

MEDIA PROGRAM

SOUTH EAST EUROPE

CHRISTIAN SPAHR

JURO AVGUSTINOVIĆ

DR. VLADIMIR ZLATARSKY

May 2015

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Balkan countries: Government spokespersons visiting Berlin

COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS, PR STRATEGIES, THE GERMAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY WERE THEMES OF THE STUDY VISIT

The SEECOM association, jointly founded by the KAS Media Program South East Europe, supports exchange of professional experiences of PR experts from governments and public authorities. A delegation from six countries visited Germany to gain information about how German Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel, the CDU as well as the governmental authorities and politicians communicate with citizens. In addition the spokespersons obtained insights into the German media landscape by visiting the public broadcaster ARD and the tabloid BILD.

The KAS Media Program South East Europe has further intensified the international exchange between political PR experts. The aim is to make the communication of politicians more efficient, transparent, and closer to the citizens. This coincides with the goals and values of SEECOM – the central platform for spokespersons from governments and public authorities from the Balkan countries (www.seecom.info).

The members of SEECOM and some other communication experts accepted the invitation of the KAS Media Program South East Europe and the headquarters of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to visit Berlin. The nine participants met with political managers, PR experts, politicians and journalists from 17th to 23rd May. The concept included the development of new ideas for the political communication in South East Europe as well as discussions on the working conditions in the Balkan countries compared with Germany.

The focal points of the agenda were primarily communication by the German Government and public authorities, online communication and social media. Additional themes were the practical aspects of the organisation of press offices, strategic communication planning and ethical aspects of political PR. An emphasis was also placed on communication experts' understanding of their role in relation to their communication with journalists and citizens.

The Head of KAS Media Program South East Europe, Christian Spahr, expressed concern about the lack of communication on the political aims of the younger EU member states and accession candidates towards West and Central Europe. In the EU there is often a scarcity of public information about the Balkan countries and their politics.

More responsibility for stability – EU is the one and only model

Frank Priess, Deputy Head of European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, discussed the state of political security after the events in the Ukraine. The responsibility of the EU for the stability of all European countries has increased. **Jens Paulus**, Team Leader Europe and North America, emphasized that despite criticism the EU remains the one and only model for sustainable development of all European countries. In this context the aim of the KAS is to strengthen relationships with the candidate countries.

Anja Czymmeck, Desk Officer for the Western Balkans in the KAS Europe Team

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and **Henri Bohnet**, the Head of the Domestic Programs Division, exchanged opinions on the political situation with the guests from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia. The press spokesperson of the KAS, **Matthias Barner**, stressed that, with its 90 offices abroad, the Foundation are sought-after contact partners for German journalists interested in developments in other countries.

During the visit of the delegation to the Federal Press Office, the participants gained insights into the organisation of the daily communication of the German Government and Federal Chancellor Merkel. The Deputy Government Spokesperson **Georg Streiter** explained the tasks of his office and its collaboration with the Federal Chancellery. In addition, he presented the new Facebook page of the German Government. This has been launched recently and manages the comments of citizens in an unorthodox manner. The social media team reacts informally to critical posts of Internet users with humour instead of ignoring them. "Everyone says we shouldn't feed the trolls – but we do, in our own way," declared Streiter. In this way it became possible not to allow debates to escalate and maintain the basis for serious contributions.

Government wants to know what citizens understand by quality of life

Dr. Steffi Augter, responsible for the political planning in the Federal Chancellery, informed participants about the citizen dialogue initiative of Angela Merkel that started in April 2015. The German Government wants to find out what kind of vision about quality of life the citizens have and what is most important to them. The findings will be summarized in "indicators for quality of life", to which Government policy can be oriented. The participants in the dialogue were chosen at random and could use the opportunity to ask the Federal Chancellor important questions. The Citizen Dialogue will be continued until the third Quarter of 2016. The findings will be evaluated on the basis of scientific analysis (www.gut-leben-in-deutschland.de).

The expert group showed great interest when visiting the CDU headquarters. The Federal Manager of the Party, **Dr. Klaus Schüler**, explained the high level of acceptance in German society for the Head of the CDU and Chancellor Angela Merkel. He discussed with the guests the right way to focus campaigns based on the example of the Bundestag election campaign of 2013. The CDU wanted to spend the time until the next election campaign in improving its image also in areas of policy which are not its classic core themes. Social media should also not be treated separately in political communications, but integrated into the offline communication efforts. Dr. Schüler stressed that the strategy is more important than the channel. The Head of CDU online communications, **Anja Pfeffermann**, explained new aspects of the party's work with social media. A new trend and tool in this field are WhatsApp groups for members and supporters. The participants could refresh their Facebook timeline with photos from a tour around the party's headquarter.

95 percent of all politicians in the German Bundestag already use social media

On the second day of the study visit the social media expert from Hamburg **Martin Fuchs** gave an overview of the usage of social media by German politicians. 95 percent of the politicians in the Bundestag have a social media account. 93 percent are active on Facebook. Twitter ranks second with 53 percent. In comparison, 75 percent of all politicians in the EU Parliament are twittering. Every second Federal Ministry uses Facebook, 11 out of 14 Ministries are on YouTube and 12 out of 14 on Twitter. Fuchs expressed the view that a Facebook account is a great way to reach a huge number of citizens. The presence of politicians on social media is more and more a challenge for the traditional media in Germany. Politicians nowadays need traditional media less and less in order to present themselves.

A further part of the agenda tackled foreign policy. **Dr. Joachim Bertele**, Head of Bilateral Relations with Central, East and

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South East European States in the Federal Chancellery, emphasised two challenges for German foreign policy: the crisis in Ukraine and relationships with the states of the Western Balkans. Bertele gave a detailed overview of the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. In his view, Serbia and Kosovo have made progress in their efforts to get closer to the EU. Bertele expressed positive expectations about the accession negotiations with Serbia, if the country manages to meet the European requirements. The expert expressed concern about the situation in Macedonia. It was to be hoped that the political situation in Skopje would not lead to an ethnic and religious conflict. Bertele added that the conflicts in the Balkans also have an impact on Germany through an increased number of immigrants. An even closer collaboration was necessary in order to tackle the challenges, the expert concluded.

Hans-Joachim Falenski, Foreign Policy Advisor at the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group of the German Bundestag emphasised that all West Balkan countries should become EU member states, if they fulfil the requirements of the accession procedure. A main precondition for Serbia was the agreement with Kosovo. Falenski said that in Kosovo more intensive reforms should be made. Bosnia-Herzegovina had to take a new direction to become closer to the EU. The expert stressed that Germany tried to help this country in every respect, but there was often lack of local support.

Gunther Krichbaum, Chairman of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union of the Bundestag, also demanded a new strategy for Bosnia-Herzegovina. There was no significant political, economic and social development to be observed. In his opinion the ethnic groups in the country were broadly separated from one another in their political and social life. In addition, there was a need for more stability in order to attract international investors.

The German media landscape was a further focal point of the study visit. In the ARD Capital Studio the TV correspondent **Oliver**

Mayer-Rüth explained the model of the ARD and the funding of the public broadcasters in Germany. The participants also experienced a conference call in the editorial office of BILD and discussed the choice of topics and their placement with the Chief political correspondent **Hans-Jörg Vehlewald**.

Jens Teschke, responsible for strategy and communication at the Ministry of Agriculture, and **Norbert Wallet**, Head of the Berlin office of the daily Stuttgarter Nachrichten, debated the question "Politicians and journalists, how much distance?" with the group. Jens Teschke explained official and unofficial rules for the relationship between press spokespeople and journalists in Germany. PR experts and reporters shouldn't be too close to each other in order to remain credible in their professions. Norbert Wallet added that spokespersons of Ministries do not represent the most important sources for the journalists, because they search for information from diverse sources. Journalists have to know that their loyalty belongs only to the readers. This is also the basis for a professional relationship with the politicians, said Wallet.

Further exchange of professional know-how via KAS and SEECOM

All participants were highly satisfied with the insights provided into political Berlin and underlined the importance of the discussions for their professional goals. The group expressed the wish to continue to exchange ideas in future via KAS and SEECOM. The KAS Media Program will work closely with the government spokespersons to encourage professional development in political communication and support the European integration of the Balkan region in the field of communication.