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Media Programme South East Europe



Better Communication for More Trust in the Age of Populism

At the KAS/SEECOM conference in Belgrade the challenges of political communication and improved cooperation between journalists and spokespersons were discussed

Rieke Smit

What can be opposed to the seductively simple communication of populists? What to do about anti-European narratives? And how can the cooperation of journalists and spokespersons be improved? These questions were the focus of this year's South East Europe Government Communication Conference in Belgrade on 18th October 2019. The sixth edition of the conference was attended by government spokespersons and communications experts as well as journalists. The organisers were the KAS Media Programme South East Europe and SEECOM (South East Europe Public Sector Communication Association).

This year, around 70 PR experts and representatives of ministries, EU institutions and other organisations as well as journalists from all over South East Europe and experts from Italy, France and Great Britain gathered for the conference. SEECON Secretary General **Vuk Vučić**, who opened the event with **Hendrik Sittig**, Head of KAS Media Programme South East Europe, and SEECON Chairman **Ognian Zlatev**, led through the day. "Populists are surfing on a wave that is becoming larger, the weaker the democratic institutions become and the more trust in governments, parties, authorities and media is decreasing," says Hendrik Sittig. "Unfortunately, right wing parties are again on the rise in Europe."

These parties play excellently on the keyboard of political communication, using social media on all channels 24 hours a day. They are much more professional in this than established parties and governments.

Ognian Zlatev underlined the importance of working with communicators in South East Europe and how important it is to work long term: „The commitment of communications officers has led to a high voter turnout in the recent European election. With even more precise and focused messages we can achieve more positive results. This is important in Europe today especially with its crises and challenges.”

Afterwards, **Mladen Bašić**, Media Adviser to Prime Minister of Serbia, summed up the impact of populists: “The world is changing very fast and there are a lot of things, that we can learn from populists. They communicate to the weak side of community; our job is to communicate to everyone.”

Better communication with facts and emotions

The following panel dealt with the topic: “Government communications in the age of clickbait – How to capture citizens' attention, imagination and interest”. Moderated by **Dinka Živalj**, Head of Communication/Spokesperson to EU Office of Kosovo, **Karine Badr**, Political Analyst at the OECD, and **Krešimir Macan**, CEO of Manjgura Consultancy, debated with **Kristina Plavšak Krajnc**, Director of Government Communication Office of Slovenia as well as **Vincenzo Ie Voci**,

Secretary General of the Club of Venice, on current challenges in government communications.

The panellists agreed that an open government that communicates well and engages with the citizens is needed. Social media channels could give direct insight into citizen's interest. The experts clearly demanded to go back to basics. On the one hand there is the need for trustful, verifiable facts and more interaction with people face to face – a direct democracy. On the other hand, perception and emotions are also an important part of communication. Overall, governments need to learn how to communicate more strategically and to plan long term, according to the panellists.



How anti-European narratives can be broken was discussed in the second panel

The second panel “Breaking through the noise of anti-European narratives” was moderated by **Christian Spahr**, Member of the SEECON board. Part of the panel were **Yordan Bozhilov**, President of the Sofia Security Forum, **Jasna Jelisić**, Head of the Western Balkan StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service, **Maja Rimac Bjelobrk**, Deputy Director of the Bosnian Directorate for European Integration, and **Borislav Višnjić**, Editor at the Information Programme at the Montenegrin public broadcaster RTCG. The speakers noted positively that Europe is more present in the media today than ever before. Therefore, also better communication by politicians is required. Unfortunately, there is still a need to deal with fake news, however no one is able to follow every single false information. Instead, you need to raise the citizen's awareness for such problems. For a more active communication and how to respond to disinformation, the following suggestions have been made: Complex

strategies need to be simplified and any communication in order to be good needs to be fact-based and contextualised. Basically, journalists and those responsible for communication in government and institutions have the same mission – to work for the public interest.

Friends or enemies? – Journalists and spokespersons start discussion

In the afternoon, the participants discussed in two workshops on the topic "Government-media relations of spokespersons and journalists – friends, foes or frenemies?"



Experts discuss about the work as a journalist and the difficulties in working with the government

The debates were moderated from two perspectives. The workshop from the spokespersons' point of view was moderated by **Ivana Đurić** from the Ministry of European Integration in Serbia. The workshop with the journalistic focus was

led by **Ljubica Gojić**, journalist at the Serbian public broadcaster RTV.

The discussion showed that both groups have many things in common and are generally dependent on each other. Journalists and PR experts are not really friends, but they are not enemies either, and cooperation should be based on respect. The participants agreed that if both sides adhere to the media rights situation, common values and professionalism, then the communication deficits could be overcome.

With the two workshops, the KAS Media Programme had created a platform in which journalist and spokespersons could exchange views about their respective tasks, challenges and prejudices for the first time. All participants rated the discussion as extremely important for their future work.

In the closing remarks of the conference, **Bernd Hüttemann**, Secretary General of the European Movement Germany, emphasised that communication shall be directed to the centre of society. "If we strengthen the middle, we strengthen the whole democracy."

The KAS Media Programme South East Europe is planning further activities to strengthen the relationship between journalists and spokespersons in the area of political communication in the upcoming year.



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