

**The development of public relations in dictatorships – southern and eastern**

**European perspectives from 1945 to 1990**

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## 1. Introduction

It has been customary in the progressive version of the history of public relations to present public relations as either a by-product of a pluralist political system or a democratic dividend (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Bernays, 1965). Public relations, it is argued, thrives within open media systems and market economies but struggles to be operationalized in highly controlled governmental systems (dictatorships, juntas, and closed economies). This paper will consider how political history and political systems affected the formation of public relations practices in regions of Europe, after the end of World War II in 1945, that were under military dictatorships (Spain and Portugal), a military junta (Greece) and part of the Soviet bloc.

Using a comparative history approach, the notion that public relations operates as an effective method of persuasional communication solely in a democracy will be challenged, although the paper concedes from the outset that public relations practice thrived in post-war Western Europe but struggled to take off in parts of southern and eastern Europe. Nonetheless, it was in existence in some of these countries and had sufficient standing to expand rapidly when the dictatorships broke down and the Soviet bloc collapsed. So, the research question will be to identify the conditioning factors that allowed public relations to emerge in nondemocratic contexts. This considers Rodríguez-Salcedo's proposition that "the historical development of public relations [in Europe] does not respond to any dominant pattern, but rather to a certain historical and cultural context" (2015, p. 213).

The article will consider the formation of public relations institutions and practices in Spain, Portugal, Greece and countries of the former Soviet bloc, notably the German Democratic Republic, but also including Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Within the historiography of Eastern Europe, there is a divide between those who consider that

public relations is a 'democratic dividend' (Lawniczak, 2005; Boshnakova, 2014) and advocates of antecedents and established practices that could be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were very evident across the last century (Bentele & Mühlberg, 2010; Hejlova, 2014; Szondi, 2014). Russell and Lamme have recently suggested ways to qualify precedents that can be considered part of public relations history before the 20th century (Russell & Lamme, 2016). In accordance with public relations scholarship, research should be "grounded in the idea that PR occurs in the context of other change" and include "broader societal, cultural, and institutional frameworks" (Lamme & Russell, 2010, p. 356).

After analyzing the histories of the formation and expansion of public relations in more than 70 countries, Watson (2015) proposed this hypothesis: "The generalization is that PR thrives in democratic environments in which there is a relatively open economy" (p. 15). Generalizations, of course, include exceptions and variations. This article will make a case that public relations was able to operate, within political limits, in the countries under review. In the instance of the German Democratic Republic [East Germany], an alternative version that was titled as 'socialist public relations' was actively developed and operated until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The countries to be examined are (in order) Spain, Portugal, Greece, and former Soviet bloc nations such as German Democratic Republic [now Germany] Bulgaria, Croatia, (former) Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

## **2. Comparative history**

In this paper, the comparative history methodology is applied as it offers an opportunity to compare and contrast the development of public relations across the countries under review. This methodology has been discussed at public relations academic conferences but has not been enacted beyond discussions of historiography

where the Annales model of history and the *longue durée* [long term] has been advocated by Xifra and Collel (2014) and McKie and Xifra (2014). The Annales approach and its successor Total History movement are dense forms of historical comparison in a technocratic form, often considering centuries, rather than the decades considered in this article. Comparative history “opens up the possibility of a new line of analysis”, according to Tosh (2015, p. 139) who further argues that “comparisons can have an important bearing on historical understanding” (p. 137) and that this research approach is “an essential means of deepening our understanding of the past” (p. 138).

The medievalist Chris Wickham goes further in support of comparative history:

The key point is that comparison is essential. I don't think you can properly do history without it. Some of this comparison is chronological, and historians are used to it simply because that they recognise that they study change, and thus know they have to confront before vs. after. But for me the crucial issue of comparison is geographical: why things happen in different ways in different places. You cannot get away without confronting this in history, or, if you do, you are weaker for it. (Wickham, 2005, p.2)

Within the limited length of a journal article, it is not possible to present the density of this methodology. However, the authors' aim is to offer this introduction to comparative history and encourage others to adopt this approach in future research.

### **3.1 Spain in the mid-to-late Franco era**

The political and social context in the mid-to-late period of the Franco dictatorship shaped the emergence and early development of public relations in Spain. The country had not taken part in the First World War, suffered a civil war between 1936 and 1939. This was followed by the installation of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco that lasted 35 years; as a result Spain did not intervene in the Second World War either. The precarious economic conditions, along with the international isolation and blockade of major Western powers, forced Franco to introduce changes. Thus, from the 1950s onwards, the country made economic and military agreements

with the United States and, in less than a decade, Spain introduced some economic reforms and press law reform in 1966 which gave an opportunity for agency public relations to emerge.

Although the precedents of Spanish PR have not been extensively explored (Reina, 2015; Reina and González 2014a and 2014b; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008), it is clear that the term public relations was first found in press and some advertising handbooks of the 1940s and 1950s (Reina, 2015 and 2016; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008). However, the practice of public relations came almost ten years later. The first public relations campaigns took place in the mid 1950s (Gutiérrez and Rodríguez, 2009; Noguero, 1994 and 1995; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008, 2012 and 2015, Rodríguez and Xifra 2015) although they were not named as such until the end of the decade (Gutiérrez and Rodríguez, 2009; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2008 and 2012). Any previous activity was known as “educational industrial advertising” or “social/prestige advertising” or even propaganda (Rodríguez Salcedo, 2008).

In this context of limited government public information campaigns, reduced political control and a gradual opening of the economy, Joaquin Maestre and Juan Viñas established in Barcelona in 1960 the first firm devoted to public relations services in Spain (Rodríguez-Salcedo and Xifra 2015; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2015; Viñas 2003). They and other pioneers benefited from unprecedented economic growth, aided by three Economic and Social Development Plans in the period from 1957 to 1968 (Pérez-Lopez, 2012). During that decade, other professionals such as Jesús Ulled and the American Bernard Jennings started to offer public relations services, the first in Barcelona and the latter in Madrid (Rodríguez-Salcedo and Buil, 2015).

At the beginning of the 1960s as soon as PR started to develop as a professional practice, practitioners prompted the first attempts to form a professional association in

Madrid and Barcelona (De Uribe-Salazar and Pascual, 2015; Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2012 and 2015; Gutiérrez and Rodríguez Salcedo, 2009). The lack of associative tradition in a poorish country wounded by the aftermath of the Civil War and the subsequent split between winners and losers was exacerbated by the lack of personal and managerial understanding among members. This context led to the existence of several associations condemned to perpetual misunderstanding in Spain's two main political and business locations: Madrid and Barcelona.

By the late 1960s, the first PR higher education college (ESERP) was established (Rodríguez-Salcedo, 2015; Xifra, 2012). In the 1970s professional associations and practitioners joined in movements for the recognition and institutionalization of the PR profession. Just when progress was about to occur, Franco's death in 1975 and the emergence of the first democratic government in 40 years paralyzed the process of institutionalization, but not the development of the profession. It would expand in the following years in a new context of greater political, economic and information freedom.

It was not, however, until the 1980s that global PR firms started to settle in Spain, starting with local associates before opening offices. Burson-Marsteller and Hill & Knowlton were the first. Others such as Weber Shandwick and Evercom (Rodríguez-Salcedo and Buil, 2015) would follow in the 1990s, also the decade in which PR was granted university recognition through the introduction of undergraduate courses.

### **3.2 Portugal**

The concept of public relations first emerged in Portugal under the expression "relations with public" in an article written by Mário de Azevedo Gomes, an agronomist lecturer who had traveled to the US and had been awed by the good relations that U.S. universities maintained with their publics (Santos, 2016). He later became Minister of

Agriculture and created the Central Agrarian Station to promote agricultural techniques among Portuguese farmers (ibid).

Until recently Portuguese public relations had been dated as starting when a PR office or department was established at LNEC (Portuguese civil engineering laboratory) in 1960, some 28 years after the Salazar regime was established and another 14 years before it fell in the Carnation Revolution of 1974. It was set up by Domingos Avellar-Soeiro, considered to be the nation's first public relations professional (Cabrero & Cabrero, 2001; Avellar-Soeiro, 2007). Avellar-Soeiro had learnt about public relations practices from the British during World War II and had also been employed by the British Eastern Telegraph Co, which had operated in Portugal for around 70 years (Santos, 2016).

Santos (2016) has identified earlier PR-like activities undertaken by the Touring Club of Portugal in 1906, which promoted the country both internally and abroad through bulletins, leaflets, press relations and advertisements in foreign media. It also appears the first Portuguese press department started in 1919 and was restructured 20 years later to gain new responsibilities such as press relations and tourism (ibid). Other governmental activity, Santos (2016) notes, included the Secretariat of National Propaganda (SNP) in 1933, a central piece of Salazar's *Estado Novo* (New State) dictatorship.

Corporate public relations also started much earlier than it was believed with the start of PR-like departments in the 1920s and the 1930s. Their emergence has been linked to political context and instability, which was an outcome of three different political regimes between 1910-1933. Eiró-Gomes (2014) also pointed out that by the 1960s, Mobil was operating the equivalent of a modern-day corporate social responsibility programme. Public relations was promoted in the country in the 1950s

and 1960s as an organizational activity and expressed in informational and governmental information forms, although critics considered to it be propaganda (Eiró-Gomes, 2014).

The first public relations course appeared in 1964 at *Instituto de Novas Profissoes* (INP). Soares and Mendes (2004) place the formation of the first public relations association, *Sociedade Portuguesa de Relacoes Publicas* (SOPREP), in 1968. Both events indicate that, despite regime restrictions, early stages of institutionalization and professionalization occurred.

The reality in Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime was that there was censorship in all aspects of public life including advertising and promotional activity. The first attempt in 1971 to establish a national professional charter, similar to those of other European nations, was stalled by anti-syndicalist legislation and it was not until 1979, five years into the new democratic era, that public relations was classified as a profession, albeit in a technician role.

Because of the controls in Portugal, it was not able to make educational and professional progress in line with other European countries. Although there had been early British influences on public relations, it was Spanish and French approaches or "schools" that had greatest influence from the 1970s onwards (Eiró-Gomes, 2014). As the economy grew, governmental public relations and communication advanced first. Although the first small PR agency was set up in 1976, it was not until the 1980s that PR consultancy started to emerge as a separate area of practice, aided by political reorganization and economic expansion.

PR education has started with a 1964 course, but it was not until 1990 that the first private degree course was launched by the private *Escola Superior de Comunicação Social* (ESCS) college in Lisbon. Other degree courses followed.

So, although Portuguese public relations emerged between 1900-1950 as an occupational field and as a profession (Bentele, 2013; Santos 2016), it is notable that the activity developed slowly during the Salazar era in an organizational informational form, mostly influenced by international companies. Eiró-Gomes (2014) comments that the most innovative aspect during this time was “the clear notion that PR was neither propaganda nor advertising”.

### **3.3 Greece**

Greece emerged battered from World War II after Nazi occupation, which was then followed by a civil war. Theofilou (2015) commented that “these conflicts drained the country’s resources and led to an infrastructural and economical gap compared with other Western countries” (p. 61).

It was 1950 before the political situation stabilized and gave a platform for reconstruction of the economy and the development of promotional communication. Unlike Portugal and Spain, which were then controlled by long term military-led one-party dictatorships, Greece succumbed relatively briefly to a military junta from 1967 to 1974.

Public relations as a term and a practice emerged in 1951 when the Greek National Tourism Association (EOT) appointed the US-owned Foote, Cone and Belding advertising agency on a six-month contract (Magkliveras, 1970; Zobanakis, 1965, 1974; IoC, 2003, 2004; Theofilou & Watson, 2014). A British PR adviser Eric Williams was in charge of the campaign and recruited Manos Pavlidis of Athens to work with him. Pavlidis is regarded as the ‘father’ of Greek public relations and was a prominent figure during the following three decades (A. Rizopoulos, in Theofilou, 2015, p. 61).

Professionalization of Greek public relations took place within a decade with the formation of the Hellenic Public Relations Association (HPRA) in 1960, followed by that

organization becoming a member of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in the same year (Watson, 2011). Pavlidis and his countryman Marcel Yoel took up the Secretary and Treasurer posts in IPRA from 1964 to the early 1970s. They appreciated that IPRA helped “expand their network” and personal reputations (Theofilou & Watson, 2014, p. 702).

The involvement of Pavlidis and Yoel in IPRA appears had an unexpected benefit when the military dictatorship started in 1967. Although IPRA had adopted a human rights-oriented code of ethics in 1965, the “Code of Athens” (Watson, 2014), their positions were not challenged by the association’s membership. Theofilou (2015) comments that Greek PR pioneers were able to expand their network (and thus attract new fee-paying business) through IPRA and membership of the UK’s Institute of Public Relations during the dictatorship.

“Even though a fundamental principle of practicing PR is freedom of speech, it appears that the junta did not affect the PR industry’s development at the time” (M. Yoel, in Theofilou, 2015, p. 63).

The formation of Greek PR practice and thought was largely shaped by US influences. This process was a combination of the US support for the initial tourism promotion program of 1951 and access to the mainly US-written books on public relations whose content was reflected in early Greek texts. “US literature and practice dominated from 1951 to the 1960s” (Theofilou, 2015, p. 65) and, although the French PR leader Lucien Matrat had considerable influence from that time onwards till the early 1980s, the style of Greek public relations was very promotional. This aspect may have allowed it to prosper during the dictatorship when the military junta was actively seeking the present the nation positively and attract tourists.

Greek PR continued its gradual growth after the junta ended and democratic government, but not the monarchy, was restored. After 1974, international public relations agencies such as Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton and Ogilvy entered the market through partnerships with local practitioners. Also, multinational companies such as Shell and Mobil began operating corporate communication operations that were benchmarks for local practice. However, Theofilou (2015) notes that the successors the pioneers, such as Pavlidis, were not able to sustain national development and public relations has been largely subsumed into advertising professional organizations.

### **3.4 Eastern Europe**

Shortly after the end of World War II, Eastern Europe came under the political control of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia soon took a different socialist path and was expelled from COMINFORM in 1948 and Romania had an independent stance after the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. They and the other nations of the post-war Soviet bloc remained under severe controls of media and political activity until the late 1980s when the Berlin Wall fell and Russian influence waned.

In analyzing the role of public relations in these nations from the Baltic to the Black Sea and westward to borders with Germany and Austria, there are clearly different historiographic interpretations of whether public relations existed in concept and practice before 1989.

Historians of public relations in Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Russian and Ukraine place the commencement of national public relations at around 1990. For example, "Bulgaria discovered PR after the changes to democracy in 1989" (Boshnakova, 2014, p. 6). In Poland, Lawniczak, who proposed a transitional model of public relations to explain this major change, commented that "the history of modern PR started with a transition from a centrally planned to a market economy and the shift from socialist

democracy to a pluralist political system that began in the early 1990s” (Lawniczak, 2014, p. 259). The Russian public relations field “started to develop in its modern sense towards the end of the 1980s” and “has been deeply affected by the first Western business practices and by the political election campaigns of the early 1990s” (Tsetsura, Minaeva & Aydaeva, 2014, p. 83). A clear distinction is made by scholars between previous persuasive communication practices, which are considered to be mainly propaganda. The field of public relations “in a modern strategic sense has been actively developing in Russia only in the last 30 years” (p.83). Croatia and Ukraine had similar start dates for the emergence and identification of public relations as a separate communication practice.

There is, however, a completely different interpretation in the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia), German Democratic Republic (GDR, now part of Germany), Hungary and Romania. The histories of these nations show antecedents and previous public relations practices that had been in existence for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Germany and Romania, public relations-like activity can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the Nazi era from 1933 to 1945, Bentele and others have argued that there was residual public relations activity in Germany. This was characterized in the fourth of Bentele’s seven periods of German PR as: “NS-Press Relations and political propaganda” and undertaken as “Party-ideologically dominated press relations within the framework of political propaganda; state and party control of journalism and press relations; censorship” (Bentele, 2015, p. 47). Public relations was not undertaken during this 12 year period in any form that would have been recognized by Western nations such as France, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Public relations, in a “socialistic” form emerged in these countries; confidently in the GDR but more disguised in the other three countries. Bentele and Mühlberg (2010) reported that the terminology was nuanced with “socialistic public relations” being approved but the Western version being “invested with negative connotations ... as a tool used in the manipulative practices of capitalist society” (p. 12).

In Czechoslovakia and Hungary, “public relations” was replaced with “economic propaganda” when used internally to promote goods and service. Szondi (2014) noted that internal attitudes to public relations in Hungary were initially negative in the 1960s, but the national Presto promotional organization “realized that PR was a necessary tool, particularly if export promotion was to be successful in capitalist countries” (p. 43). In these two countries, public relations sectors began to emerge, with books published and training courses organized. Eminent speakers from the West, such as Sam Black from the UK and Professor Carl Hundhausen from Germany, were invited to speak to practitioners. Some practitioners were also allowed to travel for training, notably in the U.K. In Romania, public relations was expressed as publicity to promote products and encourage healthy lifestyles in the manner of Western promotional campaigns. As the Ceausescu regime developed from the 1960s onwards, there was greater emphasis on propaganda, particularly through the creation of festivals (Rogojinaru, 2014).

The relationship between the state and PR people was constantly monitored. The veteran Czech practitioner Jindřich Lacko, who frequently met foreign journalist at trade fairs and through press trips, reported on these contacts:

I met them (secret police officers) almost every other day. We’d meet in the hallway and greet, and they had an office on the same floor...I was meant to report on every foreign contact, what we were talking about (Hejlova, 2014, p. 31).

Public relations activities in these countries were organized within state entities. There were no service sectors of agencies and consultancies (Bentele & Mühlberg, 2010). In the GDR, the PR sector was an important employer with around 3000 practitioners by the 1980s. One characteristic was the role of plant newspapers as a fundamental strategy in promoting political mass engagement in large factories. Shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were 667 plant newspapers with readerships of more than 2.2 million (ibid).

It was only in Slovenia that a different path was taken in the mid- to late-1980s when younger practitioners began formulating a strategic management-oriented form of public relations. They could make a more rapid transition to 'democratic' public relations than other nations that were engulfed by Western agencies and think tanks after 1989-1991 (Verčič, 2014).

The formulation of public relations in Eastern Europe always struggled with the concept of "publics", as it implied there were interests other than those of the state itself which was formed to act in the people's interests. Because almost all practice was undertaken in state organizations, public relations had to follow the state's guidelines "that limited political headroom on account of their quasi-legalistic nature" (Bentele & Mühlberg, 2010, p. 20).

The limitations resulted in public relations being primarily instrumental as its practices focused on disseminating approved information, promoting state enterprises and products, giving information to highly controlled media and aiding the interests of the state. Ironically, Mühlberg and Bentele (2010) commented, "professional public relations in the GDR can be regarded as having been a *powerful influence* in GDR society" (p. 19). It was not as important in other nations but public relations did exist in recognizable forms, albeit under state control.

#### 4. Discussion

Table 1: Categorization of development in national public relations sectors

Categories	Nations
No impact (Short-term junta)	Greece
Continuity/Disguised public relations	Czechoslovakia, GDR, Hungary, Romania
Emergence during dictatorship	Portugal, Spain
Transitional (1980s onwards)	Slovenia (part of Yugoslavia until 1991)
Democratic dividend (post 1989)	Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine

The comparison of the experience of the histories of the emergence of public relations in these 13 nations (including the GDR) indicates that there are five categories of development. In Table 1, they are ordered from the least impact of dictatorship – No Impact in the case of Greece - to those which did not emerge until the early 1990s when the Soviet bloc broke up.

- No Impact: public relations in Greece emerged in the early 1950s and the evidence of oral history and archival material is that it was not affected by the military junta which ran from 1967 to 1974. Indeed, this regime actively used a wide range of promotional methods to foster its tourism industry and to counter negative publicity.
- Continuity: In four Eastern European nations – the former Czechoslovakia, GDR (now Germany), Hungary and Romania – comparative studies show that forms of public relations were in operation before World War 2 and the subsequent inclusion of these nations into the Soviet bloc. These continued from the late 1940s until 1989, often in disguised terminology as ‘economic propaganda’ which was marketing and promotional publicity, and ‘socialistic public relations’,

primarily a form of internal communication. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, agency public relations and government communications quickly evolved often with former regime communicators in leading roles.

- Emergence during dictatorship: The Iberian nations of Portugal and Spain both suffered until highly conservative dictatorships from the early to mid-1930s until the mid-1970s. Although there is evidence of public relations practice in Portugal from early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the field did not evolve strongly until the latter part of the Salazar regime. It was a similar picture in Spain – public relations development as economic and political controls were eased from the late 1950s. In both nations, the expansion of the field and its institutionalization came after the end of the dictatorships.
- Transitional: Although the term ‘transitional’ has been applied by scholars to Poland, it is more relevant to the experience of Slovenia which began its process of separation from the Yugoslav Republic in the 1980s. By the time of independence in 1991, practitioners had drawn on Western influences to formulate a strategic management-oriented form of public relations and made rapid progress.
- Democratic dividend: The public relations sectors in Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Russia and Ukraine all emerged after 1989 and are, arguably, evidence that public relations “thrives in democratic environments” as proposed by Watson (2015, p. 15). Before 1990, there was only governmental propaganda. After, a wide range of public relations practices emerged as each nation scrambled to introduce new democratic forms of government.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to explore the histories of the development of public relations in southern and eastern Europe from 1945 to 1990, when the world-wide field of public relations emerged and expanded greatly. Using a comparative history approach, the experiences of 13 nations were considered in testing the widely-held verity that public relations is a by-product of pluralist political systems or the outcome of a democratic transfer. The outcome is that public relations practices not only survived experiences of dictatorship and strong political control (as in the No Impact and Continuity categories) but that it was formed during dictatorship (Emergence during dictatorship and Transitional categories) and thrived subsequently. There is little doubt that public relations, and all forms of communication, prosper in “democratic environments in which there is a relatively open economy” (Watson, 2015, p.15) but these practices are sustainable in some disadvantageous political situations where democratic activity is very controlled.

The use of the comparative history method has shown its potential to indicate new understanding about the formation of public relations in Europe, which is different from that of North America which has dominated historical writing with its progressivist, optimistic modelling. Wickham’s comment that comparative research helps explore “why things happen in different ways in different places” (2005, p. 2) is well illustrated in this study and has enabled the research and analysis that fuels the proposition that there are five categories of development in the history of public relations in southern and eastern Europe. Tosh’s comment that “to work within the boundaries of a single society is to deprive oneself of a critical angle of vision” (2015, p. 138) is also vindicated. There is considerable potential for other studies to be

conducted, whether using national, professional or institutionalization experiences in many regions and continents and to gain new insights and historical understanding.

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