

Governments online: Citizens' Dialogue and Europe's Values

KAS CONFERENCE OF SPOKESPERSONS OF EU INSTITUTIONS AND NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS ON COMMUNICATION WITH CITIZENS AND EUROPEAN VALUES

80 leading PR experts of state institutions from 25 countries met in Sofia on 26th and 27th March at the invitation of the KAS Media Program South East Europe. The Conference on Digital Communication received high level political support and was held in co-operation with the "Club of Venice" and the "Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies" (Brussels). Top of the agenda was defence of European values on the Web.

Traditional media are losing audience. Exchange of information on the Web is booming. Heads of government communications in the whole of Europe must face this challenge. For a long time news portals have no longer been the only sources of political information on the Internet, Facebook und Twitter are replacing or supplementing professional journalism. Those who want to enter into dialogue with the public must communicate asymmetrically through many channels.

This is an enormous task in two respects: citizens increasingly expect to contribute opinions and ideas in political opinion-making. But the European model is also under attack from political actors who do not share its goals and values. Political conflict takes place around the clock on global platforms.

"We are simply taking the values of the EU for granted," was the criticism of the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov in his address at the beginning of the conference. "We must explain the EU better

and start defending it", said the Foreign Minister, with regard to Russian action in Ukraine and extremist parties inside Europe. "Our European communication has to become more strategic in nature." The German Ambassador Detlef Lingemann emphasised the importance of citizen involvement and value orientation as aspects of digital communication by governments. Democratic values like freedom and the rule of law and universal human rights were in need of protection.

More than 20 contributors to the conference discussed these themes in detail. A succession of three panel discussions considered examples of good practice in online-dialogue with citizens, the war of information in the Ukraine crisis, and new approaches to the explanation of European values in the world.

Feeding the trolls or not? – The new Facebook page of the German Government

Erik den Hoedt began by saying that social media were a great way to improve communication with citizens. The director of the Public Information and Communication Office of the Netherlands chaired the Panel on citizen participation. A new approach to this was presented by Keynote speaker Georg Streiter, Deputy Spokesperson of the German Government. This is newly also represented on Facebook and manages citizens' comments in an unorthodox way. Impertinent criticism from Internet users is not ignored but is answered by a 15-strong team with humour and in unofficial

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language. "It is generally said, don't feed the trolls - but we do, in our own manner," explained Streiter. This prevents arguments from escalating and preserves the basis for serious contributions.

Thibault Lesenecal, head of online communication of the European Parliament, impressed on participants: "If people are talking about your institution, you must join in." It was also important to accept that you can lose control in social media. Those responsible for PR should also explain this to their bosses. Lack of resources for online communication and lack of knowledge within the public authorities were still a problem in many parts of South East Europe, said Vuk Vujnović, Public Affairs Specialist of the Government of Montenegro and Secretary General of SEECOM. This professional association for government spokespersons from South East Europe founded in 2013 was another of the joint organisers of the conference in Sofia.

Kremlin propaganda and EU reactions: Ukraine as touch-stone for political PR

The way in which geopolitical crises are creating a new kind of propaganda and information war was the subject of the second expert panel, chaired by Christian Spahr, Head of the Media Program South East Europe. He discussed, with five experts from Brussels, Kiev and the Baltic countries, the conflict of narratives concerning Ukraine. A central question was whether the EU needs counter-propaganda in competition with the Kremlin. Sanda Svetoka of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga first presented a detailed analysis of Russian social media strategy. "Traditional and social media as well as multimedia platforms and armies of trolls are being applied in a coordinated manner," was Svetoka's conclusion. According to experts, Moscow is investing hundreds of millions of Euro annually for this purpose. "We need a counter-strategy that is not itself propagandistic", claimed Matteo Arisci of the European External Action Service in the discussion. He described the launch of a new task force at the EEAS as decided

recently by the Foreign Affairs Council. Dmytro Kuleba from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry also emphasised: "We must react but we must not betray our own standards and values". Speakers from Lithuania and Estonia argued that the EU should also provide information aimed at Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine and the Baltics.

Experts ask for clear messages and integrated narratives of the EU

"The EU needs a clearer message" – this expectation was highlighted in the third Panel, led by Vincenzo Le Voci from the Club of Venice. This expert body, made up mainly of EU heads of communications and spokespersons of foreign ministries, was a partner for the first time of the KAS Media Program in organising the conference. "A priority for the EU is to develop integrated narratives", said Robert Andrecs, head of the online communication of the Commission. Clear messages are needed, which the public can relate to. Jens Paulus, Head of Team Europe and North America of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, urged the PR experts to respond to the challenge from political opponents to the EU model and be more resolute in support of European values. Survey results from Serbia showed that the image of the EU particularly in South East Europe is not always the best: Although the EU is by far the largest financial contributor to the country, the majority of the population believes this to be Russia. But Russia in fact provides no financial development assistance for Serbia, according to the expert contributor Ivana Đurić of the EU Integration Office of the Serbian government.

The Media Program South East Europe of KAS and the SEECOM association will be holding another conference this year on questions of European political communication: The SEECOM annual conference is planned for September, also in Sofia. Co-operation with the Club of Venice and with the Wilfried Martens Centre should also be further developed on the basis of positive feedback from conference participants.

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