

Speech

Government PR and the "hub" approach: public accountability, professional exchange and digital innovation

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Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Government PR is nowadays strongly linked to the aspect of responsibility towards the citizens, but also to the development of a true dialogue with citizens and within the PR community. I have been asked to focus on the two aspects of public accountability and professional exchange, and would like to give you recent examples from South East Europe where the KAS Media Program is active. Besides that, I have heard that the new management of digital topics within the German Government is of interest, and I will briefly touch on that aspect in the end. For all these topics, the idea of creating hubs plays an important role.

In a recent analysis for our foreign policy magazine "KAS International Reports", we have examined the establishment of "Right to information" laws and their application in the Balkans. Both for journalists and citizens, RTI laws have become a strong instrument for obtaining transparency. They are sometimes a more effective lever than specific provisions in media law, and they help civil society actors to participate in debates. The right of access to state information has nowadays a de facto status of a human right, as it is based on many global and European conventions and court decisions. In Central and Eastern Europe, RTI laws play a particularly important role: They have helped to make politics more transparent after the system change. Formerly, government knowledge was reserved for a small elite. Today, there are more RTI laws in this region than in Western countries, and they are often more progressive.



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**PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY:
FROM SECRECY TO COMMON KNOWLEDGE**

- "Right to information" laws: strong instrument for journalists and citizens
- Help civil society actors to participate in public debates
- Today widespread adoption of RTI laws – a human right
- Roots: Declaration of Human Rights (1948), ICCPR (1966), Article 10 ECHR
- More RTI laws in Central/Eastern Europe than Western countries
- Legislation of new EU states / candidates in some respects more progressive

During the formulation of RTI laws in the Balkans, lawmakers could learn from shortcomings in the West. Serbia has received the highest marks for its freedom of information law. It is placed first out of 95 states in a ranking of the NGO "Access Info Europe". Criteria are the scope of application of the law, permitted exceptions, the procedures and sanctions. A main reason for Serbia scoring high is the institution of an Ombudsman as a "hub" between state and citizens.

The Public Commissioner for Access to Information receives complaints, decides on contentious cases, and issues instructions to authorities. In seven years, he dealt with 15,000 complaints and solved 91 percent of them. In a KAS survey, journalists have rated the law as good, but the cooperation of authorities still only as average. Quite often, authorities refer to the protection of personal data or to “commercial secrets”, or argue that they are not responsible.



CASE STUDY: SERBIA SCORES HIGH – IN THEORY

- The country's RTI law placed first out of 95 states in ranking of “Access Info Europe”
- Criteria: scope of application, permitted exceptions, procedures, sanctions, etc.
- Ombudsman: receives complaints from citizens, decides on contentious cases, issues instructions to public authorities
- Seven years – 15,000 complaints
- Intermediations: 91 percent successful
- Journalists: Good law, but willingness of authorities only average



According to an estimation of SEECOM, the recently founded Public Sector Communication Association, the prevailing communication practice of public institutions in South East Europe is simply giving information about public policies. An effective dialogue between authorities and citizens is still rare. Therefore, SEECOM will introduce a “Transparency, Accountability and Public Participation Programme” as one of two pillars of activities (another one will focus on informing, educating and engaging citizens in European integration affairs). The “TAPP” programme aims at spreading effective communication practices, making collaborative communication projects possible, and increasing the engagement of civil society in policy design. SEECOM is a “hub” for professional exchange of Public Sector communicators in South East Europe.

PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGE: SEECOM PRIORITIES

- Prevailing communication practice of public institutions in South East Europe is simple information about public policies
- Effective dialogue between public authorities and citizens is rare
- → Transparency, Accountability and Public Participation Programme (TAPP)
- Areas of action: introducing effective communication practices, collaborative communication projects, engagement of citizens / civil society in policy design
- New website: www.seecom.info



One example of such a professional exchange is the Montenegrin project “Be responsible” which is currently being discussed. It is a Web portal that tackles one of the biggest problems of the country, the grey economy, which is estimated at 20 percent of the GDP. The project encourages citizens to report grey economy, but also abuses of authority and environmental offences. Smartphone users can download an app, take photos and send them to authorities, and half of the revenues from fines are invested in community projects like kindergartens. In Germany, reporting law violations of fellow citizens to authorities is seen more critical due to our history, but in the context of the region, it can actually make sense. Representatives of other countries are interested in the idea which can afterwards be adapted to the local context.

BEST PRACTICE: “BE RESPONSIBLE” (MONTENEGRO)

- Tackle informal (grey) economy, 20 % of Montenegro's GDP
- Encourage citizens to report grey economy
- Smartphone users take photos and send them to authorities
- Half of revenues from fines invested in community projects
- Interest of other countries' officials in the approach, possible exchange



The “hub” approach to which I referred is also a leitmotiv in the discussion how to organise digital topics in the German government. In the coalition agreement between conservatives

and social democrats, the Internet plays an important role, reflecting the harsh debates on data privacy. Net activists and the industry had advocated an “Internet ministry” or a minister of state for digital issues over years. So far, the ministries of interior, justice, economy and consumer protection competed with each other for these topics. Now the new government has bundled technical and economical issues of the digital sector in the ministry of transport, making it a comprehensive department of infrastructure. That makes certainly sense because there are deficits in the broadband supply of rural regions and in the global competitiveness of Internet firms. However, Minister Alexander Dobrindt is not covering the societal aspects of the digitalisation. In addition, the government created a new Parliament committee for “Digital Agenda” which was positively registered both by the industry and the Net community.



THE “INTERNET MINISTER”: DIGITAL INNOVATION ON THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT’S AGENDA

- Internet plays important role in 2013 coalition agreement of CDU/CSU and SPD
- Net activists and industry had advocated an “Internet ministry” or minister of state
- Now technical and economical issues are bundled in “Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure” (Alexander Dobrindt, CSU)
- Societal aspects (privacy, copyright, consumer rights) stay in other ministries
- In addition: new permanent Bundestag committee for Digital Agenda




Thank you very much for your attention.