

Better communication in Europe

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GOVERNMENT SPOKESPERSONS MEET IN SOFIA FOR THE 4TH SEECOM CONFERENCE

The SEECOM conference for government spokespersons, held in 2015 for the first time in Sofia at the invitation of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, took place against the background of the refugee crisis and the wish for improved perception of the Balkan region. On 18th and 19th September, over 60 PR experts from governments, public authorities and EU institutions discussed how the dialogue with citizens and international exchanges could be improved. The participants came from 15 European countries.

The professional association [SEECOM](#), founded by the KAS Media Program, brings together communications experts from the public sector with an interest in a modern concept of political communication – above all, transparency and citizens' dialogue. "It is a fundamental responsibility of governments to engage their citizens actively in politics", the Bulgarian President **Rosen Plevneliev** contended in a message to the conference participants. "Citizens are entitled to expect that leading politicians perform their work in a more transparent and efficient manner." Plevneliev expressed his support for the objectives of SEECOM and emphasised the increasingly decisive role of stronger regional cooperation in South East Europe facing challenges like the refugee crisis.

In a welcoming speech, the German ambassador in Bulgaria, **Detlef Lingemann**, expressed the view that citizens today have significantly higher expectations of the dialogue with politicians. The work of experts in communication in politics therefore acquires an increasing

significance. **Ognian Zlatev**, Head of the Representation of the EU Commission in Bulgaria and Chairman of SEECOM, underlined in his opening remarks that "public dialogue in the turbulent Balkan region is an instrument for the reconciliation of differences". **Christian Spahr**, Head of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, referred to representative surveys conducted by the Foundation in Bulgaria and Romania, according to which around two thirds of the citizens are dissatisfied with communication by politicians. "Particularly in situations of crisis, governments must increase their communication." It was therefore important to create good working conditions for spokespersons and PR specialists and to encourage the exchange of information about successful examples of citizen dialogue.

British Head of Communications Alex Aiken explains measurement of PR success

Alex Aiken, Head of the Communications Department of the British Government, presented a leading model in Europe in the field of government communications. "The function of communication is to improve the life of the citizen, and communication is a strategic contribution to the work of a government", Aiken asserted. In an interactive workshop with participants, he explained how the success of communication can be measured and improved. Communication was increasingly a scientific question.

In the first of three specialist panels, **Georg Streiter**, the Deputy German Government Spokesman, discussed innovative

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approaches for dialogue with citizens with experts from Bulgaria, Cyprus and Great Britain. The debate was moderated by KAS Press Spokesman **Matthias Barner**. Georg Streiter presented the initiative "Living well in Germany", a citizens dialogue started in April 2015 by Angela Merkel. The government wanted to find out what kind of conception the citizens have of quality of life and what is important for them. The findings should then lead to "indicators of quality of life", to which government policy will then be oriented. The citizens taking part were chosen at random and could use the opportunity to address important questions to the Federal Chancellor.

The London PR expert active in community politics, **Cormac Liam Smith**, emphasised communication must be oriented to the concrete needs of the people and for this, trust was necessary. "The age of the spin doctors is past." The PR industry must distance itself from its bad image. In the opinion of Cypriot communications expert **Eleonora Gavrielides**, the communication of governments should have a participatory character and incorporate feedback of citizens into political action. Online chats, social media and videos on the Internet were suitable means of interesting citizens in politics, according to **Aleksandra Atanasova**, Social Media Expert of the EU Commission in Bulgaria.

An attractive initiative in public diplomacy for South East Europe was the subject of a second podium discussion, moderated by SEECOM joint founder **Nadica Dujović**: How can culture be employed to make countries better known internationally?

Ragnar Siil, founder of the Estonian think tank Creativity Lab, pointed out that international cultural work is often regarded as equivalent to advertising for tourism. Countries in transformation, above all, should not only advertise their familiar traditions but display novel approaches of their creative industries. It was a matter of establishing the brand of a country and a kind of cultural communication, conveying ideas and values. With SEECOM General Secretary **Vuk Vujnović** and the Bosnian experts **Jasna Jelisić** and **Nebojša Regoje**,

Siil discussed how a concept of this kind is capable of realization in the Balkans.

The third panel was devoted to improved cooperation in the region and with the EU. Led by **Peter Lindvald-Nielsen** from the European Economic and Social Committee, it was concerned with how the Balkan countries can speak more strongly with one voice, and how EU issues can be better conveyed in South East Europe. SEECOM Chairman **Ognian Zlatev** emphasised that this was critical, particularly in dealing with the refugee crisis. Citizens and communities must articulate their views better, urged **Tom de Smedt** of the European Committee of the Regions. There were deficits in coordination between the local levels and higher authorities. **Vincenzo Le Voci** of the EU communications network Club of Venice was emphatic that communication in the refugee crisis must follow clear ethical criteria. The Kosovan Social Minister and government spokesman **Arban Abrashi** described examples of the challenges currently faced from Kosovo.

SEECOM commits itself to cultural themes and elects two new board members

Following the Conference, the General Assembly of the SEECOM Association met to decide the programme of work for 2016 and hold new elections for the committees of the Association. A new Working Group would concern itself with cultural themes as a means of public diplomacy. In addition, SEECOM wanted to identify and publicise good approaches to communication in the refugee crisis. **Ognian Zlatev** was confirmed as SEECOM Chairman for a second year. Together with General Secretary **Vuk Vujnović** and **Christian Spahr**, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, the Assembly elected two new, additional, board members: **Nebojša Regoje**, Head of Communication in the Foreign Ministry of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and **Ivana Đurić**, Assistant Director of the European Integration Office of the Serbian Government.

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