

MEDIA PROGRAM

SOUTH EAST EUROPE

CHRISTIAN SPAHR

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Scoring points with the voters

COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALISTS OF POLITICAL PARTIES FROM SOUTH EAST EUROPE MEET AT THE SECOND NETWORK WORKSHOP "E-LECTION BRIDGE"

A coordinated strategy for online and offline, fair and professional relations with the media and authentic appearances by candidates are key elements of a successful election campaign. This was confirmed in the exchange of views of 16 PR experts of political parties from South East Europe, meeting in Zagreb with colleagues from the CDU and KAS for the second "E-lection Bridge".

A polarised political landscape and media reporting with little attempt at balance are typical for South East Europe. Trust in the media and politicians is in some parts extremely low, as representative surveys by the KAS have shown. For example, in Romania and Bulgaria, only seven and eight percent respectively believe that they are well-informed by politicians about their decisions.

Parties in this region in particular face the challenge that party programmes are of little significance and the personalities of candidates all the more important. In addition, parties are competing for attention in political discussion with NGOs. "NGOs are today regarded as sexier but the parties still play the central role in the formation of political opinion", according to **Frank Priess**, Deputy Director of the KAS Central Department for European and International Cooperation, during the official opening. "That's why we want to support parties in being attractive to citizens and potential members."

Christian Spahr, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe and host of the "E-lection Bridge", called for a modern

understanding of political communication, in which citizens and journalists are not only target groups but also dialogue partners. The "E-lection Bridge" should be a bridge over which positive approaches and new trends in political campaigning will be exchanged, between Germany and South East Europe but also between the individual countries of the Balkan region. Among other aspects, the participants from 11 countries were concerned with improved internal processes in the preparation of campaigns, effectively reaching floating voters, and building trust in candidates.

Campaign chiefs must convince their co-workers, members and supporters

The main speaker of the "E-lection Bridge" 2016 was **Holger Haibach**, Head of Internal Management of the German CDU and former member of the Bundestag. He argued that it is not only questions of PR but also the internal organisation, personnel policy, and financial concept of a party that are crucial for successful campaigns. According to Haibach, "we can have the best ideas and produce the best policies but to put them into practice we must convince our co-workers, members and supporters". Without involving broader circles in the membership no party headquarters could conduct an election campaign. In addition, it was essential to establish and highlight priorities in key messages. These must, furthermore, suit the personality of the leading candidate. It was not advisable to change the strategy, once chosen, in the middle of the campaign. This could undermine credibility. Haibach gave a detailed account of the regional organisation

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of the CDU, attracting volunteers for campaigns, the analysis of important target groups and trends in political communication in Germany.

The party representatives from South East Europe also discussed “Do’s and Dont’s” of election campaigning among themselves.

Ante Janković (Croatian Democratic Union 1990, Bosnia and Herzegovina) maintained that a campaign leader needed a strong position in the party: “Let your candidates know that they are not there to satisfy their own demands but that they must follow the common strategy.” The candidate must also be clearly distinguishable from others.

Ionuț Stroe (PNL, Romania) said first, there was no generally applicable blueprint for an election campaign. But one had to choose carefully which party representative should speak on behalf of the leading candidate, as not everyone was good at public appearances. In addition, these required a simple, understandable election message.

Anamarija Vicsek (SVM, Serbia) recommended adopting the perspective of the voter in an election campaign: “Don’t say what you want to do in office, but what you want to do for the citizens.” People had to know that a candidate was concerned about them.

Journalists are interested in good political narratives

Participants discussed the relationship between parties and media with **Henning Tewes**, Managing Director of RTL Croatia and RTL Editor-in-Chief **Ivan Lovreček**. According to Tewes, the process of transformation in South East Europe is not yet complete. “Many thought the end of this process is joining the EU – but that was an illusion.” In the judiciary and the media continuity was partly to be observed of post-communist personnel. Since 2011 there was again increasing resistance against political and economic transformation which in several countries was leading to antiliberal tendencies.

Politicians were often not aware that pressure on the media undermined professional behaviour and trust between the two professional groups, thought Lovreček. “Don’t believe that you can control the media”, he advised, “but engage in dialogue with us.” Journalists were interested in good political narratives. The participants also met the Croatian TV Moderator **Mislav Togonal** (Talkshow “Otvoreno”). He went into the debates on media policy in Croatia and explained the working of public service broadcasting. **Dr. Michael Lange**, Head of the KAS office in Zagreb, explained to the guests the internal political challenges in Croatia, which is currently facing new elections.

Slogans must suit the strategy and the candidate

In concluding the workshop, **Florian C. Feyerabend**, desk officer for the Western Balkans in the KAS Head Office, underlined the importance of good planning as a precondition of successful campaigns. Preparations had to begin early. It was also crucial to define target groups clearly and tailor slogans well to suit the election strategy and the candidate. In the view of Christian Spahr, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe, it was also clear that the Internet cannot yet replace addressing voters offline but only supplement this. Several participants had emphasised that particularly older voters and those living in rural areas in South East Europe could still best be addressed through conventional media or in person.

Participants were highly satisfied with the opportunity to learn about successful communication strategies from other countries. This could lead to the dialogue with voters becoming closer to ordinary citizens. In addition, the speakers had passed on numerous practical tips. The KAS Media Program will continue in future to offer workshops on modern political communication.