



Managing Governmental Public Relations in Russia: Evidences from St. Petersburg

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the problems of media relations management in governmental organizations in Russia. Governmental public relations (PR) became one of the fastest developing areas of the PR-industry in contemporary Russia. The study uses expert survey method in order to unveil true mechanisms of governmental PR in Russia. The authors of the study have interviewed sixteen high-ranking experts. The findings of the study shows that governmental PR in Russia are very well developed in the executive branch of power while it is close to zero in the jurisdictional branch and very weak in the legislative branch of power. Another important result deals with the significant role of governmental financial support to the mass media, which influences governmental PR in the way of corruption and miscommunication with the public.

Keywords: Public Relations, Governmental Public Relations, Media Relations, Political Communication

JEL Classifications: D73, H83

1. INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) in contemporary Russia are developing towards further self-differentiation and further sophistication of technologies in use. Over the past decade, governmental PR became one of the fastest developing areas of the PR-industry. In Russia, all state institutes have their own PR-departments. For example, at the federal level the PR-department of the State Duma (the Russian Parliament) employs about one hundred full-time PR-specialists (Chumikov and Bocharov, 2013). At the local level, PR-specialists work in district courts, police offices, local government bodies, government medical centers, etc. The trend manifested itself in the establishing of “The Journal of PR in State Institutes” and in the publishing of new textbooks (Markov, 2014; Rusakov, 2006; Chumikov and Bocharov, 2013).

Governmental PR as a part of PR-industry faces real problems with terminology, which are widely discussed in academic literature (Shishkina, 2012). The problem is in heterogeneity of

state institutions in Russia. From the formal point of view, local government bodies are separated from those of the state. Moreover, in Russia along with state institutions, which belong to the executive, legislative and judicial branches of power, there are many different organizations and private firms with state financial support. In this regard, Shishkina treats governmental PR as “an information and communication activity which is realized by state bodies in the broad sense (firms, state institutions, non-governmental organizations, etc.)” (Shishkina, 2012, p. 119-120). According to our interpretations, governmental PR includes PR-activities performed both by state institutions and by organizations with state financial support.

In this article, we would like to describe the basic functions and trends in governmental PR in today’s Russia, based on the study of governmental PR in two neighbor Russian regions – St. Petersburg and Leningrad. St. Petersburg as the second largest city in Russia and Leningrad region has formed an urban agglomeration and a unique information space. This makes almost impossible to separate these regions in our study.

2. GOVERNMENTAL PR AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN RUSSIA

Governmental PR usually deals with the creation and maintenance of effective communication environment for governmental organizations (Canel and Sanders, 2013). However, if the effectiveness of management in private sector is “measured by the amount of profit or the lack of it, in public administration it is evaluated by citizens’ political support or the lack of it” (Komarovski, 2001. p. 54). We accept this statement as a whole, though with some refinements (Liu et al., 2010). Just like profitability of a business reflects the level of consumer readiness to pay for goods and services provided by the company, any state depends on its citizens’ support and their readiness to pay taxes. However, public administration is more complicated function because political actors tend to use state governmental organizations for their political goals. Governmental PR should obviously be aimed at the solving of national goals but not at the satisfaction of the interests of one or several political actors. Long-term state interests are bounded with the creation of stable political institutes and the rule of law, which allow to settle political conflicts peacefully and to consider the diversity of political interests which exist in one or another society.

Some main activities of governmental PR are usually defined in academic literature (Bennet and Entman, 2001; Kiousis and Strömbäck, 2010; Lee, 2007; Sanders, 2009; Valentini, 2013; Waymer, 2013). They include media relations, communication with publics, special events, corporate communications, public opinion analysis, media-planning, content-analysis, etc. The core activity for governmental PR is the main PR function - media relations. Media relations play primary role in political PR because modern political communication runs via the mass media. According to Bennet and Entman, mediated political communication in contemporary democracies occupies the central place in public politics (Bennett and Entman, 2001. p. 1). Governments and state institutes can no longer exist without heavy usage of the media: “Communication can shape power and participation in society in negative ways, by obscuring the motives and interests behind political decisions, or in positive ways, by prompting the involvement of citizens in those decisions” (Bennett and Entman, 2001. p. 2). The role of the media is growing in importance, which is connected with increasing professionalization of political communication with PR specialists, press secretaries, spin-doctors who are continuously involved in news management.

The relationship between government officials and journalists has become an important issue both for academics and practitioners in media relations. As Larsson emphasizes, journalists and institutional actors appear in complex and also in simple relationships, in both organizational and personal relationships (Larsson, 2012. p. 258). Broom et al., have formulated a three-step model of the media relations:

1. Connection between both actors arises at the system’s input. Actors at the same time possess mutual expectations in the need to work together.
2. At the second step exchange, communication and other forms of interaction are taking place.

3. As a result of the interaction, we have the consequences of the relationship: Goal achievement, routine behavior and reduced autonomy (Broom et al., 1997).

The majority of scholars in politician-journalist relationship thinks that this relationship is forming in the process of mutual adaptation when reciprocal needs are primary characteristics. Larsson reminds Sigals’ statement that “news-making is a consensual process within a context of shared values” and that of Hess’ saying that politicians and journalists during their interaction “like each other - and hate each other - because they are so much alike” (Larsson, 2012. p. 259). The same idea was stressed by Heath from an organizational point of view: “Politicians, journalists, news-makers, governmental officials and experts interact in a self-confirming infrastructure” (Heath, 2009. p. 102).

There is another problem of the politician-journalist relationship, which deals with the control function. It is really important to control communication because if one part of a relationship is able to control it, so this part commands communication. There are different points of view on this issue. On the one hand, it seems that journalists are able to control communication: “It takes two to tango ... where the sources do the leading” (Larsson, 2012. p. 259). On the other hand, the others suppose that the leading role depends on the phase of the interaction. Sources control the phase of receiving information, while journalists dominate during the editorial phase. Moreover, the leading part may vary according to an actual situation for the connection between political actors and resources is twofold: On the one hand, actors are making efforts to achieve total controllability of media sources; on the other hand, they understand the significance of the mass media for further interaction with the public. Institutional actors control information while journalists control the media. Actors provide information for access to the media space. Journalists guarantee media presence. During the process of sources exchange the publicity of both parts grows: State institutes provide necessary information to public, thus increasing their own authority; at the same time, the mass media obtain greater awareness among the public.

Usually there are spin-doctors to help politicians and government officials to handle journalists. In everyday public practice, spin-doctoring is one of the most important parts of integrated political marketing. The roots of government spin-doctoring go to election campaigns management. Over the last decades there was a process of modernization and professionalization of political campaign which can be assessed as a trend “from labor intensive to capital intensive” campaigns (Esser et al., 2000. p. 211). Election campaigns have transformed into the process of developing media relations. Richards (2005) in his “Be Your Own Spin Doctor: A Practical Guide to Using the Media” points out that “we live in the age of spin doctors... Feared, loathed, venerated or emulated, the spin doctors are among us shaping the images we see and crafting the words we hear. Behind the scene of politics and business, at the shoulders of rich and powerful, discreetly out of camera shoot (most of the time) and firmly off-the-record, they ply their trade” (Esser et al., 2000. p. 212). According to the mentioned definitions, the term “spin doctor” has a negative connotation: Manipulator, conspirator, propagandist, hazard force

or even liar. For some scholars spin doctor is a professional who tries to influence public opinion putting benevolent background on presented information to the public.

Spin doctor's success can be determined from the several points of view: First, the journalist entrusts him as an ordinary source of information, cites him and announces his full name and party affiliation; second, the journalist accepts spin doctor's interpretation of information and doesn't disclose the source in his publication. The reason of a spin doctor's relevance lies in the process of knowledge relativization, i.e. people no longer believe in the existence of unprejudiced truth. Facts and events have different importance for different people. The main goal of spin doctor is interpretation. Not only positive news should have their presence in the media but even negative ones should be smoothed over if it is possible.

All government and state bodies should coordinate their information policies, presenting a common "general" position on each problem and operate with information provided by central authorities (Kioussis and Strömbäck, 2010). One of the goals of spin-doctoring is to constantly inform the rest of the management team. Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign chief James Carville and press officer George Stephanopoulos well understood the "absolute imperative of speed in the accelerated new media environment, printing the slogan 'Speed kills... Bush' on T-shirts" (Sanders, 2009. p. 29). That was about the immediate response to the opponent's statements in order to prevent unnecessary interpretations. Successful implementation of such tactics could be only guaranteed by permanent media monitoring. Another example is the Obama advertisement "Fundamentals" in 2008 campaign, which was aired within 24 h of his opponent John McCain's remarks about the economic situation in the United States.

Thus, governmental press-cutting services or PR-departments have become an integral part of the state's efficient politics. They exist at all government levels: From the central state bodies to local ones. In practice, the quality of such departments depends on the government level. At the federal level, press secretaries are also usually news-makers; at regional and local levels they are only an intermediate part of the "politician-journalist" communication mechanism.

In Russian academic literature scholars analyze several problems concerning governmental PR. First of all, it is important to characterize informational politics in Russia in general. Informational politics of the political actor consist in the development of the systematized code of rules and principles of media relations. The main types of it can be marked out by the extent of information openness, i.e., an institution's background accessibility and comprehensiveness for mass media. Usually the following characteristics of informational politics are identified:

1. Increased conspiracy and unavailability
2. Reactive openness
3. Systematic openness.

Informational unavailability is a distinctive feature of a variety of political organizations in Russia. The most exciting example

are the public authority institutes where "...almost half of state employees considers the process of building a dialog with the public and public organizations as a trifling task" (Komarovski, 2001. p. 113). So, they are basically against the public control over government services. Another quarter-part of governmental employees supports relationship with public, several forms of public control, but supposes it premature for Russian public life. And only the last quarter-part not only supports relationship with public but promote such an approach in everyday activity.

There can be several explanations of why informational unavailability persists: Historical experience and mentality, spontaneous circumstances when institutes have plenty of problems with achieving their goals and prefer to reduce the amount of negative information etc. The Government seems unprepared to deal with mass rallies due to the acute politicization of the public.

Reactive openness can be characterized by non-systematic, forced information disclosure when an institution for some reasons becomes a goal for the media. Such policy is usually considered as less costly than systematic openness. As Tchumikov and Botcharov (2009. p. 195) underline "the main goals of media relations are regular contacts with the media, friendly and public relationships with media society, creation of the positive image amongst journalists." Politics of systematic openness is based on it, facilitating the solution of main goals by political actors.

Systematic informational openness is a long-term basis for political actors to increase their influence on society and to achieve public support. The basis for this influence is an "activity or process when a communicator is trying to stimulate modification of an individual or a group of individuals beliefs, attitudes or behavior through specific messages which provide to a recipient some freedom of choice" (Wilcox et al., 2014. p. 423). It may be used to serve the following purposes:

1. To change or neutralize a hostile public opinion
2. To crystallize latent opinions and positive aims
3. To support favorable opinions.

There is no chance to attain any of the mentioned goals by using informational unavailability. Reactive openness may help to achieve only the first one. Therefore, it is not a surprise that systematic openness is more advisable behavior in governmental PR: "An essential condition for PR departments is to promote democracy, openness of government and to enlarge society awareness and not to attend the interests of several bureaucrats or political parties" (Komarovski, 2001. p. 106). However, reactive openness with half-truth or negative information is considered to be a most used approach in the Russian governmental PR (Shishkina, 2012). To verify this we run a study of governmental PR at the regional level in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region.

3. METHODOLOGY

During the spring of 2015, 16 experts in governmental PR were interviewed. The main condition of our choice was an experts' experience in this professional field. Among our experts

were employees of PR-departments in the governments of St. Petersburg and Leningrad region, several state employees from federal institutions, representatives of the mass media (100 TV, “Novaya gazeta,” “Delovoy Petersburg,” “Zaks.ru,” “Sankt-Petersburg vedomosti,” news agency “TASS”). The journalists represent different media: TV, newspapers, on-line media, and the news agency. A part from that, two persons in our sample had experience both in journalism and governmental PR. Our experts composed two groups of equal size: Eight journalists and eight PR-departments’ employees in each one.

The main goal of our survey was to characterize the process of development of governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region and its problems. Our survey has a descriptive or intelligence framework. Nevertheless, we have proposed several hypotheses that could be summarized as follows:

- H1 - Governmental PR in Russia follows contemporary world trend toward interactivity and digitalization;
- H2 - Governmental PR is better developed in the PR-departments of the executive branch of power;
- H3 - Governmental PR at the regional level is insufficiently developed, communication intensity is low, and contacts with journalists are infrequent;
- H4 - The level of institutionalization of governmental PR is low, regulations are weakly defined.

To check each hypothesis we addressed several questions to the experts. The questionnaire contained eight open questions. Therefore, our survey relies on in-depth interviews which is rather common for qualitative research.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the most popular activities of governmental PR. The respondents were able to make several responses or suggest their own answer. According to presented results the main activities of governmental PR are interactions with media, the process of informing public via controlled media channels (web page, newspapers, official bulletins, etc.), and organizing special events. These data are correlated with global trends and match perfectly with academic literature except one very important field of the social media. There is only one voice to mention the Internet and no voices to point at the social media as a tool or the area of activity. We found this a first significant result which differs Russia from international standards in governmental PR (Hong, 2013).

As we expected, our experts marked PR-departments from the executive branch of power as the most proactive public administration bodies in governmental PR (Table 2). Answering this question, our respondents were able to make several responses or add their own commentary. These data confirm our hypothesis about the prevalence of executive power departments in governmental PR at local level in Russia. Among all the bodies which were marked by the respondents, the majority belongs to executive power. Among representatives of legislative bodies only member of St. Petersburg legislative Assembly Vitaliy Milonov was marked. Only one respondent marked the office of the Public Prosecutor. Hence, we can easily ascertain the total prevalence of

executive power in governmental PR, which reflects the whole power hierarchy in Russia.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of answers to the question about the initiation of communication in governmental PR. The expert could make only one vote. Our experts reveal the fact that governmental press-departments are not usually proactive: They do not initiate contacts and just respond to the media inquiries: 11 experts out of 16 says that the journalists more often initiate relationships via information inquiries. This tendency is proved by the both PR-specialists and journalists from our sample. Even PR-specialists working in the government press-departments at the moment confirm it. The reasons vary from the traditional for Russia secrecy to the lack of financial or organizational resources.

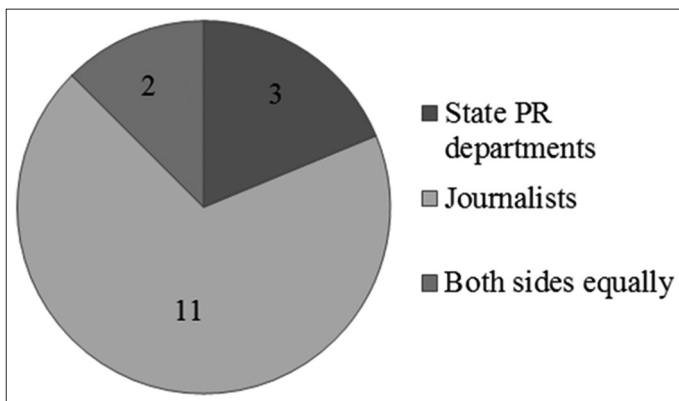
In addition we have put a question of the level of intensity of relations between the governmental bodies and journalists. The expert could make only one vote. Our data shows the low level of it (Table 3). Two experts said that intensity depends on communication style of specific governmental organization and varies from “several times per week” to “several times per year.” Thereby the intensity of governmental PR conforms to its reactivity. According to experts, there are no governmental institutes in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region which contact with journalists every day.

Table 1: Main activities of governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region (N=16)

Activity	Mentions
Media relations	16
Informing via controlled media channels	15
Special events	11
Direct contacts with the public	7
Information politics/strategy/code development	3
Government relations	1
Brand development	1
Visiting infrastructure objects	1
Official congratulations	1
Speech writing	1
Website administration	1
Anti-crisis PR (conflict situations)	1

Source: Field survey. PR: Public relations

Figure 1: Initiation of government-journalist communication, number of votes (N=16)



Source: Field survey, 2015, composed by the authors

Table 2: Government bodies with the most visible governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region (N=16)

Government bodies	Mentions
Press-department of Leningrad region and the Governor (Drozdenko)	6
Deputy Governor of St. Petersburg (Albin)	5
Deputy Governor of St. Petersburg for construction and development (Oganessian)	5
Press-department of St. Petersburg and the Governor (Poltavtchenko)	4
Committee for construction of St. Petersburg	3
Committee for investments of St. Petersburg	2
Federal anti-monopoly service in St. Petersburg	2
Deputy Governor of Leningrad region (Yalov)	2
Committee for transportation of St. Petersburg	2
Committee for the development of transport infrastructure of St. Petersburg Government	2
Legislative assembly of St. Petersburg	2
Member of Legislative assembly of St. Petersburg Vitaliy Milonov	2
Others: 15 Government bodies (Office of Public Prosecutor of Russia, ombudsman of Leningrad region, ombudsman of St. Petersburg, committee for agriculture and fishery of Leningrad region, committee for town-planning and architecture monuments protection of St. Petersburg, children ombudsman of St. Petersburg, committee for tourism of St. Petersburg, Committee for business and consumer market development of St. Petersburg, Committee for social policy of St. Petersburg, state construction supervision and expertise service of St. Petersburg, committee for nature management of St. Petersburg, Committee for education of St. Petersburg)	1

Source: Field survey, 2015. PR: Public relations

The passive character of governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region was confirmed by the answers on question of the quantity of paid-up articles. Our respondents were able to make several responses or add their own commentary. The all experts mentioned the way to get publications in the mass media by financing them. According to the experts, there are three the most common methods of payment:

1. Media funding via regional budgets or grants (14 mentions)
2. Informational contracts (11 mentions)
3. Illegal payment (9 mentions).

Government institutions frequently tend to control the information flow in the mass media simply buying their content. Figure 2 shows the significance of financial impact for governmental PR at the local level. It is interesting to mention that the answer “no share” was not used by the experts. Therefore, we can conclude that financial support plays important role in governmental PR. Obviously, if government pays to the mass media, there is no need to communicate on everyday basis.

Next question deals with the strategic role of governmental PR: 8 experts of 16 said that in most cases the aim of governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region is to promote private interests of officials; 6 experts said that the aim is to create stable state institutions; 2 respondents said that the aim can be twofold. These data demonstrates the low standards of governmental PR at the regional level and frequent mismanaging of private and state interests.

The level of need for new professionals in governmental PR in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region is reflected in Table 4. Firstly, almost 25% of our respondents skip that question. Secondly, our experts haven't indicated the necessity in new governmental PR professionals. The lack of consensus on this problem among the experts could be interpreted by low institutionalization. Every social institute with effective activity stimulates market demand. In private talks our experts marked several reasons of it. On the one hand, vacancies are

Table 3: Intensity of contacts with journalists (N=16)

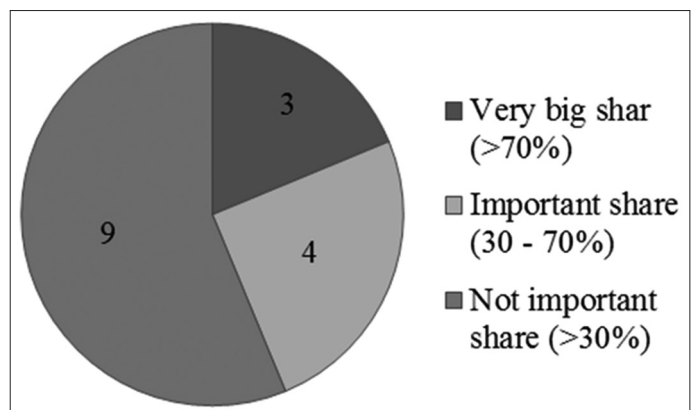
Contacts of state employees with journalists	Votes
Every day (once or several times per day)	0
Several times per week	7
Several times per month	4
Several times per year	3
Depending on the institution several times per week or “several times per year”	2

Source: Field survey

Table 4: Need for new government PR-professionals in St. Petersburg and Leningrad region (N=16)

Level of need	Votes
No need	3
There is some need	1
1-2 professional/year	1
3-7 professional/year	3
More than 7 professional/year	4
No answer	4

Source: Field survey. PR: Public relations

Figure 2: Share of paid-up materials in the mass media of St. Petersburg and Leningrad region (N=16)

Source: Field survey, 2015, composed by the authors

being occupied by the candidates bounded personally with the officials. On the other hand, public service in Russia does not

provide adequate opportunities to start a career. Moreover, according to the similar survey about the government relations, experts (N=17) found considerable demand in GR-professionals (Bykov, 2015). Obviously, there is a need for future research on this matter.

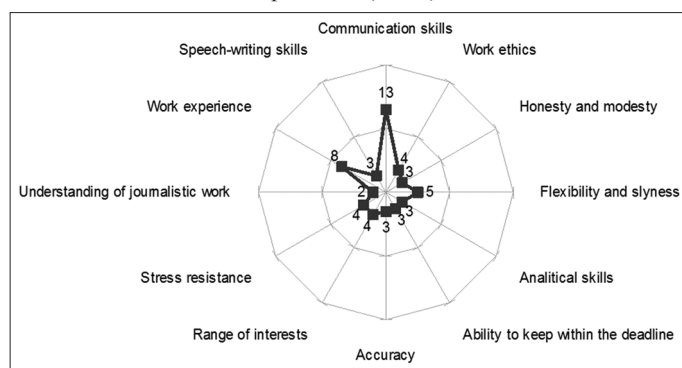
The last question we asked deals with the professional knowledge, skills and experience which could be helpful for PR-specialists. The question was open-ended. We have got the list of 24 characteristics which were classified into 10 sub-groups (Figure 3). We have combined several communication characteristics into “communication skills” and several knowledge characteristics into “range of interests.” Our analysis of the mentioned characteristics shows that communication skills, speech-writing and understanding the specific of journalism are determinant characteristics for governmental PR. The specific characteristics are competence in particular sphere and previous experience. Strangely, there is no need in specific knowledge in political sciences, jurisprudence or statistics. Moreover, our experts have mentioned discrepant characteristics as honesty and modesty (“don’t lie” as one of the experts said), on the one hand, and flexibility and slyness (sometimes it is called “adequateness”), on the over hand. Obviously, in such conditions it should be very helpful to be a stress resistant person.

5. CONCLUSION

First of all, our study rejects hypothesis 1. An absence of social media marketing (SMM) among the main activities is astonishing. In both Russian and foreign academic literature this activity is considered to be one of the fastest developing among the governmental PR functions (Markov, 2014; Tchumikov and Botcharov, 2009; Hong, 2013). There could be two reasons for such result: SMM is not relevant for governmental PR in Russia or it is included in other activities - media relations or informing the public. But this condition does not reflect modern trends in the sphere of PR.

Second, our study proves hypothesis 2 about dominance of the governmental PR in the PR-departments of the executive branch of power, which reflects general imbalance of power in Russia.

Figure 3: Knowledge, skills and experience useful for public relations-specialists (N=16)



Source: Field survey, 2015

Third, according to the results presented in our study, governmental PR in Russia have several problems at the regional level bounded with the state dominance by means of financial control, reactive communication, inactivity, weak ethic standards in publicity, uncertain perspectives for young professionals, absence of requirements in knowledge in public administration and jurisprudence. This conclusion unites hypotheses 3 and 4 because government PR at the regional level is both non-active and non-institutionalized. Obviously, governmental PR in Russia is developing in specific conditions characterized by the domination of bureaucracy and by the lack of political competition. This model is not yet aimed at “consent management” but bureaucratic control (Komarovski, 2001. p. 125). This, undoubtedly, affects the governmental PR-departments’ activity. Our survey data demonstrate that the basis of governmental PR in Russia usually contains principles and practices which are not corresponding to contemporary PR-trends.

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