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***"Political indifference can be very costly"* says Director of KAS European Office**

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In less than a month, the EU citizens will have to exercise their democratic duty by electing the next members of the European Parliament. Politicians who, for the next five years, will represent the interests and respond to the problems of the same citizens who voted for them. Well, the European elections should be a very important event for every EU citizen, yet they are often underestimated and perceived as secondary - especially in some countries in South East Europe.

To narrow the gap between Brussels and the region, our Alumna Fellow Martina Kazakova, seeks answers to the challenges facing the next European Parliament, and respectively the EU in a series of interviews.

In the introductory interview, we delve into the role of the European Parliament, the importance of voting, the common misconceptions that prevent citizens from voting in the European elections and the challenges ahead for the next European Parliament. Our guest this week is Dr. Beatrice Gorawantschy, Director of KAS European Office in Brussels.

Dr. Gorawantschy, from the first European elections in 1979 to 2014, there has been a decline in voter turnout, with the exception of 2019. Why is it important for European citizens to vote in the European elections, especially at a time of global crisis and wars knocking on the EU's door?

The answer is very simple - every citizen's vote matters. European elections are often perceived as elections, which are not very important, as second-class elections. But one thing is clear, especially in the upcoming European elections - there are many political issues at stake and responsible voting is more important than ever. Abstention or political indifference, on the other hand, is very costly – because it plays into the hands of extremists. Voting in the European elections is also a powerful sign, a kind of commitment to the European project, a sign of belonging to a shared community with common values and goals.

What are some of the common misconceptions or barriers that prevent people from South East Europe voting in the European election and how can these be addressed?

Unfortunately, there is this quite visible gap between the older members of the EU, the founding members, and the newer members, coming mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, when it comes to voting in European elections. One has to ask, why is the gap so big? Maybe, it is a lack of awareness. We need more awareness-raising, because many people are not fully aware of the importance of the European elections and how it affects them.

The second issue could be the language barrier. The third argument I wanted to mention is that the EU is sometimes perceived as very distant and bureaucratic. The question is how to address these barriers? We could do it through education and outreach, and that already starts in schools. We should look at the school curricula and also more to the factor of engagement and participation. We also need to do everything we can to encourage active participation. That could help. We also need to address people's concerns as that helps to create and build more trust. And, of course, there are different cultural sensitivities that need to be taken into consideration.

At a [European Council meeting](#) in October 2023, EU leaders discussed the future priorities for the EU, which will be formally adopted in June: energy, security and defense, resilience and competitiveness, migration, global engagement and enlargement. For example, the long-term climate change mitigation strategy by 2050 is [moving at a different pace](#) in the countries of South East Europe and in Western Europe. How can the next European Parliament narrow the gap in the pace of implementation of the EU agenda in different EU countries?

First of all, to narrow the gap in the pace of implementation of the EU agenda in different European countries, the priorities and the political directions need to be clearly defined. In the field of climate policy implementation, it is important to advocate for a stronger legislative framework. Again, it is necessary to increase public awareness for all these goals. Perhaps also to do a little bit more in the area of research and innovation. Now more than ever, in the field of Security and Defense it is important to further encourage the cooperation between the Member States. In the area of resilience and competitiveness measures for the Single Market and strengthening cooperation focusing on SME can also contribute.

In the light of the previous question, why should the work of the European Parliament matter to every single European citizen?

In order to make people aware, it is important to explain what role the European Parliament has. If you look at the fact that the members of the European Parliament are directly elected by the citizens of the EU member states, which means that they represent the interests of the citizens, they advocate on behalf of the citizens – that is already a very strong position. The

European Parliament also has control over the allocation of the EU budget, which is a lot of power. The Parliament furthermore has a considerable influence in areas such as trade, security, environmental issues, and fundamental human rights. It has to be made clear to the public that EU citizens are directly affected in their daily lives by the decisions taken at the European level.

What role do young people play in shaping the outcome of the European elections?

They can play an important role, because if we take a look at the last European elections in 2019, the voters' turnout among the youth and first-time voters increased tremendously. This shows us that there was an impact. For the 2024 European elections, there was a campaign to lower the voting age in some EU countries [e.g. in Germany, Austria, Belgium and Malta you can vote at age of 16, while in Greece at age of 17]. An interesting point is that the young generation connect on social media, they are connected through all kinds of digital means. They could have an influence among their friends, their peer group. Therefore, it is very important to attract young people, but also with topics that they are interested in.

What are the main challenges facing the EU in the next five years in terms of maintaining unity and cooperation among member states?

There will be several challenges. If we look at the current geopolitical situation that we are facing, one of the challenges will be to maintain unity and cooperation among the EU member states, especially in terms of a common foreign and security policy, but also towards a common security and defense policy. A second very relevant topic will be the political coordination in the economic sphere, topics like industrial policy, competitiveness, Free Trade Agreements.

A third factor is the topic of migration – managing refugee flows, restraining illegal migration. Other important issues are climate change, but also digitalisation and not to forget a very important factor – the rule of law and democratic backsliding. We are facing the rise of anti-democratic tendencies, the rise of the far-right, the rise of illiberal tendencies. And this is a major challenge that has to be approached by EU member states in commonality in order to become more resilient.

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