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In today's issue of the series Now & interacting with the European Parliament, Radio Bulgaria, Gateway Europe and the European Institute bring more about the all-European essay competition EP 2009 Vote & Beyond the Sugar Cubes. The contest is open to all Radio Bulgaria listeners coming from any of the EU member states.

The competition has been declared by the team of the project Now & interacting with the European Parliament and its Grand Prix is a trip to Paris and Versailles in early April. Maria Nikolova is a journalist from Gateway Europe, one of the organizers of the essay competition. Here is what she said:

"As early as a year back it was clear that we would launch an essay competition focused on the European elections. We hadn't formulated the title alone, but the Czechs currently holding the EU presidency, made it easier for us. EP 2009 Vote: Beyond the Sugar Cubes & is a wordplay based on the unofficial motto of the Czech presidency We will Sweeten Europe. Our idea is to see what the citizens of Bulgaria and of all EU countries think, whether voting will sweeten Europe or not; to find motivation for the EU citizens that will make them become aware that this parliament is theirs and that we must vote. The essay should not be too long & one and a half page to two pages maximum suffices. We prefer to have the entries in English. However, any entries in French, German or Bulgarian will be translated into English and will be submitted to the jury consisting of representatives of our partnering organizations, Radio Bulgaria included. One of the conditions is for the essay authors to have turned 18 years of age by 31 March 2009, because they will be entitled to vote. The prize is a trip to France and involvement in public discussions in Versailles, organized by our partners from Yvelines Radio."

What are the criteria for evaluation of essays and given the wordplay in the title, will unconventional thinking and a sense of humor be welcome?

"A key requirement is the originality of texts", Maria goes on to say. "The first and basic criterion however is a clear focus on the European elections as a key topic of the competition. The second quite important requirement is knowledge of the European parliament powers and of the powers of other institutions. Besides, the texts should be previously unpublished and original & not copied or reprinted from somewhere. There is no need for them to be scholarly: we do not expect references to pundits or to some authority. Our objective is to hear the voice of citizens. There are no upper age limits. If an 80-year-old wishes to send an essay, he or she will be most welcome. The first five essays will be published on the project's website."

The first prize, as we already told you, will be a trip to France.

“The award-giving ceremony will be held in France – in Paris, Versailles, in the early days of April. There our winner jointly with YvelinesRadio and our Bulgarian partners will carry out a few public discussions on European elections, on the sentiments of young people and on the readiness to vote. Sightseeing tours have been included in the program. It will be a nice trip with a working component fitted into it.”

What about the deadlines for essay submission?

“Essays should be sent to the e-mail address of our project - parliament@europe.bg. The subject of the e-mail message should desirably be “EssayCompetition”. Essays should be submitted by 10 March 2009. The winners will be announced on 18 March in Brussels at the European Parliament, where another event under the project is due – a discussion involving representatives of all political groups in EP and focused on what the parliament has done and what is ahead.”

Is the European Union theme sweetened or embittered? What comes to the fore: the good things or the darker colours?

“I think that the darker colours come to the fore,” says 36-year-old Alexandra Ilieva, academic. “People definitely expected that upon Bulgaria’s accession to EU, everything would get on swimmingly. Now the reality is different. While the EU has been working hard in the last 50 years, Bulgaria has shown in just a couple of years that it cannot use the funds allotted to it. Well, it seems we have to think about the people who manage the funds – are they competent enough? In this sense, the bitter stuff is more than the sweetness. The sugariness is maybe in that the borders have opened for us, and now most of us can travel widely in Europe, meet other peoples and come to know their traditions. As far as I am concerned, the sugar is in that we belong to the large European family. And when somebody is part of a family, he has got rights, but obligations too. If we start playing under the rules, things will hopefully take the right course.”

“I guess that Bulgarians tend to experience the sugariness of EU membership to a greater extent,” 43-year-old trader Slavi Boyanov says. “The sweetness is in that movement of people to and from Europe has become much easier. The same is valid where goods are concerned. It is a fact that writers, actors and musicians from Bulgaria are now free to go and do creative projects in Berlin, for instance. And this is coupled with an increasing number of musicians and people of art visiting Bulgaria.”

Is Europe sweeter for the old or for the new members?

“I cannot say, but normally, old members should feel more comfortable,” Slavi Boyanov says. “And I don’t think that anybody should fret about it. The new member states including Bulgaria, should work very hard to be able to achieve the results and successes of the old members.”

The elections for the European Parliament are oncoming. For the first time Bulgaria will be electing

members of the EP for a full five-year mandate. What Europe should we create together after the elections?

“Perhaps a cleaner one from an ecological point of view,” Slavi Boyanov claims.
“Perhaps more tolerant not only in view of EU countries but all our neighbors and the countries on the European continent, and not only. Furthermore – a faster reacting Europe in view of problems happening in Bulgaria and the other countries.”

Whether “sweet or bitter” the European theme has kept the attention of Bulgarian artists. The project “Eurosapiens” is a colorful Bulgarian interpretation of events in the European Union. It is a contest launched by the House of Humor and Satire in the town of Gabrovo with the support of Bulgarian MP Nikolai Mladenov. The exposition will visit Brussels on the occasion of the Day of Humor – April 1. Caricature is a live art that moves on the edge, reflecting daily hot issues,” said Tatiana Tsankova, director of the Humor House.

“We wanted to have the artists’ critical vision on European policies in member states, Bulgaria included, Tsankova adds. And here is what they reflect: in the first place – corruption, misuse of money from the European funds, violation of consumers’ interests and politicians’ immoral behavior. The cartoons also interpret the gas crisis and the instillation of Czech artist Czerny. The overall result is a diverse picture of the way Bulgarians see what is happening in this country and across Europe. Public shortcomings happen not only in Bulgaria. However Bulgaria is ours and so we would like them to happen less often.”

The project encompasses 18 of Bulgaria’s most popular cartoon artists. In one of the drawings we see Europe as a healer giving a resurrecting breath to Bulgaria. The caricature that was distinguished with the third prize of Eurosapiens depicts the wish for reality in Bulgaria to be different from what it is. Ivan Kotuzov has depicted Bulgaria as a dwarf dreaming of the beautiful blonde Europe, but remains seated on a bench in the mighty bear hug of Russia.

Before the Czech Republic undertook the EU Presidency on January 1, 2009 the motto the country was envisaging was “We would sweeten up Europe”. It was illustrated with a sugar cube melting into a cup of coffee. The idea was grounded on the fact that the sugar cubes are a Czech invention. Later it turned out that the expression could be interpreted ambiguously, which drove Prague to give it up and replace it with a far more traditional motto.

“The motto now is “Europe without barriers”, explains Martin Klepetko, Czech Ambassador to Bulgaria. “We will sweeten up Europe” is a slogan that appeared as a suggestion before the country took up the Presidency of the Union. It was conceived as a joke of double meaning. But it is not quite correct. This ambiguity in the Czech language is not exact and people took it as something not as positive as initially thought.”

What is Prague doing in its capacity of rotation presiding country?

"We are working on the programme previously adopted according to our priorities. Three of them are the fundament, or as we call them – the "three E-s": Economy, Energy and "Europe & the World". Each of these titles has several subtitles. We should work along the programme of our Presidency but also on issues that later came up. You know that at the beginning of the year two crises sprang up and it was very important for the Czech Presidency to engage. One was the gas supplies crisis and the crisis in the Middle East. For a month these were the priorities of our Presidency, Ambassador Klepetko goes on to say. Now we are back to our initial programme. We are working on institutional issues as scheduled. A few days ago the Lower Chamber of the Czech Parliament endorsed the Lisbon Treaty. Now we are expecting the ratification of the Upper Chamber. Of course, one of the top priorities is the economy, because of the current economic crisis, which is currently holding the world in its grip. We are to host the discussion within the EU and try to find a solution that would be accepted by all countries."

Should the countries of weaker economies in the EU be given stronger support?

"This is a very important issue – what kind of support should EU member-countries receive. There are various ideas. We, as a presiding country, are of the opinion that work should be done in the direction of developing the so-called free market, that is – not to introduce protective measures, which would entail over-protectionism of certain local markets. We believe that the way out of the crisis is related to the increase of competitiveness in Europe. And this competitiveness cannot be achieved through restricting the free market through protective measures for different markets."

We talked about the two top priorities. Could you dwell more on the third priority of the Czech Presidency of the EU?

"The third priority is "Europe and the World" and it concerns the foreign relations of the European Union. There are within the framework of this priority several subtitles, too. In the first place there stands the Czech initiative for institutionalizing the so-called "eastern partnership". It means introducing certain preferential relations with the countries, which neighbor on the EU from the east. A summit will be held to that end in Prague, May 7. The second subtitle can be defined as the process of enlargement of the EU, which we would not like to be suspended under the current crisis. And here I mean the institutional crisis in the EU as well as the world economic crisis, because they both exert pressure over that issue. That concerns the countries of the Western Balkans, which are at the moment the ones standing closest to EU accession. The third sub-priority is the relation with our partner over the ocean, especially the USA and Canada. For us they are very important partners not only economy-wise but politically, too, as well as in the sphere of defense within the framework of NATO."

And finally let us get back to our contest. What would you say to the participants in it?

"I would like to wish to all contestants a lot of good luck and many nice moments upon listening to the programmes of your Radio Station", said in conclusion His Excellency Martin Klepetko, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Sofia.

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