

## Bulgarian customs and the media

A key priority in the Bulgarian government's program is the integration of the country in the European Union. Regarding this a Communications strategy was developed. Its task is to bring the issue out into the public sphere and to give an opportunity to every part of society -institutions, groups and individuals- of becoming aware of the predominantly positive aspects of this process. The Communications Strategy is a dialogue with society and a way of guaranteeing its active participation.

The implementation of the Communications Strategy is aimed at bringing the Bulgarian citizens closer to the everyday dimension of EU membership. The entire campaign is divided into two main aspects (depending on the goals and on the public to whom it is directed): the national plan, addressed inwards to Bulgarian society and aimed at explaining and bringing the citizens closer to the "European idea" of Bulgaria, and the international plan, directed to the citizens of the EU Member States.

All Bulgarian institutions are taking part in this Communications strategy as part of the national plan and are following common rules like transparency, honesty, flexibility and openness.

Those principles are also the most important ones for the Bulgarian customs agency. The idea of transparency led us to the creation of four documentaries that show the daily work of the ordinary custom officer. The everyday battle against customs offenders found its way into the film thanks to two very big cases of fraud and smuggling. After a few months of long investigation by the internal service, called the Inspectorate, 10 customs border officers were dismissed and charges against them were filed. They made serious procedure violations when they allowed goods to enter the country without proper control. It turned out that behind this criminal scheme was a notorious underground "businessman". In another case, customs officers found that a large amount of medicines worth more than 23 million EURO were missing from a warehouse under customs control. This means that the budget tax loss was of about 4.5 million EURO. When presenting these two cases we are not just informing the society but also exercising a

warning effect on any potential future offenders. Public opinion was on our side and it played a big part as well.

The main purpose of the PR department is to present a new image of the customs officer in a fair and open way. Every week we are trying as well to show the media interesting events that reveal different aspects of the customs work, such as reports, interviews and publications. However, we must not restrict ourselves to the presentation of every single offence discovered by customs officers such as smuggling, fraud and so on. When presenting these cases we are searching for a comprehensible language. Even though the journalists are looking mainly for a sensationalist story, unfortunately we are restricted by Bulgarian law on the issue of supplying them with the complete information.

One of the best ways to strengthen the authority of an institution is honesty. When mistakes have been committed we must have the ability to be the first to admit and discuss them. The hiding or concealing of sensitive information leads only to speculation, and this is arguably the worst media reaction. A competent spokesman must confront every crisis situation.

The development of close contacts with journalists who follow customs work is an absolute must. We need to respect and help every reporter in every case. This means never denying a request for information and giving the needed data as soon as it is available. When it is possible, some information could be presented in advance or assistance lent to reporters when we can't directly provide them with the information they request.

The information must go both ways: we not only give but also receive it. Any information from the investigative journalists about the customs or a case where customs officials are involved will help us get a different perspective and understand a little bit better how society views the work of the agency.

The information policy of Bulgarian customs has another important dimension, as there is a big segment of people whom are clients of the customs service and should be informed of every new detail in the customs legislation or procedures. That is why information brochures were printed and distributed in every custom office. Our

web page has also special sections for clients and people who travel abroad. If the information in the Internet is not enough there are also telephone numbers which could be used whenever necessary.

All of our activities are aimed at informing ordinary people and businesses as well as trying to create connections between the people and the institutions that in fact are working for them.