



Belarus  
PR Country Landscape 2015

## **Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management**

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# Acknowledgments



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## Snapshot of the Profession

The formation and development of Belarusian PR should be viewed as part of the larger post-Soviet transformation and economic reconstruction. First public relations practitioners and organizations emerged in early 1990's and started to search for their own space in the establishing economy and transforming society. These original players included the Department of Public relations and Media of the Council of Ministers and similar units in the government. In 1991, the Belarusian Association of Public Relations (BASO) was founded.

The next decade saw active efforts to formalize the PR practice and to set rules for PR companies to follow. The period of primary institutionalization began in 1993 when the National Press Center of the Republic of Belarus was founded. This promoted occupational standards and professional reciprocity in the PR field. 1993 also saw the founding of the first PR agency in Belarus – The Institute of Public Relations (IPR). The first PR degree was offered in Belarus in 1996 by the Faculty of Journalism at Belarusian State University. Currently more than five universities offer degrees in PR and there are many opportunities for informal education as well.

There are no official statistics on the number of PR professionals in Belarus. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, the profession *PR Specialist* was recognized on a national level and included into the Unified Qualification List that includes all the professions recognized in Belarus. Since then, the number of job offers for PR specialists increased up to 153% [1]. These numbers indicate high demand for communication services in Belarus and growing interest in the profession.

All agencies in the Belarusian PR-market can be classified into three groups: advanced, intermediate and beginners.

- **Advanced:** The advanced group includes companies with seven or more years of experience specializing in strategic planning and communication, consulting, complex PR services and long-term projects.
- **Intermediate:** The intermediate group includes companies with four to five years of experience who offer both basic and more complex services, primarily in the area of media relations.
- **Beginners:** The beginners are inexperienced PR agencies with up to three years in business. They typically conduct occasional event management or varied short-term or low-budget projects.

Large international organizations are still the main consumers of PR services in Belarus. Among the key players are companies in IT and those who face heavily regulated or restricted advertising (tobacco, alcohol etc.). Most popular PR services include special event planning and event management, media relations, strategic campaign planning, media monitoring and content building for social media.

Most PR agencies do not offer more sophisticated services due to the lack of clearly expressed demand. However, a combination of PR, BTL and direct customer relations is gaining in popularity. Aside from the basic preparation of press releases, conducting press conferences and BTL events, many agencies specialize in internal or corporate communications and event planning for customers or staff. Large governmental organizations prefer to handle PR activities themselves and normally are unwilling to outsource to external agencies. They cannot afford their own PR-staff who are actively involved in strategic organizational planning.

In most companies, the budget for marketing is about 70% advertising and 30% PR. Some companies have limited options for advertising, for example, because of the law (such as the ban on alcohol and tobacco advertising), so they allocate about 80% to PR; typically, PR budgets are significantly lower. When you consider that the advertising market is between 76 and 112 million USD, corresponding spending on PR is far below the average level of neighboring countries. Experts estimate the volume of the PR market in Belarus to be between 2.5 and 10 million USD. However, the PR budgets of most Belarusian companies continue to increase every year.

## State of the Profession

It is not always possible to apply classical PR strategies in Belarus. The sluggish public sphere coupled with a high level of state control impedes the implementation of most innovative ideas in the PR field. An insufficiently developed public sphere is primarily evidenced through the low circulation of print media, the limited number of media outlets and the mediocre quality of FM radio channels.

Another issue is that top management at many companies in Belarus is reluctant to consider public relations as part of strategic management, to understand the specifics of PR trade and to adequately pay for intellectual work in general. In many companies, PR specialists face a lack of respect, structural knowledge, systematic thinking and a lack of understanding of how effective PR efforts can result in an increase in sales. Top management typically approves only standard PR services such as promotion, writing press releases or organizing special events and press conferences. They expect PR specialists to be primarily in charge of advertising or marketing new products. The profession itself has limited public image as a tool for marketing, image-making or public information.

PR is normally not perceived as a communication management that involves long-term strategic planning, research, analysis and reputation management. More advanced forms of PR practice typically cause confusion and resistance in the upper management who believe that these functions should be delegated to marketing, and that PR specialists should be part of the marketing department.

Thus, the role of PR in Belarus is often underestimated and oversimplified. An incorrect perception of PR and the improper use of PR are the main reasons why Belarus is often perceived as a country unfriendly to foreign investors and international business partners.

According to Belarusian Ministry of Information (as of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014) there are around 1572 printed media [2] among which 30% are state-owned. These include:

- 712 newspapers (216 state-owned, 496 private)
- 804 magazines (198 state-owned, 606 private)
- 42 bulletins (14 state-owned, 28 private)
- 12 catalogues (all private)
- 2 almanacs (all private)

Television is still the most popular media in Belarus with maximum reach of 99,3% [3]. There are now about 93 registered TV programs in Belarus (34 state-owned). The only producer of broadcast news is the Belarusian Television and Radio Company. Regional channels produce 25-40% of their own programming. They do not produce their own news or current affairs programs, relying instead on news from national channels.

There are around 30 FM radio stations in Belarus and a number of stations broadcasting from Belarus and covering bordering regions.

National TV and Radio Company (NGTRK) is the largest media holding in Belarus. It covers almost 100% of media households. It is a member of the European Broadcasting Union. After rebranding in 2011, it includes three national TV channels, Belarus-1, Belarus-2, NTV-Belarus and one satellite channel, Belarus-TV. The only independent TV station is BelSAT, based in Warsaw, that broadcasts via satellite. This was launched on December 10, 2007, as the first independent TV network that broadcasts in the Belarusian language. This covers the whole territory of Belarus including rural areas. An estimated 7% of the households in the country watch Belsat.

As for the Internet, recent studies by Gemius have shown that the number of Internet users is rapidly increasing. More than 8 million Belarusians are connected to the Internet. This makes an impact in the digital media market that also shows growth indicators every year. The most important Internet portals include [www.tut.by](http://www.tut.by), [www.onliner.by](http://www.onliner.by), [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by), and others. Digital media environment is now trying new formats of interaction with brands and special interactive projects, tests and other kinds of activities becoming more popular tools for reaching target audience. These trends demonstrate that local Internet-media study international experience and strive to develop opportunities that would make the user experience of interacting with brands more complete and satisfying.

## Context for the Profession

Public Relations in Belarus work within a bilingual cultural field. There are two official languages: Russian and Belarusian. Thus, it is possible to separate two schools and traditions of public relations. The Belarusian-speaking community is actively working to increase the use of the Belarusian language in media and advertising and to make using the Belarusian language more attractive to different audiences. One of the main resources for this type of activity is [AD.NAK!](#) Festival where the best advertising and PR projects in Belarusian language are awarded every year. Russian-language advertising and PR dominates Belarus. This can be explained by the fact that the majority of Belarusians use Russian language on an everyday basis more than Belarusian.

A typical characteristic of the Belarusian PR market is the absence of political PR that constitutes a large share of PR services worldwide. The main reason is the centralized political system makes it impossible to practice this kind of PR. At the same time, however, state institutions actively use public relations techniques. As they are required to communicate with citizens, many governmental bodies, including ministries and departments, have positions for press secretaries and public affairs specialists. This increases the profile of PR profession and contributes to a relative openness in society. As expected, the functions of state public relations services are limited to public information and political advertising. Their activities are often irregular, focused on short-term actions, and designed for immediate, one-time results.

In addition, state services are often slow to respond to issues. State agencies are reactive not proactive. State agencies seldom use preemptive strategic planning, develop and implement long-term programs, or attempt to create a sustainable positive image of their organizations.

Even when state agencies outsource PR work to independent contractors, the state organizations often fail to meet desired goals. State officials tend to interfere with PR planning and micromanage PR activities. Many independent companies refuse to work for state organizations due to a high risk of damage to the companies' reputation as a result of low-quality outcomes when working with state organizations.

The 2008-09 financial crisis had an impact on the Belarusian PR market, as new trends and tactics appeared, some services became less popular, and traditional customers redistributed their marketing and advertising budgets. The effect of crisis is directly linked to declining revenues. Even though regular and established customers did not appear to experience serious problems, these customers chose to spend less on PR-activities instead of waiting for better times to come. In general, the market did not change significantly, although total spending did decline in 2009 and 2011. In an environment with low competition, local PR agencies continued to manage fewer accounts.

New trends include the growth of crisis public relations in leading IT companies while media relations significantly declined in popularity. There has been an increase in demand for public relations techniques based on interpersonal communications, consumer relations and investor relations.

The crisis of 2011 revealed the problem of a lack of public trust in government, banks and corporations. This resulted in national and international manufacturers in Belarus turning to PR as a new opportunity to promote their products and services while those importing, on the contrary, reduced or eliminated their PR activities. According to some Belarusian PR specialists, after the financial crisis of 2011, many national companies expressed an intention to spend a large share of their budget on relational management and digital PR at the expense of publicity. The use of digital communications showed a steady growth. The largest PR agencies reported an increase of at least 50% over 2010.

Now all PR specialists are required to work in new and social media. More clients ask just for digital PR and most contracts require constant engagement in social networks, forums, or blogs. Some customers ignore simple monitoring services and ask for advanced analytics as a part of strategic public relations and government relations' campaigns. In general, clients do not want to simply observe the situation, but rather want to understand the specifics of online communication, and receive expert advice on how to interpret results to improve daily interaction with online audiences. The recent transition to digital PR had a positive impact on the overall development of the PR industry in Belarus. At the same time, it is important to realize that there is a relatively low level of Internet usage in Belarus as compared to other EU countries.

Another post-crisis tendency is the emergence of smaller agencies that engage in price dumping or heavy discounting in order to win contacts. However, these newcomers usually fail to obtain any significant share of the market as they often lack necessary experience and resources. In short, Belarusian PR industry successfully came through the financial crisis by gaining new clients interested in digital PR-services. The full-cycle agencies demonstrated steady growth. In general, current developmental trends of the Belarusian PR correspond with leading global trends: the expansion of digital PR, increased attention to strategic and long-term consulting, and the expansion of public affairs in government.

## Issues for the Profession

The last decade has seen the rise of corporate social responsibility projects in Belarus. Large companies, non-governmental institutions and independent individuals have run a large variety of projects of different scales that initiated change in many fields, such as ecology, education, culture, science, etc. Many PR agencies today see corporate social responsibility projects as part of PR activities and now engage in consulting companies on CSR strategies. CSR projects serve to improve a company's image and engage new reference groups to interact with the brand.

Belarusian mobile communication companies are a good example. Major mobile communication service providers have large CSR platforms that support more than 20 projects at a time starting from improving bicycle tracks to continuing education for senior citizens.

Sustainability is in process of becoming a "hot topic" and is now primarily covered by non-governmental organizations working on raising awareness on themes related to ecology, responsible consumption and conservation of natural resources. A number of "green" topics are being covered by online-media within special projects with companies specializing in energy efficiency technologies.

According to the World Bank's "Doing Business" annual rating, Belarus ranked 57 among 189 countries in 2014. Quick growth of the local IT-sector has led to the creation of special economic environment for this industry to develop and by the special law issued in 2005 Belarus Hi-Tech Park was established with the main goal to support software industry. All companies registered in the Belarus Hi-Tech Park are exempt from all corporate taxes including VAT, profit, real estate and land taxes. There is also a fixed rate of 9% income tax for employees of HTP companies.

Thus, PR in the IT sector is becoming one of the most perspective branches within the industry. Gamedev and software development companies organize a number of public activities to support their positive image and attract prospective employees. Improvement support of the HR-brand is a strategic goal for many IT companies in the country.

Companies of other sectors (banks, manufacturers, service providers) tend to initiate a number of PR and BTL activities with an objective to reach reference groups. In general, brands are moving from closed events for press to semi-public events for opinion-leaders, bloggers and journalists. This tendency could be seen as first step to building specific communities around themes of interest.

## Future for the Profession

Since November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, the day when the profession was included into Unified Qualification List, the number of job offers for PR specialists increased up to 153%<sup>[4]</sup>. These numbers indicate high demand for communication services in Belarus and the growing interest to profession.

Many PR-professionals attribute this increased importance to the Department of Information and Communication (School of Journalism, Belarusian State University) and see this particular department as an institutional driver of development of PR profession. Another trend shaping local industry is the increasing influence of Russian capital in the country. Competition between agencies increases activity in local markets. The professional community sees PR as part of strategic communications and outlines the growth of demand in brand image and reputation audit

as important components of media relations. Demand for anti-crisis management also increases because of the necessity to manage negative user experience and all kinds of threats coming from inside and outside of the company.

The digital environment has also influenced PR industry in Belarus. Many projects with integrated PR solutions (including both online and offline activities) increase the percentage of the audience interacting with brands, as well as viral videos and mobile communications that become effective PR instruments in Belarus. This indicates a positive move to integrated marketing communications where PR is not seen as “one and only” tool of communication but is included in the context of many instruments helping companies to reach prospective clients and customers.

Another important trend is a move from project-oriented work with agencies to long-term collaboration. This strategy helps to save time and resources both for companies (search for a right agency can take a lot of time and resources) and agencies (long-term collaborations help to manage working processes better). Companies tend to trust agencies more, outsource a bigger number of projects and buy more advisory services and concepts that are purely intellectual products.

Local experts expect more specialized agencies to appear on the market and large international networks to come to the country. This, they believe, will serve as a driver of development for advisory service industry and restructuring of PR services into specific groups such as IR, GR and others. Each of these groups includes specific sets of technologies and competences that might stimulate creation of new faculties and specializations in universities.

## Resources for the Profession

The first association of PR-professionals, the Belarusian Association of Public Relations, was founded in 1991. Unfortunately, it has not worked to unify the local community and never introduced professional membership. Today BASO is stagnant. The first private PR agency founded in 1993, the Institute of Public Relations, is active in organizing events for professional community such as conferences, round-tables and public talks.

A couple of years ago, with help and support of industry enthusiasts, international associations started to organize activities in Belarus. IABC has been quite active with organizing business breakfasts and seminars with leading practitioners in industry. A number of event venues and creative institutions are also inviting speakers from Russia and other CIS countries to share experience with local community.

The introduction of PR education happened in 1996 at the Department of Journalism of Belarusian State University. A year before legal, professional and ethical principles for public relations were adopted. They included: “On the Press and Other Mass Media”, “On Advertising”, “On Sharing the Information Concerning The Authorities and their Activities With the Media”, “On Public Associations” and many others. Additionally, other laws concerning media relations, codes of professional conduct and media ethics were adopted by members of the Institute of Public Affairs and the Union of Journalists in Belarus.



## References, Bibliography, and Online Resources

[1] <http://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/pr-shchikov-v-belarusi-stalo-bolshe-no-mesto-pod-solntsem-im-eshche-predstoit-zanyat/>

[2] [http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera\\_Belarusi.pdf](http://iac.gov.by/sbornik/Mediasfera_Belarusi.pdf)

[3] Белорусский радиотелевизионный передающий центр. Официальный сайт. – Интернет-ресурс. Режим доступа: <http://www.brtpc.by/services/television/>. – Дата доступа: 02.10.2014.

[4] <http://marketing.by/novosti-rynka/pr-shchikov-v-belarusi-stalo-bolshe-no-mesto-pod-solntsem-im-eshche-predstoit-zanyat/>

## Contact information

The Global Alliance is always interested in cooperating with local institutions and associations to provide profiles of the social, economic and media context of member countries, along with details on the local public relations industry, its main activities and tips on successful local practice.

For suggestions and discussion, please contact:

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