

"Now – Interacting with the European Parliament" Project Presentation

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Is it possible that my opinion on issues that concern me and the life of a circle of people whom I am related to through common interests, is taken into account influencing decision making in the EU? What makes the European Parliament, about which there is so much talk, different from let's say the European Commission? What is this bureaucratic language of which I understand nothing? Isn't electing members for the EP just dust in our eyes? We would be providing answers to such questions in the course of 15 programmes, of which this is the start. Radio Bulgaria has the honor and great responsibility to be one of the mass media partners in the large-scale project "Now – Interacting with the European Parliament". The initiative will extend until April 2009 and is to coincide with the final stage of the preparation for electing the new members of the European Parliament.

Standing as a basis of the project and supported by the EP is one of the most influential non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria working in the sphere of European Integration – the European Institute. The aim is to make clear and promote the work and broad potentials of the EP. The initiators of the project have all the reasons for calling it "large-scale" because the information it provides would go beyond national frameworks to cover an audience in 20 European countries, mainly EU members, with the cooperation of partner organizations in them. "We will try to render it in every-day language", is the resolve of Yuliana Nikolova, director of the European Institute.

"Besides Radio Bulgaria, besides RFI Bucharest and YVELINES RADIO, France we have participants from three other networks of NGOs dealing with strategic surveys and European studies, she explains. This is a network of universities called Challenge Project network, Belgium; also the Balkan Communication Network as well as PASSOS network from the Czech Republic – a network of Open Society encompassing 7 member-states and 18 countries outside the EU."

The year 2008 is special for the European Parliament. On March 19 it turned 50. It is natural that the project "Now – Interacting with the European Parliament" enjoys the support of this notorious institution having gone through half a century all the way from a consultant body to an acting law producer in the EU through the endorsement of the Lisbon Treaty. Tsvetomir Boyadjiev, deputy director of the Information Office of the EP in Bulgaria said for Radio Bulgaria: "Our wish as employees of the Communications Department of the EP is to pass through the following message to the

“Now – Interacting with the European Parliament” Project Presentation

citizens of Europe – that through the constant expansion of the potentials of the EP it is turning into one of the basic factors determining one aspect or another of their daily life. From this point of view voting at the coming elections for the next European Parliament in 2009 is extremely important. In Bulgaria, since we are member of the EU just over a year now, people often think: “Well, that does not regard us!” However, we should not forget that the European Parliament is the only democratically elected body of the European Union through direct elections. Bulgaria has been away from the EU for a long time and European institutions are not quite known to us because they gave not had any influence on public and political life in our country. But it is time now that each one of us understands that important decisions are made at EU level. From this point of view I am indeed glad to see such projects launched for improving the level of information among people and envisaging the coverage of a growing number of mass media in different countries. In this way the message would reach a greater number of citizens providing the opportunity to exchange viewpoints.”

A new interactive website has been created for the purpose of the project. Ognian Boyadjiev, expert of the European Institute brings more to the listeners of Radio Bulgaria: “www.parliament.europe.bg – this is the site where sound, image and text present all that formulates the political and institutional functioning of this body of the EU of an ever-growing importance; what makes it different and the way each citizen can write a petition. For example, if there are a sufficient number of signatures on an issue they would be accepted in the EP and that may influence further decisions. We are to show how exactly that would happen. Furthermore we are planning regular dialogues through sound, picture or text, with high-standing representatives of the European Parliament well known in member-countries. The project kick-started on March 19, when the EP marked its 50th anniversary. It is a nice symbol that in this day from history we turn to the future, to expanded potentials and the growing significance of the EP within the Union. By the way, a factor that strongly impressed our partners at the European Parliament when considering the project was the active approach of your audience. All countries for which Radio Bulgaria broadcasts in so many languages, including the countries, which are not members of the EU – the broadcasts in Turkish, Albanian and Russian yield so many letters and phone-calls. These people having questions, opinions or wishing to address an official would be able to contact the site. Feedback starts today. By the end of the project I believe our readers, listeners and viewers would get to understand that our problems, wishes and concerns are one and the same, just like the ways we can influence the future of the EU and be part of the decision-making process.”

“On an equal basis with Austrians and Swedes, because they have the same number of European Parliament members, adds Yuliana Nikolova. Our votes have an equal value. We hope the project here in Bulgaria to contribute so that people get more interested in voting for European Parliament members, to make the EPM something different from an exotic figure for whom we provide a good payment – an attitude we witnessed during the latest EP elections. Bulgarian citizens were thinking: “Why should I go to vote? Someone would go to live in Europe on my account. No I wouldn’t”. We want to show that the EP has its great responsibilities and capacity. The European MP represents me, the citizen and not the state, not the institutions and is well worth voting for him and having my expectations.”

After on January 1, 2007 Bulgaria became member of the European Union, five months later, on May 20,

“Now – Interacting with the European Parliament” Project Presentation

2007 the first elections for Bulgarian members of the European Parliament were held. The low turnout then was impressive and left us with the feeling that the majority of people are not aware of the significance of this European institution in the context of their own life. Bulgaria has 18 representatives in the current EP. Radio Bulgaria has asked several citizens of the capital Sofia what they know about the EP and what do they expect of the work of the representatives they have sent there. Here is what they said:

“I did not vote for Bulgarian representatives to the European Parliament. I am not very clear how exactly EP members and the laws they adopt would reflect on my life here in Bulgaria, said Vladimir Petrov.”

“Of course I am of the opinion that EP members should above all stand up and promote European values, said Nina Staneva. I think one of the important tasks of MPs is precisely this – to impose the adoption and observance of anti-discrimination laws.”

“I expect them to work so that our life as citizens of the EU becomes better, is the opinion of Elena Dobрева, a retiree. I wish for a better living standard for the people, especially in newly acceded member-countries. There should be better conditions for making business. This concerns me as a mother and grandmother because I want a better life for my children.”

What is the situation with our partners from the Czech Republic as to the level of information people have on the functions and importance of the European Parliament? We will hear Jeff Lovitt, executive director of PASOS – Policy Association for an Open Society.

Mr. Toon Streppel is director of the Information Office of the European Parliament in Bulgaria. We asked for his opinion on the project “Now – Interaction with the European Parliament” and related expectations.

That was all in today’s edition. In the next issue on the project we would be talking about how the Lisbon Treaty increases the potential of the European Parliament, Especially since in 2009 we, Europeans, will be again electing our representatives in this institution. On the other hand the EP is facing challenges related to the increase of confidence of the citizens of the Community towards it. Your questions, suggestions and comments are welcome by mail, on the phone or by e-mail. For more details look up our new web portal <http://parliament.europe.bg>

The programme is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria, RFI-Romania and YVELINES RADIO, France – media partners on the project “Now-Interacting with the European Parliament” and put through by the European Institute, the Center for modernizing of policies and Portal EUROPE.

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