

# Digital Literacy and Strategy of PR-education in Russia and Kazakhstan: Comparative Analysis

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**Abstract**—The paper presents results of comparative research in the field of PR-education development in Russia and Kazakhstan. After the disintegration of the USSR, the paths of education development in former soviet republics divided. However, there are still many similarities due to the inter-government cooperation and integration projects such as the Eurasia Economic Union. The study aims to understand how PR-education in Russia and Kazakhstan is developing. In particular, the study compares BA and MA education programs comparing courses in common and not in common. This project uses both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, but is rooted in a qualitative epistemological position that recognizes the importance of locating the research within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. The authors place an emphasis on the competences in the sphere of digital public relations, assuming that skills in information technologies and digital literacy are crucial for success in the future. In order to understand dynamics of PR-education development, the authors compare statistics on student submission to the institutions of the higher education both in Russia and Kazakhstan. The numbers show that there is a big demand in PR-education in terms of students submitted and in terms of competition. In order to indicate what digital skills is needed a survey method is applied. The authors have conducted a survey with 60 BA and MA students. The survey shows that students consider their decision to become a PR-specialists as ‘strategically right’, but the opinion on digital literacy was controversial.

**Keywords**—PR-education, information technologies, digital literacy, Russia, Kazakhstan

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 90s, when the Internet and the information technologies started to transform the sphere of mass communication, digital literacy become a vital part of PR-education. All textbooks on PR usually includes one or several chapters on the problem of digital skills needed to become a successful professional. For example, in 2001 Robert Heath included special section ‘The Frontier of New Communication Technologies’ in his ‘Handbook of Public Relations’ [1]. In this section the development of information technologies was treated as constant process of technological innovations which effects strongly on public relations. Even the most humanitarian part of the PR as writing has suffered from digitalization [2]. The Internet and the information technologies have caused the emergence of new forms of PR-texts such as social media release as well as have contributed to transformation in styles and formatting [3].

No doubt that digital literacy is very important for success in modern information society, including the countries of post-Soviet area. The authors aim to study development of PR-education in Kazakhstan and Russia with emphasis to digital literacy in overall strategy for education in the field. Public relations started to develop immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Epley, “the dramatic political changes occurred in the Soviet Union came to a large degree through the increased openness of communication, and recognition of the importance of public relations there” [4]. Now, public relations become an important part of economics and politics in all post-Soviet states with some exceptions and particularities. After the disintegration of the USSR, the paths of education development in former soviet republics divided. However, there are still many similarities due to the legacy of the USSR, inter-government cooperation and integration projects such as the Eurasia Economic Union. This project utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, but is rooted in a qualitative epistemological position that recognizes the importance of locating the research within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. The purpose of this research is to provide a critical analysis of the history and development of public relations education in Russia and Kazakhstan.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Unfortunately, there are not so many sources on the development of PR-education in Russia and Kazakhstan in English. There are a few works about evolution of higher education systems in general, not PR-education [5]. This paper addresses to fill the gap in the studies.

At the moment, experts in the field notes that today Kazakh PR has achieved considerable level, when public relations managers appear in boards of directors, take positions of deputy directors and presidents at various levels. However, there are many growth problems such as ‘the existing belief that good journalists turn out to be good PR-specialists’ [6]. In addition writing skill, the PR-professionals also must have a managerial grip and a knowledge of marketing and market relations in general. It is also very helpful to have a knowledge and skills in the field of advertising [7].

The first Kazakhstan University to actually offer a degree in public relations was the al-Farabi Kazakh National University in 2000 with its BA in Public Relations and MA in 2009. Over the past twenty years the growth in PR education has been

phenomenal in Kazakhstan. An approach for educational standards continue to improve, with 8 universities of Kazakhstan offering degrees in public relations:

1. The al-Farabi Kazakh National University;
2. The Lev Gumilyov Eurasian National University;
3. The Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages;
4. The E. A. Buketov Karaganda State University,
5. The International Academy of Business;
6. The Turan University;
7. The Almaty Management University;
8. The Khoja Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University.

More than 1,000 students graduated from Faculty of Journalism at al-Farabi Kazakh National University on Specialty Public Relations. Major Kazakh PR-agencies, such as Renaissance, Promo Group Communications (PGC), PR-Management, Star Media & Ogilvy, East Point, Media Systems and Public Relations & Promotion Central Asia are all cooperating with the Universities [8].

National Public Relations Association of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NASO) has been established in 2001. NASO became the thirty member of the International Communications Consultancy Organization (ICCO). NASO successfully started Ak Mergen, a National Award for Public Relations practitioners, attracting every year more and more efficient PR-projects. Also, NASO supported and contributed in the organization of 12 PR-conferences, and held over 50 workshops and master classes during all those years [9].

There is a strong demand for PR-education in Kazakhstan. For example, the al-Farabi Kazakh National University enrolls annually about 50 students in PR (BA and MA programs) with the very high qualifying marks: the student must has at least 114 points out of 125 possible.

In Russia, PR-education started earlier than in Kazakhstan. For example, first department of public relations was established in 1996 at the Saint Petersburg Electro-technical University 'LETI'. St Petersburg was one of the first Russian cities where development of new education and research fields in communication was very active since 1990s [10]. Elena Vartanova claimed that there are only four 'ferments' for communication studies in contemporary Russia:

1. the Moscow school of media studies, formed around the Moscow State University;
2. the St. Petersburg school, which emerged from the academic environment of the Faculty of Journalism of Leningrad State University;
3. the demand from actively growing media business, the industry and the labor market;
4. the impact from the methodologies and the experience of global media studies. [11]

The Russian Public Relation Association (RASO) was established in 1991. RASO has more than 100 members and it runs numerous activities such as business-conferences ('PR-days in Moscow', 'Baltic PR-Weekend'), awards ('Prova', 'Silver archer', 'Crystal orange') [12]. Recently, PR-industry in Russia tends to differentiate to specific fields such as government relations or digital communication [13]. There is a strong demand for PR-education in Russia. For example, in 2018 PR was a most demanded education in all Russia [14]. To be enrolled in PR (BA and MA programs) one must has more than 80 point out of 100. There are many universities in Russia with PR-programs providing 778 budget-funded scholarships and about 10000 students enrolled annually.

### III. METHOD

The main research method used in this paper is the opinion poll among students studying in the last courses in MA and BA programs from the al-Farabi Kazakh National University and the St Petersburg State University. We have managed to get responses from 60 students (31 from Kazakhstan, 29 from Russia). The answers were anonymous and the sociological questionnaire has included only 9 questions. Thus, due to the anonymity and the easy-to-do approach the response rate was 100 %.

There were 3 main research questions in the study. First, we wonder if PR is really attractive profession and students fill satisfied for their strategical choice of the future job. Second, current situation in the PR-education in Russia and Kazakhstan (especially to get a job after graduation in PR) in both countries is still an issue. We examined this issue from the point of job expectations and satisfaction with internships. Third, we wonder if IT-technologies has been applied enough during education and if it is a good idea to transfer some courses to MOOC-format (massive open on-line courses). In addition to survey, the authors compare education standards in PR from the al-Farabi Kazakh National University and the St Petersburg State University both in MA and BA levels.

### IV. RESULTS

The survey of PR-students studying in the last courses in the PR Department of the both universities (N=60) has revealed that majority of students are female (83.33 %) and are in BA-level (71.67 %). According to our results majority of students think positively about their decision to study public relations and are not sorry about this: 83.33 % agree or strongly agree that the decision to became a PR-specialist was strategically right. However, our study shows that students are concerned about possibility to get jobs after graduation. While it seems they have enough opportunity for internships, they are not satisfied with the scope and range of IT-technologies applied during the education. The opinion has been divided: students from Kazakhstan are more optimistic, students from Russia being pessimistic. Overall opinion toward MOOCs is positive with more than the half of students thinks that it is a good idea to transfer some courses to MOOC-format. However, a careful analyzes of the survey results indicates that IT-technologies has not been applied enough during education.

Careful comparing of education standards in PR from the al-Farabi Kazakh National University and St Petersburg State University shows that Kazakhstan offers more courses with IT. For example, in MA Kazakhstan has courses such as 'Information and Communication Technologies' (in English, 3 credits), 'Smart technologies and Internet of things' (2 credits), 'Mathematical methods of information (data) processing' (2 credits), 'Computer and telecommunication technologies in PR' (2 credits), 'Big Data in PR' (2 credits). Russia has only 'Modern Computer Technologies' (2 credits) and 'Computer and telecommunication technologies in PR' (2 credits). For MA courses Kazakhstan has 'The Information Systems in PR' (3 credits), Russia has 'IT in Journalism and Research' and (2 credits) 'IT-consulting in Communication Sphere' (2 credits). It looks like we have an explanation why students from Kazakhstan are more optimistic on the information technologies application during the education, while students from Russia being pessimistic. It is simply a number of courses specialized on IT and the Internet.

However, one must bare in mind that there are problems in quality of teaching. IT can be used in teaching of any subject in university. Our data shows that students from Kazakhstan are less familiar with massive open online courses (38.7 %) then students from Russia (51.7 %). The poor results for Russia in the field of IT-application in education may be mean that there is a much higher expectations from students there. Also, there are slightly more male respondents from Russia (24.1 %) then from Kazakhstan (9.7 %). This might mean extended initial digital literacy for students in St Petersburg, Russia. Thus, students from Russia could have higher expectations in IT-education. Our method certainly has some limitations because we did not actually evaluate digital literacy.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper finds more similarities than differences between public relations educational development in the two countries. The first PR-course at the Kazakh National University was taught in the end of 90's and the first-degree program was offered by the same Kazakh National University in 2000. Kazakh universities often look to al-Farabi Kazakh National University for direction when it comes to establishing and developing public relations education programs.

In Russia, PR-education started rather earlier in the beginning of 90s when mostly in Moscow and St Petersburg new PR-programs were established. St Petersburg has become a center of PR-education in Russia, when in 2017 the Federal Educational and Methodological Council (FUMO) on advertising and public relations was transferred to the St Petersburg State University. FUMO is an advisory organization which prepares educational standards and educational programs in the field of PR and advertising for the Russian Ministry of Education. These standards are to be transferred to the all PR programs in Russia.

An opinion poll carried out among students shows there positive and negative tendencies in public relations education in Kazakhstan and Russia. Our respondents in general have agreed that decision to become a PR-specialist was strategically right and. They have some uneasiness with their internships and with the application of information technologies during the education. It seems that additional efforts should be put into the digital literacy. One of the possibilities is to apply MOOC to the PR-education.

The al-Farabi Kazakh National University and the St Petersburg State University are leading PR-education development both in Russia and Kazakhstan. However, due to the high dynamics of digital technologies it is really hard to keep up pace, providing top PR-programs in the post-Soviet area.

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