

Media experts from South East European NGOs visit Berlin

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS OF KAS DEBATE CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN JOURNALISM AND POLITICS WITH GERMAN EXPERTS

The study visit took place from 23 to 29 April in Berlin, organised by the KAS department for domestic programmes and the KAS Media Program South East Europe. The guests from Albania, Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Italy, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia met politicians, KAS representatives, journalists and NGO managers.

Germany is perceived as a leading power in the EU. This is what the guests from South East Europe mentioned many times in the discussions. It is one of the reasons why they are interested in meeting decision makers from Berlin. The future of the EU in the context of migration and Brexit as well as current challenges in the political landscape of South East Europe were key themes of the discussions. Fake News and the declining trust in media as well as the impact of activities of NGOs have equally been debated.

Dr. Lars Hänsel, Head of the Team Europe and North America of KAS, and **Christian Spahr**, Head of the KAS Media Program, opened the event and spoke about the role of KAS, regional and international cooperation. Spahr emphasised the main goal of the study visit which is to strengthen Germany's dialogue with the countries of South East Europe.

The participants met Deputy Government Spokesperson **Georg Streiter** and were acquainted with the work of the Federal Press Office. Streiter explained his view on professional communication and drew a

clear line between working for the state and working for a party – two fields that get intertwined too often in South East Europe.

With the federal elections ahead the meeting with **Anja Pfeffermann**, CDU expert on online communication, attracted much interest. She shared innovative social media concepts with the participants and advised on how to handle trolls and hate speech, taking the online communication strategies of the CDU as an example.

The delegation also visited BILD's editorial office and could discuss the concept of the German tabloid, which has 20 million readers per day, with chief reporter **Hans-Jörg Vehlewald**. The guests were invited to join a daily editorial video conference.

EU perspectives for the Western Balkans

Another highlight was the exchange with **Hans-Joachim Falenski**, Foreign Affairs Advisor of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, and the following tour of the Reichstag Dome. Falenski commented on current challenges in South East Europe as the increasing nationalism and the growing influence of countries as Russia, Turkey, and Arabic States. He also supported the hypothesis that a change in the Balkan States should not be initiated by the EU or Germany, but from within the region. This opinion was shared by **Thorsten Frei**, member of the German Parliament and Deputy Federal Chairman of the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, whom the group met afterwards. The journey to EU integration is

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MEDIA PROGRAM
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May 2017

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long and criteria for membership should be complied with, he said. Requirements as a sound judicial system, stability of political life and a functioning market economy are important. One thing should not be forgotten in the region: No state could function on its own and cooperation is necessary to progress, according to Frei.

The NGO representatives also had an opportunity to debate with three German colleagues: **Tabea Grzeszyk** from the Hostwriter network, **Hanno Gundert**, n-ost, and **Maximilian Kuball**, journalists.network. They all highlighted the importance of international cooperation and discussed current examples as the investigative project „Panama Papers“. Two essential issues were discussed: The sustainability of NGO activities and different methods of fundraising.

During the study visit, the NGO “Reporters without Borders” (RSF) has published its annual ranking on Press Freedom. The guests had the opportunity to discuss the results with RSF’s German manager **Christian Mihr**.

The experts from South East Europe, Italy and Austria had an intensive week in Berlin – with very competent dialogue partners and an agenda full of current political topics as the federal elections, European perspectives for the Balkan States, the German Foreign Policy and the development of media NGOs. To get to know Germany and its culture in this way was appreciated by all participants.



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