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Proximity and distance: Think tanks handling the independence paradox

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Abstract

The credibility of think tanks is grounded in their image as independent experts. In order to gain authority to act, think tanks must be seen as independent, but in order to exert influence and gain funding, think tanks are forced to compromise this independent image. We focus on how think tanks handle this independence paradox. How do think tanks use different resources to construct an independent image? The aim of the article is conceptual, as we develop a theoretical model of the independence paradox. This conceptual work is based on empirical analysis of attempts by think tanks in Poland and Sweden to create independence while maintaining influence. The two desirables central for think tanks, independence and influence, force them to make strategic choices about their relations with various actors. We conclude that the processes of keeping distance and arranging proximity are at the core of the independence paradox.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The credibility of think tanks is grounded in their image as "independent experts" and "their presentation of themselves as legitimate and trustworthy sources of value-free advice to decision makers" (Shaw, Russell, Parsons, & Greenhalgh, 2015, p. 73). By claiming independence, and thereby integrity, think tanks can be trusted as legitimate actors in the field, acting out of conviction for a cause rather than opportunism. However, this independence is not unproblematic. As Stone (2005, p. 18) contends, "calls for independence can sometimes conflict with and contradict calls for policy relevance." The result is a paradox: in order to be legitimate and thereby gain authority to act, think tanks must be independent, but in order to exert influence and gain funding, think tanks become dependent on others.

Starting from the observation that independence and influence are not easily aligned, we focus on how think tanks attempt to construct independence without endangering their relations, thus effectively handling the independence paradox. We ask: How do think tanks use different resources to construct an independent image? Thus, we by no means assume that think tanks *are* independent, nor do we discuss *to what extent* the studied organizations are independent or how they conceal their dependence. Rather, we focus on how think tanks organize and represent themselves as independent.

The aim of the article is conceptual, as we develop a theoretical model of the independence paradox. This conceptual work is based on empirical analysis of attempts by think tanks in Poland and Sweden to create independence while maintaining influence. We find that the variation in how our sample of 21 think tanks handle the independence paradox is related to processes of keeping a distance and arranging proximity. In addition, we find that the discourse around independence varies among think tanks. While all will claim independence, this claim is less central for certain organizations, and these organizations manage to be recognized as legitimate actors in spite of openly admitting partisanship or being driven by strong ideological convictions. This variation suggests not only the need to unpack the notion of independence, distinguishing the ways in which think tanks may attempt to come across as independent, but also the need to provide a comprehensive theoretical model of the independence paradox.

One explanatory note is due at this point. In many instances, "independence" is used interchangeably with "autonomy." These terms, however, do not fully overlap. Autonomy is "the condition or right of a state, institution, group, etc., to make its own laws or rules and administer its own affairs," while "independence" is defined as "the fact of not depending on another […]; exemption from external control or support; freedom from subjection, or from the influence of others" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). This implies that an analysis of autonomy should be more focused on the studied actors' characteristics that allow for self-government, while an analysis of independence should concentrate on relations with other actors and the extent of control they entail. Independence, as observed, is defined negatively as an absence of dependence.

The article is structured as follows. After providing an overview of the existing literature on independence in think tanks, we present our theoretical starting points and a short discussion of the case selection and methods. In the analysis, we draw on examples of think tanks in Poland and Sweden with the ambition to unravel how think tanks use different resources to construct an independent image. We submit that despite possible contextual differences with regard to specific constellations of attempts at independence and of resources utilized, our findings can be generalizable to other think tanks. Therefore, after the analysis, we elaborate on a theoretical model of the independence paradox.

2 | INDEPENDENCE: FROM AN INDEPENDENT TO A DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Independence is a prominent theme in existing research on think tanks. Both scholars and public commentators often examine the presumed dependence of think tanks from funders or depict them as ideologically influenced. Nevertheless, independence is seldom the main focus of these interventions; rather, it is seen as a means of enabling or hampering the goal of objective policy advice. Moreover, while independence may be a central topic in think tank scholarship, the literature paints a mixed picture of the independence of think tanks. Particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, independence has gained the status of a necessary condition that constitutes part of the very definition of think tanks (e.g., Abelson, 2009, p. 9; Weaver & McGann, 2000. p. 4). Other researchers have been skeptical of such a definition not only because attempts at constructing independence vary across contexts, as suggested by Stone (2005: pp. 2–4), but also because independence is more an aspiration or a means for achieving, for instance, legitimacy, than a given organizational feature of think tanks.

Hence, independence does not come ready made; it is constructed in accordance with what is acceptable and desirable in a given context. Moreover, as Medvetz (2012a) argues, think tanks are founded on the contradiction between dependence and independence. A think tank is dependent, for instance, on funders and the recognition of other actors. At the same time, to gain authority, it must establish an image of itself as independent in both of these aspects. Thus, while mobilizing resources in various formats from the fields of academia, politics, and media, think tanks simultaneously attempt to show how they are independent from actors within these fields (Medvetz, 2012b, p. 24).

We group the literature discussing the independence of think tanks into three main themes: economic, political, and academic independence. The most often studied type of independence is the *economic/financial (in)dependence* of think tanks (e.g., Abelson, 2009; McLevey, 2014). Following resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), scholars in these studies assume that funders have some extent of control over the institutions they sponsor. From this literature, we learn that think tanks' funding takes many different forms, indicating their economic dependence on various types of actors, such as the state, private funders (individual or organizational), or foreign sources. Not surprisingly, studies show great variation in the patterns of funding that occur over time (Gonzalez Hernando & Williams, 2018) and across different sociopolitical contexts. As with think tank research in general, the dominance of studies based on empirical findings from the United States and Canada is striking. Abelson, for instance, (Abelson, 2000, p. 231) observes, "For most think tanks in Canada, and in the United States for that matter, achieving financial independence is the most significant obstacle that they must overcome to become involved actively in the policy-making process". Although this might seem like a generalizable statement, in Germany (Thunert, 2008) and several Asian countries (Stone, 2005; Xufeng, 2009; Yep & Ngok, 2006), economic dependence on government or political parties is actually a precondition of credibility among decision makers and thus of active involvement in the policy process. Such diverging conclusions have led some authors to argue that the idea of economic independence as a prerequisite for objectivity is distinctly Western and not necessarily shared by governments and think tanks in other parts of the world, especially in developing and transitional countries (Stone, Denham, & Garnett, 1998). It should be noted, however, that endeavors to establish an image of economic independence are easily questioned even in the West. For a large number of Western think tanks that are government or university affiliated as well as for those with strong links to the private sector or those directly affiliated with a political party, interest group or a prominent political personality, the image of independency is a delicate matter (McGann & Johnson, 2005). Hence, both in the West and beyond, economic independence must be constructed, although potentially in different ways.

Political independence from vested interests is more difficult to study, which is probably the reason why it features less frequently in existing research. As with economic independence, studies have observed large variation in political independence between think tanks in different contexts. Some scholars explain the notion of political independence by referencing the formal status of think tanks in the legal framework of a given polity (Stone, 2005; Zbieranek, 2011). This form of legal or formal independence is exempt from the domain of perceptions and can easily be adjudicated by checking an entry in a register. For instance, we find think tanks that are government agencies producing analysis for a given ministry (e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and think tanks that have a formal status as an non-governmental organization (NGO) with no legal obligation to deliver certain types of advice to given institutions. However, political dependence does not have to take the form of legal regulation. Formal political independence of a think tank might in practice be compromised by various organized relations, such as board members from political parties or corporations, or more informally through collegial ties. The so-called revolving door phenomenon is an example of the latter, when think tankers go back and forth between government and think tanks (Blanes, Vidal, Vidal, & Fons-Rosen, 2012). In general, previous scholarship has demonstrated that proximity to the political field threatens the perception of political independence (Jezierska, 2018).

Arguably, the most central type of independence is *academic independence*, that is, the freedom to produce analysis and results in line with the rules of academic integrity. This type of independence has been treated only in passing in the existing literature (but see some interesting observations in Lindquist, 1989), with the notable exception of Williams (2018), who thoroughly discusses the manufacturing of "cognitive autonomy" and the processes in which think tanks and other knowledge producers engage in order to claim legitimacy. This focus on internal processes of manufacturing and maintaining "cognitive autonomy" is useful for our broader aim of highlighting the independence paradox and the dynamic interplay between different types of independence.

The contribution of this study to research is that it demonstrates how think tanks construct an image of occupying an independent position in the interest of being treated as legitimate actors. While independence has featured quite heavily in previous studies on think tanks, it has most often been treated as an independent variable explaining variation in, for example, influence and media visibility. Thus, independence has been treated in an unnuanced way, with very little attention given to various types of independence and the interplay between them. We argue that the form of ascribed independence based on the legal or formal status of a think tank described in the literature does not suffice if we want to understand the workings of think tanks.[1] This objective status still requires interventions to construct an image of independence with respect to the economic, political, and academic fields. Hence, we contribute by unpacking and conceptualizing the phenomenon of think tanks' endeavors to claim independence, explicitly focusing on independence as a dependent variable. It is important to emphasize that what we analytically distinguish as pursuits of different types of independence are often mixed in reality.

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAME

As we have seen above, a key characteristic in most definitions of think tanks in the Anglo-American tradition is the importance of independence from governments and social interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties (e.g., Rich, 2004; Stone, 2000; Weaver, 1989).

The credibility of think tanks is grounded in their image as "independent experts." However, independence is only relative since think tanks are often in "resource-dependent relationships with these (kinds of) organizations" (Stone, 2005, p. 4). Hence, rather than being a defining characteristic of think tanks, independence is a feature that think tanks must consider and organize accordingly to meet the qualifications for being authoritative actors. The operative definition of a think tank used in this article, which is drawn upon in the selection of interviewees, is a research component in the organization and actions directed at influencing public policies (directly, i.e., preparing law proposals, and/or indirectly, i.e., changing the public's attitudes and knowledge about a certain issue). Think tanks' main audiences are decision makers and opinion builders (Jezierska, 2015, p. 837).

To understand what constructing independence practically means for think tanks, we adopt a symbolic-interactionist perspective. At its core, this perspective is "processual, relational, temporal and utterly anti-dualistic" (Dionysiou, 2016, p. 2), suggesting an openness to the negotiated ways in which think tank independence is constructed. The key notion of this perspective comes from George Herbert Mead's concept of the generalized other (Mead, 1934), which denotes the human predilection to anticipate others' behaviors, thus enabling social organization and coordination. Studies of organizations have drawn upon this notion for understanding organizational performance, capabilities, structure and change (Dionysiou, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, we make use of this perspective to avoid static notions of independence, stressing the dynamic relation between the institutional understandings of this concept within the context of the think tank space and attempts to construct a range of freedom and images of it (cf. Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

In our understanding, think tanks' construction of independence is contingent and dynamic in a phenomenological fashion (cf. Aspers, 2010). Epistemologically, it entails a plea for analyzing think tanks' construction of independence as a process of interpretation, translation and adaptation in relation to other actors. This means that we see the claim for independence as forged, formed and established by these organizations and not a given. Moreover, these efforts must be recognized by other actors, which underlines that independence makes sense only if it is perceived as such, indicating successful creation by the think tank. If this occurs, the think tank may appear legitimate in the Weberian sense and thus be seen as an actor who is accepted in the field by others (Weber, 1922/2013). Legitimacy will also render authority, that is, the possibility of being of consequence for other actors (Coleman, 1990).

There are three types of resources that think tanks may use in the interest of being seen as "independent" and constructing a space of actual self-determination. These resources are material (e.g., funding), symbolic (e.g., academic image), or relational (e.g., affiliations with other actors), all three of which can be drawn upon in the form of discourse and/or practice. While discourse refers to how think tanks talk about and present their activities, practice refers to how the work within the think tank is set up and formatted. Indeed, these two aspects are interrelated because discourse within organizational settings such as think tanks presumes some form of practice—a website, a report, a tweet, and so on—and practices often take the format of language, talk, and communication in a broad sense. Think tanks often employ these resources in various constellations to claim the three types of independence presented above.

4 | CASE SELECTION AND METHOD

The empirical grounds for our argument come from interviews and a document analysis of think tanks in two selected cases: Poland and Sweden. The study is not a straightforward comparison; rather, we lean on these data to establish common patterns of how the independence paradox works for this type of institution, irrespective of the disparate contexts in which these institutions operate. Hence, Poland and Sweden were selected because of the differences between these countries in opportunity structures for policy advice. Sweden has a neo-corporatist history of organizing non-state actors' involvement in politics (Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991) as well as an established tradition of evidence-based policymaking (e.g., the official commissions of inquiry; see Petersson, 2015). Since the 1990s, however, Sweden has moved in a more pluralist direction (Öberg et al., 2011), which coincides with the increase in the number of think tanks. Although the first think tanks in Sweden can be identified as early as the 1930s, the rapid expansion of this type of institution did not happen until 1999 (Åberg, Einarsson, & Reuter, 2019). Today, there are approximately 40 think tanks in Sweden, together forming a cluster of organizations aiming to advancing policymaking (Sörbom, 2018).

To identify the Polish legacy of policymaking, we must turn to the state-socialist period between 1945 and 1989. During that time, political influence of any non-state actors independent of the communist party was practically impossible. Since 1989 and the shift to liberal democracy, the pluralist model has been adopted (Czaputowicz & Stasiak, 2012). With the steady flow of external funding, which secured the blooming of the non-governmental sector, expert organizations developed as well. However, the involvement of think tanks in policymaking is rather limited. Think tankers usually blame their relatively meager impact on the "immaturity" of the Polish political class, which results in a lack of systemic access routes for expert organizations and only sporadic use of policy advice (Jezierska, 2020). The first modern Polish think tank was created as a government foreign policy institute in 1947, but the speedy growth in numbers occurred first in the mid-1990s and later after 2015, parallel to the shift to the so-called "illiberal democracy" in Poland. Today, there are approximately 60 Polish think tanks. In sum, we can consider think tanks in Sweden and in Poland as rather new players in the policymaking field, but their conditions for providing policy advice differ.

In both Sweden and Poland, existing organizations cover a broad ideological spectrum, from the leftist Arena Group (Sweden) and Political Critique (Poland) to the market liberal Timbro (Sweden) and Civil Development Forum (Poland). Lately, even radical conservative think tanks have appeared in both contexts. In 2020, the Swedish Oikos was founded, and in Poland, the Catholic Ordo Iuris has been active since 2013. There are obvious differences between Sweden and Poland with regard to funding of think tanks, which, to a large extent, mirror the funding patterns of NGOs more broadly. In Sweden, the most popular funding strategy among think tanks is project-based funding and consulting, while in Poland, most think tanks rely on government project funding, with a decreasing share of foreign funding over time. However, as we indicate in the analysis, there are several funding strategies that think tanks choose in both contexts.

While all think tanks strive to carve out an "independent" space, think tanks in both countries exhibit large variation with regard to positioning toward other social actors. Importantly, there is no institutional solution for party think tanks; that is, neither in Sweden nor in Poland are there legal regulations for German-style party think tanks funded exclusively by political parties. Nevertheless, there is one such think tank in Poland, the Civic Institute, which practically exists in a legal vacuum. Other institutions are linked to political parties (through large portions of funding, personal ties, or ideologically) to varying degrees. There is also variation when it comes to relations with business actors, mostly through funding. Here an outlier is the Swedish Timbro, which is long-termed funded by Business Sweden. In Poland, such corporate links are less prominent. Another important external partner for think tanks is the university.

While there is some overlap with respect to personnel (e.g., academics serving as permanent experts for think tanks), Swedish and Polish think tanks are not institutionally integrated in the university structure. In selecting think tanks for analysis, we are covering the diversity of these institutions in each country at that time, thus forming a sample representative of the respective think tank population. In addition to the factors described above, we have also made sure to select organizations that differ with respect to organizational age and size (i.e., budget size and staff).

The argument draws on 35 interviews with 21 think tanks, including 15 interviews with 9 Polish think tanks[2] conducted in 2013 and 20 interviews with 12 Swedish think tanks[3] conducted in 2012 (see Appendix S1). All interviews ranged between 30 and 90 minutes and were conducted at the offices of the interviewees or a quiet "neutral" place selected by the think tankers. We interviewed central figures in the selected think tanks (mostly CEOs and directors of research) and made it clear that we were interviewing them as representatives of their organizations. To remove the focus from specific individuals, we anonymized the data (see Appendix S1). Text from each think tank's website was also collected and brought into the coding process. Drawing on the concepts related to the three types of independence and the three types of resources as well as empirically generated codes, abductive coding was used for the interviews and texts (Reichertz, 2010). In contrast to deduction and induction, this form of coding entails openness to discoveries by allowing the researcher to formulate a new rule/hypothesis for his/her empirical observations. In practice, the researcher goes back and forth between theory and data in a bid to resolve queries and develop new or modify existing theory (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017; see Appendix S1 for more details).

5 | POLISH AND SWEDISH THINK TANKS CONSTRUCTING INDEPENDENCE

The analysis focuses on how think tanks may draw upon the three forms of resources presented above (relations, materials, and symbols) in the interest of handling the independence paradox and creating an image of political, economic, and academic independence. Our contention is that think tanks, by way of drawing on these resources, construct dynamic processes in which they couple, decouple and recouple relations with relevant actors outside the think tank space.

5.1 | Economic independence

All think tanks are dependent on some form of material resources, funding or other forms of subsistence, such as premises, computers, and printers. This type of material source is established and organized in various formats, for example, endowments, project grants, and private donations. To secure further funding, think tanks may be more or less open to following the expressed or presumed interests of their funders. Thus, economic independence means that a think tank and its staff are at liberty to state their positions without considering the permission or interests of funders. The studied think tanks were all inclined to say that their work was characterized by economic independence, arguing that funders would not set the agenda and that they would not require permission for stating their opinions or publishing their results. They were, however, quite aware of how different sources of funding can lead to perceptions of dependence. Funding was seen as ambiguous in character and as needing safeguarding in order not to reduce the legitimacy and authority of the think tank. We found two general strategies for avoiding an economically dependent image.

The first strategy was to generically avoid a specific type of funder. The CEO of the Polish liberal think tank Batory Foundation, established in 1988, declared that “this was our distinguishing characteristic, that we were very careful to avoid any funding from the state, not to become dependent” (Interview 1). In contrast, the CEO of a younger Polish think tank, the conservative Sobieski Institute established in 2005, describes how it refuses another source of funding: “We programmatically avoid foreign funding. That is, we only use it if these funds don't endanger our sovereignty. The political-intellectual sovereignty” (Interview 11). The CEO of the Swedish think tank Tällberg Foundation explains in length how funding needs to be aligned with the questions the organization is willing to take on. If it succeeds in combining these two, it will have “built networks and knowledge at the same time as funding” (Interview 34).

A second strategy for claiming independence, and by far the most common strategy, is arguing for a de facto decoupling of financers from the actual work of the think tank. Timbro, a Swedish right-wing think tank established in 1978, has been funded by the Foundation for Free Enterprise in Sweden since 2003. As the CEO describes the relation, the Foundation directs the think tank in a broad sense, indicating what general trends and broader themes to focus on. Other than that, the employees at Timbro are said to be free to formulate their own visions. According to the CEO, funders do not interfere with day-to-day practices and are in this sense decoupled from the think tank. One of the managers at Timbro clarifies that there is, of course, a limit to what the funders will tolerate. If the think tank used its funding “unwisely,” then “we would not have a renewed confidence, which entails that there is balance between how independent one may be relative to one's funders” (Interview 32).

Interviewees acknowledge that at times, decoupling does not work. The CEO of the Polish liberal think tank Batory Foundation admits that the think tank has had some issues with the founder and original funder, the American philanthropist George Soros, about which activities to concentrate on.

> Our foundation, just like tens of others in the world, was launched by George Soros. [...] In the beginning, he was the only source of our funding. [...] We have had many conflicts. These were not caused by his ill will but rather by his missionary conviction, that he knows better. And often, we fiercely opposed that, we had our own ideas. [...] However, he did show his dissatisfaction by granting us relatively less money with respect to other foundations. We can say that he did not reward us. (Interview 1)

While the first strategy of generic avoidance entails non-relations with selected actors, decoupling is an attempt at handling the fact that the funder to some extent forms part of the think tank. The issue at stake is related to monitoring on behalf of funders. The more strongly financers are coupled to and form part of the think tank, the more they can practice oversight. Our data indicate that the monitoring of think tank funding can be described as a U-curve; the middle-range time frame of the relation is the version that is most likely to be monitored, and thus, these think tanks stand in a stronger dependent position relative to the provider of the material resources. In contrast, those with either a very long time frame in relation to the funders (i.e., in the form of endowments) or very short time frame (e.g., short-term subscribers or donors) are more likely to claim a broader range of independence. However, the short-term funding perspective also comes with issues regarding the longevity of the organization.

In Poland, where developed philanthropy is generally lacking, only a few organizations boast an endowment. Hence, project funding is the main way to secure capital. Think tanks view grants as somewhat problematic from the point of view of independence. Combined with financial insecurity, a reliance on grants drives think tanks to take on projects that are not in line with their mission. The phenomenon is not unique for think tanks; in fact, it is shared by other NGOs and has been described as "grantosis" (e.g., Jezierska, 2018), entailing relatively intense monitoring and directing of activities. One interviewee describes this ailment as follows: "Their [other think tanks'] actions are very outspread; they skip from one topic to another based on where the money is" (Interview 8).

"Grantosis" is by no means only a Polish phenomenon. Short-term project grants are an increasingly dominant funding scheme for think tanks (Gonzalez Hernando & Williams, 2018) in other contexts, as well. Among the Swedish think tanks, only Timbro boasts an endowment. One Swedish example of dependencies and monitoring accompanying project-based funding comes from the think tank Foundation Society and Business (FSB). This think tank has (institutional) members but is foremost funded by various types of project grants. In 2013, FSB was scandalized when the author of one of the think tank's issued reports, regarding the privatization of state-owned companies, was prohibited from communicating its content. Allegedly, the ban was implemented because some members on the foundation board had been part of funding the project and were critical of the report.

At the other end of the U-curve are subscriptions, an example of a low-monitoring type of funding. This form is nowhere to be seen in the Polish case but is practiced by the Swedish think tank New Welfare, which is run by subscriptions from approximately 15,000 small business owners. Initially, the think tank had members. However, it later changed into a foundation (and thus became memberless), as the think tank leadership recognized the risk of members wanting to decide what the organization should do. In the following quote, the CEO describes how subscribers cannot influence the think tank's activities, as they have no say inside the organization: "They do not have any influence on what we are up to. Or rather, they have huge influence over us. It's not like they are calling us, telling us what to do, but if we do not do things they like, then they won't pay" (Interview 21).

Overall, our interviews point to the effect of time frames on think tanks' ability to draw on material resources while claiming independence. Those think tanks that have been able to establish a stable, long-term relation with funders are more likely to experience a lower degree of monitoring and directing of activities by funders. Another way of increasing independence from funders is relying on very short-term sources of funding. In addition, in line with propositions from resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), our interviewees indicate that diversification creates a less dependent position for their organizations, somewhat mitigating the proximity issue.

5.2 | Political independence

In general, a politically independent position is treated as a premise, something that the think tanks participating in this study believe requires little explanation. It seems that think tanks consider it sufficient to state that they are independent without specifying what this entails in practice or providing more detail. For instance, any think tank website declares that the organization is unbound to other actors, especially political ones. Various wordings are used. The Swedish green think tank Fores describes itself as follows: "We are an open, voluntary and independent meeting arena."[4] The Polish liberal think tank Batory Foundation defines itself as "independent of any state or political institutions."[5] In an interview, the CEO of the liberal Polish think tank Institute of Public Affairs explains the following:

> We are apolitical in the sense that we are not glued to any political party. But we have positions on concrete issues. It happens to be the case that our positions very seldom align with the Law and Justice [right-wing] party. When it comes to other parties, it depends on the issue... We are non-partisan but within the frame of the mission, interpreted from our founding aims. (Interview 13)

At the same time, political independence requires both long- and short-term strategies for showing that irrespective of any particular political relations the think tank may have, its analyses and results are not influenced by these relations. We observe a range of strategies for claiming independence in spite of boasting about close relations. Those claims are situated on a scale from attempts to conceal existing ties to open admission that full political independence is impossible.

At one end of the scale, think tanks pursue an apolitical image by avoiding mentioning or by downplaying relations to actors that are considered political, such as political parties or trade unions. This is clearly expressed by the CEO of the Polish liberal Civic Institute:

> When we started our work, everybody knew that we were linked to the [political party] Civic Platform. Partisanship and political parties have bad connotations in Poland. So, I was treated as a hot potato. After three years of our activities, there are no objections to collaborate with us because it's clear that political and partisan matters are not important here; the important thing is to create new ideas. (Interview 4)

In the case of Fores, which has strong relations to a centrist, conservative party in Sweden, the CEO describes the constant need "for proving our independence" (Interview 22). As an example, at one point in time, the think tank employed staff from all other conservative parties to establish an image of political independence from its former founders.

At the other end of the scale, we find endeavors to construct political independence by making use of strong ties to political actors as a veritable resource and trying to show that these ties are productive instead of limiting, as they may provide a path into policy making. Hence, in these cases, think tanks wish to convey that they drive other actors and are not driven by them. The director of the Polish leftist think tank Ferdinand Lassalle Centre for Social Thought explains, "We are independent from political parties, but we generally try to influence SLD [the post-communist left party]" (Interview 6). In a similar vein, the CEO of the Polish conservative Sobieski Institute boasts about close relations to the political field:

> We are close to politics. It is useful for our research. Without access to politics, there is no genuine discussion. I know a few major party leaders, and I can talk to them, just like that. This gives the sense that we create applied science. I can dispute with them, showing that what they claim to be good politically has nothing to do with [scientific] evidence (Interview 11).

At one of the think tanks close to the Swedish Social Democratic party, the CEO describes that the importance it may have in Swedish politics is partly due to the fact that it has "a direct link into the largest political party in Sweden" (Interview 16). As a consequence of this obvious relationship, the Labor Movement Think Tank underscores that it is objective in the results that it promotes but subjective in choosing its topics: "We are not impartial; we are subjective. The worst thing you can do is promote an objective image and then be caught as subjective" (Interview 16).

Relations to the political sphere may thus also be drawn upon as a resource for coming across as politically independent, if not apolitical. Yet again, the issue is to prove that the ideas are not tainted by these connections. The head of Times, another Swedish think tank close to the Social Democratic labor movement, underscores that this relationship does not imply that employees at the think tank are circumscribed by these relationships. "We never ask for permission to publish. Many may not believe this, but the party and the trade union organization [funders of the think tank] both show great respect for our independence" (Interview 33). Similarly, the CEO of the Polish Civic Institute, which is directly linked to and exclusively funded by the central-liberal party Civic Platform, claims independence, mostly in terms of intellectual freedom. "It is really interesting, I'm not a person from the Civic Platform, I'm not engaged. What is more, back in the days, I wrote quite critical comments about the Civic Platform, and this also proves that the party wants to create a relatively independent institute" (Interview 4).

5.3 | Academic independence

As the production and diffusion of knowledge is at the core of think tanks' activities, they are wary about coming across as unbiased in these endeavors. If a think tank does not succeed in creating an image of academic independence—that is, the appearance of being unhindered by ideological or any other constraints—it is hard for it to claim to be a trustworthy policy adviser. This is the form of independence that all interviewed think tanks strongly claim. In practice, academic independence is akin to academic integrity based on the ideal of value-free production of knowledge. Academic integrity can be showcased through the production of rigorous policy reports, factual reporting of the results to the broader public, organization of conferences with various standpoints present, and so on. In these endeavors, think tanks lean on and integrate with academia. In addition, think tanks "mimic" the academic field in its manifest organization and production, thereby implying proximity to academia.

In day-to-day work, think tanks have a range of symbolic resources to draw upon for constructing an image of value-free interpretations of reality. Most generally, they construct this image by imitating academic knowledge creation and academia as an institution. Therefore, extensive use of academic labels is common at these think tanks. Many think tanks call their departments "research units," their employees "researchers" or "fellows," their publications "research reports" and "analyses," and the meetings they organize "seminars" or "conferences." There is also some extent of direct overlap between the space of think tanks and the field of academia. In addition to think tank workers and collaborators who hold doctoral degrees, others have parallel affiliations with universities and publish in academic journals. One of the studied leftist think tanks in Poland, Political Critique, has its own "research and education institute"—the Institute for Advanced Studies—with teaching programs targeting undergraduates. Another organization, the think-and-do tank Shipyard, organizes PhDo programs (which are allegedly more applied than classical PhD programs) in collaboration with a university. In the same vein, Sweden's two largest think tanks, Timbro and Arenagruppen, have started "academies" of their own.

In addition to institutional mimicking of academia, think tanks stress distance to politics to make their proximity to academia and their academic independence credible. Their results are presented as independent research that is not politically tainted. One think tanker at Fores, in Sweden, argues that it is important, and possible, to be impartial with regard to actual research results. These results may later be drawn upon for policy arguments. Nonetheless, it is important not to politicize results, and she underscores that the think tank where she works is not truly a think tank, as it engages in research and not politics. "We do not want to be a think tank. We want to be a research institute. [...] I believe that as a think tank, you can extend your influence by being neutral" (Interview 23).

The idea of pure knowledge, free from politics, is based on the epistemological notion of academic independence as avoiding "blinders," which would impede a value-free interpretation of reality. However, this idea is criticized by other think tankers. Expressing an opposing epistemological position, the CEO of Arenagruppen, the largest left-leaning think tank in Sweden funded mainly by labor trade unions, ponders: "Well, I see concepts such as 'objective' and 'impartial' as very difficult to embrace in relation to policy issues because I don't see the existence of any absolute objectivity, or truth, or impartiality" (Interview 17). He then goes on to claim that the only way to guarantee the production of trustworthy knowledge is to present one's assumptions regarding how the results were obtained.

Irrespective of which epistemological position the think tank adopts, the common idea of apolitical knowledge risks producing ivory tower knowledge that is detached from policy needs and thus impact. The CEO of the liberal Civic Institute explains the intricate problem of being like an academic without the ivory tower image. "In Poland, it is a matter of intellectual honesty for academics not to collaborate, at least officially, with political life. But how do they imagine their ideas will penetrate political life? There has to be a symmetrical, not an asymmetrical, relation, and I believe think tanks are such a place [...] where politics meets the academic world" (Interview 4).

6 | THE INDEPENDENCE PARADOX: A THEORETICAL MODEL

Figure 1 below is a theoretical model of the independence paradox analyzed in previous sections; that is, it is based on our study of how think tanks relate to independence. The varying arguments, compromises and ambiguities of the think tank world presented in the above

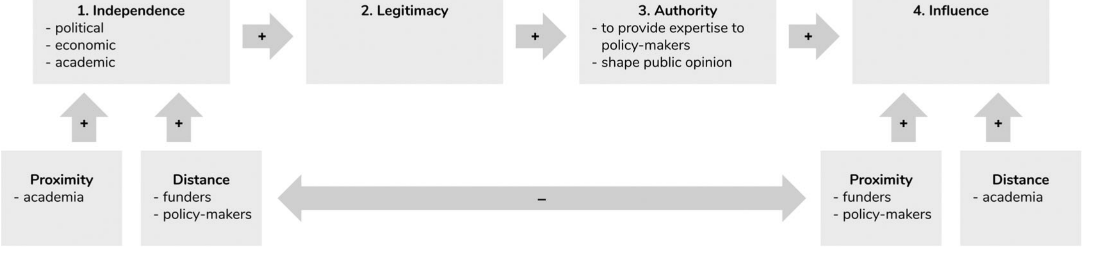

FIGURE 1 The independence paradox: between distance and proximity

sections are here incorporated into a theoretical model. The intention of this model is to extract the general strategies by which think tanks handle external relations so that the model can be applied in various contexts. Think tanks' relationship to independence is a paradox (para-doxa, that is, distinct from common expectation) because it reveals the unexpected detachment (cf. Forajter, 2018) between the two desirables—independence and influence. As the analysis shows, these two desirables push think tanks to constantly renegotiate their position and force them to make strategic choices about their relations with various actors. Think tanks direct their actions toward various audiences, most notably toward decision makers, the media, and the broader public. The latter two, however, are only indirect means to reach decision makers and influence political decisions. We argue that think tanks face the independence paradox in their relations with all these types of audiences. The paradox, irrespective of which audience is targeted with a specific action, forces think tanks to negotiate between independence and influence. In practice, the decisions made boil down to strategic choices with regard to the acquisition and use of resources (relational, material, symbolic), which are visible through the way that think tanks position themselves relative to other actors and fields. This positioning is expressed by the dynamic interplay between distance and proximity.

The construction of independence is based on maintaining distance from funders (e.g., avoiding too much funding from one source, avoiding funding from the state or abroad) and from politics (e.g., creating an apolitical image). On the other hand, independence is also constructed through an affinity to academia and the ideal of independent research. In this sense, these three types of independence are guided by different vectors. Political and economic independence are guided by distance, and academic independence is driven by proximity, making the former “independence from” and the latter “independence to.”[6] The analysis displayed how these types are interconnected, with proximity to academia being the primary way in which think tanks maintain the appearance of distance from funders and political actors. If their strategy works, the perceived independence (1) in all its forms (political, economic, and academic) gives think tanks legitimacy (2). It is the projection of independence that potentially gives think tanks the position of credible providers of expertise. If such a reputation is established, it grants them authority to operate (3), that is, perform their main functions, such as providing expertise to policymakers and shaping public opinion, for instance, through media appearances. At the same time, to be successful in these endeavors, that is, to exert influence (4), think tanks must ensure proximity to the same actors, that is, funders and policymakers, whom they also have to estrange, as this proximity might compromise think tanks' claims to independence.[7] On the other hand, think tanks must make sure they keep some distance from other actors and fields, especially academia, to ensure that they are engaged not in ivory tower research but applied, practical analysis that is useful to policymakers.

The presented model is obviously an abstraction. In reality, independence is not a fixed phenomenon, and the paradox does not affect all think tanks in the same way. Still, all think tanks have to relate to the dilemmas it presents. For instance, proximity to specific funders or political actors might be less problematic for think tanks that aim at influencing decision makers sharing the same ideological leaning. Nevertheless, these think tanks still need to manufacture an independent image if they want to access broader publics, for example, through the media. Moreover, the paradoxical position indicated by the model is somewhat moderated by the strength of the reputation of independence a given think tank manages to establish. This means that a new think tank, or a think tank with a damaged reputation, must devote more effort to projecting an independent image, while an established think tank with a reputation as independent can utilize that reputation and have occasional closer relations to politicians or funders without immediately risking the image of independence. However, as the example of FSB shows, the reputation is not stable and must be reinforced or constructed anew, which means the dynamic indicated in the model is valid for different types of think tanks.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of think tanks in the different contexts of Poland and Sweden, this article develops a theoretical model for understanding the independence paradox. The disparate contexts of Poland and Sweden show similar challenges for think tanks with regard to constructing an image of independence. To be important in their respective political landscapes, the studied think tanks must appear independent from outside actors, such as funders and politicians. At the same time, complete independence would also indicate irrelevance because it would entail a lack of relations to other actors. Based on our analysis, we draw a series of conclusions that highlight and clarify the general dynamics of the independence paradox.

First, independence, irrespective of the form—economic, political, or academic—is most commonly not an end in itself for think tanks. Rather, it is a means to an end. The end is to become credible and thus legitimate actors with authority to act as policy advisers. Influence on political decision making (direct or indirect) is the ultimate goal of think tanks. The problem is that independence and influence are not easily aligned. Think tanks are forced to maneuver between proximity and distance to find an adequate balance between independence and influence. While distance from politics and funders seems to be a crucial way of achieving independence, it also causes trouble by implying a lack of influence. The reverse seems to be true for relations with academia: proximity to academia guarantees independence but risks creating an image of ivory tower researchers unlikely to be useful for policymakers.

Second, by distinguishing different types of independence, we were able to identify the constellations of different resources think tanks employ to create images of economic, political, and academic independence. Economic independence is difficult to achieve because all think tanks need to have some form of funding. Distance to funders is commonly constructed by various forms of arrangements over time, with an endowment apparently being the preferred solution. In this arrangement, a think tank controls its own funding, with only scarce relations to and monitoring by original investors. Short-term funding, such as crowd-funding and smaller sums of ad hoc contributions, is another way of keeping distance from funders, that is, of achieving less monitoring. The most prevalent form of funding, though, is middle-range project funding. This type of funding creates the strongest relations of control both before and after fund donations. Hence, the time frame of the funding scheme is crucial in creating distance (and independence) from funders.

One could claim that political ties are the very means by which think tanks operate. Nevertheless, they commonly claim an apolitical position, situating their work in a neutral and independent space free from political agendas and partiality. We see variation among think tanks in how they make use of relational resources for the construction of political independence. Some think tankers attempt to conceal existing ties, arguing that they operate and provide expertise *despite* relations with given political actors, while others openly admit close relationships with political actors and claim influence *because of* those claims. This highlights the independence paradox.

Finally, acting *like* an academic is the most common way that a think tank claims independence. Kinship to the academic field and the use of symbolic resources showcases that proximity (titles, methods of analysis, peer review, etc.) is crucial in the construction of academic independence. We argue that the credibility of academic independence hinges upon successful claims to both economic and political independence. In this sense, these different types of independence are interlinked.

Although our theoretical model was developed based on our study of think tanks in Poland and Sweden, it presents the ways in which think tanks attempt to negotiate distance and proximity to funders and other actors. As such, the model can be applicable in various contexts, taking into account the specificities of these localities. We also posit that the independence paradox is valid for a broader range of expert organizations that seek to influence policymakers. This claim, however, must be corroborated by future research.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Similarly, in the public administration literature, "the dangers of using formal-legal status of a public organization as an indicator of its autonomy" (Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschuere, 2004) have been observed. However, the taxonomies of autonomy developed in this literature are not useful for our purposes, as their interest is more in positively assessed factual autonomy (as self-government) and less in the construction of an independent image or perception (understood relationally).

[2]The interviews in Poland were conducted by one of the authors. In addition to the sample of nine Polish think tanks, one umbrella organization, the National Federation of Polish NGOs, was interviewed.

[3]The interviews in Sweden were conducted by research assistants Daniel Bodén and Hannah Pollack Sarnecki under the guidance of one of the authors.

[4]http://fores.se/om/ (accessed April 30, 2019).

[5]The quote is taken from the Polish version of the website (as the English version is abbreviated): http://www.batory.org.pl/o_fundacji (accessed April 21, 2019).

[6]Both are aspects of the same phenomenon, as in positive and negative liberty.

[7]Cf. Lindquist links the notorious troubles with measuring the impact of think tanks with the dynamic we describe as the independence paradox here: "The very characteristic that gives legitimacy for the institutes—their independence and distance from policymakers—makes it difficult to determine and demonstrate their impact on the policy process" (Lindquist, 1989, p.273).

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