

## SEECOM: Press officers extend their Forum into new Association

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS EXPERTS MEET TOGETHER AT THE  
 "SOUTH EASTERN EUROPEAN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION CONFERENCE"

**80 PR specialists from the political sphere met together from 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> September at the 2<sup>nd</sup> SEECOM Conference in Budva. This should in future take place on an annual basis. It is concerned with the professional public relations activity of governments and public authorities. KAS and its partners have now gone a step further and have developed the Conference into the first professional association with a profile of this nature.**

From now on SEECOM is not only a high-level conference but an established network of PR specialists from the public sector. 80 government spokespersons and political communicators from the Balkan countries but also experts from Germany and the USA make up the membership of the new Association, which was established unanimously by the participants at the conclusion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SEECOM Conference. The name of the Conference was adopted for the Association. SEECOM is a forum for exchange of views and the professional further development of PR specialists of governments, parliaments, the judiciary and other state authorities in the countries in transition of South East Europe. The Association should contribute to ensuring that the development of democracy is accompanied by professional political communications. The acronym SEECOM stands in future for "South East Europe Public Sector Communication Association".

Krunoslav Vidić, the press spokesman of the Croatian Ministry of Labour, was elected as the honorary Chairman of SEECOM. General Secretary is Vuk Vujnović, PR specialist of the Government of Montenegro. Executive

Board members are Christian Spahr, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, based in Sofia, together with Nadica Dujović of the Development Program of the United Nations (UNDP) in Montenegro and Dinka Živalj of the Regional Co-operation Council (RCC).

The establishment of the Association goes back to an idea from Vuk Vujnović and Christian Spahr, who wanted to create a stable basis for the annual SEECOM Conference and further networking of government spokespersons in South East Europe. With their partners from UNDP and RCC they prepared the Statute of the Association and other framework conditions in the summer of 2013. SEECOM will be registered in Montenegro as an international non-governmental organisation and should have its headquarters in Budva, where the Conference was first established.

**Frank Priess (KAS):**  
**"SEECOM is a network for values"**

This also follows, as SEECOM rests in its thinking on the principles of the "Budva Declaration", a professional and ethical self-commitment by government spokespersons. It was adopted by participants at the first SEECOM Conference in 2012 and stands, among other things, for the principles of transparency and openness, involvement of citizens and orientation to public interest in communication by authorities.

Frank Priess, Deputy Head of European and International Cooperation of the KAS, emphasised in Budva the responsibility of press spokespersons for the democracy.

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"For political communication, good resources and structures are required. But even more important is the professional attitude of PR managers in politics. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung actively involves itself as one of the hosts of the SEECOM because it is a place of experts who see their job as a social responsibility. SEECOM is a network for values."

**Vice-premier Marković underlines the potential for citizen participation**

In addition to the KAS Media Program South East Europe, the hosts of the SEECOM Conference 2013 were the Government of Montenegro, UNDP Montenegro, RCC and the US Embassy in Podgorica. Leading figures were present at the opening. Duško Marković, Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, emphasised the opportunities of modern communications. Public relations activity which goes beyond pure information enables citizens to participate in the decision-making process. Small countries above all could not afford to neglect the potential of citizen involvement. The US Deputy Ambassador in Podgorica and representatives of UNDP and RCC also spoke at the opening.

International experts exchanged ideas and experiences on successful models of communication in four podium discussions. Today what governments announce as authorities is continuously decreasing in significance. Civil society demands its right to participate actively in political life, so that the importance of communication increases as part of political decision-making. Adrian Rosenthal, for example, an expert on social media with MSL Germany in Berlin, said that the Internet, above all, makes it possible for citizens to be heard by decision-makers.

Jens Teschke, Press Spokesman for the German Ministry of the Interior, emphasised the opportunities and risks for PR managers. "In Crisis Communication the principle is, if you want to avoid a scandal, you must give sufficient information." In addition, the precise choice of words is of importance. Spokespersons of governments

and ministries should not forget that they are often dealing with serious subjects and should guard against an increasing tendency to try to be entertaining.

Further well-known guests were John Verrico, President of the US National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC), Nebojša Regoje, Spokesman of the Bosnian Foreign Ministry, and Ognian Zlatev, Head of the European Commission Representation in Bulgaria.

Part of the conference was also a practical Workshop on the "Art of Effective Public Speaking". Joan Detz, a specialist from the USA, offered some expert advice. It should not be forgotten that a speech will be given once only – there is no second chance for making a good impression. But those who master the art of speaking receive their reward: media like to quote good speakers.

**South East Europe: Not every government has an official spokesperson**

Unlike Western Europe and the USA, in South Eastern Europe professional political communication has no fixed place in the organisational charts of many government departments. It is far from true that every Prime Minister has an official spokesperson to appear on their behalf. The same is true of ministries. And only around one in two Heads of Government in the Balkans has a profile in the leading online network Facebook. In addition there is a need to catch up in some areas in respect of access to information for journalists and in equality of treatment of media. There is still no broad consensus on the differing social roles of political communicators and media representatives in democracy. These are some of the topics which could be addressed in further SEECOM conferences and in the work of the Association.

In future the conference should take place in different locations in South Eastern Europe, to emphasise its regional character. The host country in 2014 is expected to be Croatia.