

EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

EUROPEAN OFFICE BRUSSELS

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“Cross-party cooperation within the EPP: The Russian factor”

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“We underestimated Russia politically and overestimated Russia economically”, stated Prof. Lien Verpoest, Director of the Centre for Russian Studies at the KU Leuven, during a workshop jointly organized by the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the KU Leuven. Under the heading “Cross-party cooperation within the EPP: The Russian Factor” European policy makers and academic representatives came together at KADOC in Leuven in order to discuss the potential Russian influence on political agendas in the region. The workshop was based on the research project “European Party Monitor” which analyses the sister parties of the European People’s Party (EPP) in several European countries.

Dr. Hardy Ostry, Director of the EBB, presented the research project that was initiated by the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and **Teona Lavrelashvili**, PhD student at the KU Leuven. The project, supervised by **Prof. Steven van Hecke**, President of the KADOC Leuven and Chairman of the Wilfried Martens Fund, examines in how far EPP sister party models and programmes in Western Balkan and Central Eastern Europe differ from those in Western Europe. The workshop focused on the potential role of the Russian factor in influencing political agendas in the region and in how far the KAS is providing support to the local EPP parties.

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, Director of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Serbia, Montenegro, started the debate by giving an overview of Serbia’s relations towards the EU and Russia. He emphasized that the Serbian society was deeply divided on this topic as on the one hand, the Serbs aspired to EU membership but, on the one hand,

Russia was a more tangible partner for them. EU membership seemed rather impossible to achieve so that parts of the population had lost optimism and started to turn to support coming from Russia, Mr. Beckmann-Dierkes stated. According to him, the paradox lied in the fact that the EU was considerably more important for Serbia in terms of financial flows and economic investment (with the exception of the gas sector) but that this was not reflected by the public opinion in Serbia. Given the fact that the Russian influence was more visible in their everyday life, surveys had shown that most Serbs believed Russia to be the most important economic partner of the country. Mr. Beckmann-Dierkes thus pledged for more efforts coming from Brussels in order to limit Russia’s interference in the country, undermining the regional stability. Examples of exchange between EPP MEPs and parliamentarians from the national party SNS had shown that contact to international partner parties was efficient in the organisation and democratisation of the region.

Michael Gahler, MEP, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, took up the importance of interregional exchange, telling that already in the 1990s Serb trainees were working in the European Parliament. This early inclusion of Serbs on an individual basis had been a future-oriented step whereas afterwards Brussels had remained inactive for too long. According to Mr. Gahler, the EU should now open up a credible accession perspective to Eastern countries and work with regional policy leaders in order to convince them from democracy, an indispensable condition to the stabilization of the region.

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In the following debate, moderated by Prof. Van Hecke, participants further discussed the concept of cross-party cooperation. It was put forward that in the past, EPP representatives had already succeeded in convincing partners to deblock and that EPP MEPs could train regional parliamentarians so that they become more independent from governments. In this context, the question was raised how Russian influence on regional political agendas is actually measured. One participant emphasized that one of the main problems lied in the concept of "liberal democracy", which had lost its narrative and was often associated to values that were not supported by the regional populations.

Prof. Lien Verpoest closed the debate. She reminded that national parties' preferences were also related to history and to cultural origins. At the same time, European policy makers were often uniformed about Russian politics and continued seeing Russia as a learner. As a result, Russia had been politically underestimated and economically overestimated by the West.

The dinner speech was held by **Christian Kremer**, Deputy Secretary-General of the EPP, who stated that over time, not only a geographical but also an ideological enlargement of the EPP had taken place. Accepting the nature of Europe meant also accepting different traditions in the countries. In this context, the rise of populism played an important role as it would weaken Europe and was thus in Russia's interest. He explained that with regard to Brexit and the ongoing disengagement of international affairs on behalf of the United States, the European Union would need to address conflict areas on its own. Otherwise, Russia would also extend its influence in other areas of the world such as the Middle East.