

Introduction

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Abstract: *The commonality of political, social and economic systems in the nations of Eastern Europe until 1989 implies that there were shared or very similar experiences in the national development of public relations (PR). The breakdown of the Soviet bloc was followed in many nations by introduction of Western-style or modern PR practices. However, this book demonstrates different phenomena and interpretations as to when PR commenced or became identified as a defined practice. Some nations identify the arrival of PR as 1989 to 1991, whereas others tell of PR and PR-like practices for centuries and decades before, including the post-World War II era of communist or socialist management.*

Keywords: democracy; economic propaganda; proto PR; public relations, propaganda; transition

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[p.2] *Eastern European Perspectives in the Development of Public Relations: Other Voices* is the second volume in this series of six books on national histories of public relations (PR). The nations that comprise the nine chapters were all in the former Eastern bloc from shortly after World War II until the period between the late 1980s, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and 1990-91, when Yugoslavia broke up. Thus they were either governed by centralized, planned communist regimes or, in the case of Croatia and Slovenia, under Tito's self-managed socialist system in Yugoslavia.

The commonality of political, social and economic systems would imply that there were shared or very similar experiences in the national development of public relations. This is evidenced in most chapters by the introduction of Western-style (or modern) PR practices at the beginning of the 1990s. Only Slovenia was immune to the arrival of international PR agencies, mainly owned by US organizations, as it was the smallest of nine nations in this volume.

However, these phenomena are interpreted differently. In the cases of Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Russia and the Ukraine, the introduction of modern PR around 1990 is seen as the beginning of the national history. Ryszard Ławniczak, who has proposed the transitional model for PR in Eastern Europe (Ławniczak, 2005) 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'. In Russia, PR 'has been actively been developing ... only in the last 30 years', while 'Bulgaria discovered PR after the changes to democracy in 1989'. In Croatia, PR

‘started to distinguish itself as a separate profession’ (from marketing and advertising) after the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1990-91 and Ukraine identifies its independence year of 1991 as the start of PR as an identifiable communication practice.

Although the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania also identify 1989 to 1991 as the time when Western PR was introduced, along with agencies, their chapters have identified a much longer history of antecedents and proto PR in the form of commercial publicity, economic propaganda and promotional activity in support of exports. The Romanian antecedents go back to the early 19th century for commercial, governmental and intellectual communication. The Bata shoe company of Czechoslovakia, after World War I, was innovative in both internal and external communication and, through the advocacy of its management, informed other commercial organisations. These chapters, and that of Slovenia, show that PR-like communication was widely applied before the introduction of regime propaganda and media controls after World War II. These regimes also used one-way PR to support the marketing and sales of exports to Western markets from the 1960s onwards, but disdained PR within their borders, referring to it in Czechoslovakia as ‘economic propaganda’. The term, public relations, was also evident in Hungary from the 1960s, although considered [p.3] as a ‘capitalist tool’. Denisa Hejlová, however, comments that ‘despite public relations being an English word, it has been used in professional practice since the 1960s’ and so indicates that concepts of PR were well known before the avalanche of Western PR practice in the final decade of the 20th century.

After the fall of the communist and Tito regimes, the Western form of PR became ubiquitous in Central and Eastern Europe, with the exception of Slovenia where innovative practitioners introduced a managerial/strategic approach. The evidence from these chapters is that, after the initial period of governmental and democratic reform in the early 1990s when political communication was the main service introduced, PR has been conceived and operationalized as a form of promotional communication that was typically offered by agencies from the US, UK and Germany (in that order). In Russia, it has a more governmental emphasis but in other countries PR is undertaken in forms that are internationally recognizable.

The historiographic interpretation, as noted earlier, has been in two clusters: those which see PR starting at similar point around 1990, and those which identify antecedents and prior experience. There is some use of periodization, mainly by timeline (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia). Thematic approaches, with emphases on education and institutionalization of PR, are used in other countries. Only the chapter on Poland has a specific historiographic model (transitional public relations) used to interpret national PR development.

Overall, there is no evidence of an Eastern European approach to PR which is rooted in the cultural, political and social norms of Central and Eastern Europe. Since the changes of 1989 to 1991, PR has been undertaken in a Western form that was strongly influenced by (mainly) US agencies and

their clients who surged into the region. There are, of course, national variations with Russia's emphasis on governmental relations being the most apparent. However, the international agencies and their increasingly successful national competitors mainly use technical delivery methods, notably media relations, that would be included in most International PR campaign strategies. Adela Rogojinaru summarises this overview appropriately in her chapter: 'Romanian PR represents a process of imitation of Western values, practices and doctrine'. This purview could be applied to most nations in the region.

[p.4] **Reference**

Ławniczak, R., Rydzak, W. and Trębecki, J. (2003) 'Public Relations in an Economy in Transition and Society in Transition: The Case of Poland', in K. Sriramesh and D. Vercic (eds) *Global Public Relations Handbook* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).