

Spokespersons from Balkan countries reinforce their EU network

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION EXPERTS MEET WITH EU COLLEAGUES AND PARTNERS AT THE 5TH SEECOM CONFERENCE IN BRUSSELS

Perception of the EU in the context of Brexit and the refugee crisis was the main topic of the SEECOM conference on 6th October 2016. This is the biggest conference for government communications experts from South East Europe and was held for the fifth time – on this occasion in Brussels. The hosts were the KAS Media Program South East Europe, the [SEECOM](#) association, jointly founded by the KAS, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR).

Some 80 PR specialists and politicians from governments, parliaments and international organisations from more than 15 states took part in the conference. With the cooperation of the EU institutions, the network of South East European public sector communicators could be further strengthened at regional and European level.

The conference was opened by SEECOM Secretary General **Vuk Vujnović** and **Christian Spahr**, Director of the KAS Media Program South East Europe. Spahr emphasised the significance for SEECOM of meeting in Brussels, where the association's most important partners are located. It was necessary to strengthen the ties between senior government spokespersons from the Balkan region and their peers in the EU. "The international view of South East Europe is too often restricted to the challenges of transformation like the fight against corruption or the need to improve democratic institutions. The Balkan

countries play a crucial role for stability in Europe and for the EU's geopolitical interests," said Spahr. Vujnović underlined the importance of professional political communication: "Meaningful dialogue between governments, civil society and citizens is a critical element of political stability, social cohesion and economic progress."

There was a vigorous debate among the communications experts on EU public relations in South East Europe in the course of the refugee crisis. They agreed that the EU needed to find new forms of dialogue with civil society, including simpler and clearer messages, addressing not only facts but also citizens' personal sensibilities.

Communicating European values: the need to work together with civil society

The way in which the EU communicates with the accession countries, and globally, was the main focus of the SEECOM conference. Spahr, as the host, emphasised that it was important, particularly in times of political crises, to engage more actively with shared European values. In competing with other political models the EU had to be more successful in explaining its position and fundamental principles.

EESC Vice-President **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier** observed in the opening session that communication with the public lacked an unambiguous system of values. Regional initiatives and cooperation between governments and organisations in civil

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society were of particular importance to renew awareness of European virtues. The Rapporteur on Communication of the Committee of the Regions, **Christophe Rouillon**, made clear in his speech that European values had to be internalised and defended by both politicians and citizens.

Angelina Eichhorst, Director for Western Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey of the European External Action Service (EEAS), spoke about Brexit and its consequences for the EU. It was essential to look for points of contact with citizens to develop shared perspectives: "Young people in particular need more inspiration, and this is also true for the project of Europe." The EU could improve its communication with citizens if it had a better understanding of their wishes and needs.

During the first expert panel, the Head of Communications of the Government of the Netherlands, **Erik den Hoedt**, examined polarisation and radicalisation of the political landscape in his country and drew conclusions for communication with citizens. With regard to the refugee crisis, politicians had to engage more intensively with citizens' anxieties: "The EU has to deal with the effects of globalisation and must find a clear language to confront these fears."

Claus Giering, Head of Communications at the EC Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), displayed examples of video communication of the EU. He explained how the EU incorporates emotions in their visual language and the role these play in presenting Europe to the outside world. The greatest challenge in times of social media was the question "quality or speed of production?" To achieve good results in the long term, if in doubt, quality must have priority.

Ksenija Milenković, Director of the Serbian office for European Integration, provided insights into the work of her office. She said that EU enlargement was being regarded more critically in Serbia after the Brexit, also in the media. "The media establish particular values. Clear and unambiguous

messages from the EU in the context of enlargement are therefore of greater importance," said Milenković.

The refugee crisis as a challenge for communications of the EU

The second panel of the conference was devoted to the theme of migration. The discussion was led by **Ivana Đurić**, Assistant Director of the EU Integration office of the Serbian Government. In his keynote address, **Georg Streiter**, Deputy Spokesman for the German Federal Government, stressed that the refugee crisis was a mutual European issue. The greatest challenge was the communication with the receiving countries. As an example of best practice, he mentioned the KAS publication "[Germany – First Information for Refugees](#)" in Arabic and German. This summarises important information about Germany which every new arrival should know. Its author, **Rocco Thiede**, also took part in the panel discussion and presented the project in detail.

Susin Park, Head of the UNHCR Representation for South East Europe, emphasised that the refugee crisis was global and not only European. There were countries which were accepting considerably more refugees than the EU. How the EU was reacting to migration, was noticed throughout the world. **Martina Smilevska**, from a Macedonian NGO of young lawyers, spoke about the situation in her country. Her organisation is offering free legal assistance to refugees. To cope with the crisis, the EU and the accession countries had to adopt long term political measures instead of relying exclusively on a policy of reaction.

Another focus of the work of SEECOM is culture as an instrument in public diplomacy. The third panel of the conference was devoted to this topic. **Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović**, Secretary General of the cultural heritage organisation Europa Nostra, talked about cultural legacy as a resource for storytelling. There was too much negative reporting about Europe. Governments could do a great deal to

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counter this with strategic communication in the area of culture. The cultural heritage of South East Europe was an inseparable component of Europe. In this connection, **Todor Chobanov**, Deputy Mayor of Sofia, presented successful measures of public policy in his city.

Culture as a theme in government communication

Nataša Aćimović, the Mayor of Herceg Novi, showed, by the example of her town in Montenegro, how culture can be employed as a theme in urban development. EU adviser **Jasna Jelisić** highlighted further aspects from Bosnia and Herzegovina. She emphasised the importance of developing a communication strategy for cultural themes and drew attention to new aspects and modern approaches in communication of culture. The discussion was led by **Jonila Godole**, Director of the Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture (IDMC) in Tirana.

Visit of MEP Eva Paunova to the KAS European Office

At an evening reception by the KAS European Office in Brussels, the Bulgarian MEP **Eva Paunova** (GERB) spoke about Europe's position in the digital world and political online communication. Her address was received with great interest by the audience and led to a lively discussion about the use of social media in political communication.

In conclusion, the annual SEECOM General Assembly was held. **Ognian Zlatev**, Head of the Representation of the EU Commission in Bulgaria, was re-elected by the members as Chairman of SEECOM. In addition, **Vuk Vujnović** was confirmed as Secretary General for a further year. Among other matters, an assurance was received of continued cooperation with experts of the EU Commission and the Government of the Netherlands in 2017. The next SEECOM conference would take place in October 2017 in Berlin or Sarajevo.

Members of SEECOM were unanimous in their continued engagement for a modern understanding of political communication – above all for transparency, authenticity and dialogue with citizens.

With the assistance of Dobrina Trifonova