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research article

Legitimising policy knowledge in autocratising contexts: the case of Hungary

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In contexts of autocratisation and political polarisation, maintaining the legitimacy of policy expertise is cumbersome. Experts are clustered on two sides of the political divide: those not aligned with either side are excluded from regular policy processes, while those aligned to the regime are too close to the government to be seen as legitimate. This article analyses how policy-knowledge producers work towards achieving legitimacy for the knowledge they produce in such highly politicised contexts. It identifies three sets of legitimacy-building practices used to navigate the dominance of the political. First, knowledge producers increasingly embrace values-driven practices rather than insisting on neutrality and independence. Second, boundaries between political arenas and epistemic authority are tightened by the separation of individual and organisational identities. Third, the relevance of policy knowledge is reframed by diversifying audiences and outcomes to maintain usefulness. The practices identified are not specific to autocratising contexts, but they are exacerbated and become coerced responses to the hard constraints of an incrementally closing regime. Based on interview data with think tanks in Hungary's polarised autocracy and highly politicised policy making, this research examines populist tendencies of questioning truth and neutrality of knowledge and expertise – all hallmarks of today's turbulent policy environments. This makes it a valuable contribution to the broader literature on how think tanks negotiate legitimacy in contexts of de-democratisation.

Keywords policy knowledge • autocratisation • legitimacy • Hungary • polarisation • think tanks • knowledge production • experts.

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Introduction

Legitimacy of policy knowledge is seen to hinge on a delicate balance between the technocratic, scientific robustness of knowledge and its political relevance (Stone, 2013;

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Bandola-Gill, 2021; Capano et al, 2023). Previous research discusses how knowledge producers carefully construct legitimacy by navigating a tension between robustness and relevance through a series of practices and strategies (Williams, 2018; Bandola-Gill, 2021; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021). In contexts of autocratisation however, legitimacy of policy expertise is linked to the political positionality of its producers and their relation to the political regime. In these cases, knowledge producers are either aligned with the regime and seen as lackeys of the government or non-aligned and thus exposed to state scrutiny and control, excluded and, sometimes, blacklisted (Bakir, 2023; Krizsán et al, 2025). Maintaining the legitimacy of the policy knowledge they produce vis-à-vis decision makers, peer experts and the wider public is cumbersome. It may require constructing new definitions of political relevance and robustness, and the use of distinct legitimacy practices.

In such a context, can legitimacy of policy knowledge be argued outside the direct legitimacy provided by the autocratic regime to its experts (Bakir, 2023)? In this article, we argue it can. We examine how policy-knowledge producers endeavour to uphold an image of legitimate knowledge production in an autocratic context characterised by polarising politics and society, an ideologically selective and hostile state, and eroding democracy. We identify the legitimacy-building practices they use at different levels to navigate the dominance of the political and the tension between political and technocratic considerations, either by finding new ways to align with existing expectations on legitimacy or by constructing new bases for legitimacy (Brown, 2010). Legitimacy of policy knowledge is negotiated by balancing various bases of legitimacy, most prominently the scientific robustness of knowledge and its political relevance (Brown, 2010; Bandola-Gill, 2021; Capano et al, 2023), and relating them to the individual and organisational identities of its producers (Williams, 2018).

We see legitimacy as constructed through discursive and practical processes by actors in specific contexts (Connelly et al, 2006; Williams, 2018; Bandola-Gill, 2021). We do not ask whether legitimacy is achieved but analyse *how* it is narratively constructed: what approaches are used to building legitimacy. We look at discursive, practical and organisational practices policy-knowledge producers use to maintain or defend organisational legitimacy and the legitimacy of the knowledge they produce (Brown, 2010; Williams, 2018).

The need to negotiate legitimacy at the boundary between the objectivity of research and political relevance is characteristic of democratic and non-democratic policy contexts alike, and understanding these processes is relevant generally. However, in a context of autocratisation characterised by dismantling accountability, transparency and rule-of-law, the imperative of evidence-based policy making is increasingly subordinated to the political logics of the regime (Bauer et al, 2021; Krizsán et al, 2025), and relevance can be seen to be determined by imperatives of the regime (Bakir, 2023). The question is whether constructing policy-knowledge legitimacy is possible at all outside the control of the regime (Bakir, 2023) and, if so, how policy-knowledge producers work towards constructing it.

To answer this question, we conduct an exploratory case study on policy-knowledge producers' practices of constructing legitimacy in an abruptly autocratising country, Hungary (Boese et al, 2022). We propose three sets of practices that navigate between meeting existing legitimacy expectations and creating new constructions of legitimacy. First, embracing openly values-driven practices rather than insisting on neutrality. Second, strategically sharpening the distinction between political arenas and arenas of epistemic authority by separation of individual and organisational identities. Third,

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reframing the relevance of policy knowledge by diversifying audiences and outcomes to maintain usefulness. These practices are not specific to autocratising contexts; they resonate with global trends of change in policy advice (Capano et al, 2023). In autocratisation, however, they may be exacerbated and coerced responses to the hard constraints of an incrementally closing regime.

The article proceeds with a conceptual section, followed by a detailed description of context and methodology. The three analytical sections build on our data set of semi-structured interviews and finally, a conclusion that highlights our contribution.

Constructing policy-knowledge legitimacy in autocratising contexts

Literature links legitimacy of policy knowledge to a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic criteria (Suchman, 1995; Capano et al, 2023): on the one hand, to its relevance, meaning its utility or perception of usefulness by some audience; on the other hand, to its epistemic authority, the academic credentials of its producers, and the rigour with which it was produced, including its objectivity and neutrality. It is in relation to these bases of legitimacy (Brown, 2010) that policy-knowledge producers argue and construct the legitimacy of their work. Legitimacy is a fundamental condition if they were to play a role in policy making, for promoting their utility, sustainability and appropriateness.

Think tanks are located at the crossroads of academia, market and politics (Medvetz, 2012), thus facing an independence paradox – striving to maintain a posture of independence while aiming to influence policy decision makers and securing financial sustainability (Stone, 2013: 65–6; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021).

The legitimacy of the knowledge think tanks produce is not anchored in a set of objective criteria but is relational, jointly constructed by knowledge producers, the context and various interested actors (Williams, 2018: 55), including governments, policy makers at national and local levels, academics, think-tank peers and also publics. Think tanks actively negotiate the legitimacy of the knowledge they produce, balancing relevance with scientific robustness, political and economic allegiances with epistemic authority.

Literature discusses practices of legitimacy used by think tanks in various contexts. Narrating independence is one of the key legitimacy practices for think tanks. Independence is relational to the fields in which think tanks operate (Abelson, 2009: 9; Weaver and McGann, 2000: 4) and is constructed rather than real (Stone, 2013). Think tanks discursively construct academic, political, financial, and legal and administrative narratives of independence (Stone, 2013; Jezierska, 2018). They emphasise academic rigour and integrity and narrate political and economic independence as desirable but difficult to achieve (Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021: 399). Other legitimacy practices discussed in the literature include secrecy and informality to access decision makers (Stone, 2013; Kelstrup and Dialer, 2019; Sörbom and Jezierska, 2023), emphasis of research integrity (Medvetz, 2012; Stone, 2013; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021), internationalisation (Stone, 2013; Kelstrup, 2016), and knowledge dissemination (Perez, 2014; Kelstrup, 2017; Djordjevic and Stone, 2023; Jezierska, 2023). More recently open alignment with values and political commitments as opposed to value neutrality and political independence are also explored (Stone, 2013; Capano and Malandrino, 2022; Djordjevic and Stone, 2023; Jezierska, 2023; Pal, 2023).

In a more systematic attempt, Williams (2018: 5) suggests that legitimacy practices can best be captured by three aspects: coherence in identity (between individual and

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organisational identity), coherence in the process of knowledge production (focusing on integrity, independence and transparency) and coherence in creating the right type of products, audiences and outcomes. The basis for legitimacy is seen to be constructed in various ways depending on contextual factors and relations between knowledge producers, political regimes, and publics (Williams, 2018).

Practices of constructing the legitimacy of policy knowledge do not operate in a void: thus, their study requires context-sensitive analysis, factoring in political and regime specificities (Howlett, 2019; Manwaring, 2019), particularly in turbulent policy environments and specifically in the case of hybrid or autocratising democracies (Capano et al, 2023).

Independence and autonomy of expertise are cumbersome to maintain in autocratising and polarised contexts. Anti-democratic and polarised contexts constrain the construction of policy-knowledge legitimacy, as regimes shape policy processes to serve their objectives (Buzogány and Varga, 2018; Pierre et al, 2021; Pirro and Stanley, 2022). Extreme politicisation of bureaucracy, the dismantling of formal accountability procedures, or dependence on state funding and personal connections facilitate government control and challenge the legitimacy of policy expertise (Pierre et al, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Krizsán et al, 2025). The lines separating insider and outsider advice become blurred by ideological considerations (Belyaeva, 2019: 401, 405; Manwaring, 2019; Jezierska, 2023). Pernicious polarisation, typical of newly autocratising regimes, but also present in some democracies, endangers the legitimacy of policy knowledge because it pushes towards alignment with one side (McCoy et al, 2018). This means the legitimacy of policy knowledge is linked to the identity of its producers (Krizsán et al, 2025) and must compete against preconceptions and emotions (Williams, 2018; Fischer, 2019). Moral convictions become pervasive, and policy issues are moralised (Bayes, 2022). The cost of allegiance is extremely high in such contexts: for aligned think tanks there are reputational consequences while non-aligned think thanks face material consequences. Non-aligned positions are sanctioned and as a result middle-ground positions are unattainable (Jezierska et al, 2024).

In this autocratising context, the image of political and economic independence (Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021) becomes more difficult, even undesirable. For non-aligned think tanks, 'coming out of the closet' and siding with the pro-democracy camp and its values (Jezierska, 2023), rather than claiming neutrality, may represent the path towards legitimacy. Openly admitting values alignment is an emerging feature of think tanks (Stone, 2013; Capano and Malandrino, 2022: 421; Jezierska, 2023; Djordjevic and Stone, 2023: 339), and the polarising pressure that makes non-alignment almost impossible is a phenomenon that is recently discussed (Jezierska, 2023: 268; Pal, 2023). The image of neutrality may be more important than ever for government-aligned think tanks to claim legitimacy, even though building legitimacy by referring to neutrality may prove impossible. These conditions set the limits of the space between relevance and scientific robustness that think tanks in an autocratising context like Hungary must navigate to garner or maintain legitimacy (Bandola-Gill, 2021).

The constraints of the autocratising context can push think tanks either to find innovative ways to relate to existing standards of legitimacy or to move away and construct new bases of legitimacy when previous legitimacy standards become impossible to meet (Brown, 2010).

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To understand processes of negotiating legitimacy manifested at organisational and individual levels, we focus on Williams's (2018: 57) three arenas: the procedural realm, the realm of identities and the pragmatic realm. We see legitimacy as not fixed, but occurring through a process of negotiation between policy-knowledge producers, imperatives of the political context, and publics. Building on our analysis of Hungarian think-tank narratives, we identify three interrelated legitimacy practices (Table 1): embracing the values-driven positionality of knowledge production (procedural legitimacy); decoupling individual and organisational identities (cognitive); diversifying outcomes and audiences (pragmatic). We build our framework of analysis on a specific context, where democratic policy-making pathways are closing, publics and politics are polarising, and truth and knowledge are questioned in politically salient ways.

Table 1: Think-tank practices to achieve and maintain legitimacy

Level	Objective	Practices
Procedural	Synthesise technocratic and political objectives	Openly embrace values-driven positionality of knowledge production
Cognitive	Separate technocratic and political arenas	Decouple private and organisational identities Draw boundaries between professional and political
Pragmatic	Reframe relevance of policy knowledge	Diversify audiences and outcomes

The first practice is procedural. We suggest more think tanks across the political spectrum are openly embracing values-driven practices rather than insisting on robust technocratic standards tied to neutrality. Negotiating legitimacy outside the independence narrative maybe necessary because of practical difficulties achieving the appearance of political or financial independence, especially in a polarised, autocratising context, and also because of the moral implausibility of neutrality in the political controversy over fundamental institutions of democracy (Jezierska, 2023). Maintaining a narrative of political independence could be costly for non-aligned think tanks in reputational terms if basic democratic institutions are at stake. Instead, the polarisation context seems to be conducive to the narration of epistemic authority alongside unconcealed values commitments. Thus, in such a context, for most think tanks, legitimacy is negotiated by admitting political relevance while maintaining scientific robustness. Think tanks emphasise higher levels of academic and often moral standards serving public interests rather than positioning themselves as independent thinkers (Stone, 2013: 74).

While the first practice aims to find a synthesis between political and technocratic objectives, the second builds on their separation (Bandola-Gill, 2021). More specifically, we suggest the separation of individual and organisational identities – their decoupling, rather than their coherence – may provide think tanks with wiggle room to work towards legitimacy by relying on robustness in some arenas and claiming relevance in others. This negotiation of proximity to and distance from the political field (Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021) can be achieved by splitting the advisory roles of experts into personal and organisational (Bandola-Gill, 2021: 625). There can be different modalities of decoupling. While organisationally political independence is a facade that is important for some think tanks even under conditions of extreme polarisation,

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claiming to act as individual experts gives them space to use expertise in politically committed ways. At the same time, for most think tanks, the polarisation of publics and politics forces organisational alignment with either the state or the opposition (Somer et al, 2021), with serious reputational consequences for misbehaviour. Decoupling organisational identities from individual identities can be a strategy to escape the straitjacket of polarisation and coercive policy allegiances and find spaces where professional logics are dominant. Acting appropriately in public organisational realms, while transgressing the logic of polarisation privately to meet experts or decision makers from the other camp, can help construct relevance and legitimacy for their expertise.

The third practice involves reframing the relevance of policy knowledge, beyond the spaces controlled by the autocratic regime, by diversifying outputs and audiences. Working towards products, audiences and impacts that contribute to legitimacy (Williams, 2018: 65) needs significant amendment in an autocratising context. While internationalisation of think-tank activity is by no means new (Stone, 2013), when access to policy making is selective and funding is controlled, as in autocratising contexts, seeking relevance from alternative audiences elsewhere may be the only way to achieve legitimacy (Djordjevic and Stone, 2023). Similarly, moving from activities geared towards policy makers to public-facing or advocacy-type activities could repurpose sources of legitimacy (Galanti, 2023; Moon et al, 2023) and serve the public interest (Stone, 2013).

Context and methods

Hungary is seeing abrupt democratic erosion; while not yet a closed autocracy, it has been autocratising since 2010 (McCoy et al, 2018; Boese et al, 2022). The process of autocratisation impacts not only all aspects of democratic institutions, but also the field of media, education, civil society and culture, among others. The reorganisation of these fields follows similar trends. The civic space is characterised by a selective closure: preferred organisations aligned with the government have access, and those considered critical of the regime are excluded (Fejős and Szikra, 2020; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021). The map of civil society organisations is revised through selective patterns of public funding favouring GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations), including think tanks and excluding non-aligned organisations (Kapitány, 2019).

The reorganisation of knowledge production and knowledge institutions (Rónay, 2018; Ryder, 2022) follows similar patterns. Systemic reforms, including withdrawn accreditations, cuts in funding and smear campaigns against knowledge producers are utilised to curtail academic freedom (Rónay, 2018) and question the scientific value of research (Windisch, 2018). This negatively affects those who voice criticism of the government (Buzogány and Varga, 2018: 817; Bíró-Nagy, 2019: 76–7). At the same time, knowledge institutions whose products are linked to government agendas, values and ideology are created and supported (Bíró-Nagy, 2019; Kapitány, 2019). Some of these government-aligned organisations function as sense-making apparatuses, intellectual counterweights and organisers of conservative support networks (Buzogány and Varga, 2018: 820–1).

The reorganisation of knowledge production and institutions also shapes bureaucracy and policy-making processes. The country's illiberal governance is

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tight, top-down and command-style, instrumental to the will of the political masters (Hajnal and Boda, 2021: 84). Accountability mechanisms largely serve the purposes of political theatre, including web-based consultations or consultations of fixed lists of organisations, including GONGOs (Batory and Svensson, 2019). Politicisation of bureaucracy and policy making, though present before 2010, is now a dominant feature. Policy expertise is also polarised: either excluded or ideologically validated (Hajnal and Boda, 2021; Krizsán et al, 2025). The research and educational sector and the field of policy making, reference points for think tanks, are exposed to extreme governmental control.

Analysing legitimacy practices in Hungary, a country in the process of autocratisation, allows us to relate lessons learned to closed autocracies and to countries with reasonably democratic patterns of policy making but with some autocratic practices (Glasius, 2023). Even though we relate our findings to legitimacy-building practices in other contexts, we have no comparative ambitions. Our analysis remains an exploratory case study that aims to provide in-depth understanding of the case and have the potential to generate propositions for future research (Yin, 2018: 10). Our research contributes to understanding think-tank practices in the context of rapid autocratisation. Previous research on Hungary has not discussed these aspects.

Our data consist of 23 semi-structured interviews with key think-tank representatives, most commonly the founder or director. We adopt a loose definition of think tanks as organisations that 'do research, analysis and communication for policy development within local communities, national government and global institutions in both the public and the private domains' (Stone, 2013: 64). Interviews were conducted in two rounds in 2021 and 2022. Interview questions included think tanks' policy influence, relations with other actors, and the changing context since 2010. We used an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) in our research. We identified concepts and legitimacy-building strategies from the literature, used them as a starting point for our empirical analysis, and amended them as specific patterns of practice emerged from the analysis. To support our research, we used iterative coding (see Appendix for more details on coding and sampling).

Analysis

This section discusses the three practices for negotiating legitimacy of policy knowledge: openly embracing values-driven knowledge production; separating or decoupling the individual from the organisation; and reframing the relevance of policy knowledge by diversifying audiences and outputs. Each practice reflects specific modes of negotiating the tension between scientific robustness and political relevance. Think tanks use them to construct legitimacy, depending on their positionality, either separately or in combination.

Embracing values-driven practices and procedures

Narrating independence in political, financial, scholarly and administrative terms is a fundamental component of legitimacy for think tanks, even if realising it is cumbersome, if not impossible (Stone, 2013: 65–6). Polarisation and the autocratising state make the construction of an image of independence even more difficult. Even

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in such circumstances, for some think tanks, independence remains a core discursive and institutional component of their legitimacy work. However, others step away from the independence paradox (Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021) and construct legitimacy by openly recognising the importance of distinct value-systems that govern their actions, resolving the tension between scientific robustness and political relevance by embracing the values-driven nature of their work (Pal, 2023).

When we asked our interviewees about independence, they mentioned detailed organisational practices and procedures they used to show independence. These practices were not unique to the Hungarian context (Stone, 2013; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021), and they occurred across the political divide. Both government-aligned and non-aligned think tanks narrated political independence. They talked about avoiding situations where their organisation was seen as representing a political party. A non-aligned think tank commented: 'We were consciously very careful to make sure that not only we knew that we were independent, but that this was also visible to the outside world' (IP 1). Another said independence can be maintained by not becoming a party spokesperson: 'Your integrity is not compromised by working with parties. To become a spokesperson for a party … is another matter. Independence is also compromised if … I have only politicians from one party at my events' (IP 16). A third non-aligned think tank said:

> In practice, this means that we do not accept support from political parties. We don't campaign for political parties. If we cooperate with political parties, we will ensure that all political parties are provided with the same conditions [W]e comment on the political programme of anyone who asks for it. If we make recommendations for the election programme to parties, we send them to all parties. (IP 5)

Organisational independence was also narrated vis-à-vis the state. The think tanks interviewed claimed political independence could be achieved through an ownership and leadership structure that was free from party politics and state influence. A government-aligned think tank explained how it attempted to maintain its integrity:

> How the decision-making processes are carried out, who the members of the board of trustees are, is obviously not something that anyone other than the founder has a say in. Moreover, the two companies are also owned by private individuals, so in this respect they operate completely independently of the state. (IP 12)

Several non-aligned think tanks discussed organisational rules and practices set up to achieve economic independence. Legitimacy was constructed by consciously distancing from political party funding, not accepting support or contracts. Non-aligned think tanks warned about the dangers of financial dependency. Some learned these lessons pre-2010 and developed practices to ensure 'that the majority of our orders do not come from here [the government], because then we are less likely to get into trouble during one of these political storms' (IP 3). One saw this challenge emerging after 2010 and framed it along the lines of a classic resource dependency argument (Jezierska, 2022): 'Our principle has always been to have a lot of legs, like a centipede, and not to have any exposure … if one of the big legs falls out' (IP 14).

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Another said, 'No one can give us more than 10 per cent of our annual budget' (IP 8). These procedures were seen as securing both financial stability and 'a high degree of sovereignty' (IP 8), and therefore legitimacy.

While non-aligned think tanks saw funding diversification as a strategy, the revenue of pro-government think tanks came almost exclusively from public budgets. One said it was not a secret that they had a business contract with the government (IP 12). For them, political relevance was easy to attain, but their research standards had to be proved. Therefore, legitimacy had to be constructed outside the political and economic independence paradigm. A representative of an insider policy advice unit emphasised scholarly independence:

> If we think or assume that anyone would regularly interfere with our work … this is of course not true. So, we have independence in that sense. Of course, being an [insider policy advice unit] means that we are accountable to the ministry in whose bureaucracy we operate. In that sense, we are not talking about independence in the same way as … in the life of an NGO. (IP 13)

Open recognition of values-driven action

Although the Hungarian think thanks we interviewed used various procedures to ensure independence, even the facade of political or economic independence was difficult to maintain. The narrative of serving the public interest (Stone, 2013) by non-aligned think tanks meant working alongside pro-democracy actors against an autocratising regime. For them, stepping away from values neutrality and embracing the values at the heart of polarisation may be seen as providing an alternative source of legitimacy. Similar practices by think tanks have been observed in Poland (Jezierska, 2023), Western Balkans (Djordjevic and Stone, 2023: 343), transnationally (Stone, 2013: 71), and in the context of the global trend towards delegitimisation of expertise (Pal, 2023: 348)

Think tanks underscored the impossibility of being perceived as independent. One non-aligned think tank said salient political issues instantly trigger the enemy logic. Interventions in these issues, even if made by think-tankers as private persons, are consequential for the larger organisation (IP 7). Consequently, many interviewees across the political spectrum discussed their identification with values systems – organisationally or in terms of inspiration for their research. They talked openly about political values defining the choice of their interventions and the boundaries of their actions. As these values are at the core of the polarisation divide, and therefore highly politicised, identification with them clearly aligns organisations within the polarisation logic. As presented by a non-aligned think tank, 'We identify with values that I and my colleagues believe are true of the opposition and not of the government' (IP 15). Another non-aligned think tank said adherence to certain values had gained significance:

> We consider ourselves independent, but this independence does not mean value neutrality. We have had a fairly strong set of values since we were founded … These were quite simple values, which seemed quite meaningless in [the 2000s], such as parliamentary democracy, Euro–Atlantic engagement or a market economy … but since 2010 they have also been seen in a completely different light … So, yes, we operate independently of parties, but we operate in a value-oriented way. (IP 14)

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The same position was taken by think tanks on the other side of the political divide. One commented: 'Obviously, XXX is like most think tanks. It embraces certain values … we can define ourselves as taking a right-wing, conservative, Christian Democrat direction, in social values, in everything else' (IP 12). Another said: 'That doesn't make us independent or objective, because I don't think we are. Obviously, we openly accept that we take a conservative, liberal conservative position' (IP 17).

One government-aligned think tank argued for the need to take values-driven positions even if divisive:

> We believe in these things, so, I think it would [be] shying away from our own values … So yeah, I think it's a free society so, we should be able, you know, under some very broad rules … say what people like to say, so if somebody says that … same-sex marriage is good … that's okay, but the other person says that, we think that … the traditional family is the best, then, that should be okay. (IP 23)

Specific values can link organisations with a specific political camp, affecting their relationship with the government and other political actors. The legitimacy of their expertise derives partly from their relevance, the values they endorse which can be facilitators or barriers of knowledge (Capano and Malandrino, 2022). Several think tanks talked openly about acting on their values and cooperating with political parties or other political actors, such as municipalities (of various political orientations) or the government. They stepped away from insisting on independence procedurally. The legitimacy of their expertise was not constructed in relation to their independence from politics. One non-aligned think tank explained how their endorsement of certain values defined who they cooperated with: 'We are anchored in social democratic and labour movements. So, actors who are in this field of sociological questions are more likely to become part of our network than actors who are not part of this field or who are explicitly against it' (IP 9).

Moral integrity was occasionally invoked and tied to respecting basic rules of democracy: 'Those who we think are morally not on the same level as us and we are very much staying away from them' (IP 1).

Academic integrity as a backdoor to legitimacy

While maintaining an image of political and economic independence was seen as possible by very few think tanks, academic integrity emerged as a common standard across the political spectrum. Mimicking academic standards is an important strategy for think tanks to create legitimacy (Medvetz, 2012; Stone, 2013: 66; Bandola-Gill, 2021: 629; Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021). This was true of the Hungarian think tanks we interviewed. When talking about their research products, several described their work as high-standard, factual, unbiased, fair, evidence-based, scientific and internationally publishable. They aspired to reach the standards of academia. Some talked about neutrality of knowledge production as an absolute standard:

> I can't add something that a lot of think tanks can add, that we want to promote the liberal world order, or we want to promote Catholic values, or we want to promote the market economy. We do not have that. For us

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> it is the analysis and support of unbiased, meaningful, let's say evidence-based policies … there is a mission … It says that it is to produce unbiased analyses. (IP 2)

Besides emphasising the academic value of their products, some think tanks justified the validity of their knowledge by highlighting the acknowledgement of external actors, sometimes from opposing camps. For example, research integrity could create a measure of immunity from attacks; a non-aligned think tank said smear campaigns focused on the personal level and avoided criticising research (IP 2).

Legitimacy built on scientific robustness permitted government-aligned think tanks to communicate inconvenient results to clients:

> We have no choice but to communicate the results … even if those results are not to their liking … If that is contrary to the opinion of the client or the idea that the client expected, we are not limited in that respect, because our aim is to give the best we can based on our own knowledge. (IP 12)

Another government-aligned think tank argued: 'It is in the interest of all policy makers to know the reality of what is happening in society. There would be no point in filtering it or ordering' (IP 13). In these instances, research integrity was used to narrate procedural-knowledge legitimacy.

While independence from specific political parties or economic interests was an important benchmark for many, it rarely meant values neutrality, whether these were democratic values or Christian conservative values. Legitimacy in procedural terms was anchored in scientific robustness and academic integrity but was seen as values-neutral by very few think tanks.

Decoupling individual and organisational identity

We found think tanks tended to decouple individual identities from organisational ones as a means to get around the closed and ideologically polarised policy arena. This strategy allowed individuals the flexibility to take on identities that differed from those of their organisation. Individuals were able to cross political camps in a personal capacity and avoid the 'stigmatising' identity of their organisation. We identified several different modalities of this type of boundary making.

The private can be political

While projecting political independence was seen as desirable at the organisational level, accepting political commitments at the individual level was highlighted as important by think tanks across the spectrum. In a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation of policy knowledge and expertise, think tanks' political connections are both sensitive and consequential. For some of the think tanks we interviewed, distancing from political parties and narrating political independence were key elements of their organisational identity (Jezierska and Sörbom, 2021). They went to great lengths to discuss their independence from party politics and from the state.

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To maintain the image of independence, think tanks often relegated the political to the level of the individual, where they agreed to identify as politically committed experts. One non-aligned think tank defined the difference between the two levels as the following: 'Of course, as a private citizen, I will give my opinion if asked, but I do not see it as the mission of the organisation to influence public opinion in any direction' (IP 3). Another non-aligned think tank said detaching individual identity from organisational identity allowed one to support democratic values and projects in one's private capacity:

> On the one hand, we have figured out that we do not work for parties … Then we partially went around that a little bit. And through others we worked for … XXX party foundation. So, we didn't adhere to that 100 per cent. But basically, what we tried to do was: if we were asked to contribute to party programmes, we did it as private people and not during our working hours. (IP 1)

With the creation of boundaries between the individual and the organisation, those working for government-aligned think tanks could express pro-democracy stances. One interviewee said that during the attacks on academic freedom, his aligned think tank did not take a position, but 'there was no instruction from leadership or management that you should not be allowed to take up a position individually' (IP 11).

Drawing boundaries between political and technocratic arenas also happens organisationally. This is discussed by government-aligned think tanks where political communication forms part of responsibilities in exchange for government contracts. The image of separation is constructed by devising separate research units and political communication units within the organisation. As one think-tanker explains, these units 'have different profiles and their activities are largely independent of each other. Of course, there are projects where there is cooperation between individual departments' (IP 5).

Informality

When the organisational level is impacted by the polarisation logic, leading to the impossibility of middle-ground and across-camp communication (Sörbom and Jezierska, 2023: 356), the personal level can sometimes connect political camps. Our interviews suggested that disconnecting the official polarised logic from informal, individual-level communication allowed behind-the-scenes discussions which could confirm mutual professional recognition and contribute to the legitimacy of others' policy expertise. Personal connections provided opportunities for the exchange of ideas:

> I'm friends with XXX. My opposition colleagues look at me strangely when I say this, but I like him as a person. We absolutely interact in a way that we don't try to convince each other. I know that a lot of what he says, he says because he has to say it and [it is] something he doesn't fully agree with. If we don't talk in public, I can have a great conversation with him and in some ways, we even think alike about things. (IP 15)

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Informal, individually based access to mid-level decision makers was another avenue to maintain legitimacy of expertise, or as one of our interviewees put it, to 'somehow require, at least procedurally and professionally, that things be grounded and prepared to some extent' (IP 1). While informal entry points are typical of policy advice in democratic and non-democratic contexts alike (Stone, 2013; Kelstrup and Dialer, 2019: 454), in the absence of formal interactions between non-aligned think tanks and government, the informal and personal became the route to legitimacy.

Secrecy

The rigid polarisation was maintained in public, but professional cooperation was maintained, at least to some degree, in private. Continuing professional work in secret, without being credited for it, allowed non-aligned think tanks to access decision makers and contributed to the legitimisation of their expert knowledge. Mid-level decision makers received analysis without others knowing about it: 'They send over materials informally now to give our opinion, but secretly. They send it over, we give our opinion, but nothing in the file will indicate that we talked about it' (IP 5).

Such instances could be either private or sanctioned ways to solicit external policy advice without openly admitting its source. Either way, they demonstrated the usefulness of expertise and contributed to its legitimacy. However, as the autocratic and polarising closure of policy making continues in Hungary, even informal contacts are likely to disappear. Interviewees talked about government cleansing and alignment and the disappearance of informal connections and entry points: 'At the beginning, I personally had classmates in ministries or right-wing analysis institutes, I would say that we kept in touch with pro-Fidesz institutes … and that started to disappear completely around 2013, 2014. And that was the same with all my colleagues' (IP 14).

Meetings run under Chatham House rules were mentioned as exceptional platforms where expert dialogue could happen without the coercion created by public and formal situations connecting organisational identity to individuals. Interviewees highlighted it was critical that these meetings were closed to the public and media to create space for political communication and expert discussion. A government-aligned think tank said:

> This [Chatham House] was … good, because government people were more willing to sit down with somebody who is not considered a friend, if they know that this will not be in a newspaper tomorrow. So, I think it's better for these kind of informal policy exchange or discussions, than let's say, actual open events. (IP 23)

Drawing boundaries between individual and organisational identities allowed space for think tanks to manoeuvre to secure legitimacy. It allowed some to maintain a facade of political independence at the organisational level while permitting individual engagement with political processes that are morally imperative in times of democratic erosion. For non-aligned think tanks, the private, informal, secret exchange of expertise was an alternative arena for legitimising their policy expertise. Experts could escape the coercion of polarised camps and what it entailed for their organisation, securing professional recognition but without credentials.

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Reframing relevance of policy knowledge

In the context of a closing state and ideologically driven policy making, non-aligned think tanks found themselves and their expertise largely excluded and irrelevant for policy processes controlled by the government. They responded by reframing their relevance. This became a terrain of intensive boundary work for non-aligned think tanks. However, think tanks on both sides stretched the boundaries between expertise and advocacy, objective research and committed policy entrepreneurship in the search for legitimacy. We identified several interconnected practices that expanded non-aligned think tanks' portfolios to create 'proper' research products and impacts and allowed them to reach appropriate and receptive audiences. At the same time, we found government-aligned think tanks reframed their relevance, but in different ways.

Move towards advocacy

Along with their increasing willingness to openly admit values-driven and often political objectives, several non-aligned think tanks talked about a sense of commitment to act upon the values they embraced and move towards an advocacy and civil society logic. They discussed their objectives, current or planned strategies, and engagement with the political regime. Openly presenting their views was a main concern:

> It is your job – even if you are just a political analytical institute – to make your speaking position clear … what your concerns are when the age for compulsory education is lowered. What is your problem when homelessness is criminalised. It is a public policy problem. And behind all public policy are normative decisions. (IP 16)

Another example of values-driven advocacy was expert support for political actors struggling to maintain democracy. One think tank talked about these collaborations, saying they were not profitable but accepted because of the values they represented: 'These are typically either pro bono or heavily loss-making projects for the company, but we take them on because of their mission' (IP 1). Others talked about cooperation with those seen to hold similar values, including recommendations for electoral programmes (IP 2, IP 5, IP 15). Think tanks critical of the government seemed to see themselves as actors working towards public interest (Stone, 2013) or more specifically, 'democracy defenders' whose political engagement was justified by the wider democracy project (Jezierska, 2023: 270).

Think tanks sought dialogue and participatory engagement with different (often marginalised) stakeholders to strive for participatory knowledge production and legitimacy. Inclusiveness was narrated by some non-aligned think tanks as a tool to gain legitimacy (IP 19). In this strategy, legitimacy was achieved by including both the general public and experts in policy-knowledge production (Moon et al, 2023).

Diversifying outputs and audiences

Turning to advocacy implies a diversification of tools and strategies to move the traditional think-tank portfolio closer to an advocacy portfolio. Various new activities are seen as 'proper' outputs in a polarised context. With different outputs, think tanks will target different audiences. In Hungary's autocratising state and closing civic space, think tanks aligned with government ideology repositioned themselves in the

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proximity or under the tutelage of the state, and non-aligned think tanks targeted other audiences, resulting in a polarisation of the think-tank space. Diversifying audiences (Stone, 2013) can allow alternative entry points and a different anchoring of legitimacy to replace the previous one. New audiences were sought internationally, locally (under oppositional rule) and among the general public.

Internationalisation and localisation

Recent waves of think-tank development often step beyond the confines of the nation state (Stone, 2013; Plehwe, 2014; Bajenova, 2023). Many Hungarian think tanks were internationally networked before the 2010 turn, and Hungary has been a target for the activity of several international think tanks. However, since the early 2010s, there has been an important shift towards international audiences among think tanks excluded from working with the government. They seek a use for their expertise by establishing networks and searching for funding outside the national policy context. This is a way to maintain legitimacy beyond the closed national policy arena. More specifically, it provides an audience for their outputs and permits their entry into professional expert dialogues. A non-aligned think tank argued:

> Knowledge production has been transformed. There are people who have become weapons in this culture war … And there have been those who are not relevant. And I think the kind of knowledge that is important to me has been moved into the category of not interesting/relevant. So, it's a much bigger relief when I attend an international conference than when I attend one in Hungary. (IP 3)

International projects can boost legitimacy at the national level. Through their international projects, several non-aligned think tanks mitigated the eroding entry points and became indirectly involved in policy making at the national level, a practice labelled a 'bypass' by Djordjevic and Stone (2023: 343). An interviewee explained: 'There's a project where the Hungarian state has asked [international organisation] to help them. [They] needed someone who could speak English and do the qualitative part [of the research] in Hungary and could interpret the context. And they knew us, so they asked us to work for them' (IP 1).

Orientation towards international audiences was much less salient among pro-government think tanks. As they had state resources and could gain legitimacy through access to government at the national level, they were far less active on the international scene. Recently created pro-government think tanks claimed lack of experience was an obstacle to accessing the international level, while others highlighted the cumbersome bureaucracy of international projects compared to more easily accessible national funds (IP 12). Although government-aligned think tanks' involvement in international projects seemed to be ad hoc, they still produced research materials for the international arena. One conservative think tank highlighted the importance of English-language output directed at foreign audiences for network building, but also talked about bringing foreign experts together with government decision makers (IP 17).

Turning to local governments was another avenue towards legitimacy. While national-level policy making was closed to the expertise of think tanks critical of the government, local-level authorities under oppositional rule could be

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open to policy advice. After several important municipalities were taken over by opposition candidates in the 2019 municipal elections, many non-aligned think tanks found an audience at local levels: 'Prior to that [2019 municipal elections], there were no municipal collaborations either on the data collection side or the consulting side [but] it became possible, after the municipal structure became a bit more heterogeneous' (IP 16). While localisation is a potential resource for constructing legitimacy, as autocratisation and centralisation progress in Hungary, the competence of local governments is incrementally decreasing and the funding of local governments is becoming ideologically more selective (Kerényi, 2023). In this context, think tanks' access to the local level and the resulting legitimacy becomes more symbolic than practical.

Targeting the public

Another way for think tanks to expand their outputs and audience and achieve legitimacy was to go beyond the expert and decision-maker community and engage with the general public. To achieve this, several think tanks complemented traditional knowledge-production techniques with advocacy work and democratic education activities. Education and awareness-raising practices are not unique to the Hungarian context; think tanks elsewhere in both non-autocratic and autocratic countries serve educational purposes (Stone, 2013; Kelstrup, 2016; Djordjevic and Stone, 2023: 343; Jezierska, 2023: 265). Indeed, think tanks generally see education as an important tool to discuss ideas and gain legitimacy. What is specific to Hungary, though, is that reaching out to the public served the purpose of the political project to which the think tank was aligned, whether a liberal democratic project or an illiberal autocratic one.

Educational activities took different forms. In addition to traditional educational activities, think tanks sought a larger audience and legitimacy by broadening their outputs, including podcasts, YouTube videos, articles in pop culture magazines, issue statements and comments, pub talks and summer universities. A non-aligned think tank argued: 'It's important to reach the elite, it's important to have a professional environment, but we have to be a bit more open than that and that's why we tried this' (IP 14). Engaging with the public also meant meeting with people beyond the capital city, where government voters mainly reside, and presenting knowledge in a more accessible form:

> [We need] to recognise that not everyone is able to process the knowledge that is available in written form. And that doesn't mean that they're not open-minded and intelligent, it just means that we have to find another form that suits them better. And that's why we still have these audiovisual tools that we want to use. (IP 6)

Educational initiatives were seen by non-aligned think tanks as strategies to strengthen support for democratic values. In contrast, education was used by government-aligned think tanks to promote the sustainability of the regime. A conservative think tank said the following about educational activities:

> That one [course] is specifically aimed at young people who are interested in public life and politics and want to get more involved in it … to have a deeper insight into public policy issues, to understand better what is going

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> on in the constitutional process, what the Hungarian political system looks like, how the parliament works. (IP 12)

Government-aligned think tanks also produced materials and communication for propaganda purposes, another specific output that promoted legitimacy, but this was rarely referred to as such by the interviewees. Communication branches of these think tanks served the government by communicating its main messages and influencing public opinion; they acted as talking heads in public, delivered campaign messages, and issued reports providing alternative repertoires of facts and arguments (Buzogány and Varga, 2018; 2023; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2021).

Overall, think tanks looked for legitimacy not just as experts but also as advocates, educators and brokers using various strategies and outputs. Non-aligned think tanks searched for new audiences to secure legitimacy, expanding from the restrictive national level to international and local levels, from elite to more inclusive targeting. The diversification of audiences to include transnational and local ones and the addition of new outputs created new entry points to policy making, new kinds of usefulness and new sources of legitimacy. Relevance had new meaning for think tanks on both sides of the political divide: non-aligned think tanks claimed to promote public interest by serving the democracy project, while government-aligned think tanks worked to maintain the regime.

Discussion and conclusions

Using Williams's (2018) three types of coherence as a framework of analysis, we examined how the individual, organisational and epistemic logics used for gaining legitimacy are combined, accommodated and negotiated. We focused on these practices in a specific context, autocratising Hungary, where policy processes close down, the political regime polarises and the maintenance of the legitimacy of policy expertise is increasingly difficult. As Williams argues 'the structural and cognitive features of each research context make available certain positions, which can be taken up' (2018: 65). Our analysis shows the contextual embeddedness of constructing policy-knowledge legitimacy in relation to knowledge producers, policy makers and the wider public.

As experts are increasingly clustered on opposite sides of the political divide – some with limited or no access to policy processes; others too close to the government, undermining their professional credibility – they rely on a series of practices to construct legitimacy. Our analysis demonstrates that despite the main bases of legitimacy (policy relevance and scientific robustness) remain to be seen as benchmarks for constructing legitimacy, they gain new meanings in the context of polarised, autocratising Hungary. Research integrity and robustness continue to be the main procedural anchors for legitimacy; however, instead of insisting on independence and research neutrality, values commitments are openly admitted. This is seen as inevitable given the constraints of polarisation and the notions of public interest associated with it. At the level of identities, the separation or decoupling of the organisation and the individual is necessary to bridge the political divide and balance professionally anchored and yet politically committed identities. It is also necessary to reframe relevance by diversifying outputs and audiences to show that even in autocratic contexts, regimes may not be the only sources of legitimacy for knowledge producers (Bakir, 2023). In this way, relevance can be redefined with reference to other audiences

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and different kinds of outcomes. While coherence in identity, process and outcome is fundamental to legitimacy (Williams, 2018), our analysis suggests a need for strategic incoherence: decoupling identities, giving up the image of independence or shifting from neutral providers of expertise towards advocacy strategies.

Although empirically we look at a specific case – Hungary's polarising, autocratising context – we see the tendencies in policy making observed in Hungary resonate with global trends. Highly politicised policy making, polarised publics and politics, populist tendencies of questioning truth, neutrality of knowledge and expertise are all patterns in today's turbulent policy environments (Capano et al, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to understand how these patterns influence the ways in which think tanks can negotiate legitimacy, in what ways (if any) legitimacy can still be anchored in research robustness and political relevance. As such we see our research as contributing not only to the little-researched case of Hungarian knowledge producers but also to the relatively scarce literature on how think tanks negotiate legitimacy (Williams, 2018) primarily in autocratising contexts but possibly also in other turbulent policy environments.

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Research ethics statement

The empirical research behind this article followed strict ethical research rules including informed consent for the interviews, and rules for anonymisation, storing and transfer of data in conformity with CEU's Ethical Research Policy.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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