erc-az.org), Iqtisadi Təşəbbüslərə Yardim İB (www.sei.az), "Intellekt" İB, İctimai Vəsaitin Monitorinqi Mərkəzi (www.pfmc.az), Azad Iqtisadiyyata Yardım İB (www.freeeconomy.az), Iqtisadi Innovasiya Mərkəzidir.

undertook a number of monitoring exercises using these indicators. Some of the recommendations made by the NBG have been picked up by the government. Among others, these include changes in the law on the accounting chamber, and introduction of investment classification into the budget. Apart from contributing to the professionalization of the various clusters of the society on budget issues, the NBG contributed to a further process of venue creation. For example, through its "Your Money-Your Future" project in 2012, the NBG launched and nurtured a multi-stakeholder consensus-building mechanism - the Public Partnership Platform - a network of CSOs from all around the country, with journalists and experts who had received training from NBG and expressed their commitment to participate in budget hearings in their respective regions. It started with a conference on "Public Finance Management: Government-Civil Society Partnership", with 50 participants from various stakeholders, including local civil society, media, and international organizations. The process of citizen engagement in public finance management was discussed and various tools of citizen engagement and multi-stakeholder consensus building platforms were presented and discussed. The network of the Public Partnership Platform was established, and included thirty CSOs and ten representatives from various media (NBG report, 2014).The conference was followed by a number of pre-budget discussion roundtables which were attended by MPs and twenty CSOs, representatives from Ministries and experts from international organizations, to present a 2013 state budget forecast review prepared by NBG experts. During the event, participants were provided with a review of the state budget; researched data and figures from the state budget were analysed based on internationally accepted indicators; and the recommendations of independent experts were brought to the attention of officials. After the presentation, participants discussed ways of consolidating of efforts for sustainable and meaningful cooperation between CSOs and the government, allowing the latter to recognize the right of civil society to be heard at the national level. Representatives from CSOs and the regional media particularly focused on budget monitoring in five areas: education, health, social protection, investment (infrastructure) and agriculture. It was noted that monitoring of these sectors would reveal problems in the implementation of regional programmes and

management of the budget. Participants declared their commitment to participating in budget monitoring in respective regions (NBG report, 2014).

Thus, the very existence and activities of the alliances, especially in the context of the limited openness of the policy-making process, helped to keep specific topics alive in the discourse, and to introduce the experience of participatory practices in the local authorities. The alliances managed to (re-)establish and nurture venues: through reference to the commitments of the Azerbaijani government before the CoE, BINA managed to reinforce an additional policy venue –the CoE Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - and to elevate the "status" of the discourse on local self-governance within the country. In the case of BINA, this resulted, if not in immediate policy change, at least in a return to the issue of local self-governance onto Azerbaijan's agenda. In the case of the NBG, they went one step further and multiplied venue creation by creating the Public Partnership Platform.

6.3.2. Networking

Along with strategic alliance-building, networking comes as an irreplaceable instrument in nurturing relationships with bureaucratic insiders and advocates, as well as building and using relationships with executives and politicians (Roberts and King, 1991). A network can be defined as a number of actors with different goals and interests, different resources, different instruments of power, and perceptions but who may depend on each other for the realization of their goals (Bruijn and Heuvelhof, 2008). A network helps the actors to acquire valuable information in a relatively efficient manner and enables them to understand concerns of the stakeholders. In other words, networking can develop social perceptiveness, which can pave the road to opportunities for change agents (Dye et al., 1995), including identifying and exploiting windows of opportunity. The bigger the network, the more channels of communication they have, which implies talking and listening to a broad set of actors. Until 2012 in Azerbaijan, government cooperation was satisfactory, as reported by interviewees, and the Ministry of Justice, as one of the key focal points for the municipalities' affairs, always joined the events held by the think tanks. Apart from that, through targeting parliament

and using personal contacts to raise issues in parliament's agenda, the BINA alliance members worked with no more than five members of parliament. The NBG also worked quite tightly with the Ministry of Finance throughout their activities, at least at the middle level.

One of the instruments of networking was the study tour. For example, within the framework of the NBG project, "Your Money-Your Future", a group of NBG representatives and MPs went on a study tour to the Czech Republic, as a country which has the best records and ratings among post-communist countries in Europe on the Fiscal Decentralization Index. There, a group of local experts and policy-makers familiarized themselves with the nature of fiscal decentralization in the Czech Republic. The evidence suggests that change agents can be successful when they make good use of networks (Mintrom, & Vergari, 1998) or when they form teams that contain both "insiders" and "outsiders" (Roberts, and King, 1991). In this regard, interviewees from both alliances - BINA and NBG - noted that they frequently engaged insiders in research teams even if their collaboration remained incognito due to the reluctance of the insider to be known as a contributing researcher (Mehtiyev, Agayev, Interview, August 2017).

Another potential benefit of networking is trust. Trust is vital, not only for success, but also to obtain attention and gain support from the stakeholders (De Bruijn and Heuvelhof, 2008: 91).Findings from the work of the BINA alliance confirmed that meetings with the target groups, apart from municipalities, were useful in terms of learning the interests of all stakeholders, identifying problems and brainstorming possible solutions. The work with the state authorities included the following bodies; the Department of Regional Governance and Work with the Local Self-governance Bodies of the President's Apparatus, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Taxes, the State Land and Mapping Committee, and the Centre on Work with Municipalities of Ministry of Justice. The representatives of these structures have engaged in various events including debates, feedback, and individual informal consultations. Despite the absence of formal structures such as

parliamentary hearings, or a formal advisory panel at ministries[18], personal contacts and informal communication channels were the most important mode of work with policy-makers during the time-frame of the case study. Generally, the interviewees stress that the main channel of communication for them was through mid-level officials: experienced professionals outside corrupt networks. They sympathized with the think tank experts and even suggested research topics. They also participated in joint research with civil society experts. They played an important role in the diffusion of the ideas, concepts, and policy recommendations. The think tanks noted that some of the information was acquired for a fee, but some was due to personal connections among the government and brought access to publicly inaccessible information (Mehtiyev, Agayev, Interviews, August 2017). When asked about the motivation of the mid-level officials to informally collaborate with local think tanks, it was noted that mid-level officials are usually professionals with technical expertise, and are often in latent confrontation with the higher level officials, who are frequently appointed for political reasons, irrespective of their competence. Professional pride motivates some of the mid-level officials to leak certain information to attract public attention to the issues that concern them. For members of parliament, the motivation behind communication and cooperation with local think tanks and generally with a broader epistemic community is to benefit from their issue-based technical expertise and thereby enhance their own parliamentary speeches. Sometimes, depending on the sensitivity of the issue, discussion with policy-makers is held before publicizing policy papers (Mehtiyev, Interview, August 2017). Generally, think tank activity seems to appeal to legislators and mid-level officials, once they are convinced of their professional credibility. Over time, an expert network was formed, comprising specialists in the area of municipalities, the banking sector, and economics. This also included people from political parties who were willing to incorporate local self-governance issues into their election platforms.

The availability of an epistemic community in a specific policy area in the country also inspired various donors to continue funding their activities. For example, the

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[18]Note: Public Councils have been created recently at a few ministries in Azerbaijan.

work of the think tanks SEI and ERC in just one project on local self-governance funded by Oxfam inspired the work and interest of other donor organizations to fund a similar theme: the Open Society Institute funded a project called "Baku City Municipality Model Proposal and its Advocacy", and a policy paper for the government was prepared by local experts with regard to models of local-self-governance in capital cities based on international best practices, where they reflected the status and mechanisms for establishing such institutions, required harmonization with the local legislation, and procedures regulating relations between local institutions and central government (Mehtiyev, Agayev & Aliyev, 2009).

To sum up the interaction strategy in the politics stream, it should be noted that even though each of the instruments discussed above has a different purpose and composition, they are complimentary to each other. Alliance-building typically involves several organisations, where each has a common goal and can contribute assets, expertise and connections (Todeva and Knoke, 2005) to achieve long-term policy changes through strengthening the voice of the group in dialogue with the policy-makers. Networking as an instrument has several useful functions. It helps change agents to understand the way their actions will affect others, how these actions will be perceived by others, determine the most persuasive way to frame arguments and present messages; as well as building trust (Suggett and Australia, 2014). Generally, both alliance-building and networking prepare change agents to make adjustments to their policy proposals and advocacy strategy, taking into account the interests of others and eventually finding compromises (Mintrom, 2000: 58), thus, making incremental change possible.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to analyse the agenda-setting activities of think tanks in Azerbaijan between 2003 and 2014 in the sphere of local self-governance and budget transparency, using the enhanced matrix integrating MSF and categories of activities. There are two types of findings in this chapter, with regard to (a) policy change impact and (b) to the nature of the accomplished activities.

The case-study shows that think tanks deployed their activities not only in the policy stream as traditionally assigned to think tanks, but also across streams. In doing so, they were more successful in coupling (connecting) problem and policy streams while continually creating and maintaining venues in the politics stream. The impact of the think tanks' work on immediate policy change was marginal. In the best case, the government picked up only those policy proposals (or aspects of them), which would not threaten the overall power control of the government. To name a few of the accomplishments: The Ministry of Finance decided to publish the Citizen's Budget (released on 25 November 2014) (Maliyye.gov.az), which was based on NBG and IBP recommendations. The Ministry of Finance published a "Citizen's Budget Guide for the state and consolidated budgets of 2014" for the first time in Azerbaijan. A more comprehensive annual budget execution report consisting of a draft budget implementation law and explanatory notes became publicly available. A mid-year report was also published - "Information about tax and other revenues to the state budget for the 1st quarter of 2014".The Open Budget Index and Fiscal Decentralization Index were worked out and applied in Azerbaijan for the first time. Together with the Law on Public Participation and the National Action Plan on Open Government, these policy changes opened up new opportunities for public participation in fiscal policy-making despite weak oversight by Parliament and the Supreme Audit Institution. In the area of local self-governance, a number of policy proposals and legislative amendments were accommodated by the government, such as the implementation of a mechanism of reduction of the number of small village municipalities, and improvement of property tax calculation by municipalities.

The strategies and activities of the think tanks described across the MSF of agenda-setting seem to be aimed at two main process-oriented tasks: interactions and policy education. It is through accomplishing these two tasks that both alliances sought to impact on policy in the long run. Because policy education involved the accumulation of data about problems and solutions not in a vacuum, but in the context of social interactions, networking and alliance building activities were equally significant for the Azerbaijani think tanks. This interaction among

various actors ensured not only the circulation of policy ideas among the stakeholders, but also the creation of additional alternative venues of debate. Interaction-related activities helped not only to pool resources and reduce the risk of repression, but also to enhance the credibility of the consolidated voice. These initiatives eventually created additional leverage for dialogue with policy-makers.

By focusing on the non-confrontational activities of civil society in a non-democracy, I have argued that even without having an immediate policy impact, local think tanks can play a meaningful role by contributing to agenda-setting. Activities such as the establishment of networks, framing issues into a problem, the creation of new venues for debates, connecting stakeholders, opening doors for ideas, improvement in research skills, bringing international experience to the attention of policy-makers and the experience of advocacy create a potential social resource. This social resource might be particularly meaningful in the case of a future opening up of the political system. As was argued in Chapter Four, the case of research centres in the USSR and in Perestroika teaches a lesson with regard to the potentially prominent role local think tanks or any other research ventures can play at critical moments in non-democracies.

The findings of the study are essential insofar as they illustrate categories of the non-confrontational activism of think tanks which were acting as a part of civil society in a quite restrictive political context. The study has deliberately chosena perspective which reinforces a focus on the process, rather than just measurement of the "tangible result". While it is useful to find that some policy change impact is possible even in non-democracies, the study is a tribute to the importance of a process which is undeservedly ignored and underestimated in social science. This is done with the motivation of informing theory on civil society and the practice of international democracy promotion in non-democracies.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the findings in terms of the theoretical and practical implications of the debate nurturing activities of the think tanks in order to understand the non-confrontational function of civil society. I will conclude with

ideas in terms of how this understanding can fit the new paradigm which has come to replace transitology in the international development industry.

Chapter Seven. Think tanks and Implications of the Debate-nurturing Function of Civil Society

Introduction

This thesis has studied the unrecorded and underestimated non-confrontational activities of civil society in the non-democratic context in order to understand the different functions of civil society and to inform the practice of international democracy promotion. Specifically, it investigated the activities of local think tanks in Azerbaijan in the period from 2003-2014 in the agenda-setting policy process of "good governance" reform.

The thesis argues that, by playing a discourse-nurturing function in the agenda setting process, local think tanks contribute to the overall legitimacy of civil society. While their activities may not bring about immediate policy change in non-democracies, they contribute to the formation of social resources, which could play a substantial role once there is a political opening-up. In support of this argument, the history of research centres in the Soviet Union teaches us a great deal about the role and means of functioning of the local epistemic community in non-democracies and its contribution to the political opening and implementation of the reforms during windows of opportunity.

The theme of the thesis was inspired by the problematic influence of the notion of a confrontational civil society as a key element of democratization in democracy promotion work in the post-communist countries. The result was that civil society actors in the post-Soviet area found themselves overloaded by confrontational functions they were not in position to fulfil because of the restrictive political context. Meanwhile, the international democracy promotion community, guided by ambitious goals and in search of immediate tangible results, overlooked the potential of less confrontational activities and a focus on process-oriented and long-term impact. Informed by my multiple-year experience in the international development field, in this thesis, I have suggested a neutral notion of civil society as a dynamic forum, where various actors fulfil various functions including service

delivery, watch-dog, advocacy, education, policy debate nurturing, etc. I argue that a neutral vision of civil society broadens scholars' and practitioners' perspectives; and encourages examination of the actors and activities they are engaged in to understand the dynamics and functions of civil society in various contexts, instead of mere routine assessments along a "weak-strong civil society" continuum.

In this context, the thesis has emphasized the activities of think tanks in the agenda-setting process because this is what they (and indeed any other civil society actor) do that informs the function of civil society. For this purpose, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) was chosen due to its flexibility in comparison to other network approaches. To adapt it to the purpose of analysing activities, a typology of strategies and activities typology was integrated into the MSF.

The purpose of Chapter Seven is to discuss the findings and implications of the thesis. The first section presents a discussion of the findings, which is organized around the research questions. This is followed by the second section, which discusses the implications of the broadening perspective on civil society and its actors in terms of: (a) the source of autonomous political behaviour; and (b) the source of legitimacy for civil society. Finally, the third section discusses the resilience paradigm, which has recently started to replace transitology in the international development industry; and how it can embrace the findings of the research.

7.1. Findings: policy education and interaction as the key tasks of the debate-nurturing function of civil society

The activities of think tanks in the agenda-setting process as an example of non-confrontational activities have been overlooked. Most of the recent literature on think tanks is focused either on the conditions for their proliferation or on their influence. Furthermore, the greater part of this literature is based on case studies of democracies. The few case studies of non-democracies focus on the measuring the effectiveness of the think tanks, and regard adoption and implementation of policies as the only criteria justifying the existence of local think tanks. Hence, their

role as an actor in civil society is largely disregarded. In this regard, the thesis argues that the influence of civil society actors, and specifically think tanks, on public policy is more subtle. Sometimes, influence involves opening up doors for discussion on certain ideas, or can be educational in nature, in terms of policy learning (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2002). This kind of influence is difficult to evaluate (Driscoll, Christiansen and Jenks, 2004). Therefore, the thesis has suggested that the significance of the think tank as a civil society actor must be associated with the specific activities it undertakes in society. In this regard, focusing only on evaluating the power of think tanks in Azerbaijan is not useful. Instead, this thesis opens a debate about the civil-society activities which would allow it to enhance its legitimacy and contribute to the scope of "change agency" in the non-democratic context.

In this section, I will analyse the findings of the empirical chapters with regard to the overall research question of what activities local think tanks, as a part of the civil society in Azerbaijan, employed to pursue their objectives to influence policy process in the area of good governance, namely local self-governance and budget transparency. "Good governance" was chosen to illustrate the activities of local not-for-profit think tanks, since starting from the 1990s, this framework informed international democracy promotion strategies and activities in the post-Soviet area. Moreover, as post-Soviet Azerbaijan became a member of various international institutions and organisations it undertook commitments in good governance reform. The selected timeframe of 2003-2014 was informed by the start of the good governance international technical assistance to Azerbaijan, which influenced the rise in think tanks with an economic profile in the 2000s. In its turn, 2014 marked the peak of the repressive campaign against civil society in Azerbaijan, which almost terminated the work of many civil society actors (Ismayil and Rezaite, 2016). Analysis of ten years of work by the vocal and influential BINA and NBG led to the following findings with regard to: (a) the MSF theory; and (b) the impact of the activities accomplished.

Although, like most policy theories, the MSF was informed by case studies of democracies (specifically the USA), the flexibility of the MSF allowed it to be

adapted to the analysis of agenda setting in the non-democratic context. Further, this thesis has enhanced the value-added of the MSF by emphasizing actors' activities across the streams. It suggested a two-dimensional matrix of concrete strategies and activities which local think tanks were using in and across multiple streams. The suggested matrix allowed the exploration and description of the work of think tanks in Azerbaijan in policy agenda-setting in a more structured way. Moreover, the MSF enhanced with this matrix may be useful beyond the issues, country and regime type studied here. The case-study determined three categories of strategy across the MSF, each of which contained a range of instruments and activities that the think tanks used in their work in the two policy areas. In the problem stream, which deals with constructing a convincing case through defining and (re-) framing the problem, local think tanks were engaged in problematizing strategies which deployed a number of activities such as data collection, dramatizing issues, and awareness raising. In the policy stream, which is focused on building consensus for policy solutions, the think tanks used a number of softening-up strategies including piloting and capacity-building. Finally, in the politics stream, which is aimed at working to create a favourable political environment, the think tanks used an interaction strategy which focused on networking, cooperation and venue creation activities. Assigning specific strategies and activities to a specific stream was conditional and does not imply that some of the strategies cannot be applied across the three streams. In fact, problem stream strategies can be applied in the policy and politics streams to re-frame the issue, or to strengthen the policy proposal with additional statistical data, for example.

The case-study implied that, contrary to Kingdon's suggestion that multiple streams are rather independent, they may be highly interlinked in the non-democracy context, perhaps due to the more centralized policy-making process and tighter circle of stakeholders. Due to this tight circle, think tanks can act across the streams: they can be active in more than one stream, such as in problem and policy streams, and even in certain circumstances, influencing the politics stream. While think tanks are able to link problems and policy in many cases, coupling with

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the politics stream depends on the political will and incentives of the political elite and on the availability of mechanisms of policy influence. That is to say, think tanks may not be in a position to influence immediate policy change, but they are able to set the platform for discussion and framing conditions into a problem and attaching a policy solution.

The immediate impact of think tanks on policy change was marginal and subject to the government picking up proposals which would not challenge overall government power and control in the long-term. However, further analysis of the impact revealed that the activities were actually aimed at two main process-oriented tasks: interactions and policy education. These two tasks determined the significance of the debate-nurturing function of the civil society in Azerbaijan. Below, these two tasks will be discussed in relation to the debate-nurturing function of a civil society.

As was described in the empirical chapters, local think tanks were acquiring data, accumulating, framing and disseminating new information and knowledge toward achieving policy change. Talking about the impact on policy change, almost all members from both alliances mentioned an additive effect of their ten-year engagement and consistent advocacy activities. In other words, capacity building and influencing activities nurture policy education through spreading knowledge and supporting the professionalization of various stakeholders. For example, groups of journalists with a specialization in good governance issues were formed as a result of the consistent and focused activities of the local think tanks. Interviewees reported that, while before the project activities, the range of topics on municipalities in the media included only municipal elections, illegal land sales, and internal scandals, after the implementation of think tank projects, the quality of the media coverage changed by giving more space to more high-level topics such as the scope of municipalities' competencies, their financial capacity, etc. At the same time, the engagement of policy makers in the policy education process sometimes had an impact on policy change. On the question of how they would evaluate their work in local self-government, the experts from BINA said (Agayev and Mehtiyev, Interviews, August 2017):

> While before, a broader society ignored the institutional function of the municipality and had a negative image of it as an unnecessary and useless institution, after the project activities perception started changing. High level officials started referring to the think tank reports and studies on the topic. Some political parties included issues with regard to strengthening local self-governance in their election platforms, and overall, the interest in participation in the local municipal election from the oppositional parties increased. Thus, the opinion-making function of BINA was fulfilled, at least partially.

However, policy education in itself rarely produces policy change: it is one of many contributing factors. The latter could include coercion and the activities of a champion policy entrepreneur (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Additionally, ideology or power interests may outweigh knowledge about the causes of problems or the cost-benefit arguments on various policy alternatives under consideration (Moyson, 2014). The importance of nurturing policy education is usually questioned if it does not lead to policy change immediately. The answer could be that much of policy education, at least at micro-level, occurs among individuals within social settings. Policy education involves the accumulation of knowledge about problems and solutions not in a vacuum, but in the context of social interactions. This interaction among various actors ensures the existence and circulation of policy-relevant ideas in the state and among experts, stakeholders, and citizens. In other words, policy education may potentially inform collective action and determine how people relate to a government. This issue is discussed widely in the literature on notions of policy networks, epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, and others (Parsons, 1995).

Another task fulfilled by the Azerbaijani think tanks was interaction-related activities, including networking and alliance building. The role of interaction and networks in civil society has gained increasing recognition among international development workers recently. This recognition derives from the assumption that the "formation of networks, coalitions, and alliances is an appropriate foundational step for bringing about strengthened civil society participation", and that "networks will build social capital..." (Chalk, 2017: 5).Apart from the joining of intellectual and financial resources, the benefits of interaction-related strategies and activities include; a more credible voice, better access to decision makers, and reduced

repression risk through joint action alongside others. A range of alliance-building and interaction initiatives by Azerbaijani think tanks had multiplication effects on other communities and stakeholders and eventually created additional levers for dialogue with policy-makers. It is noteworthy that alliances were built upon the previous networks of the stakeholders. Through capacity building, networking, and advocacy related activities, broader categories of stakeholders became identified with and involved in good governance issues during the activities of NBG and BINA members; CSOs, media, policy-makers, local-self-governance bodies, executive and legislative bodies, and international organizations. For example, the Public Partnership Platform nurtured by the NBG became, as reported, the first large-scale consensus-building action with the participation of a large number of CSOs and the national government on budget transparency and accountability issues. This and other initiatives were meant to eventually contribute to the strengthening of the voice of civil society. The reinforcement of external platforms like in the case of local self-governance in the Council of Europe took place. Beside the establishment of the alliances, which became alternative venues serving as a platform for policy debate not sanctioned by government, the Open Budget Index and Fiscal Decentralization Index were developed and applied in Azerbaijan. In short, by creating alternative discussion and action venues and by generating studies and research, local think tanks were producing additional standing for civil society in its dialogue with the government. The aspect of the agenda-setting process which involves discrepancy between the agendas of the ruling elite and broader society means that it contains a potential challenge in terms of social contract (Cobb and Elder, 1971). So, by maintaining quality dialogue with the government on public policy issues, think tanks also enhance their own legitimacy.

7.2. Implications of the debate-nurturing function of a civil society.

In the following sections, I will discuss the umbrella research question with regard to the implications of the debate-nurturing function of the civil society. In a non-democracy, this function may: (i) turn into a potential source of autonomous

political behaviour in future; and (ii) contribute to enhancing the legitimacy of civil society.

7.2.1. Potential source of autonomous political behaviour

The less-confrontational activities of civil society, as opposed to the more confrontational activities (such as protests, strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, watch-dog actions; etc.), should not be treated as meaningless and, consequently, should not be ignored by the democracy promotion community. On the contrary, non-confrontational civil society activities can be the only possible mode of meaningful functioning of civil society in non-democracies. The work of local think tanks in the agenda-setting of the policy process in Azerbaijan is an example of the non-confrontational mode of functioning in a non-democratic context. With the purpose of enhancing the public policy dialogue capacity of civil society, think tanks accomplished a number of activities through interaction and policy education. Although I found the immediate policy change impact marginal and subject to the political will of the ruling elite, I would like to elaborate on the long-term potential impact of the debate-nurturing capacity of civil society.

One of the long term implications is that such activities can become a source of autonomous behaviour. The cost of independent activism in the non-democratic context is always high, since political regimes tend to constrain sharply the ways in which civil society promotes the public good and the public sphere, and pluralism is tolerated only if it is controllable. While in democracies, business and media also try to skew the public discourse in the direction of profit accumulation, in the post-Soviet countries, the merger of business and government has created a privileged political elite which not only dictates the terms of public discourse (Ziegler, 2015), but also tries to prevent emerging alternative venues and resources for discourse.

In this regard, two implications of the non-democratic context for the civil society can be recalled as expressed by Foucault and Habermas. According to Foucault, civil society will struggle against the established authority. As the opposite to this confrontational notion of civil society, Habermas's (1992) perspective with his "public sphere" suggests that civil society can use established constitutions and

institutions to engage in a critical process of public communication through existing channels. Habermas's definition of the public sphere comes as a space where citizens engage as equals in critical discussion about the state and society, and state authority is publically monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people (Habermas, 1992). However, in the situation of the ruling elite controlling access to all resources, maintaining a monopoly on the definition of public good, and shrinking space for democratic deliberation, where unsanctioned debate on vital topics is deemed to be destabilizing by the government, the question is what the civil society is in a position to do. While the latter perspective is closest to the spirit of the present argument, which considers civil society as a process-oriented realm, as a forum, Habermasian's perspective, as with most theories of civil society, underemphasizes actors in civil society. In this regard, this thesis has attempted to emphasize specific actors who, through interaction and policy education related activities, actually nurture the public space and civic culture, or in broader terms, social resources.

In other words, one of the implications of this debate-nurturing function of civil society is its possible evolution into a source of autonomous political behaviour at some point. Civil society organizations can emerge even in a very authoritarian setting, although the latter may use them instrumentally for a while. However, these structures may, over time, develop into an independent civil or political agency once there is a more conducive context. In Chapter Five, the example of the regime-sanctioned academic institutions, research centres and scholarly networks in the USSR between 1956 and 1991 shows the evolution of these once controllable institutions, venues and networks, into a relatively independent social resource during Perestroika. They emerged in Khrushchev's time and became advisors to the Gorbachev leadership during Perestroika. They were a group of liberal intellectuals who became an elite of experts within the party and the institutes and were determined to bring Western civic and economic practices into Soviet political systems (Sandle, 1998). They had access to the policy-making process, which enabled them to contribute to the shaping of policy. Theorists argue that such groups were critical to building trust, but most importantly,

contributed to the extension of participation from outside the party-state bureaucracy (Sandle, 1998).It would be incorrect to claim that the reformist discourse of the Soviet epistemic community undermined communist ideology in the country. Most likely, it is the connections between institutes and key political figures that in the context of a favourable political situation, made it possible to nourish new ideas in the policy process (Stryuk, 2008) and to create a public sphere of dialogue and acceptability for alternative ideas and policies.

A review of the Soviet and post-Soviet context implies that, while the parameters of the discourse nurturing process may change over time, the accumulated social resources constantly flow from one structure into another. This process occurred in the USSR and post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where the experts transitioned: from the national independence movement into politics during Perestroika; then, from politics into civil society and think tanks once power was hijacked by the nomenclature in the early 1990s; and from civil society into government structures during the following years, playing a role in diffusing ideas and maintaining debate on good governance where and when this was possible. The case study of Azerbaijan demonstrates that, while civil society in general was not in a position to contest the powerful state, there was some space for proto-democratic activity. During the past decade in Azerbaijan, local not-for-profit think tanks have been intensively engaged in public policy issues ranging from strengthening local self-governance to budget transparency. Through networking and policy education, they have maintained forums for public discourse in society. These activities are particularly important when the broader public is excluded from public policy-making, and the society is polarized.

Apart from this, the gathering and use of evidence in the agenda-setting process acquires a special role in non-democracies by granting additional professional and moral legitimacy to civil society as a whole. Below, I will discuss the implications of debate nurturing for the enhancement of the legitimacy of civil society. Understanding sources of legitimacy is particularly important when civil society (and its policy segment) operates in the context of controllable political parties, media, CSOs, venues and platforms.

7.2.2. Sources of legitimacy of civil society

As think tanks become more and more vocal worldwide in shaping policies at various levels on a wide range of issues from human rights to institutional accountability, it is important to ask about the sources of their legitimacy. In the policy influence area, legitimacy refers to the right to exercise influence on policy formulation and implementation. Individual actors address legitimacy issues of their own by defining their organizational missions and strategies and by mapping stakeholders. A CSO is expected to create value for some stakeholders (service delivery, capacity building, and policy influence) by improving the quality of life of the stakeholders, mobilizing support from other stakeholders and carrying out activities within the operational capacity of the organisation and its allies (Brown et al., 2008). Thus, the legitimacy of any CSO is closely tied to its mission and the strategies used to accomplish it. David Brown and colleagues distinguished several bases of legitimacy that are important for any civil society actor engaged in policy work. Among others, these are moral legitimacy, performance legitimacy, and legal legitimacy (Brown et al., 2008: 64). Moral legitimacy depends on the CSO's ability to make a case that is persuasive in terms of the values of critical stakeholders. Performance legitimacy draws upon claims to expertise and knowledge, and alternative data, interpretations of which may boost or downgrade the claims of the CSOs. Legal legitimacy stems from compliance with legal expectations, mandates, and is usually raised by government agencies charged with regulating the activities of civil society actors (Brown, 2008). Below, I will briefly discuss the legitimacy appeal of local Azerbaijani think tanks.

Analysis of the work of think tanks in Azerbaijan reveals that local think tanks drew legitimacy, first of all, from their missions: namely, contributing to the sustainable economic development of the country and participatory governance. The moral authority of the think tanks was grounded in the perception of the destructive impact of a non-participatory, ineffective, opaque governance regime on the socio-economic development of the country due to diversion and misappropriation of public resources. The work of BINA and NBG to strengthen local self-governance and budget transparency was organized to strengthen the voice of local

communities, to stimulate participatory budget processes, to reduce the corruption opportunities in public investment projects, and to enhance the awareness of all stakeholders on these issues. The potential beneficiaries included: local communities; municipal workers who had received training; taxpayers; budget planners, who were introduced to participatory budgeting, businesses who could not compete with bribe-payers; journalists, who enhanced their expertise in covering related problems; policy-makers, who gained access to surveys, briefs, and policy papers; and international organisations, who benefited from the assessment reports and surveys produced by think tanks. Apart from the moral legitimacy grounded in opposition to corruption and ineffective governance, the think tanks' claims to expertise in policies nurtured another aspect of their legitimacy: professionalism. External actors such as the Council of Europe and IBG also contributed to boosting the legitimacy of BINA and NBG by engaging local experts as credible actors and as a source of reference for first-hand information. At the same time, the visible failure of the local self-governance institutions in Azerbaijan and the country's low score on international indexes of transparency also boosted the legitimacy of both alliances at the time of their emergence.

Various stakeholders care about different aspects of the legitimacy of the think tanks: while citizens care about the moral basis of think tanks' legitimacy, policy-makers maybe interested in whether think tanks have legal bases for their work. Regimes which see corruption as an important prerogative of holding power or see it as an alternative way of distributing resources may not see the legitimacy of the think tanks' work, no matter what they do. For example, starting from 2013, think tanks as a part of civil society in general became the target of particularly harsh repression in Azerbaijan (Ismayil and Rezaite, 2016), which started with the questioning of civil society organisations and their activities by the law enforcement bodies. The issues in focus were CSO registration status, their mandates, their source of funds, and their tax compliance. Eventually, the newly adopted legislative amendments made it almost impossible to operate a CSO in Azerbaijan without breaking the law. The aspiration of the Azerbaijani government to de-

legitimize the independent segment of civil society by accusing them of being foreign agents or tax evaders threatened the very existence of the independent segment of civil society.

Clarifying their basis of legitimacy is a constant process for think tanks, as for any actor in civil society, and this involves various approaches, which require different capacities and resources to reduce misunderstandings, to negotiate new agreements, to influence new policies, or to confront power issues (Brown, 2008). Uniting in alliances with other think tanks and CSOs gave the individual members an additional basis for moral legitimacy. Changes of activities and missions almost always carry legitimacy implications for the organisation. For example, the deployment of mere expositional activities (like monitoring and assessment) without a strong focus on policies may damage the legitimacy of think tanks in the eyes of policy-makers. In this regard, for example, BINA managed to justify its adoption of a combination of exposure activities with policy proposals by clarifying the goals and mission of the Alliance during public events. Namely, the goal was not merely to expose the incompetence of the government but to assist it in adopting international best practices, improving its international rating, and eventually, enhancing its effectiveness in service provision for their constituencies. To meet high performance standards and maintain credibility, think tanks embraced a range of methodological capacity building activities, embedded in household surveys, evaluation indicator development and piloting to produce quality policy proposals and assessments. At the same time, rejecting practices that are considered inappropriate also relates to the legitimacy issue. For example, despite being approached by state officials with the suggestion of cooperating, think tanks rejected any cooperation which would preclude them from publishing results of their own afterwards (Agayev, Interview, August, 2017). Another example of the preservation of professional legitimacy was seen in the restricted membership of the alliances.

The issue of the legitimacy of civil society and think tanks is not limited by the above aspects. On the question of the relationship of think tanks to value-based agenda-setting, funding sources from international organisations may raise

challenging questions with regard to legitimacy not only for this case-study but for think tanks across the world. Frequently, by referring to a value-neutral approach to policy research think tanks, especially in post-authoritarian countries, there is a drive to separate values and facts, as if values do not influence the emergence of facts. However, this contradicts the very nature of think tanks, which are agents attempting to bring logic to a world of feelings through framing of the condition as the issue, and constructing causal links, which task is inherently ideological. Moreover, the audiences of think tanks are increasingly aware that it is impossible to speak of "value free" evidence-based policy. Methodological choice, interpretation of data, framing of conditions as problems, proposed solutions – all are guided by the value-based perspective or ideology in the first place. In the best case, civil society can present a deliberative forum with multiple actors with different ideological perspectives.

This way or another, legitimacy building is an ongoing process as issues evolve, new actors enter and depart the realm of civil society, competitors develop new approaches and external forces create new social and political dynamics within the issues that are posed. In the non-democratic context, frequently the only available funding source for local think tanks is international donors. However, in each timeframe, the vision and approaches of the international donors is informed by a certain development paradigm: until recently, this was transitology; nowadays, it is a resilience paradigm. The question I will discuss in the next paragraph is how the debate-nurturing function of civil society can fit the resilience paradigm.

7.3. Implications of the debate nurturing function of civil society for the resilience paradigm

As was discussed in Chapter Two, the transitology paradigm, which has governed international aid in the post-communist zone for the last twenty-five years, exemplified a mechanical understanding of social change. Recently, gaps in development studies and practice have inspired the borrowing of intellectual tools from other disciplinary perspectives where resilience has been in use for a long time. The question remains of what the resilience paradigm may mean for the fate

of democracy promotion in the post-Soviet countries and indeed for other non-democracies. I argue that the resilience paradigm may open new avenues for democracy promotion and assistance by helping various local actors to boost the legitimacy of the civil society through becoming a competent voice in dialogue with government on various public policy issues. However, such an accommodation would require attention to the quality of the process from the development worker, rather than pushing for immediately measurable results, as well as greater commitment to tailoring approaches to country contexts.

Although resilience as an idea is not new, it was introduced to the development aid realm without a clear definition. Originally, the term signified the capacity of an ecosystem to respond to a crisis by repelling destruction and recovering rapidly. Since the Resilience 2014 conference in Montpelier, France, resilience has been described as a new paradigm for development. Following the conference, on 28 June 2016, the "EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy" (EUGS, 2016) was presented, in which resilience referred to building state and societal resilience in its neighbourhood as one of the key strategic priorities of the EU. Resilience is defined in the EUGS as "the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (EUGS 2016: p. 23). USAID, together with The Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation, launched an initiative in 2014 - the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP) - to co-invest in innovative and scalable solutions to building resilience. In short, resilience is the ability to prepare for shocks, including natural and manmade disasters, to respond effectively to crises and to build back better than before (Staal, 2013).The ambiguity of the resilience concept has implications both for international donors and countries who are recipients of international development assistance. So far, international donor representatives have had vague ideas about the implications of the paradigm for in-field activities. When asked what "resilience" would mean, the answer was, "nobody knows, most probably we will just reframe what we have been already doing…" (A project manager of an EU donor organisation, Interview, August 2017).

As with any other paradigm, the resilience concept may carry positive and negative consequences for all stakeholders; donor countries, foreign policy, implementing agencies and the host country. There is a risk that resilience may be used to justify and reinforce the status quo. As EUGS (2016) reads now, by reinforcing the resilience paradigm, it certainly lowers the degree of ambition with regard to democratization. The Action Plan states the key characteristics of resilience as: "country-owned and country-led: it is primarily a national government's responsibility to build resilience and to define political, economic, environmental and social priorities accordingly" (SWD, 2013: 227). In other words, still committed to a liberal narrative, the term resilience is used in EU documents to ensure grounds for the EU to work only with countries where a government explicitly seeks cooperation with the EU on a broad range of reforms. Moreover, it considers the government as a major entry point for cooperation. Although the "resilience" paradigm represents a turn away from top-down institution-building to a bottom-up approach of building the resilience of societies, the risk is that the entry point of the international democracy promoters (in the case of the EU) will continue to be only the state. This approach may limit the efficiency of development work by preventing outreach to a diverse range of non-governmental partners and through thinking of creative entry points. A review of the ENP implementation report of 2017 shows that most of the good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights related work in the post-Soviet realm is concentrated in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova: i.e., those governments which were originally ready to accommodate reforms (JOIN, 2017:18), leaving countries like Azerbaijan with quite narrow themes of cooperation.

Nevertheless, the resilience approach may potentially open new entry points in international development aid, contributing to positive change. It may bring a long-awaited recognition that uncertainty is a part of how systems and social processes work. That means an acknowledgement that the social process is inherently dynamic, and may produce unexpected results. Organisations will have to decide for themselves what form "resilience" will take in everyday development workers' activity, by determining feasible goals and an adequate measurement system. This

may mean a type of de-centralisation of international development aid; turning towards tailor-made approaches and increased appreciation for local ownership (Juncos, 2016). In other words, the resilience paradigm may be understood as a strategy for building the capacity to deal with and shape social change. This interpretation opens many avenues for democracy promotion work, one of which could be a nurturing of the pluralism of policy debate venues.

In recent years, mass social movements have shown that political activism may be found even in the most difficult contexts, although sometimes this is under the surface, since political space for civil society is limited, and encounters many obstacles; co-optation and repression is routine. As the history of the development of an intellectual legacy for the epistemic community elsewhere shows, once there are alternative venues, structures, and networks of intellectuals, they form a core of the change agency, which may play a prominent role in the transformational process once a regime starts opening up to reform. In the same way, the scope of social resources nurtured by local think tanks in Azerbaijan over the last ten years, although not demonstrating tremendous immediate policy change impact, may be instrumental when there is a more favourable political context. Understanding of change agency in an individual country requires the international democracy promotion community to broaden its perspective on civil society, and to see it not as an institution, constructed once and forever, but rather as a fluctuating process and forum where different participants play a role in maintaining a pluralistic discourse in the society: a function that needs to be nurtured. In this regard, supporting the integration of local experts into public policy-making is important because the wider public is marginalized and excluded from formal policy-making in non-democracies. In this regard, the agenda-setting process may potentially offer a venue where civil society can intervene. By building an institutional partnership, formal and informal social ties and networking, local think tanks may stimulate flows of information and ideas among various stakeholders, even beyond policy-makers. Maintaining and supporting an active and dynamic community of think tanks seems to offer a promising alternative to mechanical perceptions of social processes. To embrace the positive change aspects of the resilience

concept, the EU should go beyond the approach of the easy-to-work-with countries. The implications for EU democracy promotion include maximizing the quality of the process through supporting the local public policy process to be more inclusive. This can be achieved by supporting the acquisition of tools (advocacy and policy work, communication) and capacities by local CSOs and think tanks. Examples of meaningful actions could be: supporting alliance building in the host country; enhancing the technical skills of a CSO to increase the legitimacy of the organization as a professional entity; supporting the CSO with evidence gathering tools, lesson sharing, recording institutional memory and accumulated knowledge; supporting the establishment of public policy mechanisms that ensure access to policymaking processes for CSOs; supporting communication knowledge so that it is presented in an accessible and meaningful way; supporting international networking across regional/international epistemic communities.

To sum up, the complex nature of social processes calls upon scholars and democracy promotion practitioners to give up mechanistic approaches and excessive generalizations, and turn to supporting activities which are potentially important, even if they are difficult to measure, and working with local partners to develop new evaluation tools. This thesis suggests that altering the impact-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach in non-democracies will open alternative creative avenues for democracy promotion workers. One such avenue is the understanding and appreciation of the discursive dimension of the function of civil society, which acquires a particular importance in the non-democratic context.

Conclusion

The chapter has discussed the implications of the thesis with regard to the debate nurturing function of civil society. It has argued that, through accomplishing the tasks of policy education and interaction, local think tanks in non-democracies may be in a position to form and nurture social resources in civil society with regard to prospective autonomous political behaviour, and with regard to contributing to various aspects of the legitimacy of civil society. In addition to this, the role of local think tanks in the agenda-setting process opens creative avenues for the

international democracy assistance community in terms of meaningfully embracing the resilience paradigm.

The conceptualization of civil society as a process-oriented realm, a forum, the functions and actors of which evolve constantly depending on the context, suggests that in the non-democratic context the debate-nurturing function of civil society acquires a special significance. The empirical findings and theoretical assumptions of this thesis are particularly important in the context of the debate about political regime transformation. Within this debate, in one of his recent publications, Schmitter revised his previous views on regime transition by observing that although autocrats are capable of suppressing revolutionary threats and preventing reformist challenges, they cannot prevent the partition of the ruling elite (Schmitter, 2014). Depending on the balance of power, such a split usually leads to one group either taking the initiative to drive a change in regime or to start negotiations with the opposition (Schmitter, 2014). Here, networks of various actors with policy experience, knowledge and expertise can move into the scene of more active policy-making once a window of opportunity (in the form of reform or otherwise) is there. In other words, democracy and democratization are by definition dependent on the relations between domestic elites and the demos (Morlino&, Magen, 2009a: 29). Whether civil society has sufficient social resources to maintain this dialogue when the time comes depends substantially on the quality of processes which have been taking place for years before the window of opportunity arrives.

Conclusion

The theme of the thesis was developed in the context of the problematic influence of the presentation of a civil society as a confrontational actor, an engine of democratization in the post-communist area. Guided by this perception of the role of civil society, the international democracy promotion community overloaded civil society actors in the post-Soviet area with emancipatory and confrontational functions they were not in a position to fulfil due to a number of reasons. However, this did not prevent international democracy promotion community from the measuring civil society capacity along a weak-strong scale, setting ambitious goals for regime change, and imposing unrealistic targets and unfeasible tasks in front of a civil society. This resulted in democracy promotion work that elided the potential of non-confrontational activities in civil society. Apart from that, it prevented development workers and theorists from broadening their perception of civil society and considering alternative avenues of democracy promotion. The mainly confrontational perception of the function of a civil society was damaging both for the legitimacy of civil society and democracy promotion work. Fifteen years after the initial work of the 1990s, it became clear that the measurement of the regime transition process against an ideal model guided by the linear, mechanistic understanding of social processes with civil society as a main engine of the change, was damaging.

The role of think tanks, in particular, and the local epistemic community, in general, in and for civil society has been overlooked by both many theorists of civil society and practitioners of international democracy promotion. This is, perhaps, because this type of activity in a non-democracy is process-oriented and aimed at a long-term impact, while most democracy promotion workers aim concrete outcomes in the short and medium term. By highlighting the work of the local think tanks, this thesis draws attention to the whole category of the less confrontational but, nevertheless, still meaningful activities that the actors can engage in without further increasing the cost of action in a non-democracy. In doing so, the thesis was guided by the broad notion of a civil society. Namely, it suggests a move away from the rigid definition of civil society as a fixed institution (with a mainly

confrontational function) towards a more flexible understanding of civil society as a dynamic forum, where various actors fulfil various functions. In other words, I present it as a realm, the functions and actors of which are determined by the socio-political context in a given time frame. To understand a civil society and its dynamic in every society, the actors and the specific activities of its actors need to be studied. In this context, the thesis argues that through the analysing an agenda-setting process and think tanks' activities in it, it is possible to reveal an overlooked function of civil society –the nurturing of policy debate nurturing, a function, which is particularly important in non-democracies and is important not so much due to its policy impact, but due its influences on process.

Azerbaijan is a country where the narrow interpretation of civil society left its civil society outside of scholarly attention and prevented democracy aid workers from seeing agenda-setting as an area to support. Moreover, Azerbaijan demonstrates that, even in non-democracies, there is space for independent actors and where local think tanks emerged and functioned. Through the application of the analytical matrix, which integrated strategies and activities into Kingdon's MSF, the thesis argued that despite the marginal immediate policy change impact, the work of the local think tanks in Azerbaijan helped to fulfil policy education and interaction tasks throughout the streams of the agenda-setting process.

This thesis also demonstrated that it is possible to apply MSF to agenda-setting in a non-democracy, where there are fewer actors and a more centralized policy-making process. The case study shows that think tanks deployed their activities, not only in the policy stream, traditionally assigned to the think tanks, but also across the streams. In doing so, they were more successful in coupling the problem and policy streams, while continuing to create and maintain venues in the politics stream. In the problem and policy streams the local think tanks defined certain conditions as a problem. They made certain policy alternatives in the policy stream appear more plausible and others unthinkable. Overall, the case study implied that the streams can actually be highly interlinked in a non-democracy, perhaps due to a more centralized policy-making process and fewer actors, which

are active across the streams due to the narrower public space of a non-democracy.

Aimed at the two main process-oriented tasks of interaction and policy education, the two alliances of the case study sought to impact policy on local self-governance and budget transparency in the long run. While they accomplished certain policy changes, it is their harder-to-measure impact that is more interesting. Policy education and interaction activities helped, not only to consolidate financial and intellectual resources, but also to strengthen the united voice of the expert community in civil society. The new venues of debate eventually created additional leverage for dialogue with policy-makers. Local think tanks and other stakeholders gained expertise and credibility from these activities. By building institutional partnerships, formal and informal social ties, and networking, civil society stimulated the flow of information and ideas among various stakeholders within and beyond the policy-making community.

Therefore, think tanks can play a leading role in nurturing policy debate and performing non-confrontational activities, which eventually contribute to boosting the legitimacy of civil society in terms of its expertise and moral authority. The debate-nurturing function civil society acquires is particular important in the non-democratic context, where the wider public is usually excluded from formal policy-making. Most importantly, debate-nurturing activities contribute to the creation of a social resource which can be particularly meaningful in scenario of a future liberalisation of the political system. Apart from that, the networks and human resources nurtured in the course of agenda-setting activities may inform public administration and economic reforms once there is a window of opportunity (elite change, elections, revolt, etc.).This is particularly noteworthy as the debate on regime change concludes that it is most likely as a result of the partition of the ruling elite. If so, new power centres start building up new political alliances and attracting available experts with policy experience and knowledge from civil society. The role of the epistemic community of the USSR during Perestroika demonstrated that structures and human resources nurtured even in a post-totalitarian regime may become very helpful once there is political opening.

Thus, the agenda-setting process may offer a venue for intervention by civil society. Support for the debate-nurturing capacity of civil society is a strategy to consider for the international democracy promotion community. While civil society and its constituent actors in non-democracy may differ from those in established democracies, this is not a sufficient basis to announce the failure of civil society in the post-Soviet region. The dynamic of civil society changes depends on the context and calls for careful study of its functions and actors. In this conception of civil society, scholars and democracy promotion workers could give their attention and support to the less confrontational activities such as policy debate nurturing and to actors, such as think tanks, which irrespective of their immediate impact, can be an additional social source expertise, nurtured relationships among various stakeholders, and new venues for debate. In the area of democracy promotion, the newly launched resilience paradigm allows workers on the ground to decide and analyse what scope of democracy assistance is more suitable and feasible for the country. In this regard, it is important that especially in the difficult context of non-democracies the needs assessments and evaluations would be shaped together with the local civil society actors bearing in mind process-oriented strategies.

While the limitations of the study were discussed in respective paragraph of the methodological chapter, where I discussed advantages and disadvantages of my positionality due to my past professional background, and the ways I mitigated risks of bias in the knowledge production process; I expect that empirically informed perspective on civil society suggested in the thesis will impact policy-making in development aid industry.

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Annex A. Short Biography of the interviewees

1	Participant	Azer Mehtiyev
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	SEI Director
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, August 2017, Baku
2.	Participant	Gubad Ibadoglu
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Director of ERC
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
3	Participant	Zohrab Ismayilov
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	PFFP Director
	Date and place of interview	Skype interview, July 2016
4	Participant	Fidan Bagirova
	Sex	Female
	Affiliation	Former NBG coordinator
	Date and place of interview	Skype interview, August 2017
5	Participant	Sabit Bagirov
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Director of EDF
	Date and place of interview	August, 2016, Baku
6	Participant	Vugar Bayramov
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	CESD Director
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
7	Participant	Galib Abbaszadeh
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Former NBG coordinator
	Date and place of interview	Skype interview, July 2016
8	Participant	Abil Bayramov
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	BINA coordinator
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, August 2017, November 2019, Baku
9	Participant	Alimemmed Nuriyev
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	"Constitution" Research Foundation

	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
10	**Participant**	**Murad Nasibli**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Former project coordinator of Eurasia Foundation
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, Baku
11	**Participant**	**Kanan Aslanli**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	NBG expert
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
12	**Participant**	**Ayten Farhadova**
	Sex	Female
	Affiliation	Journalist
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
13	**Participant**	**Hafiz Babanli**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Journalist
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
14	**Participant**	**Vusala Rustamli**
	Sex	Female
	Affiliation	**Journalist**
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
15	**Participant**	**Seadet Akifgizi**
	Sex	Female
	Affiliation	**Journalist**
	Date and place of interview	August 2017, Baku
16	**Participant**	**Farda Asadov**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Former OSI director
	Date and place of interview	July 2017, Baku
17	**Participant**	**Mariyam Haji**
	Sex	Female
	Affiliation	Project Manager, EU Delegation Azerbaijan
	Date and place of interview	July 2017, Baku
18	**Participant**	**Emil Omarov**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Former NBG coordinator

	Date and place of interview	July 2016
19	**Participant**	**Rovshan Agayev**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	SEI expert
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, August 2017, November 2019, Baku
20	**Participant**	**Zardusht Alizade**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Director of Baku School of Journalism
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, Baku
21	**Participant**	**Alesker Memmedli**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Lawyer
	Date and place of interview	August 2016, Baku
22	**Participant**	**Rauf Mirqadirov,**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Journalist
	Date and place of interview	July 2016
23	**Participant**	**Sabit Bagirov**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	EDF President
	Date and place of interview	July 2016, August 2017
24	**Participant**	**Parviz Bagirov**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Former OSI project coordinator
	Date and place of interview	August 2017
	Participant	**Farid Guliyev**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	Scholar
25	**Date and place of interview**	July 2016
	Participant	**Rasim Musabeyov**
	Sex	Male
	Affiliation	MP
26	**Date and place of interview**	July 2016