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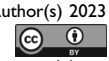

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The niche of think tanks in a consensus – seeking and neo-corporatist policy advisory system

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Abstract

While think tanks are no longer solely a feature of Anglo-Saxon countries, they still appear less prevalent in consensus-oriented and neo-corporatist political regimes. To what extent do central characteristics of these countries shape the organizational characteristics and political activities of think tanks? We theoretically contribute to the existing literature on policy advice by drawing inspiration from niche theory, and empirically complement previous work by focusing on think tanks in Belgium, a country with a crowded and closed advisory landscape. Relying on a combination of data sources, our analysis highlights three central features of think tanks: (1) the long-term and anticipatory character of their policy advice, (2) the evidence-based nature of their policy work, and (3) their consensus-oriented mode of operating. The first two features echo what earlier studies in pluralist setting identified as key distinguishing characteristics. The third feature, their consensus-oriented mode of operating, represents a new element that turns out critical for understanding the niche of think tanks in Belgium. Its consensus-style tradition shows not only in how think tanks position themselves externally, but also in their internal organizational structure.

Points for practitioners

- Think tanks have potential to be key providers of policy advice, also in relatively closed systems with neo-corporatist traits.

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- In such settings, think tanks especially benefit from a consensual mode of operating, both internally and externally.
- The long-term orientation of think tanks can set them apart from other providers of policy advice, such as interest groups and political party think tanks.

Keywords
think tanks, policy advisory system, niche, policy advice, neo-corporatism

Introduction

At present, government decisionmakers sit at the center of a complex, horizontal, and increasingly diverse web of policy advisers (Craft and Howlett, 2012; Howlett, 2019). Consequently, scholarly interest for policy advisers external to the civil service has grown exponentially in the last decade. This definitely applies to think tanks, who have become more numerous and prominent worldwide. The overwhelming majority of research on think tanks has centered on Anglophone countries and Westminster systems (Kelstrup, 2017), consistent with the bulk of research on policy advisory systems (Howlett, 2019).

As a result, we still have limited knowledge of the particular role think tanks play in policymaking in other countries. Whereas think tanks have become key political actors in the policy advisory arena in contentious (e.g., US, Australia) or communitarian contexts (e.g., UK) (Jasanoff, 2005), the extent to which they can establish themselves as relevant organizations in countries with a more neo-corporatist and consensus-seeking tradition still remains a topic of scholarly debate. In these political systems, privileged institutionalized policy access is typically given to representatives from interest groups (Jasanoff, 2005; Pattyn et al., 2022; Straßheim and Kettunen, 2014: 270).

Given the closed, and rather inert advisory landscape in such systems, one might ponder the extent to which think tanks can position themselves as yet another key supplier of policy advice. Analyses in countries such as Austria, Switzerland, and Germany have shown that the withering away of neo-corporatism and the classic consensus democracy opened up a leeway for political actors, such as think tanks, to position themselves in the core of political decisionmaking (Jochem and Vatter, 2006: 143). This development raises the question how think tanks survive in systems where corporatist policymaking patterns are still very prevalent. The aim of this paper is to study how central features of a neo-corporatist and consensus-seeking policy advisory system shapes the "niche" of think tanks, and using the concept of "niche" to refer to those organizational characteristics and political activities that render think tanks unique and enable them to survive and thrive in a particular institutional setting. Hence, we consider the "niche" of think tanks to be multidimensional, as it can relate to various features of their internal organization and political behavior.

This article aims to make three contributions. First, we connect research on think tanks to the larger literature on policy advisory systems (Craft and Howlett, 2012; see also Fraussen and Halpin, 2017). We also consider the perceived relationship of think tanks with other advisory actors (such as interest groups and political parties (see Jezierska and Sörbom, 2020 for a comprehensive discussion of think tank independence)), which in the study of policy advisory has been identified as a promising avenue for further research (Howlett, 2019). Second, we draw inspiration from niche-theory. The 'niche' theoretical perspective is frequently applied in the interest group literature, and this paper provides a first attempt to clarify the value of this concept for understanding the organizational characteristics and political behavior of other political organizations, such as think tanks (but see also Åberg et al., 2021, who also apply this term to study the positioning of think tanks). Third, we focus on think tanks in a neo-corporatist and consensus-style country, namely Belgium (Lijphart, 1999, see also Fraussen et al., 2015; Pattyn et al., 2022; Pauly et al., 2020; Squevin and Aubin, 2022; Willems et al., 2020), where corporatist arrangements are still strong and even increased after the millennium change (Jahn, 2016). As Hustedt and Veit (2017) stated, the configuration of an advisory system is shaped by the overall political system in which it is embedded. As such, we respond to a recent call for more research on policy advisory systems in non-Anglo-Saxon countries (Howlett, 2019), and aim to complement work on think tanks in other consensus-style settings with neo-corporatist traits, such as the Nordic countries (see, e.g., special issue edited by Åberg et al., 2021; or Kelstrup, 2020), Austria (Karlhofer, 2006), Switzerland (Steffen and Linder, 2006) or Germany (Jochem and Vatter, 2006; Thunert, 2006). Belgium, however, stands as an interesting case that has not been strongly affected by what is referred to as the 'metamorphosis of corporatism' (Jochem and Vatter, 2006: 143), a transformation that has significantly influenced the think tank landscape in many of these countries. These characteristics make Belgium an excellent case study for gaining a good understanding of how the neo-corporatist and consensus-style tradition impact think tanks' way of operating.

Empirically, we focus on domestic think tanks. While Belgium is home to a large number of international think tanks that focus on the European institutions in Brussels, we have less knowledge of think tanks that are active at the national level. To capture think tanks' niche, we rely on a combination of sources, including a questionnaire sent to think tank directors, semi-structured interviews with (policy) directors of the three most prominent think tanks, and document analysis.

In the following section, we clarify the concept and multidimensional nature of "niche" and relate this to the possible roles of think tanks in policy advisory systems. Next, we clarify our methodological approach and data sources. The analysis revolves around three common features of think tanks that emerged from the data analysis: their long-term horizon, the evidence-based nature of their policy advice, and their consensus-oriented mode of operation. Throughout the analysis, we relate these features to defining characteristics of Belgium's policy advisory system. The final section reflects on our central findings and provides suggestions for future research.

Identifying the niche of think tanks in policy advisory systems

Following Kelstrup, we define think tanks as "permanent organizations that claim autonomy and attempt to influence public policy by mobilising research" (2016: 1). In assessing the niche of think tanks, we build upon the literature on interest groups that has examined how these organizations aim to establish a "niche." The notion of niche-seeking is strongly connected to population ecology, one of the most well-developed theoretical accounts of how the imperative of organizational survival shapes the organization and behavior of organizations (Gray and Lowery, 1996; Lowery and Gray, 1995; Lowery et al., 2015). In short, the argument is that in order to survive in a competitive environment and acquire sufficient organizational resources, organizations need to adopt a distinct "niche." Importantly, while think tanks active in a similar domestic context will experience identical external pressures and incentives, this does not necessarily imply that they respond in a similar way. As research on interest groups demonstrates, they might interpret signals from their environment in a similar way and adopt identical niches, yet also have diverging views, and therefore adopt distinct niches compared with other think tanks (e.g., Halpin and Jordan, 2009). As mentioned, this particular niche can concern (combinations of) different aspects of an organization's structure and political activities. A strong thread in the interest group literature relates niche-seeking behavior to the policy issues a group focuses, and the need to specialize in a narrow set of issues, on which the group has a lot of expertise and credibility (Lowery and Gray, 1995; Lowery et al., 2015). While a so-called policy niche is often associated with a more narrow policy focus, however, research has demonstrated that also a more "generalist" orientation can constitute a distinct niche, which enables groups with a broader mission or more diverse membership to survive (Lowery et al., 2012).

As clarified by Halpin, the understanding of the "niche" concept has evolved. In addition to "policy-related niches," also niches associated with internal (such as the nature and size of their membership, or financial resources) and external (for instance, privileged access to policymakers) resources of the group, as well as features related to the identity of organizations, have been highlighted by scholars (Halpin, 2014: chapter 7; Heaney, 2004). In this paper, we draw inspiration from this multidimensional approach toward an organizations' niche. That is, rather than building a group's identity solely on an association with particular policy issues (in a more specialized or generalist fashion), groups can (also) establish a niche through other dimensions; for instance, by possessing specific internal or external resources, or by emphasizing (and possibly combining) specific elements of their identity, such as their representative character, ideology, or advocacy tactics, or more broadly any assets that are considered valuable by policymakers (Heaney, 2004: 618; see also recent work by Lerner, 2018).

We assume that key attributes of countries' policy advisory system will be central factors that determine the niche of think tanks. With the policy advisory system, we refer to "an interlocking set of actors, with a unique configuration in each sector and jurisdiction who provide information, knowledge and recommendations for action to policymakers" (Craft and Howlett, 2012: 80). Where existing typologies of policy advisory systems initially put major emphasis on the position that actors occupy (whether internal

or external to the government), more recent literature explicitly considers the type of advice content that different actors (can) provide to policymakers. The particular type of advice can also constitute a key component of a group's niche, as it signals "they are expert in a way of thinking about policy" (Heaney, 2004: 618). Research in a pluralist setting revealed that think tanks are particularly well equipped to produce substantive and long-term research-based policy advice, albeit to varying degrees (e.g., Fraussen and Halpin, 2017). This is consistent with Craft and Howlett's typology (2012), in which think tanks are conceived as actors with the potential to contribute to "evidence based policy making."

Building upon these expectations and observations, our study assesses how think tanks position themselves in neo-corporatist and consensus-style political systems, such as Belgium.[1] The Belgian policy advisory system, "shows all the characteristics of neo-corporatism, even more so than countries which have traditionally been seen as having strong neo-corporatist structures" (van den Bulck, 1992: 35, also cited in Jahn, 2016: 62). While different conceptualizations of neo-corporatism circulate, we refer to a strong institution-based mode of policymaking, where privileged institutional access is given to a select number of "relevant institutional voices" that represent major (and mostly economic) interest groups in society (Straßheim and Kettunen, 2014: 270), such as trade unions and federations of businesses and employers. In comparative terms, several traditionally neo-corporatist countries have experienced some decline of neo-corporatism (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2010; Jahn, 2016), including, for instance, countries such as Sweden or Norway (e.g., Åberg et al., 2021). In Belgium, however, the reliance on institutionalized advisory bodies and a small set of societal actors has remained rather persistent (e.g., Fraussen et al., 2015; Pauly et al., 2020) and neo-corporatist arrangements have even increased according to some indices. In the large-scale longitudinal study of Jahn (2016), the country is among the "top 5" of 42 democracies in corporatist arrangements since the millennium change.

The strong role of advisory bodies is intrinsically linked to the consociational nature, or consensus-style of decisionmaking, that characterizes the country. In "consensus" democracies, institutions and procedures encourage consensus and power sharing among those who represent the relevant segments in society, rather than imposing the decision of a simple majority (Sinardet, 2010). Obviously, a strong preference for institutionalized concertation and a privileged relation with a limited set of civil society organizations results in a rather inert and closed advisory system that excludes many other voices from participation in policymaking. As argued by Åberg et al. (2021), such a "mature and saturated" advisory setting might provide little space for new actors to emerge and establish themselves as relevant political players (635).

Methods and data

The findings presented in this article are the result of different data collection strategies spanning multiple years.

To identify all domestic think tanks that matched our definition, we applied a snowball sample strategy. In 2014, we approached academics, journalists, and other privileged

informants with a preliminary list of think tanks that we compiled via internet and media searches. Respondents and think tanks themselves were asked to direct us to any other think tanks. This resulted in a population of 24 domestic think tanks.

To be clear, following the above-mentioned definition of think tanks that highlights their claims to autonomy, we did not include organizations with formal affiliations to one specific interest group or political party,[2] or organizations that have particular members, such as individuals or companies (and thus can be considered interest groups). Our conceptualization of think tanks neither includes organizations that are primarily academic, or that have an institutional anchorage at a university. We neither consider foundations.

Between the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015, all 24 think tanks were sent a *written questionnaire*, consisting of open and closed questions. Fifteen think tanks completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 60%), of which 11 still exist in 2023. Three think tanks have been dissolved in the meantime or have not been shown any recent activity, and a fourth one has been incorporated in a newly established larger progressive think tank, and as such de facto ceased to exist.[3] In Table A1 in the online Appendix, we provide an overview of the think tanks that completed our survey.

To better understand how a neo-corporatist and consociationalist advisory system influences the niche of think tanks, we conducted *semi-structured interviews* in August 2017. Respondents were executives (director or policy director) from three think tanks: *Itinera*, *Minerva*, and *Vrijdaggroep*. We selected these three think tanks for a combination of reasons. They are the most active think tanks in the public debate, and among the largest domestic think tanks in terms of staff capacity (a reliable proxy for financial resources). These think tanks also represent different ideological positions, with Itinera being center-right, Minerva center-left, and Vrijdaggroep taking a centrist/pluralist stance. They vary in age, with Itinera being established in 2006, and Vrijdaggroep and Minerva, respectively, being founded in 2013 and 2016.[4] We apply a similar approach as Åberg et al. (2021), considering insights from these executives as both relevant for understanding the structure and functioning of their own think tank, as well as how their organization and behavior relates to relevant political developments and the characteristics of other suppliers of policy advice, such as interest groups.

Analysis

In this section, we describe and explain the niche of think tanks in Belgium as perceived by the think tanks themselves. The analysis is structured around what emerged from the survey data and interviews as three commonly shared features: (1) their *time-orientation* (the long-term and anticipatory character of their policy advice), (2) the *substantive character* of their policy advice (in particular its *evidence-based* nature), and (3) their *consensus-oriented mode of operating*. The first two features echo earlier studies in pluralist settings (e.g., Fraussen and Halpin, 2017) and typologies (e.g., Craft and Howlett, 2012). The third feature, their consensus-oriented mode of operating, represents a new element that turns out critical for understanding the niche of think tanks in Belgium, which shows not only how think tanks position themselves externally, but also their internal operations.

Time orientation: long-term and anticipatory

Our results demonstrate the long-term orientation of Belgian think tanks. As clarified in Table 1 (online), when asked to indicate the characteristics of good policy advice in the survey, two criteria were considered critical by all think tanks: advice should integrate all relevant research about a particular topic, and focus on the formulation of long-term objectives. The importance of a long-term perspective was also confirmed by another question in our survey that assesses how think tanks balance attention to the current political agenda versus activities focusing on long-term objectives (see also Fraussen et al., 2017). Here, 10 of the 13 think tanks who completed this question indicated that (at least) 70% of their activities relate to long-term goals.

The long-term and anticipatory orientation was also one of the key elements that stood out during the interviews among (policy) directors.

> Because we often look ten years ahead, we often observe a dynamic. And then we publish a report, that is, say, considered a little bit exotic or not realistic. Subsequently, eight or nine years later, that idea emerges in a policy proposal. (think tank #3)[5]

> The positive aspect of this study involved that it could be used in a variety of ways, and applied to different policy issues that became salient long after its publication. (think tank #2)

One can argue that this forward-looking and pioneering attitude is especially valuable in a strong neo-corporatist political system where key stakeholders (such as unions and employer federations) are often closely involved in policymaking via various institutional channels. Where this urges these stakeholders to provide input on current policy discussions, and pay close attention to the specific government agenda, think tanks might be able to take a more distant stance and not respond to every issue that emerges on the political agenda. In this regard, two of our respondents made the comparison with interest groups and political party think tanks.

> One of our distinguishing features, compared to party think tanks, trade unions and employer federations, is that their research capacity is rather small and relative, and (also because of that) very focused on the issues of the day and mainly reactive to the issues that are currently on the political agenda. A think tank has more autonomy in that regard. (think tank #2)

This finding echoes work in pluralist settings that has highlighted the "forward-looking orientation" of think tanks, and their "capacity (or at least the aspiration) to put over- or under-looked issues on the political agenda" (Fraussen and Halpin, 2017: 117), and research that has highlighted how think tanks (and advocacy think tanks in particular) "use the media in attempts to create sustained public awareness of their ideas, which may come to be regarded as policy alternatives in the long term" (Kelstrup, 2020: 133). Research on successful policy entrepreneurs also emphasizes that these actors "make sure that their favored solution is available before attention lurches to the problem" (Cairney, 2018: 211).

Substantive character policy advice: evidence-based

Another element that all the surveyed think tanks identified as essential to good policy advice involves "scientific knowhow" (see Table 1, see online). This is in line with existing typologies of policy advisory systems (see Craft and Howlett, 2013: Table 4) where think tanks are characterized as components of a policy advisory system, focusing on the supply of "evidence based policy making." The notion "evidence based policy making" should be treated with care (Blum and Pattyn, 2022), however, and does not imply that think tanks themselves produce scientific evidence. Rather, think tanks present themselves as "knowledge brokers" (Meyer, 2010). What matters, according to them, is to provide policymaker-"friendly" research input that can be easily processed. The three interviewed think tanks noted that, on many policy challenges, there actually is not a shortage of policy analyses. In their eyes, what is missing are organizations that have the ability to integrate the current knowledge in a ready-to-be-implemented format that captures the attention of policymakers, such as concise policy briefs and op-eds (think tank #1, #2, #3).

The interviewed think tanks also nuanced the scientific status of their output. They rather refer to informed policy reports, or well-developed arguments backed by data, rather than output that meets rigorous scientific standards. While they describe their approach as "science-oriented," they might in some cases be closer to the end of the "science – advocacy continuum" (Liu and Morris, 2022: 166), as they primarily match information supply and demand. Research on knowledge-gathering practices of think tanks in Norway has also highlighted how these organizations "extensively rely on second-hand knowledge, as they rarely have the resources and capacity to carry out their own research" (Christensen and Holst, 2020: 233).

Against this backdrop, it is also relevant to highlight the breadth of their policy agenda. The Belgian think tanks, tend not to specialize or prioritize a small set of policy domains, but are active on a wide range of policy topics. About 70% of the surveyed think tanks indicated that they are active in more than five policy domains, of which seven are active in more than 15 policy domains, including the three think tanks interviewed.

This broad engagement also explains that it is not realistic to expect much original research, nor sophisticated systematic reviews, especially with the limited personnel capacity that characterizes almost all Belgian think tanks.[6] At the same time, this generalist feature demonstrates that although niche-seeking often involves specialization (Lowery and Gray, 1995; Lowery et al., 2015), and previous work found that think tanks in a consensus-style setting are likely to specialize in specific policy issues (Kelstrup, 2020), a more generalist policy orientation can also constitute a viable niche.

Consensus-oriented mode of operating

While think tanks are focused on mobilizing knowledge, they also aim to ensure that key political actors (such as ministers and members of parliament) notice and apply their ideas. Here, the consensus-style features of the Belgian politico-administrative tradition

set in most clearly, and resonate with how advice is produced (internal aspect) as well as how it is disseminated (external aspect).

The think tanks we interviewed invest a lot of time and resources in connecting with key stakeholders on a particular policy topic during the preparatory work. That is, when they start working on a specific dossier, they will try to gather all the relevant stakeholders (academic experts and societal stakeholders) and ask for their input on first drafts. The value of this broad internal consultation process not only involves the empirical input or the validation of the scientific quality and approach, but also, and perhaps most importantly, a higher legitimacy of the recommendations, which increase the chances that policymakers pay attention to the formulated policy advice. This way of working has been described as "consensual strategies," referring to activities aimed "to promote common understandings of ideas, policy problems and solutions through interaction with decisionmakers, stakeholders and other organizations in their policy niche at workshops, events, lunch-bag meetings, etc." (Kelstrup, 2020: 133). Our findings highlight that this consensual way of working not only becomes manifest in how think tanks position themselves externally, but also in different aspects of the internal structures and processes. Research on think tanks has, to our knowledge, so far mostly focused on the external dimension of this consensus-style tradition.

One of the interviewed think tanks has developed quite elaborate procedures to ensure this consensus-oriented mode of operation. Specifically, it considered its pluralist composition, in terms of ideological profiles of their staff, as well as disciplines (ranging from social sciences to law to engineering), to be one of the key elements for "success." The policy documents launched by this think tank first stand a kind of pre-test of consensus-building among the pluralist visions in the group. Subsequently, they are discussed with a group of external experts. For at least one think tank, this consensus-oriented and inclusive approach is explicitly part of its recruitment process. To increase the chances of being heard, this think tank indicated to mainly hire staff members with a broad network that spans across different political parties and/or interest groups.

It can be argued that the relatively autonomous position of think tanks also supports this consensus-oriented approach, and sets them apart again from other advisory actors (and is likely to distinguish them from party-affiliated think tanks). While both interest groups and think tanks engage in policy advocacy, the former typically have a clear constituency) that they seek to represent and to which they are accountable. Some interest groups also have privileged relations with a particular political party, even though these more exclusive ties seem to be declining. Think tanks, in contrast, generally do not have members and therefore are not constrained, in principle, by the preferences and opinions of a particular constituency. This relatively high level of autonomy might be particularly valuable in a neo-corporatist political setting. As noted by one of the think tank directors:

> civil society organizations are often associated with a specific societal interest. As a result, even studies that meet scientific standards are not perceived as such, which limits their potential policy impact. (think tank #2)

Nevertheless, apart from the party-affiliated think tanks that we have omitted from this study, it is evident that certain "mainstream" Belgian think tanks clearly have more ideological

affinity with political parties situated on the left or right of the political spectrum. Yet, in line with the ideological focus of their mission statements, they nonetheless aim to initiate and maintain contacts with parties that ideologically are more distant from them (think tanks #2 and #3). This confirms that whereas the think tank landscape in more neo-pluralist countries such as Australia and the United States is often described as partisan, the political behavior of think tanks in Belgium appears to be aligned with the consensus-oriented policymaking style and the reality that governing in Belgium always requires coalitions of multiple parties.

At the same time, the Belgian think tanks indicated to avoid formal or structural relations with interest groups, as this could threaten their intellectual independence. Minerva, a left-leaning think tank, provides a notable exception to this pattern. This think tank is funded by a set of civil society groups, who seek to increase the voice of progressive ideas in society, and who are represented in the board of the organization. Yet, despite its explicit progressive focus, this think tank also aspires to a consensus-oriented approach by reaching out to all political parties, and by recruiting staff that used to work for different parties or interest groups (with a progressive orientation).

Think tanks do not consider themselves lobbyists. Their main aim, they emphasize, is creating and spreading innovative policy ideas.

> We find it important that our arguments resonate, but this does not have to imply that those arguments are associated with our organization. It is not so important that they know [name think tank], as long as they have heard our arguments. (think tank #2)

This observation is intriguing, particularly when considering studies conducted in countries that have experienced a more pronounced decline in corporatism and a weakening of the traditional consensus-based democracy. In countries such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, think tanks have gained policy influence, but had to adapt to the recalibrated corporatist environment. In parallel with corporatist practices, they also embraced advocacy or lobbying strategies (Jochem and Vatter, 2006). Comparable trends have been identified in the Nordic countries (except Iceland, Kelstrup, 2020), where "policy think tanks" continue to play a significant role, alongside an increasing number of "advocacy think tanks," who employ more adversarial strategies (Allern and Pollack, 2020; Christensen and Holst, 2020). We do not observe similar patterns in Belgium. While the examined think tanks rely on private funding, their aim is to promote a shared understanding of ideas, policy issues, and solutions through interactions with policymakers. They deliberately engage with a wide range of stakeholders to demonstrate the relevance of their ideas for policymaking (Kelstrup, 2020). Both older and recently established think tanks still appear to embrace this more consensual approach.

Discussion and conclusion: the niche of think tanks in a crowded and closed policy advisory system

While the number of think tanks has proliferated, their organizational features and political activities vary considerably across countries. In this article, we aimed to increase our

understanding of how characteristics of a policy advisory system shape the distinctive features of think tanks. Focusing on a political system characterized by neo-corporatism and consociationalism, the case of Belgium, we examined what kind of niche think tanks occupy in a neo-corporatist and consensus-oriented advisory landscape.

Our analysis highlighted three features that think tanks consider as distinct or unique features: their long-term horizon, the evidence-based nature of their policy advice, and their consensus-oriented mode of operating, which is evident both internally and externally. In general, think tanks in the Belgian setting do not display fundamentally different characteristics compared with how these policy advisory actors position themselves in other consensus-style regimes with more or less corporatist traits. However, our findings add nuance to the existing knowledge. Notably, our work reflects the relevance of the various potential aspects of niche identified by Heaney (2004), as the niche of think tanks in Belgium does not appear to revolve around a specific (specialized) policy identity. Instead, it relates to how they approach policy issues and employ particular advocacy tactics.

With the large majority of Belgian think tanks having a rather generalist orientation, our study confirms that policy specialization is not the only way to "uniqueness," especially given the possible benefits that come with a broader orientation. As noted by Heaney (2004: 641), "when groups create identities on the basis of who they represent, their ideologies, or the advocacy techniques with which they have expertise, they are free to work collaboratively on a variety of issues without fear of diminishing their uniqueness." This statement also seems to apply to the Belgian think tanks, who not limit themselves to a particular policy issue or policy domain, but rather work on a variety of themes.

This generalist orientation of think tanks has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it might facilitate a long-term view. This broad agenda indeed enables them to bridge distinct policy domains, and formulate cross-cutting policy recommendations. They can also apply this helicopter-view to quickly respond to a changing government agenda and current events, as they are able to provide expert opinions on multiple topics. There are few political actors (except for political parties) who can engage with such a broad diversity of policy issues (and therefore can be a constant presence in the public debate). In addition, it can be argued that the generalist orientation increases their autonomy, as they have quite a lot of room to maneuver, and they also can easily stay silent on some issues if that suits them. On the other hand, however, it makes it more difficult to identify their core competence in terms of policy domains, and given their often limited resources, it raises the question to what extent their positions are indeed substantially backed by rigorous research and aligned with the academic state of the art.

Furthermore, while interest groups and party-affiliated study centers surely compete with think tanks as providers of policy advice, their input is to a lesser extent evidence-based and more strongly driven by preferences of their constituency. Moreover, think tanks seem to have a better ability to translate and present academic research in a format and style that appeals to both policymakers and journalists (see also Craft and Howlett, 2012; Stone, 2007: 272) which increases their chances of being heard in a

crowded advisory landscape. Their niche typically does not seem to involve a specific type of policy issue, but rather a particular kind of policy advice, which is primarily long-term and anticipatory, and of an evidence-based nature. On this point, our findings align with previous findings in pluralist and other corporatist knowledge regimes, although we emphasize that the term "evidence-based" does not necessarily mean that think tanks "generate" new evidence. In Belgium, the term "knowledge broker" appears to be more suitable.

Our analysis further shows how the consensus-style characteristics of the country are reflected in the consensus-mode of operating of the Belgian think tanks. We could not find evidence of adversarial strategies being employed by them, which seems to set them apart from (some of the) think tanks in other consensus-style settings where corporatism is declining. Instead of competing with other civil society actors, they actively seek collaboration. Furthermore, our study highlights how this consensus strategy is embedded in their internal modus operandi, including, for instance, in how they develop their policy reports.

Our study has some limitations, which open up avenues for further research. First, we rely on a survey and interviews of think tank leaders, and thus report how they perceive the potential niche of think tanks. While this provides a rich inside view, future work would benefit from complementing these insights with observational data, which, for instance, analyzes to what extent their political behavior and statements reflects the distinguishing features identified in this article. Second, the Belgian think tank landscape is very young and fragile, as demonstrated by the low number of think tanks and the fact that some of the surveyed think tanks have been disbanded in the meantime. Hence our study relies on a limited number of observations. Furthermore, it shows that while think tanks might be able to identify a niche within the Belgian political advisory landscape, capitalizing upon this space might be rather challenging, as the overall capacity of think tanks in Belgium remains rather limited. Third, we made a deliberate decision to exclude party-affiliated think tanks, as they do not claim financial or policy autonomy in Belgium, and thus do not meet the applied definition. In cross-country comparative terms, Belgian party think tanks rather qualify as "policy assistants," primarily aiding and serving MPs with applied policy-related issues in the short term. Their distinctive status sets them apart from (typically more autonomous) political party think tanks in other countries (Pattyn et al., 2017), and also from the more "mainstream" think tanks that constitute the focus of the present article. Given these features and their closeness to political parties, it is likely that they perceive their niche(s) in a different way than the think tanks included in this study, which would be a valuable question to examine in follow up research.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We chose to focus the analysis on the neo-corporatist and consensus-style features of the Belgian policy advisory system as the main attributes characterizing the system, which also lend themselves well for comparison with other countries. We acknowledge, however, that other factors can also shape the niche of policy advisors as think tanks. In the Belgian context, it is relevant to refer to the strong role and impact of ministerial cabinets, for instance, and to co-option mechanisms via advisory councils. It is beyond the scope of the empirical study to also unravel the effect of these country-specific traits.
2. In Belgium, most political parties do have their own study group or think tank; yet, they rather serve as so-called 'policy assistants'.
3. The following think tanks are no longer active: Vooruitgroep (no activity since 2015); WeCitizens (no activity since 2020); and WorkForAll (no activity since 2015). Minerva has been established in 2016. It incorporates its predecessor Poliargus, which ceased existence since then. Both WeCitizens and the informal think tank Vooruitgroep did not have any appointed staff members.
4. While Itinera and Vrijdaggroep completed the survey in 2014, Minerva did not as it was only established in 2016 (yet its predecessor Poliargus was one of the survey respondents).
5. Original interviews have been held in Dutch. All quotes are translated by the authors.
6. Average number of staff is 1.8 FTE.

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