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A CRITIQUE OF THE 2009 GLOBAL “GO-TO THINK TANKS” RANKING

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On 28 January 2010 the Foreign Policy Research Institute presented the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program for 2009. This program includes a multitude of rankings for think tanks. The study (“The Global ‘Go-To Think Tanks’: Leading Public Policy Research Organizations in the World”) was led by James G. McGann from the University of Pennsylvania (McGann 2010). This contribution provides a critical analysis of the study. Unfortunately, it shows that the method is not adequate and has led to considerable inaccuracies.

The study is based on a three-phase survey of experts. In the first step 6,305 think tanks were identified worldwide and their contact information verified. In determining who these institutes are, the term think tank was defined in a very wide sense. The complete list is neither in the report nor is it available on the website of the survey institute.¹ An expert panel of 293 specialists, who in the past have dealt with think tanks in detail, were asked to choose between 5 and 25 nominations for various categories from this list. The selection was made according to region, research field, as well as special areas, for example, “best use of the media” (McGann 2010, 67–68). Over 400 institutions were nominated in the first phase. In a second phase these institutions were again placed before a group of experts for their selection. The experts of this second phase comprised politicians, donors, scientists and representatives of think tanks. Based on their selections, the final nom-

ination list was then drawn up. The report mentions 392 nominated think tanks. As will be shown below, this does not actually correspond to the true number of nominations. The list of nominations was then sent to some 8,500 individuals and institutions. The potential participants also included the 6,305 think tanks of the original selection.² All in all, of the approximately 8,500 individuals and institutes written to, 740 participated in the survey, which is a very low return rate.³ In all categories the participants were able to nominate between 5 and 25 institutions, and based on these results the ranking list was drawn up for each category.

The calculation method used in all three phases is not clear, however. Copies of the information written to the experts and the participants can be found in the appendices of the report. In this material mention is made of “nominations” which will be “tallied” by the author of the study. The main text contradicts this statement several times, however. On page 7 (McGann 2010) the experts of the second phase are asked to rank the nominations (“...a group of 500 policy makers, donors, scholars, and think tank officials was asked to review the slate of nominees and rank them”). Apparently something similar is true for phase 1, as can be read on page 8: “In each stage of the process I requested that those persons making nominations and ranking the think tanks ...” – that the participants in the survey were supposed to rank the nominations themselves is not explicitly mentioned in the information sent to the experts.

A serious deficit of this survey is that it relies on purely subjective judgments as the following quotation shows in particular. “The members of the Expert Panel were asked to nominate regional or global centers of excellence *that they felt should be recognized* for producing rigorous and relevant research, publications and programs in one or more substantive areas of research” (McGann 2010, 5, authors’ emphasis). It is doubtful whether all the individuals

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¹ On the website <http://thinktanks.fpri.org/> (accessed 07 May 2010) there is a list of approximately 1,000 think tanks. The initiators of the survey claim to have drawn up in the mid term a complete data bank of think tanks. The list of some 1,000 is, however, far removed from the 6,305 think tanks mentioned. Thus Transparency International and the Ifo Institute are not included.

² Despite being nominated, the Ifo Institute was not invited to participate in the survey. On asking other German think tanks, we found out that other nominated institutes also received no request to participate in the survey.

³ The information on this point is not clear. On page 8 “over 750” participants are mentioned, whereas 740 are referred to on page 9.

approached had enough knowledge to evaluate think tanks in every category. It can be assumed that an expert from Europe can only provide a well-founded opinion on this region because he will not have the necessary information to adequately judge institutions and their influence in other regions. This implies that the numbers for individual regions are probably very small and thus are not sufficiently representative.⁴

It follows that only those individuals can evaluate the best think tanks worldwide who have sufficient information about all the nominated institutions. The same problem occurs when evaluating institutions specializing in areas not familiar to the participant. Thus it is difficult, for example, for an economic research institute to assess the influence of a think tank specializing in political science or in the natural sciences and vice versa. The potential consequence is a distortion of the results if participants from only particular fields respond, leading to an under-representation in other areas.

The following interesting examples are most likely due to under or over-representation. It is difficult to suppress a smile when reading that the Department of Economics at MIT was ranked second in the category of “Science and Technology” (McGann 2010, Table 20, 45). Furthermore, it is conspicuous that the Brookings Institution is listed under the top 10 in all disciplines, although they themselves say on the website that environmental policy is not one of their focuses of research.

Because of the possibility of nominating institutes in various regions of the world and the aspect of under or over-representation, there are considerable inconsistencies if we compare regional and worldwide rankings. Table 1 elucidates this point. In the report the top 50 non-US think tanks worldwide (McGann 2010, Table 3, 30–31) are listed first of all. In the remaining pages the rankings for various regions are presented. For Europe especially there are several inconsistencies. Thus Amnesty International is ranked fifth worldwide for non-US institutes whereas in Western Europe it is only twelfth. If the rankings were consistent, it would have to be fifth in Europe as well. Another example is the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany), which is ranked eleven for Western Europe but is not mentioned in the list of the best 50 non-US institutes worldwide.

In principle a survey of experts is positive but it should only be conducted in addition to an analysis based on quantifiable information. Since no objective criteria are included in the study, the survey merely reflects whether and how the think tanks are perceived by the participants. The problems associated with this approach have already been discussed. The participants were given some selection criteria to help guide them (for example, the number of publications, reference to the institute in the media and academic reputation, McGann 2010, 50–51). Nevertheless it is difficult to assume that the participants have all the information needed to evaluate all of the nominated institutions, even those in their region or their field.

Another critical point is that the answers of the participating think tanks could be motivated by strategic thinking. Self-nomination is in fact rightly excluded but there is an incentive not to nominate institutes competing in the same research areas or regions so as not to improve their ranking. Furthermore, it is also possible that think tanks not included in the nominated list might fail to respond because they feel excluded.

In addition to the methodological weaknesses mentioned above the report also contains many inaccuracies and imperfections in the tables. For example, the countries Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan on page 16 are found in the category Eastern Europe whereas on page 17 they are listed under Asia. Benin and Botswana are not included in the list of countries with 10 or more research institutes although they have 13 and 10, respectively. According to one table (McGann 2010, 17) Sri Lanka is listed as having four think tanks, while in another it has 14 (page 16). The Kyrgyz Institute for Public Policy is ranked 30 in the category for Central and Eastern Europe (Table 11, 39–40), although Kyrgyzstan should be included in the Asian list (page 17).

The list of nominated institutes comprises 391 think tanks (McGann 2010, 19–28), although the table heading refers to 392. Furthermore, some of the institutes are listed twice, for example the Ifo Institute appears as “IFO Institute for Economic Research” as well as “Institute for Economic Research (IFO)”. The same is true for the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, which occurs once as “Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Foundation for Science and Policy (SWP)” and once as “German Institute for International and Security Affairs, (SWP, Stiftung Wissen-

⁴ The authors asked James G. McGann several times to provide us with the evaluation results. Unfortunately, we received neither the list of all 6,305 think tanks nor a selection of the distribution of votes for individual categories.

Table

Ranking comparison

	Worldwide (Non-US)	Wes- tern Europe	Eastern Europe	Asia
Chatham House, UK	1	1		
Transparency International, Germany	2	6		
International Crisis Group, Belgium	3	10		
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Sweden	4	7		
Amnesty International, UK	5	12		
International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), UK*	6	5		
Adam Smith Institute, UK	7	2		
French Institute of International Relations, France	8	3		
Center for European Policy Studies, Belgium	9	4		
German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Germany	10	19		
Bertelsmann Foundation (Bertelsmann Stiftung), Germany	11	8		
Fraser Institute, Canada	12			
European Council on Foreign Relations, UK	13	13		
Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), UK	14	17		
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China	15			2
German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), Germany	16	14		
Kiel Institute for World Economy, Germany	17	30		
Overseas Development Institute, UK	18	23		
Japan Institute of International Affairs, Japan	19			1
International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), Norway	20	35		
Royal United Services Institute, UK	21	16		
European Policy Centre, Belgium	22	32		
International Institute for Sustainable Development, Canada	23			
Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, Netherlands	24	28		
Centre for European Reform, UK	25	15		
Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark	26	–		
Bruegel, Belgium	27	9		
Fundacao Getulio Vargas, Brazil	28			
Civitas, UK	29	18		
EU Institute for Security Studies, France	30	33		
Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia	31			4
Fundacion para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales, Spain	32	37		
Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy	33	–		
Shanghai Institute for International Studies, China	34			8
Centre for Independent Studies, Australia	35			
Canadian International Council (FNA Canadian Institute of International Affairs), Canada	36			
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Norway	37	–		
International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), UK*	38	5		
Institute for World Economy and International Relations, Russia	39		12	
Center for Conflict Resolution, South Africa	40			
Demos, UK	41	24		
Institute for Economic Research (IFO), Germany	42	–		
ETH Zurich Forschungsstelle für Sicherheitspolitik und Konfliktanalyse, Switzerland	43	–		
Institute of Development Studies, UK	44	–		
Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, India	45			9
International Policy Network, UK	46	–		
Centro de Estudios Publicos, Chile	47			
Center for Policy Studies, UK	48	21		
Center for Economics and Social Research (CASE), Poland	49		5	
Real Instituto Elcano, Spain	50	29		

* This institute is mentioned in the Worldwide (Non-US) ranking twice by mistake.

Source: McGann (2010).

schaft und Politik”.⁵ The “Center on Budget und Policy Priorities” in the US is even listed twice under the same name. A double reference to one think tank using different names can lead to a disadvantage in

the tallying process and thus the ranking if both of these are counted as different institutes. This is supported by the fact that in the worldwide ranking of non-US research institutes (Table 3, 30–31) the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) is ranked 6 and 38 and appears twice in the list of nominated institutes. In contrast the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs is ranked 37 in the worldwide ranking of non-US institutes (Table 3, 30–31)

⁵ Further examples include the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), the United States Institute of Peace, South African Institute of International Affairs and the International Peace Research Institute in Norway, which is listed under three different names.

but is not included in the list of nominations (pages 19–28).

There are three versions of the report (from 21, 25 and 31 January), all three of which were available to the authors. In the first version of 21 January the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in Chile is ranked in first place for Latin America and the Caribbean (Table 7, 27). In both of the later versions this think tank is no longer included in the top forty.

All in all it appears that, due to its methodology, the survey can lead to considerable distortions in its ranking of institutes. Furthermore, the numerous mistakes and inaccuracies do not speak for the quality of this study. Any conclusions and interpretations based on it should be viewed with caution.

Reference

McGann, J. G. (2010), “The Global ‘Go-To Think Tanks’: The Leading Public Policy Research Organizations in the World”, The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, http://www.sas.upenn.edu/irp/documents/2009GlobalGoToReportThinkTankIndex_1.31.2010.02.01.pdf (accessed 7 Mai 2010).