

PR of parties enhancing its profile – profession still in development

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION IS PARTICULARLY DEMANDING – THE KAS ASSEMBLES EXPERTS FROM SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Many PR managers of political parties in the Balkan countries are engaged in pioneering work. In a polarised media landscape and in social media they must address the right target groups with modern communication methods. The KAS Media Program South East Europe invited experts to an exchange of experiences at the KAS Academy in Cadenabbia (Italy). German PR professionals and journalists contributed to the international seminar held from 31st October to 2nd November 2013.

A survey by the KAS Media Program shortly before the conference had highlighted the progress made in political PR: today virtually all of the parties affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP) in South Eastern Europe have a designated communication division which is not confined only to issuing press releases. Almost all party leaders have a profile on Facebook, and one in three party headquarters twitters in the name of its leader. However, many party leaders still reserve appearances in front of TV cameras for themselves – only one in two of them have an explicit press spokesperson who makes statements on their behalf. This shows that the profession of press spokesperson is still undergoing development.

Heads of communications and PR managers of parties from nine countries of South Eastern Europe were present in Cadenabbia: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. The common challenges faced by those communicating on behalf of parties in the Balkans clearly

emerged from participants' reports on the situation in their own countries:

- direct access for the person responsible for PR to the party leader
- opportunities for consultation with the party leadership
- the role played by spokespersons and PR advisors inside the party
- polarisation of the media landscape
- difficulty of access to media for opposition parties
- lack of ethical standards for the relationships of PR personnel with journalists
- maintaining personal integrity and protection of one's own private life

In relation to the role of PR managers in their own party, their advisory and guiding functions above all needed to be emphasised. Marko Selaković, for example, press spokesman of the Serbian party URS, thought that leading figures in the party should not brush aside calls from the press office. A number of those attending the seminar described the difficulties of ensuring that members of parliament supported the official party line in interviews. On this point, several participants recommended detailed briefings with current questions and answers for party group members to their colleagues.

As one of the formal speakers, Dirk M. Herrmann, Press Spokesman of the CDU Parliamentary Group in Thüringen, gave an insight into the organisation of the press work of a broad-based electoral party in Germany. A main emphasis in his presentation was on the management of com-

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munications at national and regional levels – a topic which also concerns many of his colleagues in the Balkans. Among other aspects, the question was raised of how politicians from a region can become visible to the whole country in leading media.

Interests of PR managers and journalists insufficiently differentiated

Dr. Markus Spieker, TV political correspondent in the ARD's capital studio in Berlin, discussed the differing roles of press spokespersons and journalists with the participants. It became clear that the spheres of interest of these occupations in Germany are much more strongly differentiated than in the Balkans. German journalists react with great sensitivity to interference with their independence, while in the Balkans agreements between PR people and editors are more frequent. Political communicators in South East Europe are reluctant to give this up because they assume that representatives of all parties make use of these opportunities. Parties that are involved in government mostly have much better opportunities to influence the media as opposition forces.

The polarisation and lack of balance in the media landscape in South East Europe also informs the work of many PR managers. "My most important function is to reply to attacks", said one of the participants. "Communicating our own central arguments is only a secondary concern".

KAS supports ethical standards in political communication

The discussion made clear the need for ethical standards in both political communication and in journalism – a topic with which the KAS Media Program South East Europe has been engaged for years. The KAS not only supports the professional development of press councils, but with the "Budva Declaration" of the communications association SEECOM, together with its partners, also defined standards for governmental PR. Similar guidelines and recommendations should in future be produced for the press relations of parties.

A further leading topic of the seminar was the use of social media. The parties in South East Europe have recognized the potential of Facebook & Co. Especially against the background of a polarised media landscape, direct contact to voters is important. According to the participants, even in small countries like Albania, which are not yet universally provided with fast Internet, parties could achieve several hundred thousand "Likes". Martin Fuchs, communications advisor and blogger from Hamburg, discussed with the participants experiences in Web 2.0 and the advantages and disadvantages of individual online platforms. He formulated ten "golden rules" for parties in social media:

Golden rules for social media

1. Act strategically
2. Do not listen to your campaign advisor
3. Create social media not before the election
4. Listen to the citizens
5. Dare to talk
6. Integrate your potential voters in your decisions
7. Do not look to the pure fan and follower numbers
8. Get inspired by others
9. Do not be afraid of critical feedback
10. Don't try to be cool

In a concluding round of discussion, those with responsibility for PR emphasised that there is still a great need for further professionalization. The PR profession was not yet generally recognized, there were no strong professional associations and in many places no basic training. Vocational education programmes like those of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung were therefore important, but so too were the exchange of experience and network building among experts. The meeting in Cadenabbia aimed to cover all three of these aspects.

The positive response encourages the KAS Media Program South East Europe to continue professional training and networking of party spokespersons in future.

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