

Speech

Political Communication for a stronger Europe – Challenges in South East and Western Europe

Christian Spahr, Head of KAS Media Program South East Europe, Sofia
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Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to be here today and would like to thank the Greek government and the Club of Venice for this opportunity. The Club of Venice has become an important partner for Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung within a short period of time. Vincenzo Le Voci is a fellow member of the public sector communication association SEECOM, which we founded last year in Montenegro.



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CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND TRUST

- Trust is the currency of democracy (Thomas Jefferson)
- Democracy = convincing people
- Democracy ≠ deceiving or forcing people
- Focus: how to convince people and gain trust

Today we all talk about communication in times of crisis and about trust. Trust is the “currency of democracy”, as Thomas Jefferson said. Democracy is the exercise of convincing people. It does not mean deceiving or forcing people. Trust has to be earned; it cannot be forced on anyone. By which means we can convince people through political communication, how we can earn their trust, is central to our discussion.

PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

- Safeguarding democracy
- Democracy: Not only steps forward in Europe
- Populists gain influence
- Foreign policy of the EU not strong and homogenous enough

A professional information policy and the trust of the public are especially important in times of crisis, if democracy is to be safeguarded. I personally believe in the democratic tradition of Europe, which has its roots here, in Athens. I also believe in the EU as a project for peace, wealth and civil liberties. But when we look closely, we notice that both in terms of democracy and in the EU as such we do not always make progress. For example, populism is gaining influence. The foreign policy of the EU is not strong and homogenous enough. Borders are being changed by military means again.

CONVINCING PEOPLE OF THE DEMOCRATIC MODEL

- Value-based political communication
- Transparency and openness
- Inclusiveness and participation of citizens
- Integrity, impartiality and public interest
- The Budva Declaration:
First Government Communication Ethical Code
in Europe, presented at SEECOM conference
2012 in Budva (KAS amongst others)
www.gov.me/en/seecom/Budva_Declaration



If we want to convince more people in South East and Eastern Europe of our democratic political system, we need a value-based model of political communication. Democracy can only be successful in the long run if transparency and openness, inclusiveness and participation of the citizens, integrity and public interest are guaranteed. Of course, power is always a key component of politics, but it should not stand alone. The points that I'm naming here, I cite from the "Budva Declaration", the code of ethics of the SEECOM association.



MODERN POLITICAL PR STILL EMERGING

- Post-communist countries in South East Europe: Many heads of government and ministers without press spokesperson
- Often: Head of PM office = PR advisor
- More traditional media, less Internet
- Majority of PM's without FB profile
- Agenda setting underdeveloped



The KAS Media Program operates in ten post-communist countries in South East Europe. There, favourable conditions for modern political communication are still developing. Several government leaders and a large number of ministers still do not have a specialised press spokesperson that makes statements in their name. Some political leaders tend to give intuitive interviews without preparation by media professionals, and their office managers have a side job as PR advisor. Agenda setting is not being practiced consequently.



CHANGE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

- Government information: not just for elites – for the public
- Political leaders: not omniscient – open for advice
- Political power: not without limits – subject to public scrutiny
- Development of political systems and communication: two sides of the same coin



That is only partly due to lack of resources or lack of experience. I have met some very professional PR experts in the Balkans. No, it has more to do with a political culture that is still in transition. In the old days, government information was secret, only accessible to the elite. Today, information is a public good and a source of public debate. Then, political leaders gave the impression that they know everything, now they are opening up to professional advice. For a long time politicians could exercise their powers without effective limits, now they are subject to public scrutiny. The development of political systems and their communication are two sides of the same coin.



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INVESTMENT IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

- New EU members and candidates need to be seen as professional partners
- So far too many negative headlines in Western media
- Governments in transition countries need to explain themselves to citizens
- Especially in times of crisis, good inward and outward communication is crucial



To invest in political communication, both professionally and financially, is especially important at historical crossroads. The new EU member states and candidates have a great interest in being perceived as professional partners in Brussels and other European capitals. Up until now Western newspaper headlines relating to the region are too negative: corruption, oligarchs, ethnic conflicts. As well, governments must explain their activities to their citizens who take to the streets demanding transparency, greater participation and more focus on the public interest.



INFORMATION DEFICIT IN THE WEST

- Democracy perceived as an established fact
- Not enough public knowledge about institutions and participation
- Younger generation without personal experience of war and lack of freedom
- Advantages of open society and citizens' participation must be explained time and again

But also in Germany and in other EU member states we have some shortcomings in this respect, I believe. Many people in Western Europe perceive democracy as an established fact, which they don't question. We have learned to appreciate democracy as a sensible form of organisation. However, many people do not know how institutions function in detail and how one can participate in the political process. Many, especially the younger generation, have not experienced war or a compromise of their freedoms. The advantages of an open society and participatory democracy have to be communicated time and again.



PROFESSIONAL COOPERATION WITH MEDIA

- Misuse of media
- "Deals" with media owners
- Secret payments to media
- Citizens don't believe in media independence
- Political messages lose value
- Disillusionment with politics growing
- Politicians should not only improve own PR, also media framework conditions
- Aiming at a consensus of politicians, journalists and media owners



In order for that to succeed, politicians also need to embrace the media in a professional way. I am not naïve: In the short run politicians can successfully influence the media and buy favourable coverage. But in the long run, that scheme is doomed to fail. For instance, many media outlets in South East Europe, especially print media, already face bankruptcy. Reasons for that are not only to do with the Internet, but also with a lack of quality.

Citizens have doubts about media independence. We have conducted opinion polls in Bulgaria and Romania: Only 14 percent of Bulgarians and 20 percent of Romanians believe that the media are independent. The reputation of the media being so flawed, political messages cannot be delivered in a credible way. Disillusionment with politics will continue.

Those developments have to be a warning to us. I think, governments should not only work on their own PR, but also create a better media environment. That is not primarily a financial question, but one of clever, liberal regulation and agreed-upon democratic values of politicians, journalists and media owners.

Thank you for your attention.