




РЕКЛАМА И СВЯЗИ С ОБЩЕСТВЕННОСТЬЮ

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**Russian Public Relations in 2020:
Peculiar Features of Transformation**Marina G. Shilina¹, Irina I. Volkova²¹*Plekhanov Russian University of Economics,**36 Stremyanniy Pereulok, Moscow, 115093, Russian Federation*²*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University),**10 Miklukho-Maklaya St, bldg 2, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation* marina.shilina@gmail.com

Abstract. The paper presents the current transformations of Russian public relations during the SaRS-COVID-19 pandemic and remote working in 2020. In response to the crisis and uncertainty, companies have adapted and restructured corporate strategies and communications. The increasing demand for communication support of strategies and daily support of corporate activities indicates the growing significance of PR and the implementation of organizational strategies, as well as the demand for the optimization of corporate communication in society. The PR industry in general and professional communication are becoming more and more integrated due to the attraction of knowledge, competencies, specialists from a wide range of related industries: marketing, sociology, management. The current communication situation caused changes in the characteristics of Russian PR in the segment of communication agencies. Despite the traditionally high volume of the agencies' marketing services, the growth of crisis and digital communications has turned to be stable, which indicates the demand for more flexible PR formats. Based on an analysis of public relations of the leading local communication agencies in 2020, the authors put forward a hypothesis on the formation of the prerequisites for the transition of Russian public relations to the format of strategic communications.

Keywords: Russian public relations, remote working, function, transformation, assessment of PR efficiency, strategic communication

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Российские связи с общественностью в 2020 году: особенности трансформации

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Аннотация. Впервые представлен анализ актуальных трансформаций российских связей с общественностью в условиях пандемии SaRS-COVID-19 и дистанта в 2020 г. В ситуации кризиса и неопределенности компании адаптировали и реструктурировали корпоративные стратегии и коммуникации. Возрастающий спрос на коммуникационную поддержку стратегий и поддержку ежедневной корпоративной деятельности определил растущее значение PR в реализации организационных стратегий, а также потребность в оптимизации корпоративных коммуникаций в обществе. PR-индустрия в целом и профессиональная коммуникация становятся все более интегрированными за счет привлечения знаний, компетенций, специалистов из широкого круга смежных отраслей: маркетинга, социологии, менеджмента. Сложившаяся ситуация изменила характеристики российского PR в сегменте коммуникационных агентств. Несмотря на традиционно высокий объем маркетинговых услуг агентств, рост кризисных и цифровых коммуникаций оказался стабильным, что свидетельствует о востребованности более гибких форматов PR. На основе анализа связей с общественностью ведущих отечественных коммуникационных агентств в 2020 г. выдвинута гипотеза о формировании предпосылок для перехода российских связей с общественностью в формат стратегических коммуникаций.

Ключевые слова: российские связи с общественностью, дистант, функция, трансформация, оценка эффективности PR, стратегическая коммуникация

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Introduction

The global situation of the SaRS-COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, and remote working has affected all industries, including public relations (PR). In response to the crisis and uncertainty, companies have adapted and restructured corporate objectives and strategies, as well as communications.

In Russia, public relations have traditionally belonged to the marketing sphere. The strategic functions of PR, which are evidence of industrial maturity, have been recorded only in recent years. Leading experts of the domestic PR industry defined the current situation as complicated and turbulent in April 2020 and quite stable at the end of the year. So, in 2021, experts from the RASO (Russian Association of Public Relations) have noted that PR activities in Russia become *strategically* important both for brands and communication agencies. The pandemic has become a kind of a trigger in the development of the industry: during crisis communications, it became possible to comprehend and plan its actions [1]. According to a survey of PR customers conducted by ACAR (Association of Communication Agencies of Russia) and DPG Russia Full-Cycle Creative Agency, in 2020, the expenses on PR services of 57% of the respondents remained unchanged, while 24% reported an increase in PR budgets. At the same time, 45% of the respondents noted that during the pandemic they carried out communication activities more intensively than in 2019 [2].

The indicated positive dynamics put forward hypothesis H1: the situation with remote working during the SaRS-COVID-19 pandemic opened the door to the *strategic* characteristics of communication for PR. The proof of the hypothesis predetermines searching for answers to the following research questions. RQ1: What are the basic characteristics of Russian public relations in 2020, including versus the previous year? RQ2: What is the essence of changes in the characteristics of Russian PR? In other words, do public relations function in 2020 in a *marketing paradigm* or can they be classified as *strategic communications*?

Methodology. This is a desk study of the peculiar features of communication support for the organizations' strategies in Russia in 2020 based on the data from a survey of experts representing communication agencies ($n = 5$, 2021) and an analysis of the open data of professional associations: Association of Communications and Corporate Media Directors of Russia (AKMR) and Public Relations Consultants Association (AKOS, ICCO/Russia) for 2020.

Public relations vs. strategic communication: shaping the conceptual framework of the research

Domestic public relations have not been properly institutionalized since their inception in the late 1980s till the present and have been operating in the marketing paradigm. The scholarly knowledge of public relations in Russia reflects the specifics of domestic PR practices, primarily in business. The scientific and theoretical vision of PR in Russia is recorded in the basic works of the scientists of St. Petersburg School of PR, who consistently develop these concepts [3]. Public relations, as defined by St. Petersburg School of PR, “are a management communication activity (a set of techniques and technologies) aimed at optimizing the interactions of a social subject with significant segments of the social environment – with its public” [3. P. 17].

According to Robert R. Health, public relations are one of the variants of *management* activities aimed at increasing the organization's efficiency and improving its strategic prospects, as well as interacting with the people necessary to accomplish these tasks [4].

In the 2010s, the consolidation of the role of communications in corporate strategies, the need to increase the efficiency of the interaction with target audiences through integration, a convergence of communication flows and multichannelling, led to the appearance and development of the concept of strategic communications: at the junction of the communication and media theory, organizational and management theory, and social theory. Currently, the concept is gaining stable foundations in European scientific discourse.

According to Professor Jesper Falkheimer from Lund University, firstly, communication knowledge is not enough, more knowledge about the context (organizational management and social structures) and tech is needed. Secondly, new approaches define increased societal complexity: demographic, political; socio-economic: hybridization, increased transparency, uncontrolled flow of information – and demands for sustainability – ethics, environment, social responsibility. Thirdly, new business models and processes determine the need for co-creation, digitalization, demand-pull-view. Reinforced stakeholders are of particular importance: consumers and citizens are increasingly active, demanding and have new opportunities to redirect their attitudes [5].

According to the leading Russian expert and Chairman of the Board of Directors of R.I.M. Communication Agency Igor Pisarsky, the integration of the scholarly knowledge and practices from various areas of communication activities seems to be logical for more effective achievement of corporate objectives, especially in the current situation of remote working and uncertainty [5].

The characteristics of strategic communication are presented by leading researchers of European PR [6; 7]. In Russia, the concept of strategic communication is just being introduced into scientific use [8; 9].

Strategic communication is defined in its most general terms as a certain way of thinking about and approaching communication as a strategic management function that embraces all the organization's communication activities.

Recently, the general trend in the development of the organization's communication strategies reflects the transition from supporting the organization's strategy in the external sphere to a more modern understanding of communication as a multilateral symmetric interaction of all stakeholders. According to Betteke van Ruler, strategic communication needs to be conceptualized as an agile management process in which the focus is on feeding these arenas for strategy building and implementation, and on testing strategic decisions by presenting and negotiating these in a continuous loop [7. P. 379].

Thus, the concept of strategic communication can be generally defined as a more *mature stage* in the evolution of the PR concept based on the flexible systematic interactive equal-right communication with target audiences.

Public relations vs. strategic communication: an analysis of the latest Russian practices

An analysis of the communication properties of the leading industry agencies in 2020 records the following peculiar features compared to the data of 2019. Communication strategies of organizations have been traditionally linked with marketing tools, which still make up a substantial and growing share in the reve-

nues of communication agencies (28%). Corporate (23%) and crisis (12%) communications regularly show significant growth [10]. Notably, the share of these segments in the structure of agency revenues is essentially very stable compared to the past years, when an assessment comparable by the industrial market volume was carried out both by professional associations and private agencies.

In 2020, in the conditions of remote working, the change in the volume of the organization's real and virtual communication is significant. According to the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the CROS Communication Group Sergei Zverev, the structure of media support and media consumption changes due to the transition to the full immersion and functioning in the media environment [5], the volumes and formats of real interaction and communication (offline) are decreasing towards remote virtual one (online). The digital segment of PR communications shows an annual growth, while in the conditions of remote working, the indicators (21%) are comparable to the "pre-COVID" ones. Nevertheless, according to the President of Pro-Vision Group of Companies Vladimir Vinogradov, the pandemic has transferred many activities to the online format and partially relieved the fear of technological advancements, primarily among conservative customers [10].

The Internet is becoming one of the dominant communication formats for public relations. At the same time, in April 2020, the experts of the Association of Communication Agencies of Russia (ACAR) identified the transition of public relations to the online format as one of the problematic parameters for the functioning of the industry.

Professionals name process automation among the main characteristics and problems of digitalization for the industry. In particular, although over the year 51% of companies invested in automation [10], experts define the complication of digitalization as a problem for professionals, in particular in the field of personal communication, creative input, and communication efficiency in general.

According to the Project Director of Interium Agency Aita Luzzgina, by 2020 PR specialists have already begun to work as "robot herders", by 2021 the number of technology-mediated functions has greatly increased [5].

Some of the most in-demand digital technologies are artificial intelligence technologies, artificial intelligence, AI; AI-driven technologies. At the same time, the paradoxical feature of the effects of using AI-driven technologies is noted almost in all European studies of PR practices. So, in 2019, a large-scale European study carried out by the European Communication Monitor recorded that professional communication enters a new phase with the appearance of artificial intelligence technologies, but not all professionals are ready for transformations [11].

According to a study carried out by the Russian Association for Electronic Communications (RAEC), the Higher School of Economics University, and Microsoft (2019), Russia is one of the countries with a high potential for the implementation of artificial intelligence [12].

In Russian public relations, AI-driven technologies are used to monitor social media, predict media trends, create a targeted portrait of the target audience, produce data-based content, and communicate with the audience in the format of bots and virtual influencers.

According to the results of our study [13], Russian PR experts are aware of the problems of AI-driven technologies and believe that artificial intelligence

changes the daily practices (40%) and the profession as such in the medium term (70%); meanwhile, the technologies are applied only in a selective manner. In 2021, two-thirds of experts were critical of using AI-driven technologies; however, all of them recognized their obligatory use [5]. Russian PR professionals are involved in the routine work related to AI-driven technologies and state the normality of their application, but the effects in the interaction with stakeholders are not yet quite obvious to them.

Although marketing communications are the most significant and in-demand segment of corporate communications and the dominating service in the structure of the agencies' revenues, experts note an increase in the volume of communications in the field of government relations (GR) and external communications. Moreover, according to the research results, GR turned out to be one of the promising areas of the communication industry. Thus, more than half of the agencies (54%) provided services in this area; over the past year the competition in this segment increased, and GR revenues account for 15% of the total volume [10].

According to Lilia Glazova, Chairman of AKOS, Director of PR News, during the pandemic, trends towards the integration of communications, erasing the market boundaries, and consolidation of the professional community have become particularly relevant, there appeared many collaboration projects both at the business level and at the level of various industrial segments. Remote working also determined the expansion of the international interaction with foreign colleagues, primarily in professional organizations, the list of which is expanding [10]. Experts note that the industry in general and professional communication are becoming more and more integrated due to the attraction of knowledge, competencies, specialists from a wide range of related industries: marketing, sociology, management.

Representatives of communication agencies – AKOS members noted a high demand for integrated communications (91%), consolidation of the positions of continuous communication support, current products and services (79%). An increase in the level of competition (77%) also indicates an increase in the demand for communication support of organizational strategies [10].

According to Nadezhda Yavdolyuk, Executive Director of the Silver Archer National Public Relations Award, an analysis of the best projects in the PR industry for 2020 shows an increased level of creative and human-centered solutions [5]. The growth of non-standard promotion formats is also recorded by agency experts (76%) [10].

Thus, in 2020, the revealed characteristics of public relations in the conditions of remote working record an expansion of the range of characteristics of strategic communication support for the Russian business.

Strategic transformations of the PR efficiency assessment

According to an expert survey in 2020, Russian communication agencies, noting the business need for comprehensible communication assessment tools, traditionally pay attention to research and analytics, which bring 15% of their revenues. Proven and precisely measurable parameters of the PR impact on business results are in demand in the agency work for 60% of respondents [10].

The attention of basic customer entities and technological agency entities to the efficiency assessment in the conditions of remote working is increasing. Ex-

perts note the strategic nature of this activity, especially due to the update of the Barcelona Principles in 2020, which are essential for strategic communication professionals [5].

We should remind that the Barcelona Principles are seven basic provisions for determining the effectiveness of PR strategies, i.e., these are essential parameters for creating effective PR strategies. The principles were adopted in 2010 at the 2nd Annual European Measurement Summit of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) in Barcelona (Spain), then updated in 2015, and now in 2020.

The principles state that goal setting and measurement are fundamental to communication and public relations (principle 1), measuring communication outcomes is recommended versus only measuring outputs (principle 2), the effect on organizational performance can and should be measured where possible (principle 3), measurement and evaluation require both qualitative and quantitative methods (principle 4), AVEs are not the value of communication (principle 5), social media can and should be measured consistently with other media channels (principle 6), measurement and evaluation should be transparent, consistent and valid (principle 7) [14].

Expert discussion of the situation in Russian PR due to the changes in the assessment principles in 2020 and the actual creation of PR strategies, which are flexible and relevant in the conditions of remote working, allowed one to state that the latest iteration of the Barcelona Principles reflects an increasingly significant integration of communication.

According to Lilia Glazova, the PR industry in Russia has changed dramatically over the decade since the adoption of the first edition of the Barcelona Principles, in particular, even medium-sized businesses now pay attention to reputation surveys [15].

Despite the optimization of communication strategies, the efficiency is still generally measured in a standard way. According to the Communications Director of Qiwi Group Anastasia Zhuravleva, we need to pay attention to the company's self-identification, an accurate correspondence of all corporate messages to the corporate identification when broadcasting via all communication channels, which are becoming more and more segmented [15].

According to the co-owner of Vinci Agency Maria Lapuk, the need for an integrated approach to measuring and assessing the efficiency of communications became particularly evident in 2020, when effective communications could only be built in a digital or hybrid environment. A relevant approach should take into account all relevant online and offline channels [15].

According to the Head of the PR Department of M.Video-Eldorado Group Valeria Andreeva, to ensure transparency of media measurements, one can use such a competency as teamship, follow the reasonable sufficiency principle, and apply end-to-end and project dimensions [15].

The experts noted that the integration of corporate objectives and values in the public sphere also requires tuning-out from the PR assessment by advertising metrics. The communication assessment should not only determine the results of a single campaign but the long-term effect of the organization's entire communication strategy.

Thus, domestic communication professionals, following the latest iteration of the Barcelona Principles of Professional Communication introduced at the end of 2020 into Russian professional discourse, are focused on the strategic approach to public relations, in particular, toughening of the requirements to the continuous interaction with all stakeholders and the community as such.

Conclusion

In 2020, the communication situation of the SaRS-COVID-19 pandemic and the remote work of organizations caused changes in the characteristics of Russian PR in the segment of communication agencies. The increasing demand for communication support of strategies and daily support of corporate activities indicates the growing significance of PR and the implementation of organizational strategies, as well as the demand for the optimization of corporate communication in society. The expanding integration inside the industry and with related areas forms communication, which is more relevant for all stakeholders. Despite the traditionally high volume of the agencies' marketing services, the growth of crisis and digital communications has turned to be stable, which indicates the demand for more flexible PR formats. The development of the GR and external communication segment reflects the consolidation of the strategic functions of domestic PR. Strategic changes in domestic PR appear in the conditions of the Russian adaptation of the latest iteration of the Barcelona Principles of PR Measurement adopted in 2020, in particular, the expansion of the social activity and responsibility area.

Thus, the identified essential transformations of Russian PR in the conditions of remote working indicate that the prerequisites for the development of strategic characteristics of domestic public relations are being formed in 2020, which confirms the research hypothesis put forward in the article.

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