

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FOR POLITICAL LEADERS IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

CHRISTIAN SPAHR, KAS MEDIA PROGRAM
PRO.PR CONFERENCE, BUDVA, 9 APRIL 2016



THE KONRAD-ADENAUER-STIFTUNG (KAS)

- A German political foundation
- A non-profit organization, influenced by Christian democratic values and principles
- Present throughout Germany with 16 regional offices
- Active around the world with offices in 100 countries
- In South East Europe: 10 country offices, two regional programs (Media/Rule of Law)



MEDIA PROGRAMS OF KAS



★ KAS Media Program
South East Europe
(2007), Sofia, Bulgaria

★ KAS Media Program
Asia (1996),
Singapore

★ KAS Media Program
Sub-Saharan Africa
(2002), Johannesburg,
South Africa

CHANGE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

- **Information** by political leaders: not just for elites – for the public
- Political **leaders**: not omniscient – open for advice
- Political **power**: not without limits – subject to public scrutiny
(Democracy, Globalization, Web 2.0: Politicians have to give explanations)
- Development of political systems and communication:
two sides of the same coin

CHANGE OF INFORMATION CULTURE

- Due to internet, no borders between consumers and producers of information
- Every second Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian uses the internet (Germany 84%)
- Most internet users read news portals, some discuss politics online
- Every fifth internet user creates content (Romania, Bulgaria; Eurostat 2015)
- Citizens' protests via internet (Bulgaria 2013, BiH 2014, Macedonia 2015)
- Independent news portals and investigative media platforms gain popularity

SOUTH EAST EUROPE – MEDIA

- **Crisis of trust:** 12 % of Bulgarians believe in free media (2016; 28 % of Romanians, 2015)
- **Print crashes:** run of traditional nationwide newspapers 10-20.000 (example: Bulgaria)
- **TV unchallenged:** Main source of political information for 68 % of Bulgarian population and most trusted media for 54 %
- **Financial distress:** most media = loss-makers
- **Media freedom:** Negative tendencies – only 3 SEE countries with small progress (RWB 2015)
- **Reasons:** in most countries not oppression by state, but shortcomings in media sector itself



TO DO'S IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

National level

- Governments/parties in transition countries need to explain many changes to citizens
- Win elections, keep approval on high level

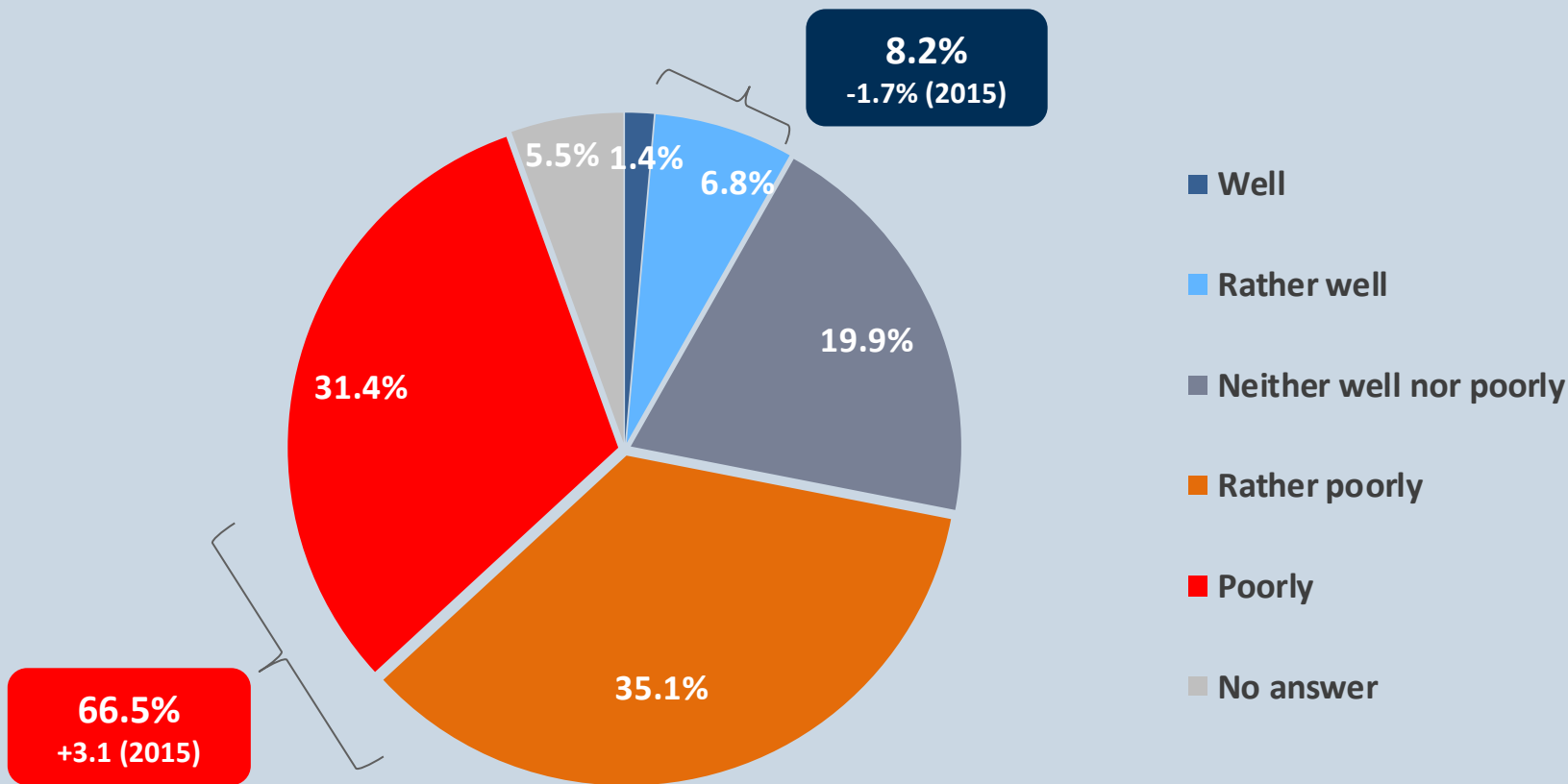
International level

- New EU states/candidates (and parties) need to be seen as professional partners
- Too many negative headlines in Western media (corruption, rule of law deficits, poor reforms, authoritarianism, ethnic tensions)
- Especially in times of crisis, good inward and outward communication is crucial. Political comms = more than propaganda. Citizens want to be dialogue partners.



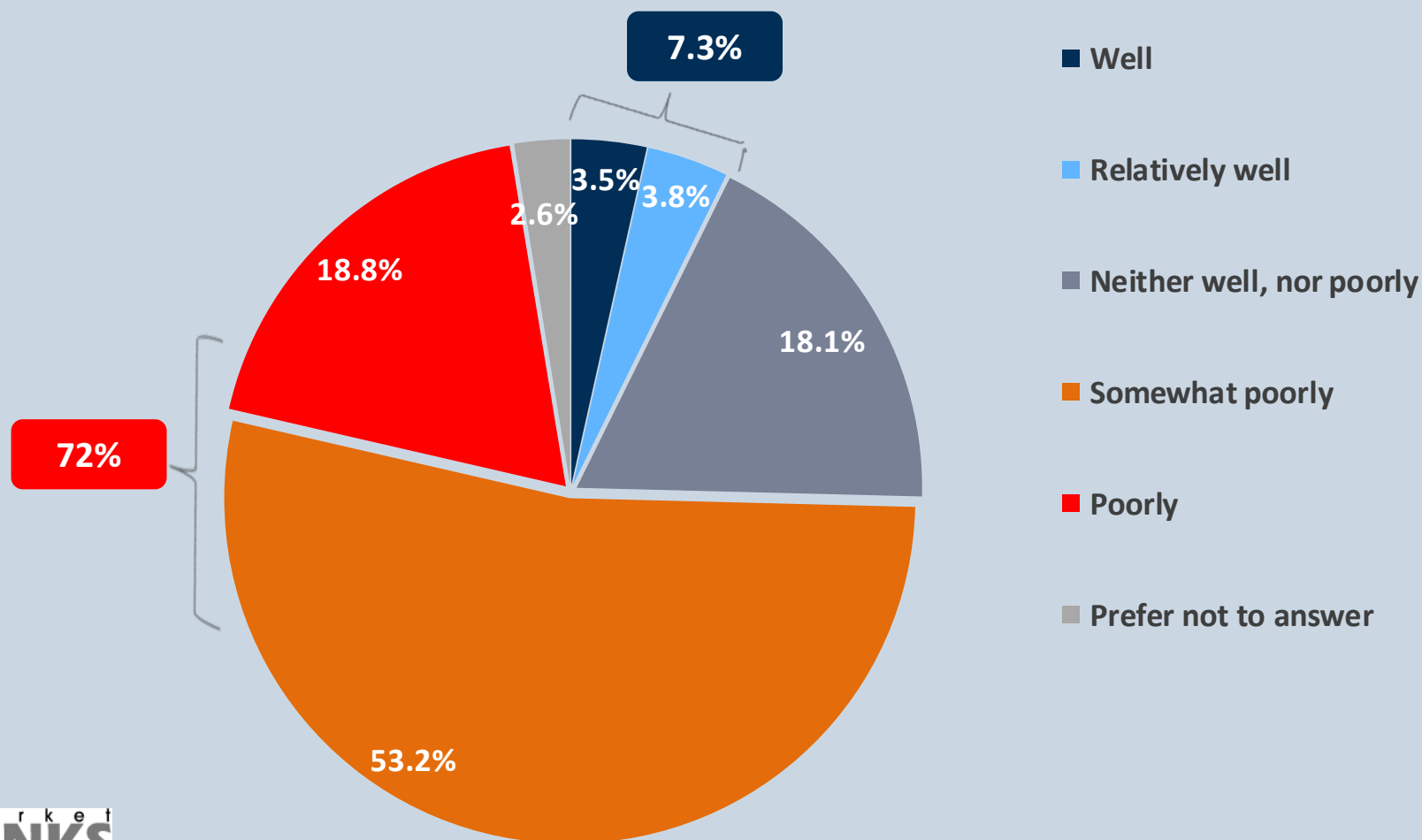
Low trust in political communication (Bulgaria, 2016)

How well or poorly are Bulgarian politicians informing the citizens about the decisions they make? (1 answer)



Low trust in political communication (Romania, 2015)

How well or poorly are Romanian politicians informing the citizens about the decisions they make? (1 answer)



PR OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

- Virtually all parties affiliated to EPP have a **designated communication division** (which is not only issuing press releases)
- Almost all party leaders have a **profile on Facebook**
- 30 – 50 percent of party headquarters **twitter** in the name of their leader (trend: upwards)
- Many party leaders still **reserve appearances in front of TV cameras** for themselves
- Approx. one in two of them have a dedicated **press spokesperson** who makes statements on their behalf

Source: parties affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP)



CHALLENGES FOR PR MANAGERS OF PARTIES # 1

- **Direct access to the party leader:**
Is communication a part of the strategy?
Do party leaders value the press office's work?
(or are they brushing aside calls from PR staff)
- **Opportunities for consultation**
with the party leadership:
Are the party leaders open for advice?
(or omniscient ...)
- **The role played by PR advisors**
and spokespersons inside the party:
Do they have a steering function?
Do members of parliament accept briefings?
(...or neglect the official party line in interviews)



CHALLENGES FOR PR MANAGERS OF PARTIES # 2

- **Polarisation of the media landscape:**
Replying to attacks
rather than communicating own arguments
- **Difficult access to media for opposition:**
Parties involved in government have much better opportunities to influence the media (pressure, state advertising – partly EU money)
- **Lack of ethical standards for relationships of PR personnel with journalists:**
“Agreements” between PR people and editors and conventional corruption
- **Maintaining personal integrity and protection of one’s own private life**



SEECOM: REINVENTING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COMMS

- Foundation of SEECOM – the Budva Declaration
Europe's first transnational govt comms manifesto
www.gov.me/en/seecom/Budva_Declaration
- Founding partners: KAS, RCC, UNDP Montenegro
- **Transparency and Openness**
Treating public policy as service, not product
- **Inclusiveness and Participation**
Treating people as assets, not target audiences
- **Integrity, impartiality and public interest**
Sustaining public's trust in government comms
- **Internal communication**
Communication as integral part of policy making
- **Professional exchange and cooperation**
Promoting peer support and sharing
- **Innovative approach**
Using technology to facilitate communication



<http://seecom.info>

KAS PROJECTS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

- Government PR: “South East Europe Public Sector Communication Association” (SEECOM)
- SEECOM conference (60 top experts) (1/year)
- Seminars and workshops for communication experts of political parties
- Increasing cooperation with „Club of Venice“, e.g. Digital Communication for Governments, and other partners



BOTTOM LINE – SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATION

- **Be as transparent as possible**
- **Have a true dialogue with citizens** and listen to them
- **Treat journalists well**, respect their professional and political roles
- **Don't oppress or blackmail media**, many citizens and the EU will see it
- **Domestic and international messages** must not be contradictory
- **Give room to your spokespersons** and PR advisers, let them do their jobs

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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