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Are citizens aware of the work of the European Parliament and its impact on their lives? How do media act to deliver information to people in an accessible and intriguing way? Are there risks of a “dangerous flirt” between the EP and the press? This is our topic in today’s edition of our series “Now – interacting with the European Parliament”.

Recently the City of Sofia played host to the conference 50 Years European Parliament financed by the EP Directorate-General for Communication. Honorary patrons of the forum organized by BTA (the Bulgarian News Agency) in partnership with the Bulgarian National Television, were European Parliament President Hans-Gert Poettering and National Assembly Chairman Georgi Pirinski. According to BTA Chief Secretary Evelina Andreeva, the conference is a good example of a project assigned by EP and executed in compliance with EP rules, with a fully positive evaluation from Brussels. The event attracted more than 50 leading journalists from twelve Southeast Europe countries. Do media understand European issues and do they provide their adequate coverage? This was the focal subject for participants to discuss.

“The way in which European issues are presented by media, is incomprehensible for most of Southeast Europe citizens”, Evelina Andreeva told Radio Bulgaria. “And although pollsters have given us statistics suggesting that the region is dominated by European optimism, this will hardly continue to be the case in the future, unless we, media, find the right language in telling people what is happening in Europe. We heard this opinion not only from media people, but also from politicians, who joined the conference – the Bulgarian EP members and other EP officials. BTA prepared a press clipping from the ten days preceding the forum and selected a bunch of phrases and clichés used in articles about the European Union. For instance: absorption capacity, application form, rendezvous clause, etc. All these words are only intelligible for the journalists and for the institutions using them. Therefore a consensus was reached that we, media, have to interpret the language of institutions and make it a normal, human language. We have to make people interested in the subject and to point to them the sources of information about EU. One example are TV stations that presented their programs about EU at the conference. Albanians tend to use mostly newscasts and commentary slots, while the Romanians have been broadcasting for months a TV series with their greatest stars. The series featured various EU countries, the programs and policies in a most comprehensible and even humorous way. The series enjoyed very high ratings. As to Bulgarian journalists, I think that the Bulgarian media community is fairly active and is aware of the need to translate the institutional language. Finally, I should like to quote leading Bulgarian journalist from BNT Boyko Vassilev, who said on several occasions, “Let us present Europe in a sexier way”.

“2009 European Parliament elections are of exceptional importance. We should increase people’s awareness not only of the benefits of the European Union, but also of the need of a high election turnout, of that their votes do matter.” This was the message of EP President Hans-Gert

European Parliament seen by media

Poettering in a televised address to the participants in the conference. Radio Bulgaria carried out a brief poll asking the following question: "Do you intend to vote and what do you expect media to tell you about EP, so that you can make an informed choice?"

"Well, most probably, yes", replies Maria Stoimenova. "Depends how the information will be presented and what will be said about the influence of that parliament. Only then I shall be able to decide whether to vote for members of parliament. I guess it would be key to know more about the role of that parliament and about the importance of its decisions as far as Bulgaria and Bulgarians are concerned. As its members are elected, they should go there not only for the benefits they will enjoy as members of the European Parliament, but in the first place, provided they have the necessary knowledge and skills."

"To be able to make an informed choice," argues Kalina Sotirova, "I should like Bulgarian media – not only the National Television and the National Radio, but also the press – to feature Bulgarian candidates as individuals, and in view of their possible contribution into Bulgaria's interests as members of the European Parliament. I'd rather vote for people, not for parties. Otherwise, I'd rather not vote at all."

What would you like to learn about the European Parliament and how do you expect it to be presented in the media?

"Who influences decision-making", Kalina says. "We are aware that Bulgaria has been criticized very strongly about a handful of problems in its domestic affairs. How exactly, and on the basis of what expert opinion are these decisions made?"

"Sorry, I know too little about this", Eli Georgieva admits. "However, if the media provide more detailed information on how voting for different parties or individuals goes, I'd get better informed before making a choice. Definitely, any information in the media would be of great help."

Do you tend to be interested in information about the European Parliament?

"Yes, if it influences the policies and decisions made concerning Bulgaria. Of course, any information would be of interest."

For the first time this year the European Parliament has launched its journalism prize. For the prize, it has nominated journalists, who with their work have contributed to better understanding of key European topics, of how European Union bodies function and of the bloc's policies. Prizes were given in four categories – press, radio, television and internet. Journalist juries in the 27 member states appointed their national winners, who were presented in Brussels to the international jury. In turn, that jury singled out winners in different categories. They are Kirsten Woernle, Germany, and Wolfgang Boehm, Austria, in the Press category. In the Radio category the winners are Mircea Radu Lipovan and Andrea Manzat from Romania. The winners in the Television category are Shirin Wheeler from UK and Denmark's Lars Feldballe Petersen. Pete Pakarinen, Finland, ranked first in the

Internet category. The European Parliament Prize fund is worth EUR 5000 for each of the categories. This naturally raises the issue of the risk that an institution runs of “flirting” with the journalists providing coverage of its work. EP Press Service Head and coordinator of the project for the journalism prize, Ioannis Darmis, sees no risk in that.

“We have deliberately chosen a procedure that would exclude MEPs from the decision-making, Darmis points out. The juries in the first phase of the contest were made up of journalists only from the respective EU member-country. The international jury that appointed the winners also consisted almost entirely of journalists – six acting journalists and three current EP members who are representatives of the journalists’ community. Our aim was to encourage journalism that would view critically the work of the EP and other EU bodies. It is very important for us for the work of parliament to be observed with a critical eye and assessed accordingly. With the choice of this procedure we prevented the “flirt” you were talking about” is the opinion of the coordinator of the project Ioannis Darmis.

The awards were given out at a sumptuous ceremony on October 17 by EP Chairman Hans-Gert Poettering in the presence of all 68 nominees and national contest winners. The award giving ceremony was preceded by a meeting of young journalists from EU member-countries. The forum takes place for the second time and brings together over 200 young colleagues. How did the idea for the EP to inaugurate its award for journalism?

“One of the goals of this contest was to improve communication among institutions within the EU and the civil society, Ioannis Darmis further explains. In our opinion there is a lack of information on what activities the EP is engaged with and what is their relation to the citizens of Europe. We believe that through the award for journalists we would stimulate greater interest in the work of the EP. When communication between parliament members and mass media is good, then our separate relations with people are good. That is why we announced that the award would be given to those journalists who have contributed to EU citizens’ being better informed on common European issues and who have through their work brought European institutions closer to the people. I think that the jury has made a very good choice.”

And now let us take a look at our neighbor Romania, which joined the EU together with Bulgaria on January 1, 2007. What is the attitude of the public in Romania towards the work of the EP? Are there instances of hiding behind the EU for finding excuses for problems on a national level?

We talked on the phone with journalist Magda Crisan from TV Realitatea.

“Everything about the European Union stays next to national problems. Poverty, unemployment-everything that’s connected to national problems, affecting the everyday life of common citizens, is in the focus of social opinion in my country. Yes, it’s maybe not good because we don’t know actually what European institutions really mean. To us the EU is like a promise for a better future. But there is a lack of information about the way it functions!”

According to a recent drill of European Values Study, confidence in politicians in Bulgaria is very low. On

the other hand the EC is among those institutions enjoying high public trust. According to Magda Crisan the situation in Romania is pretty much the same. "People trust on the first place the Orthodox Church followed by the army. Standing at the bottom of the scale are politicians," she said. What would be the turnout at the next elections of EP members; would Romanians go to the polls or would they prefer to stay home?

"The Poles show that in the former elections we had about 30 % participation. So it's not enough. Romanians are still not interested in European issues, apart some practical things of our membership, like for instance the EU funds. People in Romania are not interested in European politics, for example in the Climate Agenda of the European Union etc. Maybe the only thing that affects them is the financial help of the Union, but nothing else! The information about the European Parliament and the coming elections is lacking. So I wonder how many Romanians know that next year we have European elections."

We turn next to Croatia. It is still in a process of negotiations for membership in the European Union. "The talks for our joining the EU are not advancing as we would have liked", is the opinion of Morana Petricic, editor at Radio 101 – Zagreb.

"A latest report of the Eurobarometer, which has been published in spring, shows that only 32 % of Croatians think of European Union as of something positive, while 26 % think of the EU as of something negative. However the largest is the number of those who are hesitating about the whole issue – there is 40 % of them. And the reason of these results and antagonism is one. In general opinion the situation here is not good. But it is not good in Bulgaria and Romania too! And people know that these countries have already entered the EU! On the other side some people in Croatia are afraid of losing our identity - our coasts and national customs, for example. Regarding the European Parliament in the eyes of Croatian public opinion, I can say that Rapporteur of the European Parliament for Croatia - Hans Svoboda is highly respected in our medias and in my media too But he is often misunderstood among common people, who often blame Brussels for unobjective criticism of the situation in our country!"

Dear listeners, at the beginning we mentioned the conference "50 years EP" held in Sofia. An audio recording of the discussions would be issued on <http://parliament.europe.bg>. This feature is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria, RFI-Romania and Ivelynes Radio – France on the project "Now – Interacting with the European Parliament" carried through by the European Institute and with the financial support of the Communications General Directorate. Your questions, comments and suggestions are most welcome at our station as well as on our e-mail address info@europe.bg. For more details look up the website www.parliament.europe.bg

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