



TRAJECTORY OF PR ACTIVITIES OF RUSSIAN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT BODIES

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study aims to determine the direction of PR activities of Russian municipalities on social media. **Methods:** The paper presents a comparative analysis of the communicative activities of local self-government bodies of 13 Russian million-plus cities. **Results:** Based on a comparative analysis of the audience coverage of official accounts of local self-government authorities and the subscriber counts of popular city communities, the study identifies the trajectory of PR activities of Russian municipalities. **Conclusion:** The critical strategic direction of PR activities of Russian municipalities is suggested to be the development of official social media accounts, communicative strategies, and images on these platforms.

Keywords: PR; PR activities; Local self-government bodies; Social media; Social networks; Image.



TRAJECTÓRIA DAS ACTIVIDADES DE PR DOS ORGANISMOS LOCAIS RUSSOS DE AUTO-GOVERNO

RESUMO

Objectivo: O estudo tem como objectivo determinar a direcção das actividades de relações públicas dos municípios russos nos meios de comunicação social. **Métodos:** O documento apresenta uma análise comparativa das actividades comunicativas dos organismos locais de auto-governo de mais de 13 milhões de cidades russas. **Resultados:** Com base numa análise comparativa da cobertura da audiência das contas oficiais das autoridades locais de auto-governo e da contagem dos assinantes das comunidades populares das cidades, o estudo identifica a trajectória das actividades de RP das municipalidades russas. **Conclusão:** Sugere-se que a direcção estratégica crítica das actividades de RP dos municípios russos seja o desenvolvimento de contas oficiais dos meios de comunicação social, estratégias comunicativas, e imagens sobre estas plataformas.

Palavras-chave: RP; Actividades de RP; Organismos locais de autogestão; Meios de comunicação social; Redes sociais; Imagem.

1 INTRODUCTION

For local self-government (LSG) bodies, image, which refers to a specially created perception of a certain object, is a critical asset that requires constant nourishment and support. The formation of LSG's image is closely linked to the economic, social, and political processes at the local level of government. This relates to the fact that the range of activities of municipalities includes the widest range of tasks: from the improvement of the public environment and housing and communal services to the development of sports, cultural, and educational infrastructure. Public relations tools (or PR tools) are designed to provide a regular basis for municipalities' activities in building their image. The effectiveness of this work determines the popularity of administrative decisions made and implemented at the municipal level, support for the current municipal government, and formation of citizens' involvement in the life of the city and, in general, their identification with the municipal territory.

The PR mechanisms of Russian LSG bodies are stipulated by federal legislation. These legislative acts are designed to guarantee citizens access to information about the activities of authorities and ensure the transparency and openness of their interaction with citizens. For instance, Article 8 of the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technology and Information Protection" No. 149-FZ proclaims a norm obliging LSG bodies to provide access to information about their activities, including through the use of information and telecommunications networks (Fatykhova et al.,



2017, p. 766; Morozova et al., 2021, p. 246).

The rapid development of digital communication is bringing adjustments to the PR activities of local governments in Russia. Official websites of LSG bodies, which, in principle, do meet the legal obligation of openness and accessibility in providing information about their activities, have recently ceased to be the only official information sources.

On July 14, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law obliging state and local authorities to maintain official pages on social networks and publish relevant information there (State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2022b). This practice gives grounds to assert the institutionalization of social media as an official source of information. It is noted that the law is designed to increase the openness of the functioning of self-government, as well as subordinate structures, and provide opportunities for citizens to access official information about their activities in a clear and simple form (State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2022a).

Naturally, the transition to social networks required the PR specialists of LSGs to alter the form and content of messages broadcast to the public. Adaptation of the information flow to the algorithms and linguistic communication styles of social media becomes a key task for municipalities in creating the public image of government officials in general and municipal authorities in particular. Having a monopoly on the transmission of socially relevant information, municipal authorities have the capacity to build an audience on social networks, which presents one of the indicators of successful communication on these platforms (Kudryavtsev & Mikheeva, 2015, pp. 420-422).

The significance of social media as communication channels continues to rise. According to a Deloitte study of media consumption in 2021, 95% of Russians had experience using social media (Deloitte CIS Research Center, 2021). This trend persisted as a result of the transformation of the media field after the blockage of the social networks Facebook and Instagram in Russia in March 2022 (social networks owned by Meta are recognized as extremist and banned on the territory of the Russian Federation). According to the research company Mediascope, from February 24 to March 14, 2022, the number of Telegram users jumped from 35 million to 47 million, and the audience of VKontakte grew from 46 million users to 50 million (Mediascope official website, 2022).



2 METHODS

In order to identify the direction of PR activities of Russian municipal authorities, we conducted a comparative analysis of the audience coverage of official accounts of LSG bodies of million-plus cities and the number of subscribers of the most popular city communities on VKontakte (VK.com) publishing content on similar topics and also covering topical city news. The study considers the accounts of 13 municipalities: Kazan (“#zhivuvkazani”), Voronezh (“Administratsiia Voronezha”), two accounts of the city of Ekaterinburg (“Ekaterinburg” and “Administratsiia goroda Ekaterinburga”), Novosibirsk (“meriia Novosibirska”), Nizhny Novgorod (“meriia Nizhnego Novgoroda”), Chelyabinsk (“Administratsiia Cheliabinska”), Samara (“Administratsiia Samary”), Omsk (“Administratsiia goroda Omska”), Rostov-on-Don (“Administratsiia goroda Rostova-na-Donu”), Ufa (“gorod Ufa”), Krasnoyarsk (“gorod Krasnoiarsk”), Perm (“Perm Pervaia”), Volgograd (“Administratsiia Volgograda”).

The object of research is the official social media accounts of Russian million-plus cities on the social network VKontakte. The choice of the social media platforms owes to the rising popularity of VKontakte among Russian citizens, especially after Facebook and Instagram were blocked in Russia in March of 2022 (social networks owned by Meta are recognized as extremist and banned on the territory of the Russian Federation). Based on Mediascope data, the average daily number of VKontakte users in April 2022 was 41% of the population aged 12 and up (desktop and mobile). In addition, the study considers the rating of Russian Internet resources by audience size as of April 2022: VKontakte ranks first among social networks in terms of average daily reach (Mediascope official website, 2022).

Data on the audience of public pages in VKontakte are presented as of July 27, 2022.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Russian social network VKontakte was launched in 2006. The public pages of the studied municipalities were created at different times: Kazan (“#zhivuvkazani”) – 2012; Ekaterinburg (“Administratsiia goroda Ekaterinburga”) – 2021 (the former page “g. Ekaterinburg” was created in 2013, and “Administratsiia goroda Ekaterinburga” was made the official page after the inauguration of the current head of Ekaterinburg, A. Orlov); Ufa (“gorod Ufa”) – 2013; Omsk (“Administratsiia goroda Omska”) – 2016;



Krasnoyarsk (“gorod Krasnoiarsk”) – 2016; Samara (“Administratsiia Samary”) – 2014; Nizhny Novgorod (“meriia Nizhnego Novgoroda”) – 2018; Chelyabinsk (“Administratsiia Cheliabinska”) – 2017; Voronezh (“Administratsiia Voronezha”) – 2016; Rostov-on-Don (“Administratsiia goroda Rostova-na-Donu”) – 2019; Perm (“Perm Pervaia”) – 2016; Volgograd (“administratsiia Volgograda”) – 2020 (The official accounts of local self-government bodies, n.d.).

The number of subscribers of the official accounts of the examined LSG bodies in VKontakte is the following: Kazan (“#zhivuvkazani”) – 121,403, Voronezh (“Administratsiia Voronezha”) – 21,656, Ekaterinburg: “Administratsiia goroda Ekaterinburga” – 2,055, “Ekaterinburg” – 127,585, Novosibirsk (“meriia Novosibirska”) – 11,697, Nizhny Novgorod (“meriia Nizhnego Novgoroda”) – 23,092, Chelyabinsk (“Administratsiia Cheliabinska”) – 24,987, Samara (“Administratsiia Samary”) – 24,478, Omsk (“Administratsiia goroda Omska”) – 62,956, Rostov-on-Don (“Administratsiia goroda Rostova-na-Donu”) – 6,329, Ufa (“gorod Ufa”) – 138,857, Krasnoyarsk (“gorod Krasnoiarsk”) – 42,109, Perm (“Perm Pervaia”) – 10,662, Volgograd (“administratsiia Volgograda”) – 4,966.

Meanwhile, the population of the studied cities is as follows: Kazan – 1,257,391, Ekaterinburg – 1,493,749, Voronezh – 1,058,261, Novosibirsk – 1,625,631, Nizhny Novgorod – 1,252,236, Chelyabinsk – 1,196,680, Samara – 1,156,659, Omsk – 1,154,507, Rostov-on-Don – 1,137,904, Ufa – 1,128,787, Krasnoyarsk – 1,093,771, Perm – 1,055,397, Volgograd – 1,008,998 (Federal State Statistics Service, 2020).

According to the calculations, the share of the audience of the studied official VKontakte accounts of local self-governments in the total population of these cities is as follows: Ufa (“gorod Ufa”) – 12%; Kazan (“#zhivuvkazani”) – 9.6%; Ekaterinburg (“Administratsiia Ekaterinburga” – 0%, “Ekaterinburg” – 8%); Omsk (“Administratsiia goroda Omska”) – 5%; Krasnoyarsk (“gorod Krasnoiarsk”) – 4%; Samara (“Administratsiia Samary”) – 2%; Nizhny Novgorod (“meriia Nizhnego Novgoroda”) – 2%; Chelyabinsk (“Administratsiia Cheliabinska”) – 2%; Voronezh (“Administratsiia Voronezha”) – 9%; Novosibirsk (“meriia Novosibirska”) – 0.7%; Rostov-on-Don (“Administratsiia goroda Rostova-na-Donu”) – 0.5%; Perm (“Perm Pervaia”) – 1%; Volgograd (“administratsiia Volgograda”) – 0.4%.

The presented parameters are appropriate to compare with the data obtained by us in the course of research in 2021, which are provided in Table 1 (Ziatdinova, 2021, pp. 14-16). The data on the subscribers of popular city communities in the social network VKontakte for the current year are presented as of July 2022.



Table 1. Dynamics of the audience of official VKontakte accounts of the LSG bodies of Russian cities with a population of over one million people (2021, 2022)

| Account of the LSG body | Share of subscribers in the total population of the city in %, July 2021 | Share of subscribers in the total population of the city in %, July 2022 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ufa City Administration (https://vk.com/ufo) | 12 | 12 |
| Kazan Mayor's Office (https://vk.com/kzn) | 8 | 10 |
| Ekaterinburg City Administration (https://vk.com/ekadm) | 0 | 0 |
| Ekaterinburg City Administration (https://vk.com/ekb) | 8 | 8 |
| Omsk City Administration (https://vk.com/omsk) | 5 | 5 |
| Krasnoyarsk City Administration (https://vk.com/krasnoyarskrf) | 3 | 4 |
| Samara City Administration (https://vk.com/samaraadm) | 1 | 2 |
| Nizhny Novgorod Mayor's Office (https://vk.com/nn_admgorod) | 1 | 2 |
| Chelyabinsk City Administration (https://vk.com/chel_adm) | 1 | 2 |
| Voronezh City Administration (https://vk.com/ru_vrn) | 1 | 9 |
| Novosibirsk Mayor's Office (https://vk.com/nsk_adm) | 0.4 | 0.7 |
| Rostov-on-Don City Administration (https://vk.com/rostov_gorod161) | 0.1 | 0.5 |
| Perm City Administration (https://vk.com/gorodpermru) | 0 | 1 |
| Volgograd City Administration (https://vk.com/volgadmin) | 0 | 0.4 |

Consideration of the audience coverage of the cities' popular thematic communities in VKontakte publishing city news gives a general idea of the activity of subscribers of the studied municipalities. In this connection, we made a selection of such communities, the subscriber counts of which are provided in Table 2.

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Table 2. Audience of popular social network groups of cities with a population of over one million people in the VKontakte social network

| City, public page | Subscriber count | Share of subscribers in the total population % |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Ekaterinburg “Tipichnyi Ekaterinburg” [“Typical Ekaterinburg”] | 656,572 | 44 |
| Kazan “VKazani poimut” [“Kazan understands”] | 486,242 | 39 |
| Voronezh “Tipichnyi Voronezh” [“Typical Voronezh”] | 438,000 | 41 |
| Novosibirsk “Tipichnyi Novosibirsk” [“Typical Novosibirsk”] | 575,408 | 35 |
| Nizhny Novgorod “Nizhny Novgorod” | 401,250 | 32 |
| Chelyabinsk “Nash Cheliabinsk” [“Our Chelyabinsk”] | 626,382 | 52 |
| Samara “Samara Gorod. Novosti Samary” [“Samara City. News of Samara”] | 487,730 | 42 |
| Omsk “Omskii Pablik No.1” [“Omsk Page No.1”] | 402,243 | 35 |
| Rostov-on-Don “Rostov Glavnyi” [“Rostov Main”] | 639,595 | 56 |
| Ufa “Moia Ufa” [“My Ufa”] | 286,106 | 25 |
| Krasnoyarsk “Ia zhivu v Krasnoyarske” [“I live in Krasnoyarsk”] | 479,315 | 44 |
| Perm “Moi gorod – Perm” [“My city – Perm”] | 502,690 | 48 |
| Volgograd “Tipichnyi Volgograd” [“Typical Volgograd”] | 294,794 | 29 |

The share of subscribers to these popular pages in the total city population averages at 40%. Thus, data in Table 2 suggest that 35 to 42% of the city population is the optimal number of real subscribers to the accounts of LSG bodies that could be the goal of PR-activities of the press-services of million-plus city municipalities in the context of their work with the audience in VKontakte.

The obtained results suggest that social networks as a two-way communication channel take root in the activities of the studied municipalities with varying degrees of success. Only individual municipalities among the considered utilize the potential of social networks when working with the public, while the majority are only at the starting



positions. In particular, analysis of the content of official accounts of million-plus cities shows that not all of the studied cities adhere to a clear content plan when posting (publications are often posted chaotically) and monitor feedback (no promptness in posting responses to user comments, few reposts and reactions to publications). Furthermore, administration websites have no links to official social media accounts (for instance, of the city of Perm).

Consequently, the legal obligation of LSG administrations to publish relevant information about their activities will promote the practice of interaction of LSG bodies with the public in social networks. In this respect, municipalities will manage to implement efficient PR activities on social media only if they adapt their content to the demands and interests of social media users, use attractive forms of presentation of PR messages, promptly react to public comments, and track negative content.

4 CONCLUSION

The trajectory of PR activities of Russian LSG bodies in the near future will take the direction of mastering the mechanisms and techniques of maintaining official accounts on social media. The institutionalization of social media as an official source of information requires authorities to be flexible in this process. The content posted by official social media accounts needs to be adapted to the requirements and norms of the network (stylistic and genre) and work for the image of LSG bodies as a form of public governance that is more socially oriented and close to the public.

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