

Russian Model of Government PR: Peculiarities of Institutionalizing

Vera Achkasova

School of Journalism and Mass Communications
Saint Petersburg State University
St. Petersburg, Russia
v.achkasova@gmail.com

Liudmila Azarova

Faculty of Humanities
Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University ETU "LETI"
St. Petersburg, Russia
azarovaludmilla@gmail.com

Nina Zhuravleva

School of Journalism and Mass Communications
Saint Petersburg State University
St. Petersburg, Russia
n.zhuravleva@spbu.ru

Abstract—The purpose of this paper is the study of the evolution and state of government public relations in Russia, the history of which, unlike their Western counterparts, is slightly more than a quarter of a century old. In this research, the authors undertake one of the first attempts to indicate the steps of this phenomenon institutionalization process, and also highlight the essential characteristics which are inherent in each of the steps. Russian scientists have tried to analyze the state of government PR in Russia in the initial stages of their formation. However, at the present stage, there have been significant changes in government PR in the country. This affected both the format of their operation and their very structure.

Keywords—Government PR; institutionalizing; Russian PR model; political communications, public administration

I. INTRODUCTION

The process of institutionalization of Government PR in Russia differs substantially from the evolution of PR structures in the bodies of state power abroad, especially in countries with established democracies.

In Russia, public relations in state and municipal administration began to develop intensively only at the turn of the 1980-90s, which were marked by the beginning of political and economic transformation. The peculiarity of the resulting PR model was determined by the basic principles of relations between power and society with the help of the press laid in the last stage of the USSR existence. The main functions of press-centers and press-services were the organization of information and publishing activities of the authorities, information support of the state mass media, accreditation of journalists and work with citizens. In the initial period of public relations development in the government sphere, the primary task most often was creating a personal brand of the first persons of the state. The second stage of development of the government PR in Russia covers the period of the first half of the 1990s – late 2000s. It is the period of the final institutionalization of the government PR-structures, clear

boundaries of their activities have been formed, the staff has been supplemented by professionals, a range of functional responsibilities has been developed. The main functions of their activities have been transformed: work with mass media has ceased to be a priority; analytical and research function, encompassing serious attention to the interests and requirements of society became the primary task; logically the second in importance was the development of strategic and tactical plans for information and communication impact on public opinion.

The third stage, the current state of government public relations in Russia, which began in the first half of the 2010s, is determined by several processes. We are talking primarily about the process of integration of communications, which leads to the combination of all components of the communication process – PR, advertising, marketing. As a result, in the public administration, several autonomous services, engaged in information and communication activities, are united into one. This is particularly noticeable at the level of regional government bodies. The main emphasis in the activities of these structures is again put on the communication with the media, and on work with citizens. In fact, we can notice the turn to the initial stage of government PR. It is obvious that in a rapidly changing reality, such approach to communication is not justified. Therefore we can observe the narrowing of the range of PR tools use.

Findings. Analysis of the specificity of the existing models of public PR as a result will allow one to identify the emerging main trends of its further evolution, obstacles and challenges that arise in this process that will be very useful for other states going along the path of transition.

Limitations of this study are in the tendency of government structures to work in the mode of a closed system in terms of the provision of information about the work of internal structures, including PR services. The way out is seen in the application of more sophisticated qualitative research methods.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The essential basis of differences in regulation and management in business and the public sector has been clearly articulated by American political scientists M. Milakovich and G. Gordon in the book "Public Administration in America": if private sector management efficiency is measured by profit or the lack of it, in public administration it is measured by people's support or the lack of it [1]. Therefore the methodological foundation of the analysis is the basic ideas about the role of government PR as a part of the democratization process [2], allowing in modern conditions for the state structures to be sufficiently flexible and interactive to establish contacts with different target audiences. It is this fact that helps citizens to feel that they are more involved in the political process. Moreover (and this point is especially important for countries such as Russia, which are at the stage of social transformation and have a multi-ethnic structure), the activities of government public relations, which respect the diversity of opinions, can result in the strengthening of national unity [3; 4]. It is the national consolidation that demonstrates other countries, the exemplary model of the most effective work of government PR. In fact, government PR represents today a new version of "soft power" [4, 5].

Experts in the field of government PR come to the following conclusion: for all constraints, the most effective principle of their construction is the division of government communications services into two subdivisions - one decides the current, daily tasks (this is the press office in the usual sense), the second employs long-term planning (this service actually represents communications). Taking this into account the feature of government PR in Western countries is that they operate in a fairly hard control mode of the taxpayers, opposition represented by the Shadow Cabinet and the media.

Through the prism of these methodological approaches, it is important to consider the evolution and status of government public relations in Russia. Analysis of the specificity of the existing models of public PR as a result will identify the emerging main trends of their further evolution.

As political practice shows, the strength of state power is largely determined by its ability to keep the balance of social forces, the ability to operate in a mode of an open system. The power having the communicative nature and serving as a means of special communication, implements all its functions with the help of political communication. Social relations in society also have a communicative nature. The achievement of the identity codes of the state power and media codes allows to create favorably structured public opinion and by its use – a positive image of the government. The importance given today by power structures to "strategic political communication", encourages researchers to talk about the emergence of "a modern PR-state". Dominique Ring, for example, believes that the activities of such state are increasingly represented by three functions. The first is advertising, when the state acting as a communicator creates the message to the citizens (or controls its creation), and then ensures its distribution and promotion in various media formats. The second is the study of public opinion, identification of values, attitudes and

demands of citizens through quantitative and qualitative methods. This forms a database, allowing one not only to establish political communication with society, but also to develop public policies and make decisions on a variety of issues. The third function is public relations by means of which the communicator manages the media attention and provides a favorable light in the information field of his activity [6].

This task today largely relates to government PR. Meanwhile, the process of the institutionalization of these services in Russia differs substantially from the evolution of PR structures in the bodies of state power abroad, especially in Western countries.

Comparative analysis of this process makes it possible to distinguish several criteria: the duration of historical development, way of functioning, and trends that define the evolution of government PR at the present time.

III. EXPERIMENTAL. STAGES OF GOVERNMENT PR IN RUSSIA

Traditionally, the priority in establishing a system of public relations in the government sphere is assigned to the US: it was here in the 30-s of the XIX century that the President of the country E. Jackson actually created the position of Press Secretary. Since the mid-twentieth century, the practice of government PR has taken the offensive character, spreading in almost all countries of the New and Old World and demonstrating an amazing ability to mobilize public opinion.

A. *The first stage of Government PR in Russia development*

In Russia, public relations in state and municipal administration began to develop intensively only at the turn of the 1980-90-s, which were marked by the beginning of political and economic transformation. The peculiarity of the resulting PR model was determined by the basic principles of relations between power and society with the help of the press laid in the last stage of the USSR existence. The most active structures for the implementation of PR projects and information campaigns, then, was the Press Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the state news Agency TASS and APN, the state television and radio. Analytical maintenance of PR-activity of state structures was provided along with Ideological Department, the Propaganda Department of the CPSU Central Committee and other key government structures, by scientific and research institutes on the basis of which some of the existing private public relations firms and the centers of political consulting were later established. The main functions of press-centers and press-services were the organization of information and publishing activities of the authorities, information support of the state mass media, accreditation of journalists and work with citizens. In the initial period of public relations development in the government sphere, the primary task most often was creating a personal brand of the first persons of the state, first of all, the President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev. However, the work of the press service related to the over political image of the President was restricted by the following functions: weekly briefings, collection and analysis of media

appearances, meetings and interviews with journalists, being on the Kremlin phone duty. In the activity of his own brand creation, Gorbachev did not trust even his press Secretary Andrei Grachev, relying primarily on personal natural charm and intuition.

Many researchers have noted the inconsistency typical of the transition period elements of the combination of propaganda and PR in the information activities of the authorities [7, 8].

B. The second stage of Government PR in Russia development

This stage covering the period of the first half of the 1990s - late 2000s is associated with the emergence of a new impetus: it was the need of a new power formation in the dismantling of the old ideological stereotypes. This period is characterized by a significant weakening of censorship in the media; foreign experience of PR is examined and simply copied, along with the attempts of a certain deideologization of foreign policy propaganda and the significant adjustments in foreign policy. The appearance of the first officially registered political parties, entrance to the market of the alternative parties' mass media and propaganda, factional and ideological confrontation within the Russian Parliament and Executive bodies; the unfolding battles between the political actors also had a profound influence on the activation of processes in the sphere of ideology and public relations.

It can be described as a functional transformation of the activities: work with mass media has ceased to be a priority; analytical and research function, encompassing serious attention to the interests and requirements of society, took the first place; logically, the second in importance was the development of strategic and tactical plans for information and communication impact on public opinion.

The importance of the research component in the activities, first of all, of the regional authorities is demonstrated by the work of the Saint-Petersburg Agency for Social Information (ASI), which grew out of the official representative of the research company Gallup. In 2003-2012 ASI conducted regular surveys on the order of Rosstat (Federal service of statistics), Federal service on control over drug trafficking, the Federal medical-biological Agency, St. Petersburg Government, Government of Moscow, administrations of several regions of Russia. The project carried out by order of the administration of St.-Petersburg – “St. Petersburg Barometer Regional POLL” is of particular prominence: “The views in figures”. The main topics of research interests of PR specialists, working in power structures, are:

- development of the legislature at the regional level (“Regional representative power - 10 years. The results of the work in the eyes of public opinion”);
- relation to the activities of the governor;
- social well-being of Petersburgers: expectations for the future, assessments of the present;
- the best and the worst events of the year, for example.

The result of the changes in the system of public relations was the final institutionalization of government PR structures: clear boundaries of their activities have been formed, the staff has been supplemented by professionals, and a range of functional responsibilities has been developed. PR activity has got the specifics depending on the levels of functioning of the state structures – at Federal, regional and municipal levels there are their own peculiarities of communication with the public.

C. The third stage of Government PR in Russia development

The current state of government public relations in Russia, which began in the first half of the 2010s, is determined by several processes.

The first one relates to the realization that managing communications can assume the widest scope up to the total, and have disastrous consequences. Modern politicians, using advances in communications and other sciences, have learned not just to censor, “correct” but actually to shape public opinion. In systems of the so-called “managed democracies”, including Russia, the role and importance of such methods is magnified tremendously. Under “managed democracy” we understand a political regime where all the necessary democratic procedures are treated without excessive use of direct coercion, which is neither a major nor even significant policy tool [9]. The legitimacy of power is achieved under these conditions through the manipulation of public climate, which acts as the main method of the exercise of power. The difference between developed democracies and countries with similar political regimes is not always obvious, because the institutes of management of political processes take root today in greater or lesser degree in all countries. However, the scale of use of technologies in political management may be different, and this difference is highly significant for the self-awareness of citizens of a particular country. In fact, it is the watershed between classical democracy and “managed democracy”. Of course, today the governments of developed countries demonstrate the logic of an anticipatory positive image of the authorities and their policies promotion in the political market. Moreover, it is not mere informing of the public and not even the clarification of the respective governments positions, but actually it is a publicity of the achievements of political leaders and the governments.

The second process characterizing the government PR in Russia in the last decade was the emergence of a specific group of persons engaged in the management of news and media environment. Initially, they, as a rule, accompanied the election process, but then began to actively penetrate into the power structures and influence the course of political decision-making on an ongoing basis. These professionals occupy positions between the traditional press services and press secretaries, on the one hand, and heads of power structures - on the other. The name of their positions may be different – Director of communications, special advisers or assistants, but the nature of their activities is the same - they technologically ensure the reproduction of power, its social capital. According to analysts, if in the traditional democracies the services of firms organizing mass campaigns in support of certain decisions are used mostly by private corporations or political

forces, in systems of “managed democracy” these expensive technologies are used mainly by the governments [9].

Another trend determining the dynamics of Russian PR in the field of public administration is the integration of communications, which leads to fusion of all components of the communication process – PR, advertising, marketing promotion. As a result, in public administration several autonomous services, providing information and communication activities merge into one. This is particularly noticeable at the level of regional authorities. For example, in the body of executive power - the Government of St. Petersburg - the Office of Public Relations has ceased to exist; for a long time it oversaw PR and advertising. Now all information and communication activities are concentrated in two offices - the Department of Information – the Press Service of the Administration of the Governor of St. Petersburg and the Committee of Press and cooperation with the mass media. The main focus of these structures is again communication with the mass media, as well as to work with citizens’ applications. In fact, it is the shift towards the initial stage of the government PR. It is obvious that in a rapidly changing reality, such an approach to communication is not justified. This, in particular, is represented by the research of “Levada-Center”, which recorded a sharp decline in the level of trust of Russians to the regional authorities from 38% in 2015 to 23% in 2016 and to local authorities respectively from 32% in 2015 to 22% in 2016 [10].

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The authors of this paper had conducted their own research, which considered the situation in structures that provide communication support of public authorities, and to identify a number of fundamentally important problems related to the activities of these structures. The main limitation of the validation of our working hypotheses is the “closed” character of power. It demanded from the developers the program of intensive reflection associated with operationalization of concepts, capable to cause suspicion or rejection from representatives of the power structures engaged in information support.

In addition, the difficulty of establishing contacts with PR-specialists of public authorities especially operating at the Federal level significantly increased the duration of the study, which acquired the character of a pilot study. However, expert interviews with representatives of both Central and regional levels of government, allowed one to form a picture of the general condition of the communicative activities of the relevant structures and to solve a number of specific tasks:

- to determine the functionality of government PR in modern conditions;
- to identify professional training of government PR employees;
- to identify the respondents' opinion regarding the balance of PR and propaganda methods used in their activities;

- to establish the criteria to assess the effectiveness of communication activities.

The respondents were chosen from current and former employees of the communication departments of the central and regional bodies of state power - the Presidential Press and Information Office’s Department; the Mayor’s and Government of Moscow Current Information Department; Information Department – St. Petersburg Governor’s Administration Press Service; the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg Press and Public Relations Office’s Department.

Most of the experts (many of them have more than ten years experience in the structures related to the communication and information support of government activities) noted the static nature of their activities: “For 6 years of my tenure as the head of one of the divisions of the Presidential Press and Information Office’s Department, - said the Respondent, - all methods and procedures have remained the same. Of course, online channels have become widely used, some innovative techniques are also applied, for example, the format of the so-called Conference Hall when a special event (especially for journalists) is held every morning on the phone, but, in fact, media relations remain the basic methods, special events (especially for the press) and media monitoring”. Moreover, the employee of the Mayor’s and Government of Moscow Press Service said that “in the last two years, the communication mechanism and technology activities of the Press Service have changed not for the better. Creative initiatives substantially decreased as compared to 2010-2011, among other things because, at times, the user prefers to resort to services of outsourcing of PR-companies in the formation and promotion of its image even in social media”. Basically, this assessment correlates with the general principles of functioning of state power in Russia – static nature, “sluggishness”, the delay of response.

Analysis of the functions performed by government PR, revealed the following trend: if before - a few years ago - communication structures provided services to state governing bodies as a whole, both legislative and executive branches of power, now we are talking about personalized service – communication support activities of individuals, usually the persons heading the government. Moreover, the respondents note a direct relationship to the functioning of PR structures from the motivation, personal characteristics and preferences of the head of the public authority: “If we speak about St. Petersburg, indeed the role of the Governor’s Administration Press Service has decreased, because he is not a public person”. Likewise the role of communications in respect with the speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the city is evaluated: “All communications are tied to the promotion of only one person – the head of the legislative power”. And in general about power structures: “It is difficult to judge, since a lot depends on personalities”. Thus, we can state that the role of personal factors in the communication departments of government bodies has sharply increased. The respondents illustrate this by some examples: only the personal interest of the head of the Press service of the governor in the online activities has led to the creation of his own pages on all social networks, one of the “advanced” vice-Governors even hired his own blogger, etc.

The block of questions related to the effectiveness of government PR, allowed one to identify the specifics of the effectiveness criteria, which guide the activities of federal and regional power structures. At the level of central government, respondents prefer to talk about objective and subjective effectiveness characteristics: the first (objective) is the successful coordination of activities – security; protocol and other units must clearly understand their functions and their execution time: “The journalist must be there, where he has to be – says the employee of the Presidential Press and Information Office’s Department, – and not to be where he should not be”. The so-called subjective indicators suggest the life support maintenance of top leadership: “How long a person stood on the Spasskaya tower and was not frozen or has not got a sunstroke, and how long he waited for the start of the event – it is also the assessment of our activities, although quite often force majeure circumstances can also intervene”.

At the regional level, the issue of national consolidation as the possible criteria for effective work of government PR services put the respondent at a loss: “If we talk about national consolidation, it is rather at the level of the Presidential Administration, but not at the level of the city”. “At the same time, – said the employee of the Information Department-St.Petersburg Governor’s Administration Press Service, the main emphasis is on the tracking of social tension (protests, the discontent of the business, etc.). Also regular meetings are held with editors of the media”. Moreover, the main mechanism of this monitoring is monitoring the media: “We read what happened through the media. We look at the reaction of the citizens indirectly through the media”. As for direct contacts with the public, “there is an official website of the St.Petersburg Administration – it is the portal of all districts and committees. Portal for citizens’ complaints. Also regular meetings are held with editors of the media”.

The analysis of opinions of respondents regarding the criteria of effectiveness of the communication activities of government structures allowed one to draw the following conclusion: the degree of interactivity of citizens and authorities is low – it mainly concerns the identification of public opinion on important social issues, but without taking it into account in government decision-making; the communication is indirect, usually through the media. As a result, the respondents noted, “many government initiatives initially are met with hostility, because people do not expect anything good from the authorities”. This low legitimacy of the government structures to the large extent is the result of diluting the very essence of PR activity as a management function that contributes to the establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial relations between citizens and the government.

This raises the question: are we witnessing a renaissance of propaganda techniques in the communication activity of the government? Today everywhere there is a new round of discussions about the nature of the official political communications and on their attitude to what has traditionally been considered propaganda [11].

A number of Russian researchers of political communications problems are very radical: in government

structures we can rather talk about propaganda than PR [12]. Responding practitioners in the majority don’t agree with this interpretation of the situation. For example, an employee of the Information and Analytical Department of St.Petersburg Governor’s Administration Press Service says: “Unfortunately, we need to talk not about propaganda, but about informing. Definitely it is not propaganda, for this it’s rather weak. On the other hand in the President’s Administration propaganda in a good sense dominates. But at the city level the early modes of PR are executed: informing, materials collection, analysis. The main task – to keep the government informed of the opinions of citizens reflected in the media. Inform and pass back. We can say that our PR is straightforward, boring”. A specialist of the Department on work with mass media of Information Department-St.Petersburg Governor’s Administration Press Service, is of the same opinion: “We are not talking about constructive dialogue. If we consider PR as a two-way symmetrical communication, it is possible to agree that propaganda prevails. But what we do is not propaganda, it is informing. The purpose: to adjust the informational message given with respect to the reaction of the public. But we do not change the essence, rather we correct the form”. An attempt to determine the exact ratio of use of PR and propaganda techniques is contained in the judgment of the employee of The Mayor’s and Government of Moscow Current Information Department: “... the ratio of PR and propaganda can be defined as 85:15”.

While there are some differences in the estimates, the opinions of the experts are similar in one sense: in public administration in Russia the early model of Public Relations is becoming increasingly common. This is the model which Grunig and Hunt outlined by the formula “PR as public awareness”.

Despite the rather long period of existence of government PR in Russia – more than a quarter of a century – in specialized communication units, professionals with very different educational background continue to operate; it is noted at the federal and regional levels. As pointed out by the representatives of executive and legislative branches of the government of St. Petersburg (the Government and Legislative Assembly), PR Departments are staffed mainly with journalists, and specialists in humanities in general, but employees with degrees in public relations are very few. Things are different in the Presidential Press and Information Office’s Department where professionals with specialized education are in great demand, they graduated from Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (MGIMO), which was the first to begin the training of PR-specialists. Of course, at the Federal level, the PR departments employ a lot of staff without specialized education; however we can observe a tendency to hire skilled professionals in the field of communication. The situation with the staff (at least at the regional level – of the three dozen employees of the Press service of the Mayor of Moscow 5-6 people have professional PR training) can be explained by the fact that, with the exception of Moscow and St. Petersburg, in Russia there are virtually no educational institutions that purposefully prepare communication specialists for work in government structures.

V. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Despite the use of digital means of communication, traditional, classical technologies and methods such as media relations, special events (primarily for the press), media monitoring continue to define the activities of Russian government PR. As a result, the main audience for specialists in the field of government communications is media representatives.
- The functional and range of possibilities of communication structures in the government bodies is significantly narrowed - management prefers to resort to outsourcing services of PR companies when forming and promoting its image.
- We can notice a transition from service of power structures as a whole to the communication support of the activities of individual persons, as a rule, heads the power. On the whole, the role of the personal factor in the work of the communicative divisions of state organs determined by preferences, sympathies and motivations of their heads has sharply increased.
- We can state the “fuzzy” criteria for the effectiveness of government PR activities in Russia. The most important of them - increasing the degree of legitimacy of power and, accordingly, public consolidation - falls out of attention. On the contrary, monitoring the level of social tension, protest moods are seen as the main goal of the functioning of the authorities. At the same time, the main mechanism for such monitoring is media monitoring.

Hence, further research might be the following:

A. Study of the features of the current model of government PR functioning at the federal and regional levels.

B. A comparative analysis of the activities of communication departments in the context of specific regional regimes in Russia.

We can draw conclusions of the conducted research:

1. The main stages of the institutionalization of government PR in Russia are highlighted, each of which has a clearly expressed identity.

2. The dynamics of Russian government PR institutionalization process is “recurrent”: in the state administration of Russia the initial model of Public relations,

which Grunig and Hunt designated with the formula “PR as public awareness”, is being increasingly practiced.

3. Within the framework of the current model of government PR, we can notice a narrowing of the range of PR-means: propaganda methods of influence are being increasingly used by the government bodies. The efforts of the authorities seem to unfold in the opposite side of the democratic paradigm: instead of the formation of public policy relevant to public opinion, they engage in the purposeful formation of public opinion supporting the course.

4. As a result, the very understanding of the content and ideological orientation of propaganda is changing, which is seen as an effective and “normal” means of influencing society.

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