

# **Analysis of European climate action contrarian think tanks through the perceptions of politicians and their teams**

## **Análisis de los think tanks contrarios a la acción climática europeos a través de las percepciones de políticos y sus equipos**

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### **Abstract**

There is a countermovement in motion that has obstructed the adoption of climate policies all over the world. In Europe, although some organizations have been identified, we know little about their influence. This research aims to analyse the role of climate action contrarian think tanks in the policymaking of the European Parliament (EP). To this end, a two-fold methodology is employed. Firstly, a survey of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) was conducted in 2021, and this was followed by in-depth interviews with Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs) related to climate issues. The results indicate almost no knowledge of these climate policy obstructionist think tanks among the surveyed MEPs and interviewed APAs. However, respondents believe that think tanks are generally used in policymaking. In fact, policymakers recognize the most prestigious European think tanks and often use them. Attributes such as visibility, good networking, quality content and transparency enable think tanks to have access to policymaking, although this would not seem to be the case for think tanks that oppose climate action in Europe. Results also describe policymakers' perceptions regarding the use of think tanks in general, which they see as useful tools in the elaboration of highly complex legislative dossiers in the EP. This article contributes to the line of research on the influence of interest groups.

**Keywords:** think tanks, policymaking, European Parliament, climate change, climate obstruction

### **Resumen**

Existe un contramovimiento que ha obstaculizado la adopción de políticas climáticas en todo el mundo. En Europa, aunque existen algunas de estas organizaciones, sabemos poco sobre su influencia. Esta investigación pretende analizar el papel de los think tanks contrarios a la acción climática en la elaboración de políticas del Parlamento Europeo (PE). Para ello, se emplea una doble metodología. Primero, se ha realizado una encuesta a los diputados del Parlamento Europeo (MEPs) en 2021. A continuación, se han realizado entrevistas en

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profundidad a los Asistentes Parlamentarios Acreditados (APAs) relacionadas con temas climáticos. Los resultados indican un conocimiento casi nulo de estos think tanks obstructionistas de la política climática entre los eurodiputados encuestados y los APAs entrevistados. Sin embargo, los encuestados creen que los think tanks en general sí se utilizan en la elaboración de políticas. De hecho, los think tanks europeos más prestigiosos son reconocidos por los responsables políticos y a menudo son utilizados por ellos. Atributos como la visibilidad, el establecimiento de contactos, la calidad de los contenidos y la transparencia permiten a los think tanks tener acceso a la elaboración de políticas, lo que parece no ser el caso de los think tanks que se oponen a la acción climática en Europa. Los resultados también describen la percepción de los responsables políticos sobre el uso de los think tanks en general, a los que consideran herramientas útiles en la elaboración de expedientes legislativos muy complejos en el PE. Este artículo contribuye a la línea de investigación sobre la influencia de los grupos de interés.

**Palabras clave:** think tanks, política, Parlamento Europeo, cambio climático, obstructionismo climático

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### **Sumario**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Despite the wealth of scientific evidence available on the climate crisis, humanity is not responding to this challenge as it should. The last three decades of climate policies focusing on mitigation have resulted in failure (Stoddard et al., 2021). Among the causes for this have been: an unequal distribution of resources and power; geopolitics driven by economic and state interests that fail to adopt an effective global emissions reduction agenda; unsustainable lifestyles; and the public relations efforts of interest groups against climate action (Stoddard et al. 2021). Regarding the promotion of inaction, the activity of interest groups obstructing climate policies constitutes an important line of research.

Climate action obstructionist groups all over the world have sought to undermine climate policies, slow down their adoption, or block their policy circulation between countries. By way of example, certain interest groups in Europe, including think tanks, have contributed to spreading these obstructionist discourses. However, little is known about the influence of these organizations and the scope of their public relations tactics. Thus, the purpose of this article is to determine the reach of European think tanks that oppose climate action in the European Parliament (EP). Given that member states make their most important climate policies at the European level, the EP may well be a target for these think tanks.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The fact that there is a countermovement dedicated to undermining the adoption of climate policies is widely discussed and proven in the academic literature (e.g. Oreskes and Conway, 2011; Almiron and Xifra, 2020). This countermovement is much stronger in the US than in Europe, where contrarian organizations replicate US discourses (Almiron et al., 2020). In the European case, as in the rest of the world, the fossil fuel (Grasso, 2019) and nuclear energy (Almiron, Khozyainova, and Freixes, 2020) lobbies have contributed to obstructing climate policies with their direct influence. But beyond the action of industry lobbies, there is another, indirect, type of influence: that exerted by think tanks through the dissemination of knowledge (Abelson and Rastrick, 2021).

Think tanks are research institutes that disseminate ideas and knowledge to influence public, political and media agendas (Abelson, 2018; Almiron and Xifra, 2021). According to the agenda-building theory, the different media, political and public agendas influence each other (Rogers and Dearing, 1988). Think tanks, being full-fledged communicative actors, aim to impact these agendas with their ideological dissemination (Almiron and Xifra, 2020). Therefore, it is of interest not only to study its impact on the media agenda, a measure that can provide clues about its possible political influence, but also to directly study its possible impact on the political agenda, as this article addresses.

Some think tanks have played an important role in the climate counter-movement. Specifically, conservative and neoliberal think tanks have attacked climate policies in the US, arguing that the scientific basis was unclear, that there was no consensus, that climate change will be beneficial, or that the costs of implementing climate policies are not worth it (McCright and Dunlap, 2000). In fact, contrary to popular belief, it has been the attack on policy rather than the attack on the science of climate change that has prevailed in the discourse against climate action emitted by contrarian think tanks (Coan et al., 2021). In Europe, the main climate action obstructionist think tanks have been identified as disseminators of the same hackneyed messages as in the US: rejecting scientific evidence and consensus; attacking the IPCC, politicians, and activists; denying the human factor in the greenhouse effect; and the idea that any climate policy is worse than tackling warming (Almiron et al., 2020).

There is, therefore, extensive knowledge of the messages being emitted by climate action contrarian think tanks in the US and Europe. However, despite the discursive capacity of these organizations, their impact on policymaking is difficult to measure. The debate on think tanks surrounds what influence they exert (Abelson, 2018), how this influence could be measured (Weidenbaum, 2010) and the validity of global think tank rankings (Abelson and Rastrick, 2021). Regarding this, the impact on the media agenda is often equated with political influence, without one necessarily implying the other, even if they are largely related. This paper understands political influence as an interest group achieving its aims with regard to policymaking (as described by Kluger Dionigi, 2017). Applying this to the specific case of think tanks, it is possible to understand their influence as the effective dissemination of ideas, i.e. the successful placement of these ideas in public, media, and political agendas.

For a think tank to be influential it must be able to offer credibility and respectability (Abelson, 2018); otherwise, its arguments would not be strong enough to compete in the marketplace

of ideas. In the case of climate action contrarian think tanks in Europe, Almiron and Xifra (2021) point out that the think tank label is often used without their actually carrying out the rigorous work that would be expected of such organizations. Thus, think tanks that obstruct climate policies are characterized by making contributions to public discourse that: are not relevant; are not based on quality research; have proposals that are not always their own, but rather taken from other discursive networks; do not scrutinize power, and are not oriented towards the common good (Almiron and Xifra, 2021). However, it has not yet been empirically verified whether these conditions are an obstacle to their use by policymakers or journalists.

Regarding the case of the European Parliament (EP), it is important to bear two aspects in mind. One is that EU policies on environmental issues have often been considered to be at the forefront of international politics (Wurzel and Connelly, 2011). And the other is that the EP is no place for scepticism regarding evidence for climate change (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2022). Despite the apparent ambition of the EU's green policies, some critics have branded strategies such as the Green New Deal as a grand exercise in 'greenwashing' (Varoufakis and Adler, 2020). Moreover, an institution such as the EP, which may have been more of a guarantor of diffuse interests such as environmental concerns in the past, has now evolved towards more pragmatic environmentalism, given the need to reconcile multiple parties and interests (Rasmussen, 2012). And while there is no room for harsh climate change denialism in the EP, there are still some strong espousers of it, at least at the level of individual MEPs (Moreno-Soldevila, 2022).

Brussels is one of the world's focal points for interest groups (Burley et al., 2010). Although there are studies on the impact that lobbies have on climate policymaking in the EP (Kluger Dionigi, 2017), there is little information on think tanks' action in this regard. This is because their influence is often indirect, or not considered as relevant as more direct and observable lobby action. McGann (2007) argued that think tanks have more influence on early policymaking processes such as defining problems and solutions or setting the policy agenda. Thus, in the case of the EP, think tanks are believed to have a greater opportunity to influence the initial stages of legislative reporting with their knowledge (Kluger Dionigi, 2017): in preparing drafts by rapporteurs, the amendment phase, and the debate and voting phase of the reports.

Measuring the influence of think tanks on policymaking is a methodologically complicated task. To do so, one would have to look at specific cases of how a think tank collaborates with a politician and how it leaves its mark on the legislative text, for example. However, given the lack of knowledge about the scope of climate action contrarian think tanks on policymaking in Europe, looking to the EP and the perceptions of its policymakers may be a good starting point. While there are indications of such think tanks' collaboration with national parties in the Netherlands (Moreno-Soldevila, 2022) and Germany (Moreno, Kinn, and Narberhaus, 2022), there is no knowledge of their reach at the EU level. Thus, this research aims to fill this knowledge gap.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The following list analysed by Almiron et al. (2020) was used as a starting point to compile a definitive list of think tanks opposed to climate action in Europe: Austrian Economics Centre (AEC, Austria); Institut Économique Molinari (IEM, France); Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie (EIKE, Germany); Instituto Juan de Mariana (IJM, Spain); Liberales Institut (LI, Switzerland); Centre for Policy Studies (CPS, United Kingdom); Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA, United Kingdom); and The Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF, United Kingdom). After searching for other similar think tanks and consulting with experts, the following were added to the list: Climate Intelligence (CLINTEL, The Netherlands); Hayek Institut (HI, Austria); Institut für Unternehmerische Freiheit (IUF, Germany); Centro Diego de Covarrubias (CDC); and Den Nya Välfärden (DNV, Sweden). This sample thus comprises 13 European think tanks that have disseminated discourses against climate action. The remaining think tanks included in the survey and interviews were drawn from the Global Go to Think Tanks Index (Mcgann 2020): the Top Think Tanks in Western Europe and the Top Environment Policy Think Tanks (European only), respectively, for general-focused and environment-focused think tanks.

This article follows both a quantitative and qualitative methodology, which is guided by the following research questions (RQs): RQ1) Are think tanks opposed to climate action known among EP policymakers? RQ2) Which think tanks are the best known among policymakers in the EP? RQ3) How is think tank content perceived and used by policymakers working on climate issues in the EP? RQ4) What influence do EP policymakers attribute to think tanks? RQ5) What features does a think tank need to have for EP policymakers to use it?.

#### 3.1. MEP survey

The survey is one of the basic techniques in social research, consisting of a standardized questionnaire administered to a sample of the population (Callejo Gallego et al., 2009). In this case, the population consisted of 705 Members of the EP. A total of 56 MEPs responded to the survey, only 8% of the study population, despite ten separate survey requests being made between February and May 2021. Given the difficulty of obtaining responses from MEPs, this number was considered sufficient for an exploratory quantitative analysis of the research questions related to this section. Without aiming to be exhaustive, the objective of the survey was to provide a preliminary overview, which would then be expanded upon with the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire (see Annex 1) was developed considering aspects emerging from the literature review and the research questions.

The sample of MEPs surveyed comprised 61% men, 36% women and 3% of respondents who preferred not to state their gender. As for allegiances, 30% belonged to the Group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); 20% to the Greens/European Free Alliance group (GREEN/EFA); 14% to the European People's Party group (EPP); 9% to the Renew Europe group (RENEW); 7% to the European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR); 7% to the Confederal Group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL); 4% to the Identity and Democracy group (ID); 4% were non-registered members; and 5% preferred not to state their group. In terms of time in the position, 59% of the MEPs surveyed had been in the EP since 2019; 18% since 2014; 5% since 2009; 2% since 2007; 7% since before 2007; and 9% preferred not to say.

### 3.2. Political staff interview

To complement the results obtained from the survey, ten interviews were conducted with cabinet staff of EP politicians. The interview allows access to information related to people involved in the issue we are studying and which is inaccessible by other means (Callejo Gallego et al., 2009). In this case, the aim was to gather interviewees' perceptions on the use of think tanks in EP policymaking. Emphasis was placed on determining the degree to which think tanks that deal with environmental issues or work on environmental topics have a presence in the institution, including those that oppose climate action. A semi-structured interview (see Annex 2) was used for the study, which means that there was a script but the interviewer could redirect the conversation and introduce new questions depending on the answers obtained (Callejo Gallego et al., 2009).

The target population for the interviews were Accredited Parliamentary Assistants (APAs) working for MEPs in the EP on issues in some way related to climate change. The interviews were conducted synchronously and mostly face-to-face during an academic stay in Brussels between September and November 2021. Some of them were conducted synchronously online due to the logistical facilities available to the interviewee.

A total of eight APAs agreed to be interviewed after a process of contact search through social networks, email and face-to-face networking. The saturation point was already reached at eight interviews; that is, interviewees began to describe the topics they were asked about in a similar way to other interviewees. The APA interviews were complemented with two further interviews, one with an MEP and one with an intern on a committee, to see whether they might open up new avenues after the saturation point was reached. Ultimately, the latter's perceptions of think tanks were in line with the views gathered from talking to the APAs. Thus, it was decided that the sample of interviewees would be limited to ten interviews (Table 1), enough to qualitatively answer the research questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed<sup>2</sup> for later analysis with the written consent of the interviewees, who have been kept anonymous for privacy reasons. The interview analysis was performed by grouping ideas and categories related to the research questions, as outlined in the results section below.

Table 1. List of interviewees

ID	Role	Affiliation
Interviewee 1	APA	EPP
Interviewee 2	APA	EPP
Interviewee 3	APA	EPP
Interviewee 4	APA	S&D
Interviewee 5	APA	S&D
Interviewee 6	APA	S&D
Interviewee 7	APA	S&D
Interviewee 8	APA	Greens/EFA
Interviewee 9	MEP	Greens/EFA
Interviewee 10	Trainee	DEVE Committee

Source: Own elaboration.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the interviews were conducted in English; those that were in other languages have been translated into English by the author.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Results from the survey

Responding to RQ1 and RQ2, climate action obstructionist think tanks are barely recognized among policymakers in the EP, whereas other non-obstructionist ones are known. The best-known climate action obstructionist think tank among those with a general focus is the Centre for Policy Studies (25% of respondents knew of it), followed by the Institute of Economic Affairs (20%) and the Hayek Institute (14%). The rest (IEM, IJM, IUF, LI, AEC, CDC and DNV) had knowledge thresholds of less than 10% of respondents. Despite this, the respondents were aware of more general-focused prestigious European think tanks, with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (70%), CEPS (66%), Bruegel (57%), Chatham House (55%) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (52%) being the best known, as Figure 1 shows.

In the case of think tanks with an environmental focus (Figure 2), the IEEP stands out by far (55%), while the rest are close to the 20% threshold. In this case, most of the think tanks opposed to climate action, such as the GWPF (16%), CLINTEL (16%), or EIKE (11%) are as little known as some others indeed aligned with progress on climate policy.

Regarding MEPs' use of think tank content (RQ3), 45% said they occasionally use think tank posts, articles, reports or summaries; 25% do so frequently; 12% rarely; 13% did not recall; and 5% never do so. As for events, 45% attend think tank events occasionally; 34% do so rarely; 12% did not recall; 7% never attend; and 4% attend frequently. Over half of respondents, 53%, follow think tanks on social media, compared to 27% who did not remember, and 20% who do not.

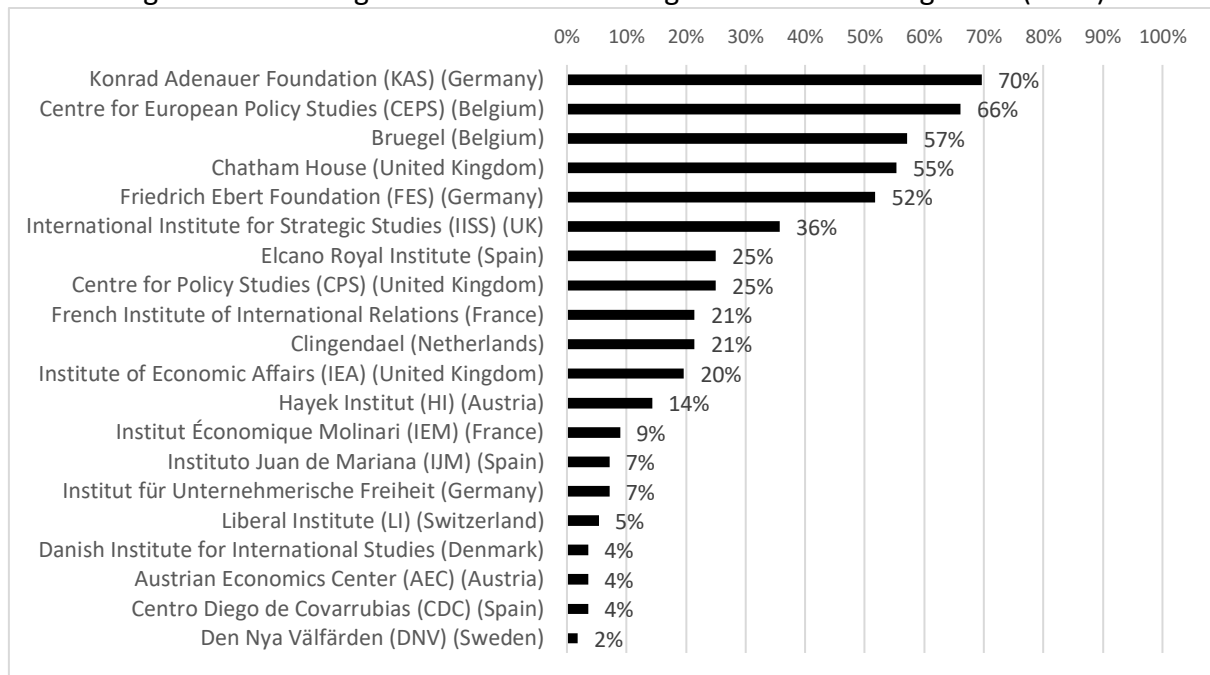
The survey of MEPs revealed that, in general, think tanks have some influence and are sometimes used in policymaking in the EP (RQ4). Specifically, 78% of the MEPs surveyed felt that think tanks exert some influence on them, 18% a great deal, and 2% said none or did not know how to answer. In fact, 59% reported knowing of an MEP whose work has been influenced by a think tank, while 11% knew of none, and 30% were unsure. A vast majority - 93% - of the MEPs surveyed had been contacted by a think tank at some time, compared to 7% who were unsure.

Some qualitative responses indicated meetings with think tanks, such as E3G, the Potsdam Institute or the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, to “consult their expertise.” One respondent said that it is sometimes the assistant who “attends this kind of meetings.” Some collaborations were close: “they financed some studies done by colleagues in my political party” (referring to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation). The only mention of a think tank opposed to climate action was that of EIKE, to say that he only knew it by hearsay and because of its dubious activities: “I know all of them, except EIKE (which I only know for its shady views).”

Overall, what this survey shows is that the large European think tanks with a strong presence in Brussels are among the best known (CEPS, Bruegel, IEEP), together with more prestigious international ones such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Chatham House and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. This suggests that think tanks being headquartered in Brussels may be linked to greater knowledge on the part of MEPs, since this improves access to institutions and provides better opportunities for networking. As for think tanks opposed to

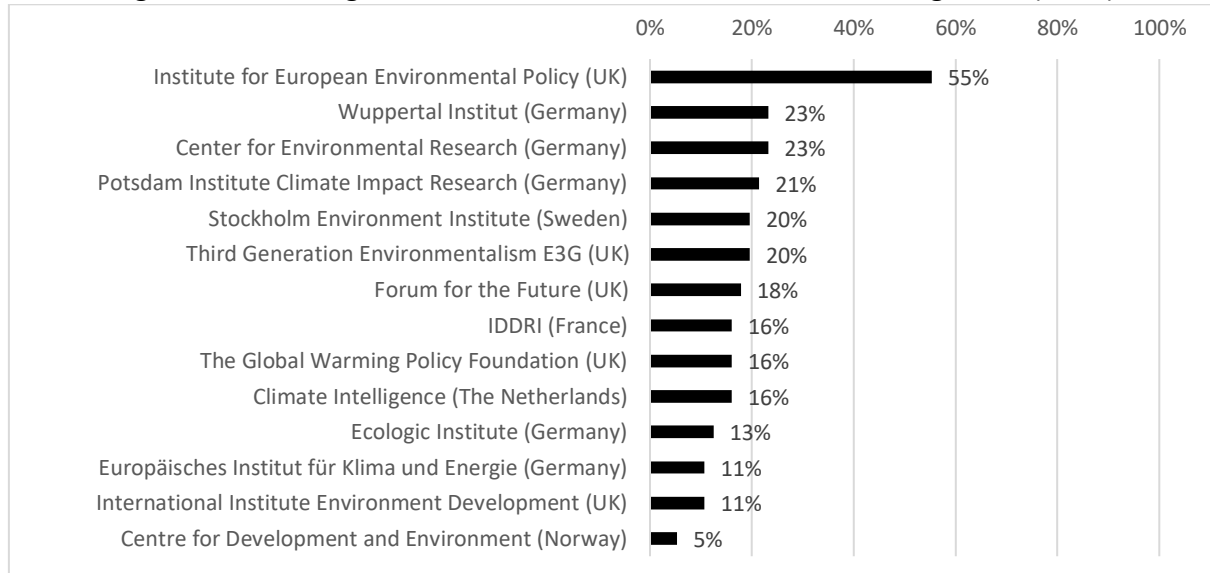
climate action, they are hardly known among MEPs, whether they have a more general focus or an exclusively environmental one.

Figure 1. Knowledge of think tanks with a general focus among MEPs (n=56)



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Knowledge of environment-focused think tanks among MEPs (n=56)



Source: Own elaboration.

#### 4.2. Results from the interviews

Interviews generally yield results that expand on what is gleaned from the survey. Thus, the staff interviewed also displayed a lack of knowledge regarding think tanks opposed to climate action (RQ1), although they did know of or collaborate with other prestigious European think tanks (RQ2). They also reported having working relationships (RQ3) with several of the best-known think tanks in the survey. Within this process, APAs were depicted as gatekeepers of



the think tank's contents (RQ3). The interviewees highlighted the differences between a lobby and a think tank when discussing their influence (RQ4), and made some statements regarding the features a think tank should have for it to be used (RQ5).

#### 4.2.1. Awareness of think tanks (RQ1 & RQ2)

Responses regarding the most known think tanks and those most widely used by the interviewees were consistent with the results of the survey. In terms of think tanks with a general focus, the best known and most used are Bruegel (known by 8 out of 10 interviewees), CEPS (8/10), Chatham House (8/10), Konrad Adenauer Foundation (5/10), Friedrich Ebert Foundation (4/10), IDDRI (4/10), Elcano Royal Institute (4/10), IFRI (2/10), IISS (2/10), IEA (2/10), IEM (1/10), IIED (1/10) and CPS (1/10). Regarding environmental-focused think tanks, the most known are IEEP (7/10), E3G (6/10), IDDRI (4/10), SEI (3/10), Eco-Logic (2/10) and Wuppertal Institute (2/10).

The interviewees make diverse use of these think tanks they know, ranging from sporadic attendance at events (organized by think tanks such as Bruegel, CEPS or IEEP) in the case of Interviewee 6 (S&D), to following the think tanks' social networks (Chatham House, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, CEPS, Elcano, Bruegel) in the case of Interviewee 2 (EPP). Some interviewees reported that they often work with certain think tanks. For example, Interviewee 8 (Greens/EFA) works a lot with IDDRI and SEI and has weekly contacts with E3G, while Interviewee 7 (S&D) had to prepare a dossier at a meeting also attended by IIED staff. This S&D assistant also reported having been in touch with the SEI for a project in the past.

Different perspectives were given regarding contact with these institutions. On the one hand, Interviewee 1 (EPP) indicated that in their office, they “barely get requests from environmental organizations... My whole mailbox is spammed by people from industry”. On the other hand, Interviewee 5 (S&D) explained that they often receive “publications from right-wing think tanks”, which go “directly in the trash.” These experiences give pause for thought on how think tanks market their content. What is clear, however, is that they tend to target their content at those who are preparing legislative reports on a topic of interest to them: “We often receive studies. Sometimes when they know that you are addressing a subject more directly, a [legislative] report” (Interviewee 9, Greens/EFA). It should also be noted that these contacts may have been influenced by Brexit, as several think tanks are based in London and are now less focused on European politics, according to Interviewee 4 (S&D).

In terms of the specific needs that a think tank might meet for these interviewees, the most important was reported as being rigorous, quick and concise information: “Sometimes I need information, but I need it super quick,” Interviewee 1 (EPP) stated. In respect of this, the same Interviewee 1 (EPP) noted that the more rigorous and time-consuming think tank analyses fall short of meeting information needs almost instantly: “I’d never call a think tank”. Some useful elements for EP policy staff are position papers (for Interviewees 3, EPP; 7, S&D; and 9, Greens/EFA), long reports (for Interviewees 6, S&D; 7, S&D; and 10, DEVE), events (for Interviewees 6, S&D, and 10, DEVE) and data or facts (for Interviewee 6, S&D). In the case of position papers, Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA) finds them useful because they allow the opportunity “to quickly get an idea of what the key issues are” on a topic related to parliamentary activity.

#### 4.2.2. The role of think tanks in society and the European Parliament (RQ3)

All interviewees agreed on defining a think tank as an expert organization on a topic that generates ideas and knowledge. According to Interviewee 6 (S&D), “putting a problem or a possible solution on the table that is taken into account by politicians, society, companies or administrations”. That is, “they put topics on the agenda” (Interviewee 1, EPP). In fact, Interviewee 4 (S&D) stated that they fulfil the function of making “people and politicians aware of certain issues.” In this case, however, their role is not so much to monitor problems in society, but rather to ensure that “democratic decisions” are “based on actual facts” (Interviewee 3, EPP). Assistants such as Interviewee 5 (S&D) also pointed to the indispensable work done with the media, since “if you are successful at influencing the media,” you are “indirectly influencing policymakers.”

In the case of decision-making on climate issues in the EP, “they are necessary because politicians are not and cannot be experts on everything” (Interviewee 10, DEVE). Specifically, they help “especially on issues that are very technical, which happens a lot here in the European Parliament,” according to Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA). Thus, think tanks “identify problems in certain dossiers that are then used by certain MEPs in their speeches, in their amendments” (Interviewee 7, S&D). In terms of who uses them most in climate discussions and reports, Interviewee 3 (EPP) stated that “the Greens” use the expertise provided by think tanks more. “I would say that in terms of discussion that I hear in the group meetings - well, my boss is an EPP- it is often so not based on facts that it’s scary,” this assistant admitted. Think tanks participate in the production of useful knowledge for hearings, debates, reports and amendments at different levels, since this is used either by MEPs (Interviewee Greens/EFA), assistants (Interviewees 1 to 8) or committee staff (Interviewee 10, DEVE).

#### 4.2.3. Assistants, the information gatekeepers (RQ3)

When contacting MEPs, the flow of information has certain filters. Therefore, if a think tank wants to make direct contact, it will most likely to be filtered by the MEP’s team: “the assistants do the first filtering of material. In the end, it is the MEP who decides. We read 100 pages, and maybe we send 20 or 50 pages to the MEP,” stated Interviewee 2 (EPP). According to Interviewee 10 (DEVE), “the assistants act as a filter, because most of them manage the mail.” Thus, “when there is a debate, the assistant is usually the one who writes the speech, because he or she has time to get information” said Interviewee 10 (DEVE). This work is often done in groups: “there are four of us selecting information, for example” stated Interviewee 2 (EPP). However, although the flow of information generally goes through the assistant, this is not the case for all teams: “My MEP manages his own email and we manage ours, and we both see what might be most interesting” (Interviewee 7, S&D). “I usually try to do it myself, but sometimes I ask the assistants to prepare some bullet points for me and they look at it,” explained Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA). Thus, though generally speaking interest groups “know that the MEP is not the one behind the mailbox” (Interviewee 5, S&D), “it depends on the MEP” (Interviewee 4, S&D). Either way, the role played by assistants in filtering or processing the information that a think tank sends to the policy team is more than relevant.

#### 4.2.4. Interest groups and influence (RQ4)

Think tanks are not the only interest groups competing for the attention of policymakers: “I don't think a think tank carries more weight than the stance of a sector, or of an NGO, or a patients' organization, or a professional association, all of which MEPs listen to. In addition to the stances adopted by the countries' authorities” (Interviewee 7, S&D). Thus, think tanks compete for influence with entities such as lobbies, which hold great power in European policymaking. “When it comes to influencing, it is quite clear to me that lobbies are more influential than think tanks,” stated Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA). This may be because “the effort you have to make to listen to a lobby is less than following the publications of a think tank,” according to this Greens/EFA MEP.

Policymakers are clear on the difference between lobbies, whose “explicit objective is to defend certain sectoral interests,” and think tanks, whose “primary objective is not this, it is to contribute ideas to the debate” (Interviewee 9, Greens/EFA). However, some organizations have problems “drawing a clear line between what constitute think tanks and what do not” (Interviewee 6, S&D). According to Interviewee 5 (S&D), this is partly due to the industry's increased efforts to defend its political interests: “I feel like the number of companies and billionaires wanting to influence indirectly through foundations, through research institutes, has been increasing.” “That has a strong influence on policymaking, because if they have more funds, they have more money for communication, more staff, more effective research,” this S&D assistant added.

In the case of European climate policy, the efforts of the gas and nuclear energy interest groups stand out. Thus, Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA) highlighted interests in “prolonging the fossil economy, fossil energy, as long as they can”. “Indeed, some are trying very hard to postpone [climate action] in the name of the transition; in particular, the gas people,” explained Interviewee 3 (EPP). “Think tanks are also actively involved”, this EPP assistant noted. Regarding the nuclear sector, Interviewee 8 (Greens/EFA) indicated that they “are meeting a lot of other entities and other political groups, with tonnes of emails and meetings to convince them to allow nuclear power at the European level.” “But on the gas issue, I can definitely see how they are lobbying here in the EP. They are sending us tonnes of emails all the time and there are clearly struggles to keep a pro-gas majority here,” this Greens/EFA assistant explained.

In short, the different interest groups seek to convey their interests to the political agenda, “they do their job” (Interviewee 9, Greens/EFA). “I don't think it's bad, that is, as long as there is transparency, they're registered and it's easy to determine which interests they defend, who's behind them,” this MEP from Greens/EFA added. The problem comes when these conditions are not met. In the case of think tanks, there are those “that in reality are disguising themselves” to gain influence (Interviewee 9, Greens/EFA).

#### 4.2.5. Enabling qualities for trust and a working relationship with think tanks (RQ5)

Whether or not MEP policy teams use think tank resources is mainly influenced by four factors. One of them is visibility: if the think tank or its staff are not known, it is unlikely that the assistants will use its content. In the case of Interviewee 5 (S&D), they would tend to use resources from organizations that they “know.” For Interviewee 10 (DEVE), the issue is a lack

of networking: “I found myself in the position of having to do that research work [for a drafted report], and it was me and my Google. If I had had other contacts, they would have been able to give me information easily.” Moreover, think tank contacts are very much driven by the political issues that the MEP is dealing with at the time: “We finished a very important dossier in the summer, and during those negotiations, we did receive statements and position papers, but right now in the last two months, we have not received any” (Interviewee 7, S&D).

Secondly, beyond knowledge, ideological bias is important. “If you're looking for something to support your opinion, you go straight to the think tank that you know will do that,” explained Interviewee 2 (EPP). In the case of Interviewee 8 (Greens/EFA), they consider it essential “to clearly know what the position of the think tank is and what they are thinking.” “Once we are aligned with them and know that we can rely on their data and information, we have a lot of contact with some of them and use their expertise,” stated this Greens/EFA assistant. “I have based some of my political points on their analysis,” acknowledged Interviewee 8 (Greens/EFA). “When I realize that a think tank or an NGO has an interesting report, I prefer to make direct contact with the person who wrote it,” this person added, which suggests that networking and the personal touch are important in these working relationships.

The third factor is rigour: “I wouldn't ditch a publication just because I don't know it”, explained Interviewee 5 (S&D). In this case, the S&D assistant admitted that “even if it's a right-wing institution” they would use it if the content has a certain quality and is useful for the topic they are preparing. For their part, Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA) defined this quality as honesty: “the criterion for the usefulness of think tanks is that they do academically honest work.” Interviewee 6 (S&D), on the other hand, pointed to objectivity: “The more objective, I would like to think, the more important they are.” Thus rigour, honesty and objectivity point in the same direction; namely, that to be influential, a think tank needs to generate quality and useful content, without methodological biases that call into question its results.

The fourth feature a think tank must have to be relevant is transparency. In respect of this, funding is one of the issues that arouses most suspicion: “It is true that think tanks need funding, and they will have more or less problems to be objective depending on who is funding them” (Interviewee 6, S&D). Another element that arouses suspicion is who has generated the information, and with what intention: “They have the will to influence policymaking, decision-making, so it is good to know or try to know who is behind the think tanks,” added Interviewee 9 (Greens/EFA). However, according to Interviewee 5 (S&D), “sometimes they are really good at hiding the real funders paying them, their real ideology”.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Regarding awareness of think tanks as outlined in RQ1 and RQ2, this research shows that think tanks opposed to climate action in Europe are almost unknown to policymakers in the EP. The survey of MEPs revealed that the best-known think tanks are the mainstream European non-obstructionist think tanks: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, CEPS, Bruegel, Chatham House, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Also, IEEP stands out as the most widely known among environmental think tanks.

As for RQ3, the interviews showed that EP policymakers perceive the contents of think tanks in general to be useful, and their work to be important for democracy and the EP. This is

relevant in an institution such as the EP, which establishes highly technical regulations, according to the APAs. Thus, think tanks provide support in the drafting of legislative dossiers when MEPs and their teams have the role of rapporteurs (being data, reports, position papers and syntheses of technical information the most useful contents).

With regards to RQ4, think tanks (in general, not obstructionist ones) are seen as being somewhat influential in EP policymaking. The more direct work conducted by lobbies is acknowledged as being more influential and identifiable, and the advice or knowledge disseminated by think tanks is generally less recognized. By way of example, the interviews clearly identified the major efforts made by lobbies in the gas and nuclear energy sectors.

In response to RQ5, the conditions that lead to a think tank being more likely to be used in EP policymaking are as follows: that it is visible; that it engages in effective networking; that it generates quality content; and that it is transparent with its ideology, funding, and affiliations. Thus, the interviews showed that better access to policymaking is possible for think tanks that carry out good and honest work.

These results particularly resonate with the work done by Almiron and Xifra (2021), who criticized a lack of rigour, transparency and orientation towards the common good among obstructionist think tanks. Thus, a possible explanation for the absence of climate action contrarian think tanks in the EP is the lack of quality of the work done by these organizations. Furthermore, as previously suggested by Abelson (2018), European think tanks with a general focus that engage in serious academic work and are honest in this regard do affect policymaking.

The use of think tanks by both MEPs and APAs is in part motivated by ideological affinity and their transparency in this regard. This would explain why certain obstructionist think tanks have collaborated with some political parties, as is the case with CLINTEL and Forum voor Democratie in the Netherlands (Moreno-Soldevila 2022), or Alternative für Deutschland and EIKE in Germany (Moreno, Kinn, and Narberhaus 2022). These contacts, which would appear to be somewhat residual, indicate that although obstructionist think tanks seek political relevance, they only receive attention from the few strongholds openly opposed to climate action. The minimal relevance of these think tanks in the EP can also be explained by the EU's traditional leadership on climate issues (Wurzel and Connelly 2011), although the EP has recently been adopting more pragmatic and conciliatory visions of different interests (Rasmussen 2012). The fact that the EP is a place where there is minimal scepticism towards evidence on the climate crisis (Forchtner and Lubarda 2022) also helps make sense of this finding.

Limitations of this article include that the survey could have been answered by a larger number of MEPs, and the interviews could have been conducted with more individuals. The difficulty in accessing such busy profiles meant that the samples are not as large as initially expected, although they do still provide relevant results. This contribution fills a knowledge gap regarding the influence exerted by think tanks opposed to climate action, since most studies in this area are devoted to studying the issuers of the discourse and their impact on the media agenda, but not so much their influence. It contributes to a broader line of

knowledge on the impact of think tanks on policymaking (Abelson and Rastrick 2021; Abelson 2018) by assessing their perceived influence among policymakers in the EP.

Having identified the generally low relevance of think tanks opposed to climate action in the EP, it may be of interest to explore their links with influential stakeholders in policymaking through case studies. The networking of obstructionist think tanks with national parties and economic sectors is of interest in this regard. In addition, it is worth noting that the EP ignoring think tanks opposed to climate action does not mean that their policies are suited to the needs of the climate crisis. Thus, further studies on the EP and non-obstructionist think tanks would be of interest when it comes to climate action delay discourses and greenwashing. In general, research that addresses the role of public relations in climate policy delay is of interest in understanding the current climate crisis and how to address it.

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## 8. ANNEXES

### 8.1. Annex 1. Survey questionnaire

Question	Answers
1. Gender	Female/Male/Other/Prefer not to say
2. Political Group you sit in the European Parliament	EPP/S&D/RENEW/GREEN-EFA/ID/ECR/GUE-NGL/Non-inscrits/Prefer not to say
3. Years in office	Since last elections (2019)/Since 2014/Since 2009/Since 2007/Since before 2007/Prefer not to say
4. Do you think interest groups have any influence on the Presidency or commissioners of the European Commission?	A lot/Some/None/Don't know
5. Do think tanks in particular have any influence on the Presidency or commissioners of the European Commission?	A lot/Some/None/Don't know
6. Do think tanks in particular have any influence on MEPs?	A lot/Some/None/Don't know
7. Have you ever been contacted by a think tank in your role as MEP?	Yes/No/Not sure
8. Are you aware of any MEP, other than you, that has been contacted by a think tank?	Yes/No/Not sure
9. Do you know of any MEP that has been influenced by a think tank?	Yes/No/Not sure
10. Can you write the names of think tanks you remember (whatever origin and purpose they have)?	Open field
11. Please tick the think tanks below you have any knowledge of:	Bruegel/French Institute of International Relations/International Institute for Strategic Studies/Chatham House/Konrad Adenauer Foundation/Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES)/Centre for European Policy Studies/Danish Institute for International Studies/Elcano Royal Institute/Clingendael/Institute of Economic Affairs/Centre for Policy Studies/Instituto Juan de Mariana/Liberal Institute/Institut Économique



	Molinari/Hayek Institut/Austrian Economics Center/Den Nya Vålfärden/Centro Diego de Covarrubias/Institut für Unternehmerische Freiheit
<b>12.</b> Please tick the environmental-focused think tanks below you have any knowledge of:	Stockholm Environment Institute/Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research/Ecologic Institute/E3G/Wuppertal Institute/Center for Environmental Research/Centre for Development and the Environment/Institute du Developpement Durable et Relations Internationales/International Institute for Environment and Development/Forum for the Future/Institute for European Environmental Policy/ Global Warming Policy Foundation/Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie/Climate Intelligence
<b>13.</b> Have any of these organizations in the previous two questions ever contacted you? If so, please specify which or which ones.	Open field
<b>14.</b> Have you ever met with a member of these organizations or participated in an activity organized by any of them? If so, please specify which or which ones.	Open field
<b>15.</b> How often do you read or check output produced by think tanks (blog posts, articles, reports or executive summaries)?	Very frequently/Frequently/Occasionally/Rarely/Very rarely/Never/I don't remember
<b>16.</b> How often do you attend events organized by think tanks?	Very frequently/Frequently/Occasionally/Rarely/Very rarely/Never/I don't remember
<b>17.</b> Do you receive any counselling from think tank's experts?	Very frequently/Frequently/Occasionally/Rarely/Very rarely/Never/I don't remember
<b>18.</b> Do you follow any think tanks on social media?	Yes/No/I don't remember

Source: Own elaboration.

## 8.2. Annex 2. Interview questionnaire

Area	Questions
<b>1. Profile</b>	1.1. Name
	1.2. Gender
	1.3. Age
	1.4. Country
	1.5. National party
	1.6. Political Group in the European Parliament: [EPP/S&D/RENEW/GREEN-EFA/ID/ECR/GUE-NGL/Non-inscrits/Prefer not to say].

	1.7. In office since: [Since last elections (2019); Since 2014; Since 2009; Since 2007; Since before 2007]
<b>2. Position on climate change</b>	2.1. Are you worried about climate change? How much?
	2.2. Do you think it is still possible to follow a mitigation path (significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions), or we can just adapt to climate change impacts?
	2.3. Have you adapted your personal behaviour due to climate change? How?
	2.4. What is your perception of climate policy outcomes in the European Parliament? Are you satisfied with them?
<b>3. Perception of think tanks in the European Parliament</b>	3.1. How would you define a think tank? What is their role?
	3.2. To what extent are think tanks important for policymaking?
	3.3. To what extent are think tanks having a relevant influence on policymaking in general in the European Parliament? And in the European Commission?
	3.4. What do you think is the role of think tanks in the European Parliament regarding environmental issues?
	3.5. Which think tanks come to your mind, especially on environmental issues?
	3.6. Do you know any of these think tanks? [Show the list with name and logos]
<b>4. Type of relations established with think tanks</b>	4.1. Have you ever been contacted by a think tank in your role as an MEP assistant? Do they contact you or your MEP regularly? When was the last time?
	4.2. Do you have the impression that think tanks regularly contact other MEPs? Do you know of cases where think tanks have influenced the views of MEPs?
	4.3. How do you use think tanks in your daily work?
	4.3.1. Have you used their content? Which content? How often?
	4.3.2. If you haven't, would you use their content?
	4.3.3. Have you attended their events? Which ones? When? How often? Did you go of your own free will or on behalf of your MEP?
	4.4. Which of your needs could a think tank cover? Which content or activities from think tanks do you find more useful for you? [Events, reports, position papers, direct consultancy...]
4.5. Are you aware of MEPs or assistants in the committees or groups in which you participate using content from think tanks in debates or in drafting policy texts?	
<b>5. Open discussion</b>	5.1. Are there any comments on the subject that have been left out and that you would like to discuss?
	5.2. Other questions, depending on the profile of each interviewee.

Source: Own elaboration.