

## Politicians and PR experts promote Western Balkans' path to the EU

MINISTERS AND COMMUNICATIONS EXPERTS FROM SOUTH EAST EUROPE MET WITH EU COLLEAGUES AT THE SEECOM CONFERENCE IN BERLIN

**The strengthening of the political dialogue between Brussels, Berlin and the Balkans was the main focus of this year's SEECOM conference on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2017. For the first time the biggest conference for government spokespersons from South East Europe has been hosted in Berlin. The event was organised by the KAS Media Program South East Europe and the SEECOM association, and backed by the Directorate General for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policies of the European Commission (DG NEAR).**

Over 140 participants from more than 15 nations attended the conference, among them politicians, PR experts, diplomats, NGO representatives and interested citizens. They came to inform themselves about the progress of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans as well as to enter into dialogue with the high-profile speakers.

The conference was opened by SEECOM Secretary General **Vuk Vujnović** and the Deputy General Secretary of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, **Dr. Gerhard Wahlers**. Vujnović underlined that an open citizen dialogue and an inclusion of citizens into the processes of reforms are vital for the further development of democratic societies in South East Europe. Moreover, he emphasised the role of Germany and France as examples for the idea of a unified Europe as well as for the future of the Western Balkans in the European Union.

During his opening speech Dr. Gerhard Wahlers said that an EU enlargement would

be, above all, a huge communication challenge: "With regard to this, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is especially proud to be co-host and co-founder of SEECOM."

Keynote speaker **David McAllister**, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament and Vice-President of the European People's Party (EPP), complimented the speech of Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, in which Juncker supported the accession of the Western Balkan States into the European Union by the year 2025. McAllister also mentioned Russian efforts to influence media, politics and civil society in some of the Western Balkan countries. He underlined that, in comparison with Russia, the EU has to communicate its achievements more clearly.

After their speeches David McAllister and Dr. Gerhard Wahlers answered many questions from the audience, among others on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The key message of both speakers was: "All six Balkan states need our attention."

### Focus on Berlin Process and the fight against Euroscepticism

Government members from Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia discussed the future of the Berlin Process, a German initiative concerning the EU enlargement. The debate was moderated by **Adelheid Wölfl**, South East Europe correspondent of the Austrian daily "Der Standard". Speakers were **Boris Grigić**, Assistant Minister in the Croatian

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Jadranka Joksimović**, Serbian Minister for European Integration, **Aleksandar Andrija Pejović**, Montenegrin Minister for European Affairs, as well as **Maciej Popowski**, Deputy General Secretary of the Directorate General for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policies of the European Commission.

Topics of this discussion included better citizen dialogue about European themes on a national level and media strategies with clear and simple statements about the EU enlargement. **Jadranka Joksimović** commented that for better communication with the EU, given structures like the newly established Ministry for European Integration in Serbia should be used. **Boris Grigić** described the experiences of Croatia with the EU accession process. He gave examples on positive narratives that his country used during the negotiations. **Aleksandar Pejović** underlined the media relations as a crucial part of communicating EU themes. With regard to communications on a national level, EU representative **Popowski** said that it is necessary to strengthen the sense of belonging of citizens towards the EU.

#### **Presentation of newly published KAS book on political communication**

After the end of the first panel, the KAS Media Program South East Europe presented a newly published book: "Reconnecting with citizens – from values to big data: Communication of governments, the EU and political parties in times of populism and filter bubbles". In an interview with the German media adviser and journalist **Christoph Lanz**, the authors **Christian Spahr**, Head of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, **Erik den Hoedt**, Director at the Public Information and Communication Office of the Dutch Ministry of General Affairs, and **Ivana Đurić**, Head of Communications of the Serbian Ministry for European Integration, discussed trends of political communication. **Christian Spahr** emphasised that the book's intentions were to support the daily work of press spokespersons in South East

European countries and to help them to strengthen their professional profiles.

#### **How can Europe resist fake news and propaganda?**

The second expert panel, moderated by **Erik den Hoedt**, was dedicated to disinformation. **Georg Streiter**, Deputy Spokesman of the German Government, underlined that dealing with fake news is a learning process for all European governments. Therefore, he continued, there is no clear and simple strategy to oppose them. **Iulian Chifu**, President of the Romanian Centre for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning in Bucharest, added that there is no immunity against fake news. In his opinion, the quality of the media decreased and they are often not working in the best interest of the citizens, but rather constantly fighting for the highest click rates.

**Alina Frolova**, Adviser for Strategic Communications at the Ministry for Information Policy in Ukraine, made the remark that journalists had a high responsibility not to share lies and false information. **Saulius Guzevičius**, Military Liaison Officer at the NATO StratCom Team in Brussels, said that nowadays the problem was not to find information, but to identify whether it is reliable or not. **Nebojša Regoje**, Spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also mentioned the increasing tendency to accuse true information as fake.

The following discussion on campaigning trends was moderated by **Christoph Lanz** again. Panellists were: **Ivana Đurić**, **Claus Giering**, Head of Communications at the EU Commission's Directorate General for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policies, **Vlad Kulminski**, Executive Director of the Institute for Strategic Initiatives in Chisinau, **John Verrico**, Immediate-Past President of the Association of Government Communication (NAGC) in the USA as well as **Anthony Zacharzewski**, Director of the NGO "Democratic Society" (Demsoc) in Brussels. The speakers mainly debated about different types of social media campaigns as well as the usage of big data.

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Afterwards, **Vincenzo Le Voci**, from the European communication network "Club of Venice", gave a speech about the cooperation between PR representatives in the public sector. "It is on the basis of partnership and interaction that we can create long-lasting and reliable communication outcomes", he said. After Le Voci's speech, Vuk Vujnović and Christian Spahr announced that SEECOM will continue to advance its work through cooperation with EU representatives and other partners.

#### **SEECOM General Assembly Meeting**

Subsequent to the conference was the annual SEECOM General Assembly. **Ognian Zlatev**, Head of the European Commission Representation in Bulgaria, has been confirmed again as SEECOM Chairman. Furthermore, the board members Christian Spahr, Ivana Đurić and Nebojša Regoje were unanimously re-elected. Dinka Živalj, Press Officer of the EU Representative Office in Kosovo, was newly elected into the board of SEECOM. New projects were planned during a panel with the closest partners of SEECOM. The next SEECOM conference in 2018 will prospectively be held in Sarajevo.

All SEECOM members agreed on their continued engagement to strive for more transparency, civil dialogue and a unified European future.

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#### **Imprint**

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