



Leadership and public relations in two emerging markets: A comparative study of communication management in Latvia and Russia



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates perceptions of public relations leadership in two emerging markets—Latvia and Russia—via an online survey of a diverse pool of public relations practitioners. This effort is guided by Meng and Berger's (2013) model of excellent public relations leadership. Additionally, this study moves a step further by seeking to understand how national sociopolitical contexts shape leadership in public relations. Results show a number of similarities and differences in Latvian and Russian participants' interpretations of professional leadership. Gaining access to the dominant coalition, or decision-making authority in the organization is perceived as an important ability in both countries. Challenges of talent management are more acute in Russia than Latvia.

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1. Introduction

Over the years public relations research has focused heavily on the study of public relations management. Public relations has traditionally been defined as a management function (Grunig, 2006) that can fully realize its potential if it is directed by communication managers rather than technicians. Meanwhile, other social science disciplines have moved forward by addressing the importance of leadership and leaders. While the scope of managerial activity is limited to planning, organizing and controlling processes, leadership implies envisioning an alternative future for an organization, encouraging followers to accomplish their potential and empowering employees (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Only recently has the public relations discipline begun addressing the issue of leadership, and how leadership in public relations can strengthen our profession and contribute to organizational effectiveness. Much of this new research trend in public relations has inquired about leadership and leaders in the United States. There has been little acknowledgement of other contexts such as Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe (World PR Report, 2013) that currently lead the growth of the public relations industry.

The purpose of this paper is to start bridging this gap in the knowledge of public relations by investigating leadership in Latvia and Russia. These two emerging markets have experienced the rise of public relations over the past two decades and they provide non-traditional sociopolitical contexts for the study of leadership in public relations.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations leadership

A number of public relations scholars have attempted to investigate various aspects of professional leadership. [Berger and Reber \(2006\)](#) believed that it is crucial to discuss leadership in public relations because of its intertwining nature with power, the most important issue in public relations. Further, [Bowen \(2009\)](#) found that leadership is one of the main routes to the dominant coalition or decision-making authority in the organization.

Research found that public relations leaders use more than one leadership style: inclusive (i.e., leaders are collaborative) and transformational (i.e., leaders provide a clear vision and inspire change) ([Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009](#)) and both transformational and transactional styles (i.e., leaders are change agents and at the same time, they use rewards and punishment as motivational tools) ([Jin, 2010](#)). Importantly, acting as an organizational change agent appeared to be one of the most important leadership behaviors ([Choi & Choi, 2009](#)). [Meng, Berger, Gower, and Heyman \(2012\)](#) found that practitioners' leadership values and beliefs are most strongly influenced by work experiences and role models on the job.

Individual studies discuss single concepts such as traits, skills, styles, behaviors, contingencies and situations, team work, among others. As an attempt to offer a comprehensive understanding of leadership in [Meng and Berger \(2013\)](#) proposed a model of excellence in public relations leadership. The model acknowledges the complexity of leadership by approaching it as a "dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication. .. [and] fuels and guides successful communication teams, helps organizations achieve their goals, and legitimize organizations in society" (p. 153).

The model consists of six interrelated leadership dimensions: self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building skills, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge and expertise. The seventh dimension, organizational culture and structure, describes the institutional environment which also shapes public relations leadership. The model has been found to be a reliable public relations scale in a study with almost 4500 communication professionals in 23 countries, the largest study of leadership ever conducted in the profession ([Berger & Meng 2014](#)). However, some important differences emerged even within geographically and culturally close country clusters (i.e., perceptions of ethics, talent management, and measurement of effectiveness).

Researchers of leadership in other disciplines have discussed its relation with societal culture. [Bass and Bass \(2008\)](#) argued that leadership traits are universal and culturally specific. This paper seeks to apply this acknowledgment to leadership in public relations. Although the current study is guided by [Meng and Berger's \(2013\)](#) model of excellent public relations leadership, it will also attempt to move a step further by seeking to understand how, not only organizational cultures and structures, but also national sociopolitical contexts shape leadership in public relations. To achieve this goal, this study investigates leadership in two post-Soviet environments: Latvia and Russia. In both countries the start of public relations can be traced to the late 1980s when *perestroika*, an attempt to reform the Communist Party, and the public dissent with the Communist rule led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

2.2. Public relations in Latvia

Like in other Eastern and Central European countries, Western-style public relations in Latvia started to develop after the collapse of the Soviet Union. [Pētersone \(2006\)](#) found that the arrival of Western-style public relations was linked to political and economic transitions in Latvia. In the late 1980s dissident groups began staging anti-Soviet protests that grew into large-scale public demonstrations in response to Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost*. These opposition movements aimed to create international awareness about the forceful annexation of independent Latvia into the Soviet Union in 1940 and gain international re-instatement of independent Latvia.

After the independence was renewed in 1991, the political use of public relations was replaced by the economic goal of introducing the free market to Latvia. According to [Pētersone's \(2006\)](#) findings, public relations helped the Latvian government facilitate the privatization of former state-owned enterprises and attract foreign investments. Both the government and private sector used public relations to introduce free market institutions and services to the public, and gain the public's acceptance for foreign investments and businesses in Latvia.

[Pūre \(2014\)](#) divided the most recent Latvian public relations history into three periods: beginnings, institutionalization, and professionalization. During the beginnings between 1991 and 1994 public relations was mostly employed by the public and political sectors. Pūre observed that during this period communication was still highly manipulative and propagandistic. There was little regard for public opinion and exchange of information.

The next period was the institutionalization from 1995 to 2000. During this period the private sector stimulated the growth of the public relations industry. The arrival of Western businesses created the need for public relations agencies. The period of institutionalization was also characterized by the establishment of first in-house units at finance institutions and government-owned enterprises.

The third period, professionalization, began in 2001 and is ongoing. Two professional associations, the Association of Public Relations Professionals and the Latvian Public Relations Consultancy Association, were founded in 2001. During the early years of professionalization most businesses and government institutions opened public relations units. The agency sector also continues to expand.

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