

Media Programme South East Europe



Hendrik Sittig: I had a very positive experience in Bulgaria

Hendrik Sittig, Head of the KAS Media Programme South East Europe spoke in an interview for Deutsche Welle (DW) about his experience in Bulgaria over the past five years and the role of the German political foundations abroad. The interview was published on 14.06.2023 in Bulgarian and is available [here](#).

DW: Mr Sittig, you have spent the last few years in Sofia as a Head of the Media Programme South East Europe of the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. How long exactly did your Bulgarian adventure last?

Hendrik Sittig: Almost five years. Before that I had gained a lot of experience abroad, I knew Eastern Europe, but about Southeastern Europe I knew little.

DW: And what were your expectations about Southeastern Europe and Bulgaria?

Hendrik Sittig: I was born in the former GDR and as a result I had the appropriate understanding and attitude towards Bulgaria, but now I have to admit that it was superficial. Yes, I had in my mind some image of Bulgaria, but I had no experience. What exactly did I know? During the time of the GDR we knew about the holidays at the Black Sea and the sweet wine "Kadarka from the Rose Valley", which was not that tasty...

DW: It was even awful.

Hendrik Sittig (laughing): Yes. I remembered these two things, both of which were not unambiguously positive. Over the past five years, however, I have experienced many positive things here.

DW: How would you rank them?

Hendrik Sittig: First I have to make the distinction between my personal life and my working activity. On a personal level, I have experienced almost only good things, the time spent in Bulgaria was very pleasant. Not only in Bulgaria, but throughout Southeastern Europe – we

drove around all these countries several times. We met wonderful people, enjoyed the wonderful nature and delicious food, enjoyed the mountains and the excellent wines. In this sense, we will carry in our hearts a lot of wonderful memories.

DW: What about professionally? What successes, but also what failures had the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in these five years?

Hendrik Sittig: The Media Programme extends through the whole Southeastern Europe. We monitor the media situation and the work of journalists in 10 countries. The positive thing about our regional programme is that we are working on cross-border topics. It is also a great advantage, because this is how we manage to create wide networks that extend beyond state borders. And at the same time, we are crossing bridges between Germany and Southeastern Europe. In particular, I would list three successful projects.

Firstly: the topic of disinformation, it has [increased significantly over the past two years](#). Two years ago, we managed to provide a vacancy for a guest lecturer at the Sofia University, we conducted a number of independent projects in this area, and this year we presented [a large study](#). All this was a huge success!

Secondly, we have paid great attention at the public service broadcasters, which are a key element of any democratic society. They must be therefore provided with support, encouragement and funding. On this topic, every year we organise a major meeting of all Directors General of public service media from all over South East European, the Baltic States, Ukraine and Georgia, together with the management staff and with the participation of the European Broadcasting Union. At these meetings, contacts are established and all current issues are discussed.

And the third big success: three years ago we founded a scholarship programme for journalism students. It is especially important for us to encourage young journalists because they are the future of the media environment. In the meantime, we have selected a number of wonderful scholars who are developing in the profession. Only two weeks ago here in Bulgaria was held their second annual meeting. I am extremely proud of our scholars. We are glad to encourage them, especially as we see what successes they achieve and how they create networks with each other.

DW: You are leaving, and fears about the Media Programme are likely to arise. Is there any reason for such fears?

Hendrik Sittig: No, not at all. Here comes an experienced journalist who led the Media Programme for the Southern part of Afrika for many years. He knows well the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, our programmes and our projects, so I am convinced that he will undertake the work with great commitment, motivation and professionalism.

DW: The Media Programme extends to ten countries, but its headquarters are here in Bulgaria. And in the meantime, you yourself have gained in-depth knowledge of the media situation in Bulgaria. How do you assess it now?

Hendrik Sittig: If we take a look at the ranking of Reporters Without Borders, we will find that when I came here 5 years ago, Bulgaria was somewhere at rank 111-112 in terms of media freedom. To tell you the truth, this was, in my opinion, unrealistic, including the comparison with other countries in the region.

DW: Unfair?

Hendrik Sittig: Yes, and unfair, to be honest. For every observer who knows the media in Southeastern Europe, it should be clear that in some countries the situation is more difficult,

much more difficult. We must bear in mind that the system for assessing media freedom is very complex. This system was changed two years ago – in my opinion, this is an important and correct step. And Bulgaria has already come to 71st place, which is much more realistic.

DW: So it's okay?

Hendrik Sittig: Unfortunately, not really. In Bulgaria and in other countries in the region, quality journalism is not particularly respected. It is vital to any democracy. For all sectors of the society. Everyone should understand well what role the media play and what role the journalist plays in a truly democratic society, what are the criteria.

DW: But this issue also has a financial dimension.

Hendrik Sittig: Yes, absolutely, quality journalism costs money. We must be aware that if politics and society do not perceive journalists as the fourth pillar of democracy, then society itself will not function properly. In addition, journalists should not fall into dependencies.

In Southeastern Europe, I met many extremely good journalists and journalists who understand well what their role and responsibility is. But there is nothing to be fooled: there are enough other journalists who are dependent, who work one-sidedly. That shouldn't be the case. That is why people need to be sensitized about the need for quality journalism. Not to mention that we are facing a number of new challenges: the digital world, multimediality, the crisis of trust not only in the media, but also in all other public spheres, but also in the super-hot topic: artificial intelligence and the changes it will bring in the media world.

DW: Your profile is linked to the media, but you live in Bulgaria and monitor the political situation. How do you assess it right now?

Hendrik Sittig: I would like to let the assessment of the political situation with gratitude to our colleagues from the country office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for Bulgaria. However, personally, as a European and a citizen of the EU, who was lucky enough to live in Bulgaria for five years, will say the following: Over the past two years, we have all been closely following what is happening, elections have been held in the country five times, the political system is complex and quite confused, but as a European I am very glad that there is now a government.

I am very glad that this government is pro-Western, that Bulgaria has clearly and unequivocally anchored in the Western system - this is where it belongs, in the EU and NATO. Immediately related to this fact is the support for Ukraine in its fight against the Russian offensive war. Because Ukraine is fighting not only for itself, it is also fighting for us, for the unity of Europe. In this sense, we are very happy with the support for Ukraine and I am happy that at the moment Bulgaria is giving clear signs in this regard.

DW: You mentioned your colleagues from the country office of the foundation and their excellent work. Yes, they do a great analytical job, but in the Bulgarian media there is sometimes criticism that the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung sympathizes too much with GERB. As it is also said that the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung has supported the MRF over the years. How do you see these party "kinships" on the international stage? For example: are BSP socialists in the Western European sense?

Hendrik Sittig: This question is difficult for me to answer, but I will formulate it a little differently. German political foundations play the same role abroad: they promote democracy and the rule of law, work for the unity of Europe and cross a bridge to Germany. These foundations are an important part of German foreign policy and I think they do a great job. Each of these foundations autonomously resolves the question of priorities and directions of cooperation, and it is not for me to comment on it. I can say about our Konrad-Adenauer-

Stiftung that we work honestly and this is well accepted. And we cooperate with different and very quality partners.

DW: One last question, Mr. Sittig, what are your expectations about working in South Africa, where you are going?

Hendrik Sittig: I've always dreamed of working abroad and, ideally, dealing with media. This dream of mine came true five years ago, but I continue to dream this for the future. My family and I enjoy what lies ahead, including the challenges that await us. Africa is a whole new place for us. We have never been there. In the coming summer we will visit the region for the first time. But from my colleagues I know what awaits us and I am very happy with the new horizons.

DW: We wish you good luck!

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