



## Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Podmolova, S. 2017. A PR Letter from Bulgaria, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5(1), 88-98

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## Stilyana Podmolova

### A PR Letter from Bulgaria

*“No matter what public relations strategies your organisation uses, in the end it still has to hand \$50 or \$100 to each journalist to get the sponsor’s name in the newspaper.” (Karadjov 2000, p. 209)*

*The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the professionalisation of PR in Bulgaria and present a contemporary view of the development of the discipline. In bringing the scattered research about PR in Bulgaria in one place, the author positions PR practice in the context of factors such as culture, politics, state of the economy and media landscape. This analysis offers PR specialists working on global campaigns and those planning to contribute to the professionalisation of PR in Bulgaria recommendations for overcoming communication and ethical challenges, and suggestions for future development of the discipline.*

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#### ABBREVIATIONS USED THROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE:

BAPRA - Bulgarian Association of Public Relations Agencies  
BPRS - Bulgarian Public Relations Society  
GAPRA - Global Alliance of Public Relations Associations  
HE - Higher Education  
IPRA - International Public Relations Association  
PRP - Public Relations practitioner  
UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

#### INTRODUCTION

Nelly Benova, a Bulgarian PR specialist, described PR in Bulgaria as an untrodden ground in her response to the PRoust Questionnaire in 2011 (Yaxley 2011). Her statement is not

surprising because until 1989 Bulgaria was under the influence of a communist regime limiting the freedom of speech and public expression, which are key to PR (Sriramesh and Vercic 2009). What is surprising is the little and scattered research dedicated to PR practice in Bulgaria as a young democracy opening its markets and allowing promotional communication disciplines to develop and grow. Existing studies (Benova 2010; Karadjov et al. 2000) have been focused on applications of Grunig's (1992) four PR models revealing that while Bulgarian practitioners aspire to implement two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communication, press agency is the common PR approach. Having worked as a PR assistant at the Municipality of one of the bigger cities in Bulgaria, I came to the same conclusion as most of the tasks executed by the PR team were aimed at gaining media coverage.

However, the use of the symmetrical model as a normative ideal has been criticised for attempting to force a single point of view on others (Pieczka 1996) especially due to its focus on PR in Western markets, where the discipline has a longer history compared to Bulgarian practice, which is still in its infancy (Braun 2004). The recognition of factors such as culture, politics, economic development and media landscape, emanating from the Excellence project (Vercic et al. 1995; Wakefield 1994), and their influence on the way PR is practiced and understood is a challenge faced by practitioners in an environment, where peoples of various cultures are becoming ever more independent (Sriramesh 2007). Therefore, this paper provides an overview of the development, education and professionalisation of PR in Bulgaria considering the influence of the aforementioned factors. The aim of this analysis is to offer PR specialists working across national boundaries and those planning to contribute to the professionalisation of PR in Bulgaria recommendations for successful practice and future development of the PR industry.

## HISTORY AND EDUCATION

PR marked its entry to Bulgaria in 1989 when the communist system collapsed, which led to the emergence of new democracies and the lifting of the barriers to communications and international trade (Culbertson 1996). Consequently, the new political parties needed spokespersons and media relations (Zlateva 2002), and the free market economy allowed the entry of global businesses in the country which brought PR know-how (Boshnakova 2014). As the discipline developed alongside advertising the Bulgarian public struggles to differentiate between the two promotional communication practices (Boshnakova 2014) and some practitioners still identify PR as "advertising by other means" (Damianova 2000 in Karadjov et al. 2000). Most of the early PRPs had a journalistic background, which is why PR is considered synonymous to media relations and publicity generation (Boshnakova 2007).

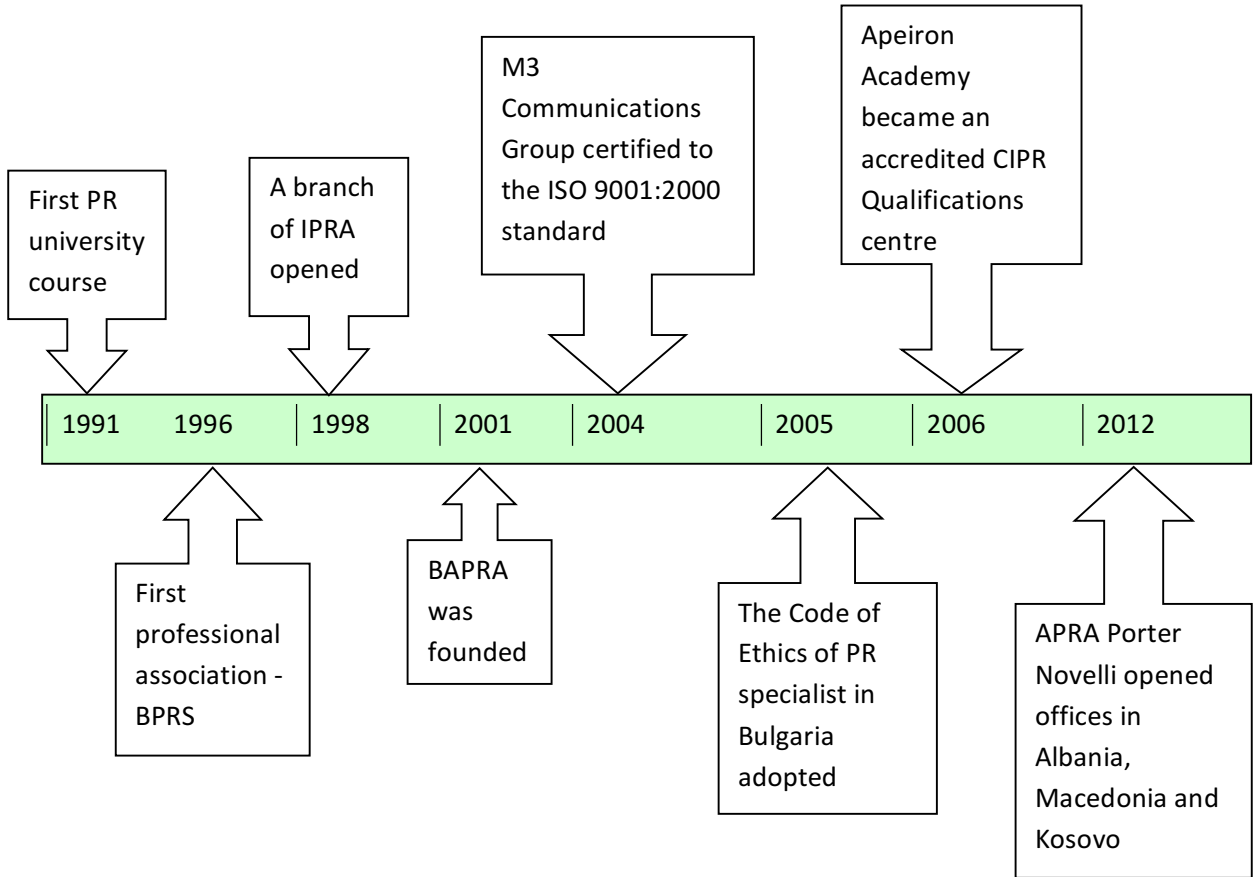
The first PR university course was established in 1991, but it was not until 1994-1995 when PR was included in the system of Bulgarian HE as part of a combined project between UNESCO and IPRA (Zlateva 2003). The course is now offered by most universities but the training provided by state and private institutions is different as the former focus on

planning and management skills while the latter are oriented to practical training (Zlateva 2003). This discrepancy highlights an opportunity for exchange of ideas between Bulgarian state and private institutions, and possible collaboration with universities on an international level, which can contribute to a more comprehensive curriculum.

## PROFESSIONALISATION

Acquiring and mastering intellectual skills through education and training is essential for the professionalisation of PR as outlined in the Global Alliance of Public Relations Associations (GAPRA) principles (Theaker 2013). There is an ongoing debate among academics and practitioners regarding whether PR can be considered a profession or not. Stephen Waddington, CEO at Ketchum, and Trevor Morris, professor of PR at Richmond University, are among the few in agreement that PR cannot be called a profession but illustrates qualities of professionalism thanks to training, degrees and the establishment of industry bodies (Parker 2016). The timeline of the development of PR in Bulgaria (Figure 1) demonstrates practitioners' continuous effort to introduce professional values and guidelines for the discipline, and also the potential of the PR industry in Bulgaria to grow and enter international markets.

**Figure 1: The development of PR in Bulgaria (Boshankova 2014)**



Based on the principles of the GAPRA it can be concluded that PR in Bulgaria has a solid professional structure in place even though the adoption of the Code of Ethics is still voluntarily (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Global Alliance of Public Relations Associations (2013)**

GAPRA principles	
Profession’s characteristics	PR in Bulgaria
1) Mastering skills through education and training	- PR education and training provided by higher education institutions and communications agencies e.g. M3 Communications (Braun 2004)  - Availability of an accredited CIPR Qualification centre (Apeiron Academy)
2) Duties to the broader society as well as to one’s clients and employers	- Stated within the voluntary Code of Ethics of PR specialist in Bulgaria (BAPRA 2016)
3) Objectivity	
4) High standards of conduct and performance	- M3 Communications group certified to the ISO 9001:2000 standard

Boshankova (2014) highlighted that although PR is developing it is focused on technical practices related to media relations (Karadjov et al. 2000; Yaxley 2007; Benova 2010) as opposed to strategic thinking and planning. The discipline is also not “an omnipresent feature of all public entities in Bulgaria” (Karadjov et al. 2000, p.210) as mainly big companies can afford it, and they often turn to foreign PR firms, rather than local agencies perceived to be lacking competence. On a positive note, cases when global companies would trust Bulgarian specialists for the implementation of campaigns are not uncommon. An example is Johnnie Walker’s global “Keep Walking” project which V+O Bulgaria successfully implemented in the country gathering 411 news pieces (V+O 2013).

However, V+O Bulgaria is part of the V+O Group which has branches in Belgium, Romania and Nigeria, and is headquartered in Greece. This raises the concern that even if Bulgarian PRPs are aspiring to improve and develop the discipline, the demand for their services might be jeopardised by international agencies. Following Ritzer’s (1996) notion of the “McDonaldisation of society”, one could argue for the emergence of the phenomenon of the “McDonaldisation of PR”, where bigger agencies from western countries enforce their culture on practice in other countries. The success of this approach is not guaranteed as the Bulgarian mentality is still affected by the communist past, an influence also known as “the scars of socialism” (Braun 2004). As shared by Maxim Behar, a leading PRP, because of this practitioners have to deal with a cynical public, not eager to accept messages and difficult to influence. This highlights that the adoption of global principles to PR in Bulgaria is an ethnocentric approach (Botan 1992) as communicators need to be aware of the country’s

political, cultural and economic background, and media landscape before implementing a PR programme.

## CULTURE

Based on the cultural dimensions suggested by Hofstede (1984), Sriramesh and White (1992) found that excellent PR can flourish in cultures with low “power distance”, “individualism”, “masculinity” and “uncertainty avoidance”. On the contrary, Benova (2010) characterised Bulgaria as a high power distance, masculine, collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance culture influenced by its communist past. Due to the high power distance Bulgarian PR is very centralised and all activity is focused in the capital of Sofia limiting work opportunities for practitioners in other parts of the country. While the culture might be collectivist, the nature of the PR practice is individualistic as PRPs prefer to work independently and do not accept outside ideas and support, a phenomenon described as “the clever Bulgarian” (Braun 2007). Moreover, Bulgaria is a high-context culture (Hall 1991), where the establishment of personal relationships is a necessary condition for conducting business. Consequently, The Personal Influence model of PR is preferred by practitioners (Benova 2010), which reiterates that what might be considered excellent practice in one culture might not translate in others.

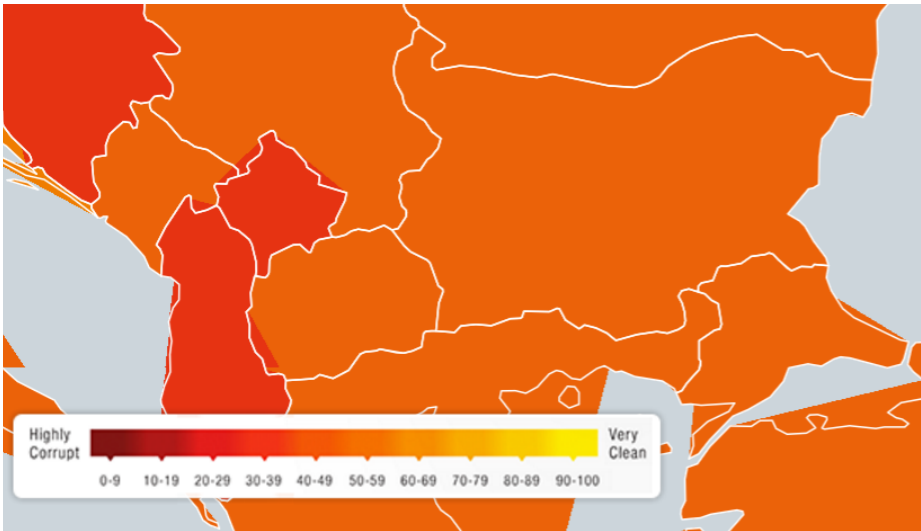
## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

However, due to the country’s political history and the widespread use of propaganda by totalitarian leaders, members of the public view PR negatively as some people who were engaged in propaganda activities entered the discipline. The “scar of socialism” has negatively affected people’s ability to process commercial messages leaving no place for PR in their minds (Braun 2007). The prevalence of authoritarian values in organisations (Benova 2010) influences the communication behaviour of PRPs, particularly those involved in government relations, who try to manipulate the dissemination of information thus echoing the communist propaganda tradition (Karadjov et al. 2000). This confirms Lerbinger’s (2001) argument that PR practice in developing countries is aimed at preserving the status quo, which positions it as serving the interests of politicians as opposed to those of the public.

It is impossible to discuss PR and political systems without acknowledging their impact on the economy and vice versa. Privatisation is a consequence of Bulgaria’s transition to democracy, which encourages foreign investment and the development of domestic enterprises including PR agencies (McBride et al. 1999). Although the government is slow to privatise, PRPs agree on the positive influence of the privatisation process on the demand for their services (Behar 2003 in Braun 2004). On the contrary, the depressed economic state, represented in high unemployment rates and low wages, is an obstacle for the use of PR by public entities not as profitable as large private organisations. Another economic

issue is corruption in the Bulgarian public sector also confirmed by Transparency International (Figure 3). As shared by a Bulgarian journalist, low wages act as a justification to ask for money to publish a press release, which highlights editorial corruption as a major ethical issue for PRPs (Braun 2004).

**Figure 3: Corruption in Bulgaria (Transparency International 2015)**



## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The existence of corrupt practices in publishing has diminished the credibility of newspapers, which are perceived by the public as political instruments (Raycheva 2003). Government controls restricting media freedom are illustrated in the system of political appointees in state-run news agencies and government bodies such as the Council for Electronic Media (CEM) overseeing the broadcast sector (Braun 2007). The country's low ranking (113 out of 180) in Reporters Without Border's 2016 Index of Press Freedom (The Sofia Globe 2016) showcases the damaged media pluralism constraining PRPs in implementing effective media relations campaigns.

Transparency of media ownership is another major issue described by Orlin Spasov, a Bulgarian media expert, as "a Matryoshka doll: there is always one figure behind the other" (The Economist 2013). Therefore, the public is more likely to trust social media and websites not owned by media conglomerates (Globalvoices 2013), which are the platforms utilised by Bulgarian PRPs attempting to build relationships with their audiences.

## CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultural differences have given rise to discussions in academia and practice regarding the need for global principles of PR with further debates on whether PR is local or global (Vercic



and Grunig 2000). Even if the truth is in the middle as argued by Brinkerhoff and Ingle (1989), who suggested the use of “generic principles” and “specific applications”, the need to integrate culture into PR knowledge, still characterised by an American bias, is vital for the development of a culturally richer profession (Sriramesh 2007).

The analysis of PR practice in Bulgaria with regards to factors such as culture, politics, state of the economy and the media landscape confirmed that using Grunig’s (1992) symmetrical model as a normative ideal would be a close-minded approach (Pieczka 1996). Editorial corruption emerged as the biggest obstacle for practicing PR in an ethical manner. As a culturally specific issue, paying for the publication of press releases should be addressed in the already existing Code of Ethics of PR Practice in Bulgaria (BAPRA 2016) while in-house and agency PRPs should be encouraged to abide by its guidelines. Although it might be a time-consuming effort, minimising editorial corruption would contribute to increasing the public’s trust in the media, currently considered to be a political instrument rather than the voice of democracy. Another challenge for PRPs communicating with the Bulgarian public is to convey a message without facing passivity, mass apathy and cynicism representing the “scar of socialism” (Braun 2007). Therefore, specialist and local knowledge combined with sensitivity of the country’s political history are vital for effective communication.

“All countries that are hostile towards PR have one common deficiency: they are not democracies” (Vercic 2004, p.1). Bulgaria is a democracy, but PRPs should be prepared that the country is still in transition from communism. The 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall have brought many changes such as the development of the communications industry and the presence of international companies looking for PR specialists. Therefore, PRPs play a key role in contributing to the development of a fully functioning democracy and encouraging participative culture in organisations and the wider society. Interacting on social media and online platforms is an appropriate way to stimulate the engagement of the Bulgarian public as they consider messages on these channels as more trustworthy in comparison to the corrupt and politicised traditional media (Boshnakova 2014). A similar insight was shared by Duncan Gallagher, Head of Crisis and Issues at Edelman, who advised embracing digital and social media in communicating with Eastern European audiences due to the lack of free press. “Always look at the cultural view, not just from our Western view”, said Duncan in a presentation for Bournemouth University PR students in spring 2016. This indicates the benefits of collaboration between PRPs working on global campaigns and local specialists, who have cultural insights, in order to avoid situations when cultural differences break a successful campaign (Heath 2001). Last, but not least, the exchange of ideas between practitioners on a global level would help eliminate the phenomenon of the “Mcdonaldisation of PR” introduced in this article, thus contributing to a more culturally diverse discipline.

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