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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE FORMATION OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, in the Georgian communication space, finding a term that will compete with the word PR is difficult. Field Specialists claim that society has wrongly applied this very positive, important, interesting, and useful activity, which aims to promote PR for the solution of vital interests and well-being, which is the primary purpose of PR as a field of activity. It is clear that in Georgian reality, the field of public relations is still in the process of being established as a democratic institution, the entire Georgian society does not have objective and complete information about the essence and importance of this institution, the qualifications and experience of PR specialists need improvement. The model of manipulation of public consciousness is still observed when the "desired" is far from the "real". The research about PR and the relationship of democratic institutions in the country is based on the following research methods: quantitative (internet survey) and qualitative (focus group).

Keywords: PR, democratic institutions, society, harmonious relations, quality of democracy

INTRODUCTION

The concept of PR (public relations) has become the business card of the 21st century, as in the modern world it is used as an effective tool for achieving communication, connections, and agreements between society and individuals. However, “image-making” - creating a favorable image for companies and specific individuals by any means - represents a distorted essence and form of PR, and in various forms, it secures a place in society to its detriment. Such an approach to the issue contradicts the principles of social responsibility within the institutions of civil society. In fact, it pushes society towards deception, especially for the realization of the selfish interests of individual subjects (Kapanadze and Khakhutashvili 2003: 5). The use of PR in this way has also become characteristic of post-Soviet society. Special attention should be paid to the colonization of the PR market - called 'black PR' in the post-Soviet space and 'spin' in the West - which is calculated to manipulate public consciousness with targeted precision. However, PR is the art and science of mutual understanding, based on truth and complete information (Black 1990: 17).

PR (public relations) is an essential part of any governance system in the West. It is tasked with assessing society's attitudes, identifying an individual or organization's policies and actions in relation to public interests, and implementing an action program aimed at achieving mutual understanding and perception among the masses (Wilcox and Cameron 2011).

The democratic principles of the field were unacceptable for the vertical system of Soviet democratic centralism, as it implied the necessity of an unyielding one-party approach. This is why public relations took hold in the Georgian context relatively late. Despite the study of the issues of the field, there are still many under-researched problems, the analysis of which should ensure the evolution of the traditional value orientation of Georgian society in a democratic, liberal direction. The influence and significance of public relations as a democratic institution in the formation of state institutions in these processes should also be considered.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study: The presented paper aims to reveal the role of PR in the course of democratic processes. The objectives of the research are: to define the role of PR in the formation of democratic institutions in post-Soviet Georgia; and to clarify the roles of PR managers and the media in implementing PR policy. The objects of the study are the Parliament of post-Soviet Georgia, judicial reform, and the Supreme Court.

Hypothesis of the Study: Likely, the role of PR in the formation of democratic institutions in post-Soviet Georgia does not yet correspond to the desired level in today's Georgian reality: it requires more qualification and effort.

Research Questions: How has PR changed post-Soviet society, and what role does it play? What factors are hindering the development of the field of public relations in the country today?

Research Methods: For the study of the issue, we have used both quantitative (online survey) and qualitative research (focus groups with PR specialists, representatives of the academic community, media professionals, politicians, and content analysis).

The theoretical framework includes specialized literature, as well as materials from conferences, discussions, and seminars; articles published in periodicals, normative acts, and parliamentary resolutions that contain essential information on the issue of public relations within the context of value change in society.

The Role of PR in the Formation of the Institution of Post-Soviet Georgia's Parliament

The state, based on the primacy of social justice and democratic values, ensures an environment of publicity and transparency, where citizens are engaged in state governance. In this regard, the press office is the primary link that ensures the flow of information between state organizations, the media, and the public, and it promotes the transparency of the structure by satisfying the media's interest. By adhering to this principle, the press office contributes to strengthening the process of democratization. This led to the continuous operation of the press office of the newly elected democratic parliament, ensuring the public disclosure of parliamentary meetings. This included preparing press releases, as well as photo and video coverage of the meetings. The press office planned press conferences, briefings, and interviews, and prepared necessary press releases for the media. It also covered the meetings of the parliamentary bureau, faction sessions, committee hearings, and parliamentary sessions, provided journalists with stenographic records of parliamentary events, responded to citizens' telephone calls and messages, covered meetings with the international diplomatic corps' press attachés and mission representatives, prepared information packages for them, and handled journalist accreditation.

In the first convocation of Parliament (1995-1999), up to 300 journalists and video operators were accredited annually, indicating significant media interest in covering parliamentary life. Freedom of speech and expression, the protection of human rights, the course of integration with Europe, striving for Georgia's membership in the Council of Europe, the existence of independent and unbiased media, the strengthening of non-governmental organizations and their involvement in parliamentary activities, promoting the development of entrepreneurship, preparing large-scale judicial reforms, harmonizing Georgian legislation with European law, cooperation with the International Parliamentary Assembly, and the deepening of regional ties and parliamentary relations in the Caucasus—these were all the challenges and messages that the public relations campaign was based on, aimed at establishing democratic parliamentary governance in the country.

An analysis of the press and information media at that time revealed that there were few publications conveying an opposing view to the process of democratization or the establishment of the values of parliamentarism. Later, it became necessary to give broader significance to the activities of the Public Relations Department. Specifically, more multifaceted and active activities were focused on preparing and airing advertising campaigns about the establishment of parliamentarism in Georgia. Organizing excursions for students from general education schools from different regions of Georgia to the parliament and arranging meetings with members of parliament proved to be effective. Press office representatives met with students and teachers, and provided them with souvenirs featuring the parliament's emblem (brochures, posters, pens), which is an effective form of communication between the state institution and the public (Charkviani 2011). In the Georgian Parliament, the named halls were established. To familiarize the public with parliamentary life and legislative activities, the PR office selected school students through a competition, who assisted members of parliament and staff during the parliamentary session weeks voluntarily. The 'Session Hall Monitor' service became popular among young people. The Public Relations Department constantly worked to strengthen the internal structures of the organization and improve the social and working conditions of employees, through what is known as 'internal PR': the full computerization of the Parliament was launched, the creation of a library and press café, and the opening of free English language courses for employees, as well as cafeterias, which became comfortable and attractive spaces for meetings between parliamentarians and journalists, and for parliamentary discussions (Charkviani 2011). Planning such meetings helped popularize parliamentary life in the media, presenting it in a better light, and bringing the state structure closer to the public. It helped form an attitude in the public consciousness where the parliament is seen as a defender of citizens' rights, an enabling body for their activities. This approach contributed to the strengthening of the idea of parliamentarism for the public and deepened the democratization process in the country. Journalists were mobilized, their professional growth was supported, and exchanges of parliamentary delegations took place. The journal *Parliamentary Affairs* was published.

Representatives of the parliamentary staff were sent to Sweden to better understand the workings of a legislative body, and training was held for employees with Swedish and EU experts. The media attended the events organized by the Parliament of Georgia, with almost all news outlets participating, which formed part of the PR policy. During this period, a video, photo, and print media archive was created in the Parliament, documenting the work of the Public Relations Department and Press Service regarding the role of this institution. With the establishment of the Parliament's Public Relations Department, the formation of PR structures also began in the non-governmental sector. The processes that started within the government institution catalyzed the formation of this important democratic structure in other organizations, at both governmental and non-governmental levels, as well as in businesses.

The Tools of PR in the Judicial Reform Process

In post-Soviet Georgia, the strategy and tactics set for the task of public relations in implementing the first judicial reform were correctly determined, which was later confirmed by the results. "For the press secretary to succeed, they must always be accessible to the press, be well-informed, and understand the importance of the press in a democratic society" (Sullivan n.d.). The reform was ensured by adhering to four components: the president's political will, an effective team of reformers, close relations with international organizations, and the media. The active and intensive action of each component contributed to gaining public support for the necessary and swift implementation of the judicial reform. In public speeches, the president emphasized the necessity of judicial reform as a key condition for the formation of the state of post-Soviet Georgia—a new democratic country. The reformers' team (young leaders) understood well the importance of informing the public through the press about key issues of judicial reform, the technical aspects of preparing the judicial qualification exams, the process of conducting them, ensuring objectivity and transparency, and the criteria for evaluating and selecting candidates for judicial positions. The press secretary (PR) defines, studies, and assesses the image to be presented to the public and the media (Sullivan n.d.).

Many topics require proper explanation and delivery to the public. Some leaders have chosen an emotional, expressive way to present them, while other topics require a calm, balanced approach. This responsibility falls to the leader. For example, in the judicial reform process, Mikheil Saakashvili stood out with his emotional, loud speeches during parliamentary sessions and committee hearings, which had an effect because his comments, as a politician and chair of a parliamentary faction, aligned with the goals of system changes. On the other hand, the balanced approach of Lado Chanturia, a member of the High Council of Justice, his moderation, and his ability to speak in a clear language understandable to the public, matched the image of the organizer of the judicial qualification exams. The members of the High Council of Justice had clearly defined areas of responsibility, working in various directions, such as with international organizations, state structures, etc.

As for the third component of the strategy - relations with international organizations - it was a new approach to dealing with the international community, as representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Georgia and international donor organizations became actively involved in the preparation and organization of the judicial qualification exams. The involvement of international organizations in this process ensured that the exam process was conducted at a high level, with transparency and objectivity, as seen by the Georgian public. The exam questions were selected with strict confidentiality, printed in the United States, and transported by diplomatic mail directly to the Parliament of Georgia. The U.S. Ambassador to Georgia publicly opened the exam questions in front of the press and international organizations, with members of the High Council of Justice present, directly in front of the exam participants. The active participation of the press, comments from foreign diplomats, public transparency, the high level of organization of the High Council of Justice members, and their reputation contributed to the public's positive attitude, support, and confidence in the objectivity of the exam process.

The involvement of the media in the judicial reform process significantly contributed to its initiation and successful implementation. The main purpose of the press secretary and the public relations office was to ensure maximum transparency in the activities of the High Council of Justice and the progress of the judicial reform, as well as to inform broad segments of the media and the public about these processes, thereby raising public legal awareness, showcasing the positive outcomes of judicial reform, and demonstrating the benefits of fast and affordable justice for citizens.

The press secretary gathered journalists working on legal issues around the press office of the High Council of Justice. Meetings were organized with the heads of media outlets at news agencies, press offices, and television stations. All media outlets in Georgia were involved in covering and promoting judicial reform. Meetings, press conferences, and open-door days dedicated to the judicial qualification exams were widely covered. The media sparked public interest, as evidenced by the large number of candidates participating in the exam process.

At the same time, the crucial role of the PR manager became apparent: to diligently perform the duty of mediation. To inform the public, a joint television project called “*For Judicial Qualification Exams*” was implemented by the High Council of Justice and the state broadcaster “*Publicist*,” which focused on discussing exam topics with well-known legal experts. Within the framework of this project, hundreds of reports and publications were prepared. Since writing about legal issues and preparing reports required professional education, most journalists chose law as a second specialty and completed a full course in law.

The judicial qualification exams were broadcast live from the parliament hall, where they were taking place so that the wider audience could see the transparency of the process and be convinced of the objectivity of these exams.

The first judicial qualification exams took place in May 1998. On May 15, 1999, the new Georgian judicial system began to function. The judicial reform provided a unique opportunity for citizens with a law degree to test their skills for the position of judge. In this process, the press and public relations office played a special role, both in terms of function and responsibility. In the process of gaining success and trust, the attitude towards the person handling public relations, their professional qualities, qualifications, awareness of social duties, and their fulfillment are crucial.

The judicial reform showed us that a sense of duty, belief in the integrity of a leader, and the sense of doing something beneficial for society have tremendous power in convincing like-minded people, and sometimes even those with critical attitudes. The analysis of the publications from that time shows that the PR manager succeeded in persuading the media about the objectivity of the exams, which convinced citizens of the necessity of holding judicial qualification exams, and the results quickly became visible.

The activation of the Judicial Training Center, the efforts of donor organizations to improve the qualifications of judges, as well as training programs, fostered a certain positive attitude in society. The rise in authority naturally led to an improvement in the image of the judiciary, and the number of cases in courts increased, which was undoubtedly a sign of trust and authority in judges.

During the judicial reform process, judicial qualification exams were held, and they continue to take place periodically. The replacement of the old Soviet-era judicial corps with new judges was accompanied by challenges. During the process of reviewing the protests from current and dismissed judges, the PR manager was also involved in correctly and convincingly persuading the representatives of this focus group about the necessity and benefits of judicial reform for society.

When the first major stage of the judicial qualification exams was completed, and the judicial system was staffed, the need for the professional development of judges and the creation of working conditions in line with modern standards became apparent. It became necessary to implement effective forms of court administration and case management systems, which were accounted for within the low-interest loan provided by the World Bank.

Five components were involved, including the creation of new model courts and the direction of public legal education. Information about these projects was consistently provided to the public. In the following years, as the project was being implemented, the

leaders of the judicial reform and the public relations office continued to maintain contact with the media, which made the process more effective and transparent, ensuring that the positive results of the reform were communicated. The media did not overlook events related to the progress of judicial reform, such as the involvement of newly appointed judges, the participation of Georgian and foreign experts, the creation of the judges' association, and judges' trips abroad, among others. These topics were chronologically reflected in both Georgian and foreign press.

A new phase of judicial reform began in 2001 when the need to establish public relations and press offices for more information and transparency in the various branches of the judiciary became evident. In this regard, the Supreme Court of Georgia served as a model for other state institutions, where, after the Judicial Council, a press and public relations office was created, and a press officer was appointed who effectively performed the role of a public relations and media manager. The success of judicial reform was recognized as a model by various international organizations across the post-Soviet space.

PR and the Supreme Court

In 2001, at the initiative of the Chairman of the Supreme Court, a legal reform media group was established in the Supreme Court, which brought together 60 representatives from the media, the judiciary, NGOs, and international organizations across Georgia. The press officer of the Supreme Court was appointed as its chairperson. The goal of this group was to promote the establishment and development of relations between the judiciary and the media. The media group regularly participated in seminars and conferences organized by international organizations regarding the relationship between the judiciary and the media. The group discussed critical issues concerning the judiciary and media representatives, and information on these matters was provided to the public. The principles of the agreements reached regarding the relationship between the media and the judiciary were discussed by the media group members. The judges-spokespersons held seminars for the media representatives, where they provided information and clarification about legislative changes relevant to journalists' daily work. These included discussions about the General Administrative Code, norms for accessing and using public information and obtaining and presenting covert audio and video recordings as evidence in court.

At the time, the law did not allow the direct acceptance of covert audio and video recordings as evidence in court. The judge could only take the content of these materials into account during the review of the case and when making a decision. A lecture and a press conference were dedicated to this issue, aimed at informing the public and the media. The necessity of the press conference arose after the broadcast of material obtained via covert filming by journalists from the television show *60 Minutes* on the TV channel *Rustavi-2*. These journalists demanded that the court accept the footage they obtained as evidence. The journalists were dissatisfied with the court's decision, which, under the then-existing legislation, did not accept the covertly obtained footage as direct evidence.

As it later became clear, the journalists were not acting purely on professional interests in this case; their actions had a political motivation. Specifically, the intention was to discredit the image of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) at the time, stir public dissatisfaction with the MIA and its officials, and weaken the MIA's influence and purpose, ultimately leading to the demoralization of this structure. Presenting this scenario in such a manner benefitted the young political leaders who openly expressed their protests and opposition to the sitting president. This group represented part of the ruling authority and began an active political struggle to gain control. This scenario was later successfully realized as the *Rose Revolution* on November 22, 2003.

From a public relations perspective, the political process became especially intense in anticipation of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, which were scheduled for 2004-2005. The political activity and media involvement in the process became more pronounced.

CONCLUSION

An inseparable characteristic of civil society is the development of mass movements, political parties, and various interest groups, which post-Soviet states still strive for today. A democratic society seeks the decentralization of unlimited state power. It aims to distribute its authority to local self-government bodies and regulate the relations between institutions and organizations with the public, based on consensus, cooperation, and mutual benefit. The best instrument for achieving such mutual understanding in society is public relations (PR).

Despite the positive role of PR in the democratic formation process of the three institutions discussed in the publication, the level of socio-political development in the country still does not provide a solid foundation for true peace and stability. This is due to the observable deficit in the culture of public communication, as well as the inadequate understanding of the key values of a democratic state, such as the protection of public interests, concern for citizens' well-being, and the creation of a political environment that is filled with harmony and consensus.

Propaganda, which some media outlets deliberately engage in, does not contribute to the strengthening of a PR culture based on humane and universal values. PR, in its classical sense, is about empowering society, but when the media pursues narrow political agendas, it risks turning PR into a tool of manipulation rather than societal strengthening.

Thus, for PR to fulfill its true purpose, it must transcend mere political interests and foster a culture of open, honest communication. The strengthening of PR is not just about supporting the status quo, but about enabling a society to empower itself, based on democratic principles, and advancing the common good.

The processes of Georgia's political and societal development do not yet provide a solid foundation for the institution of public relations to develop according to Western standards, as certain circles within society do not fully recognize the most fundamental value of a democratic state: the welfare of society's interests. In this regard, the involvement of the media is indeed indispensable, as is the awareness and preparation of journalists to effectively engage in public relations activities within society. Public relations, with its proper purpose, is not yet fully utilized even among journalists themselves, and it is often a victim of faceless image-making and the use of colorful (black, white) PR technologies, which intentionally aim to discredit the field and hinder the formation of real democratic values. Educated, well-informed, and professional journalists will be able to present public relations in its true form. Strengthening the teaching of public relations courses in Georgia's higher educational institutions for future journalists is one potential solution in this regard.

"For press services to provide full and accurate information, press offices should be staffed with professional journalists selected through a competitive process" (UNAG 2001). The global experience of the functioning of public relations systems proves that this goal is entirely achievable when the desired goal aligns with reality - meaning when society sees concrete actions from the government and various social groups that are aimed at satisfying its interests.

Mastering the specialty of public relations and mastering the art of communication remains highly relevant today.

Currently, in the post-Soviet space, a situation has developed that objectively supports the development of public relations, allowing for the use of Western experience. We are hopeful because public relations managers and professional associations have connections

with foreign PR organizations, which creates a foundation for the development of this field and the sharing of existing experience.

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