Professional PR Ethics in Developing Economies: Comparative Analysis of Russia and Thailand

Dmitrii Gavra, Alyona Savitskaya and Pavel Slutskiy

Abstract
The paper examines basic ethical aspects of PR practices and their reflection in the process of educating PR professionals in Russia and Thailand. The hypothesis is that in both developing countries, PR ethics are still developing the status of institutional regulator of the industry. Universities in countries with “non-Western” business cultures are to a certain degree founded on the Western educational model. On the other hand, in non-Western developing economies, universities, as well as their alumni’s professional behavior, are influenced by local cultural, ethical, religious and other contexts. All these factors bring up interesting problems that are worth examining; problems regarding shaping professional qualities in practitioners who will be working in an environment where economic globalization crosses paths with national cultural trends and business traditions.

A survey of two groups of PR students in each country (freshmen – first year students, and seniors – those graduating in 2 months) was conducted to examine whether Western standards of professional ethics influence the ethical imperatives of national business cultures, and whether peculiarities of national business mentalities determine the differences in views on PR. Their ideas about the PR profession and its ethics can be seen as an important empirical indicator of the overall ethical standards in the national business environment. Their understanding of professional ethics is a
mixture of what they have learned from their textbooks (usually Western ones), what they learned from their professors, and what they observed watching practitioners at work during internships.

The results show a fairly comparable attitude toward professional ethics among the freshmen and senior students from the same culture. They were similar in describing the profession as a whole; professional and unprofessional qualities of PR specialists; assessing the perceived prestige of the PR profession in the country; and defining ethical prohibitions for PR specialists. The differences clearly appeared in cross-cultural comparisons, especially when it came to professional qualities, common understandings of PR ethics, and ethical compromises. For example, evaluations of the prestige of the profession by Thai and Russian freshmen were diametrically opposed.

Thai students overall demonstrate a more explicit connection between ethics and professionalism in PR, while Russian students, in turn, insist on a more persistent realization of ethical principles, and demonstrate less dependence on the particular conditions of ethical dilemmas. The findings suggest that despite certain similarities in business cultures between Russia and Thailand, cultural differences have a greater influence on participants’ views of professional ethics than do education and practical experience.

**Keywords:** public relations, ethics, Russia, Thailand, PR-education

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Introduction

The PR profession in developing economies is usually young. This fact has several consequences: initial borrowing of Western (primarily American) practices and theoretical concepts; the inevitable adaptation of these practices and concepts to local circumstances, existing and evolving economies, and to social and cultural realities; as well as the necessity of acquiring necessary professional skills and techniques and of training local PR practitioners quite intensively (within a short period of time). In a case of such rapid progression, the main qualitative indicator that can help to trace the transition of the industry from “youth” to “maturity” and to institutionalization is the level of professional ethics. This makes the problem of forming ethical standards in national systems of PR education especially pertinent. Universities in countries with “non-Western” business cultures are to a certain degree built on the Western educational model. This is the result of traditional university development in Western Europe undergoing a modernization process that began in Renaissance days and continued into present times, and of the fact that world leadership today – and thus the right to set university education standards, belong to leading European and American schools. On the other hand, in universities of non-western developing economies, and their alumni’s professional behavior, are influenced by local cultural, ethical, religious, and other contexts. All these factors bring forth interesting problems that are worth examining – problems of shaping professional qualities in practitioners who will be working in an environment where economic globalization crosses paths with trends in national cultural and business traditions. PR and communication professionals without a doubt belong to this category of professionals.

This study is aimed at examining basic ethical aspects of PR practice and their reflection in the process of educating PR professionals, as well as in their professional behavior. This problem seems significant, as multiple research projects demonstrate that professional communicators often face ethical dilemmas, and the number of these dilemmas is constantly increasing.
Contemporary communication professionals have to deal with international and intercultural issues in their work, as well as with a growing influence of social media and online sub-cultures. Globalization of the communication sphere along with digitalization of communication raise multiple questions which need answers from the perspective of applied ethics. The subjects of these questions include, but are not limited to, information security, privacy, and ethics of social media.

At the same time, traditional ethical questions of public communication practices remain important as well. In the public conscience, the PR profession is closely associated with several ethical problems. One of the most significant ones is seeing PR as a tool for manipulating public opinion. This is an ethical problem related to such moral norms as honesty and truthfulness. There are other, no less important issues, such as correct relationships with media, remaining unbiased, maintaining the balance between the client’s interests and the interests of society, and contradictions in values relating to freedom of information and social responsibility, etc. Inability to recognize ethical dilemmas in professional practice leads to sharp drops in professionalism, dangerous and sometimes expensive mistakes in work, as well as negative long-term consequences for the industry as a whole. Unethical actions by PR practitioners raise concerns both within the professional community and among the general public.

In this paper we examine the current state of PR ethics in Russia and Thailand. The hypothesis is that in both countries PR ethics are still acquiring the status of institutional regulator of the industry. This assumption is based on several factors related to the history of the profession as well as to wider social and cultural contexts, which define how business is conducted in these countries.

Of course, the relative youth of national PR models is a particularly important factor. In the Russian Federation, the emergence of public relations dates back to the beginning of the 1990s. The first professional PR organization (Russian Public Relations Association) was founded in 1991 in Russia, and 15 years earlier its equivalent was founded in Thailand. In both countries the first or second generation of specialists are still working. Some came to PR from other professional spheres that are closely related, such as journalism, advertising, and marketing; others
came from fields that are far removed from the sphere of public communication.

At the same time, public discourse on the field is well underway, and the profession’s image has already been formed in public opinion. This image has an impact on the development of the industry, including the number of people who enter the profession through university education. For this reason, we focused in this research on students who study public relations. They chose their future profession based on its social status and prestige. They are the future of the industry. Their ideas about the PR profession and its ethics can be seen as important empirical indicators of the overall ethical standards in the national business environment. Those who are just entering the industry, who have just chosen this career path, reflect all the existing stereotypes about the profession that public opinion may hold. At the same time those students who are about to graduate have already acquired some professional experience: They have been exposed to lectures, read textbooks, studied ethical codes, gone through internships, and have perhaps developed and implemented their own projects. Their understanding of professional ethics is a mixture of what they learned from their textbooks (usually Western ones), what they learned from their professors, and what they observed watching practitioners at work during internships. The latter adds some understanding of local market requirements.

Syllabuses on PR in educational institutions traditionally pay special attention to questions of applied ethics in communication. At the same time just studying ethical principles is not always enough. Teaching experience clearly demonstrates that although students can memorize the most important norms from ethical codes, this does not necessarily mean that they will follow these norms in their professional practical work.

In fact, successful completion of the educational task of forming professional ethical standards is difficult due to an inevitable fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, the education process has to form basic ethical values and professional responsibility; on the other hand, it must develop skills in influencing the consciences and behavior of other people, including an introduction to manipulation techniques (such as NLP). Thus we can expect that during university
years, PR practitioners experience “pre-professional” transformations. How significant is this evolution in ethical world views?

To answer this question, we surveyed in both Russia and Thailand two groups of students who study public relations: freshmen who are just entering the profession, and fourth year students who over the years in university not only acquired theoretical knowledge, but also had a chance to see the industry from the inside. Both groups are equally important for understanding trends in professional development. We also thought it was necessary to describe the influence of the cultural environment that may change standardized norms that are codified in international charters. Thus an important part of this project is a comparative analysis of ethical views of both Russian and Thai students, which allowed us to examine their general and specific understandings of PR ethics. The possibilities for comparison are also supported by the notion that business cultures in both Russia and Thailand are not always compatible with Western principles of business ethics (Lewis, 2006). At the same time, Russian and Thai cultures maintain several similar positions, according to Hofstede’s criteria (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Background

Ethics in PR

Although the term PR ethics itself may seem debatable, and whether or not ethical PR can even exist is under discussion in multiple ways (Berger & Reber, 2006; Bowen, 2013; Parsons, 2008), usually ethics is seen as an important factor in business development and a special type of intellectual capital (McPhail, 2009; Willmott, 1998). S. T. Lee (2012) notes that in most discussions about PR ethics, authors describe the moral obligations of PR specialists towards various stakeholders, and try to help in avoiding ethical violations. At the same time, Lee notes that until recently there has been a shortage of empirical studies in PR ethics that would allow better understanding of what shapes the ethical views of PR practitioners.
Despite a relatively long history of development and institutionalization of PR in the West, the very nature of PR practice often demands that specialists rely on their intuition and professional experience, rather than on their academic knowledge (Okay & Okay, 2008). This leads to the problem of effective education and knowledge transfer. The existing literature suggests that university subjects and professional development courses are not effective enough in forming ethical competence (Bowen et al., 2006). Professional experience along with internal corporate training seems to be more influential.

Thus, Lee in his study showed the close correlation between the degree of stringency of PR ethics and the personal characteristics of a specialist (age, experience, and number of courses on ethics during work in the field). At the same time, he found no significant correlation between explicate ethical knowledge and such characteristics as gender, religion, the value of managerial experience, education level, number of ethics courses attended at the university, the size of the organization, number of employees, and the presence in the organization of the code of ethics (Lee, 2012).

PR Ethics within the Cultural Context
The very nature of ethical values makes them culture-specific (Brannigan, 2004; Roth, Hunt, Stavropoulos, & Babik, 1996; Shuter, 2003). Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett (2012) underline the importance of cultural factors that determine differences in how respondents solve ethical dilemmas. Therefore any analysis of professional ethics has to take into account general cultural foundations that define specific features of business communication in a given society. Lewis (2006) says that ethics belong to the basic categories in business communication, but their interpretation varies to a great degree from culture to culture. At the same time, Sriramesh (2010) states that despite the fact that PR practices are clearly influenced by local cultures, research that examines this cultural influence only started in the 2000s. Since then it has been questioned whether it is enough to simply add “specific applications” to basic professional principles formulated in the U. S. (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).
Intensification of intercultural relations, including business relations, gives prominence to an important practical problem in PR: how to act if Western professional norms contradict local norms of conducting business (Curtain & Gaither, 2007). In any case, to answer this question one requires data from applied cross-cultural analytical research of professional PR practices in different cultural environments. Relying on already existing works (Kim & Kim, 2010; Lieber, 2006; Toledano & Avidar, 2015, etc.), we studied ethical views of Russian and Thai students comparatively.

Russian Culture Vs Thai Culture
According to Hofstede et al., both Russia and Thailand are feminine, collectivist cultures with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Lewis (2006) describes the value system of Russians as compared to Americans in the following way: Russians are direct communicators; they have grand thinking and messianic inclinations; they are hospitable and expansionist; they do not have aristocracy; they are multinational; and they like technical innovations. In contrast to Americans, Russians may be dishonest to others in their endeavors to succeed; they are emotional, pessimistic, and do not possess any ethics of success.

Russian business communicators value personal contacts; they do not trust official directives and instructions; they do not expect any support from government officials; they reach their goals by relying on an extensive network of connections and reciprocity; they are conservative, and have difficulty accepting change.

Thai business communication is characterized by pragmatism; fatalism; karma; hostility toward Western work ethics; simplicity; love of liberty; formalism; correct behavior; dignity; pride; and resistance to change. An easy job with a modest salary is better than a difficult job with a high salary. Decision making and responsibility are passed up to the seniors. Conflicts at work have to be avoided at all costs; no one should lose face (Lewis, 2006).

Thai culture is stronger in uncertainty avoidance and power distance. It is more collectivist as well; thus, it places more importance on behavior codes. Thais will
be more idealistic, since adherence to the “moral absolutes” of idealism represents a reduction in uncertainty. Similarly, they will be likely to be less relativistic than their American counterparts. This thinking is consistent with arguments made by Vitell, Nwachukwu & Barnes (1993, pp. 756–757).

Borrowing from the article by Vitell et al. (1993) and consistent with proposition 10 of their article (p. 757), one would expect that marketers in a society that is high in uncertainty avoidance such as Thailand would be less likely to perceive ethical problems than their counterparts in a country such as the USA, which is low in uncertainty avoidance.

Using the same logic as presented above for ethical perceptions, one would expect that Thai marketers will be “less ethical” in terms of their ethical judgments, since they are less likely to perceive ethical problems in the first place.

Thais are both more idealistic and more relativistic (compared to Westerners). That is, they are more likely to accept the absolutism of idealism than Western marketers. Also, relative to their Western counterparts, Thais are more likely to rely on the nature of the ethical issue or the circumstances and less on universal moral principles when making moral judgments. This apparent contradiction may be resolved by examining Forsyth’s (1980, 1992) taxonomy. According to Forsyth’s taxonomy of ethical ideologies, Thais would be labeled “situationists”. In his words, situationists are those “who eschew universal moral principles (high relativism), but still insist that one should produce positive consequences that benefit all involved (high idealism)” (Forsyth, 1992, p. 462).

Thus, we can identify the common, the different, and the unrelated in ethical views of Russian and Thai people. Within the framework of every business culture, ethics of business communication have always existed. It is rooted in the national cultural genotype and serves as an important determinant of ethical regulators, which are interconnected with universal professional ethics – for instance, in medicine, law or criminal business.

The whole history of PR demonstrates that it is a product of Western Euro-Atlantic civilization which originated and developed in the cultures based on principles of Protestant ethics, in Weber’s (1958) terminology. This paradigm is
explicit in all major classic PR textbooks, which were written in the U. S. and are a foundation in professional education throughout the world.

As an economy becomes globalized, PR integrates into business spheres that are based on different value systems. This results in an emergence of hybrid forms of professional ethics. These forms combine clearly recognizable universal elements of the PR profession with some peculiarities which can be traced to traditions of national business ethics. The latter are usually difficult to explain to outsiders.

In this sense public relations education should perform a standardizing function that would enable PR specialists to acquire similar sets of knowledge and competencies, which include understanding of professional ethics. We believe that ethical awareness and ethical regulation of professional behavior is a necessary professional competency.

Thus, students in PR programs in countries with non-Western business cultures represent examples of hybrid ethical professional socialization. On the one hand, they carry ethical principles of their native culture. On the other hand, by virtue of representing a profession with already existing professional standards, graduates should possess a professionally organized conscience and an understanding of universal professional principles, which are based on the Western paradigm of PR professionalism, as well as the ability to apply these principles to practice.

The specific details of this hybrid model may vary from country to country. Within close non-Western business cultures (according to Huntington’s [1996] civilization model), the degree of variation will be less significant. More distant cultures will vary to a greater extent.

Russia and Thailand in this model both represent non-Western civilizations with relatively distant cultural matrixes. At the same time they share some similar features. Therefore, empirical research can demonstrate the similar and the different in hybrid models of Russian and Thai PR ethics, as well as how ethical values are rooted in national PR schools.

The above-mentioned leads to the formulation of the following hypotheses.
Hypotheses

H1: PR education based on Western standards of professional ethics would level the impact of ethical imperatives of national business culture. Thus, ethical values of Russian and Thai fourth year students would be more similar to each other in comparison with those of Russian and Thai freshmen.

H2: Peculiarities of national business mentalities typical for Russia and Thailand determine the differences in understanding of the PR profession and its ethical regulators.

Research Methodology

The main methodology of this study was a classroom sample survey. Four groups of respondents participated in this survey. Two groups of Russian students from five universities represented the general population of students who studied public relations in Russia. For the sake of convenience, they are labeled the first and second group – the first year (freshmen) and the fourth year (seniors) students, respectively. The third and fourth groups were freshmen and seniors from Thailand.

It was a continuous sampling of all the students who attended classes in selected universities on the day of the survey. The number of participants in all the groups were as follows: in the first group – 87; the second group – 59; the third – 67; and the fourth – 44. The questionnaire combined both open and closed questions (in the latter case they were accompanied by a five-range Likert scale).

The respondents were not informed that the survey was about ethics. This ensured that the awareness of the research purposes would not affect the responses. The official topic of the research was “PR profession in contemporary Russia and Thailand”.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections and a socio-demographic section. In the first section the respondents were asked to describe the PR profession
using five adjectives, avoiding simple value judgments (like “important” or “necessary”). This section identified the general assessment of the profession as a combination of cognitive and affective perceptions. This was followed by a section of questions about professionalism, where the respondents were asked to name five most professional and unprofessional qualities of PR specialists. The third section was related to the perceived prestige of the PR profession in the country. The respondents were offered scales from +3 (very prestigious) to -3 (very un-prestigious) with a request to explain the reason for their evaluation. The fourth section was dedicated to the problems of PR ethics and contained 12 closed and open questions. The section began with an open question that asked participants to define their understanding of ethics in PR, followed by another open question – to define three main ethical prohibitions for PR specialists. Then there was a question on what structures and institutions (from state to self-regulatory non-governmental organizations) should regulate the norms of ethics for the profession. The final questions were on identifying professional situations where following the requirements of professional ethical codes may be complicated, and possible sanctions for violating PR ethics.

Altogether the participants were asked to respond to 17 topic-related questions in 25 minutes.

Findings

Ethical Views of Russian Students
Russian first year students described the PR profession as interesting, creative, and prestigious. Similar characteristics were chosen by the fourth year students, apart from the last one, which was more often replaced by “responsible”. Answers to the question about the most important professional qualities of PR specialists were identical in the first three positions between both groups: communicability, creativity, responsibility. The third question, about unprofessional qualities, yielded only two identical types of most popular responses – irresponsibility and
laziness. First year students also listed rudeness and unpunctuality, fourth year students – being reticent and disorganized (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The most unprofessional qualities of PR-specialists (Russia)

The fourth question was about the level of social prestige of the profession and offered scales from +3 (very prestigious) to -3 (very un-prestigious). Respondents from the two groups gave similar assessments of the prestige of the PR profession in Russia. The majority of 34% and 38% for the first and second group, respectively, rated it as +1, then 26% and 18% as +2 with 0 coming in third in the most popular answers. Thus, both the first and fourth year students were equally optimistic in their judgments about PR in contemporary Russia.

The question of how the students understood PR ethics produced varied responses that we grouped in the following way. The most popular option chosen by the Russian first year students (37%) connected PR ethics with honesty and following moral/ethical norms. Also, ethics was understood as social responsibility, non-disclosure of information about the company or client, prohibition against disseminating false information, and use of one’s skills for one’s own benefit. Among repeating answers from fourth year students were: following ethical codes and general human norms of morality; unacceptability of lying; honest competition; as well as some more specific
professional norms – respect for colleagues, employers, and media; and rejection of “black PR” and corrupt practices.

The seventh question asked respondents to formulate three most important ethical prohibitions for PR specialists. Participants from both groups most often mentioned prohibition of lying and dissemination of false information. Russian students (both first and fourth year students) listed unacceptability of unethical treatment of competitors. The last of the three top listed prohibitions was “to value money above results” (for freshmen) and “to violate commonly accepted moral and ethical norms” (for seniors).

The next section addressed the roles of different actors in developing and establishing ethical norms for PR specialists. Most Russian first year students assigned the leading role to professional societies and PR associations. Government and authorities, according to the first group’s responses, should play a supportive role, along with employers and clients. Also, 15% think that the government should not interfere in these processes at all; 21% think the same of employers. The fourth year students allocated roles similarly (the most important role given to professional associations), but suggested higher involvement of employers in ethical regulation.

One more block of questions was related to the possibility of ethical compromises in some typical situations. Some Russian first year students found ethical compromises acceptable in the following circumstances (Table 1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the project and the situation demand it</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your employer or superior demands it</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
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Ethical compromises are not acceptable (Table 2):
Table 2: Unacceptable ethical compromises (Russia)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the client insists on it</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If partners/clients violate ethical norms, lie, etc.</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If competitors severely violate ethical principles against you/your client</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If nobody will ever know</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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Responses from fourth year students were more equally distributed between “yes” and “no”, although insignificantly skewed towards “yes” to ethical compromises in cases when the interest of the PR project demand it. The most notable difference between the rejection of compromise and its acceptance is in a situation where no one will ever know (against – 15%; for – 5%; the rest – not sure).

The final question asked respondents to suggest possible sanctions that should be applied to those who severely violate professional ethics requirements. The first year students chose the following options (in descending order): dismissal from work; administrative actions like fines, warnings; public disclosure of misconduct; and exclusion from the professional environment. Among the fourth year students, the most popular sanction for ethical violations is exclusion from the professional community, followed by dismissal from work, fines, and public censure.

Ethical Views of Thai Students

Responses of Thai students to the first question as to how they would describe the PR profession were more varied, although the most widely used adjective for both first and fourth year students was “creative”. This was followed by “useful/helpful”, “effective”, and “informative” for the first year students, and “responsible”, “persuasive”, and “truthful” for the fourth year students. It should be noted that the responses given by Thai seniors seemed to better reflect the features of the profession, while the responses among other groups were more generic. Another nuance is that both Thai groups gave definitions related to the
socially oriented side of the profession – “useful/helpful” and “truthful”.

Among important professional qualities, Thai students mentioned creativity, reliability, communicability, and leadership. But the most popular response for Thai participants in both first and fourth years was honesty. And while all previous characteristics are related to general professional competencies of PR specialists, honesty by all means carries an ethical component.

The list of the most unprofessional qualities mentioned by the Thai first year students included laziness, dishonesty, bias, and irresponsibility. Participants from the senior year described an unprofessional practitioner as dishonest, unreliable, stupid, and selfish. For both Thai groups, dishonesty was the most popular descriptor of unprofessionalism (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: The most unprofessional qualities of PR specialists (Thai students)

On the evaluation of the social prestige of the profession, Thai first year students were generally negative (values of -1 and -2 were given by 33% and 14% respectively), while 30% gave a neutral 0 value. Thai fourth year students almost unanimously (91%) evaluated the prestige of the PR profession as neutral (0).

To the question of what PR ethics means to them, Thai first year students gave answers that were very similar to Russian freshmen’s. The most popular answers were honesty (mentioned by 32%) and respect for norms and professional standards. The second most popular response was understanding
ethics to mean being unbiased (30%). Understanding of ethics by the fourth year students, apart from the necessity to respect moral norms and professional standards, also included honesty. Another position, mentioned multiple times, was “not to spin”.

In defining ethical prohibitions all Thai students named lying as their number one choice. In both Thai groups the second prohibition was “to be biased”. The third prohibition for the first year students was laziness, for the fourth year students – irresponsibility.

When selecting between different actors who should establish ethical norms, Thai first year students assigned the leading role to professional organizations and PR associations – 67%. Another 54% mentioned a supporting role for the government, while 37% believed that the government should play the leading and defining role. This points to relatively higher statist inclinations. The most significant variations in responses were related to the roles of employers and clients: 39% suggested that they should play the main role, 43% chose a supporting role, and 18% selected no role whatsoever. The fourth year students generally (over 70%) gave supporting roles to all of these actors. 12% thought that government authorities should not interfere in ethical regulation.

On the question about situations that would allow ethical compromises the majority of Thai respondents admitted that they considered it acceptable in all proposed circumstances. The first year students’ results were as follows (Table 3):

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
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<tr>
<td>If the project and the situation demand it</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your employer or superior demands it</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If partners/clients violate ethical norms, lie, etc.</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If competitors severely violate ethical principles against you/your client</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If nobody will ever know</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 3: Acceptance of ethical compromises (Thailand)
For the fourth year students the responses were 50/50 for “yes” and “no” in case of “if the project and the situation demand it”. In all other situations the acceptance of ethical compromises slightly dominates the answers. However, unlike Thai first year students, seniors were more unanimous in the case of “if the project and the situation demand it” (52% – yes; 32% – no).

Among the sanctions for ethical violations, Thai first year students most often suggested a permanent ban from the profession, public shame, a temporary ban from the profession, and even imprisonment. The fourth year students gave the following responses: exclusion from the profession, forcing violators to make public apologies, imprisonment.

Discussion

H1: PR education based on Western standards of professional ethics would level the impact of ethical imperatives of national business culture. Thus, ethical values of Russian and Thai fourth year students would be more similar to each other in comparison with those of Russian and Thai first year students.

The findings reject the hypothesis. In fact, we do not observe any significant differences between ethical views of students from different years in the same country. In the case of two different countries, the cultural factor becomes more dominant, but its impact does not depend on the year. Thus the difference between Russian and Thai first year students and Russian and Thai fourth year students is not significantly decreasing. Fourth year students’ responses often contain markers of better knowledge of the profession – use of the professional lexicon, or opinions that reflect specific features of PR. A definite convergence is only observed in responses to the fourth question: Thai fourth year students evaluate the social prestige of the profession as primarily neutral, which is much closer to the relatively positive evaluation by the Russian fourth year students.
At the same time, evaluations of the prestige of the profession for Thai and Russian first year students are diametrically opposed.

From the cultural theory perspective, the findings can be explained in the following way: Before entering the university and selecting PR as their profession, future students acquire norms and principles of their culture, including business culture, as a part of their initial enculturation. Then they proceed with their PR education, which is based on Western professional principles and standards; they get acquainted with western PR literature, as well as classical and contemporary concepts, thus going through a secondary enculturation. However, as students get included in the professional practical world (and for the vast majority of them that happens during their university years), students are again immersed in their national business culture, which leads to re-enculturation – the knowledge and skills acquired at the university are corrected by the practices that exist in a given business environment. Thus, a pendulum of professional ethical enculturation is created. As a result, the cultural determinant prevails over the educational one. This perhaps can explain why in both Russia and Thailand, PR professionals with a Western education are in high demand.

H2: Peculiarities of national business mentalities typical for Russia and Thailand determine the differences in understanding of the PR profession and its ethical regulators.

Research findings point to certain differences in ethical views between Russian and Thai respondents. These are caused by the cultural factor. The most important of these differences require some interpretation.

1. In the first three questions about the most important characteristics of the profession – professional and unprofessional qualities – Russian students did not list ethics or any synonyms for ethical behavior. At the same time, although the question itself did not give any hint of this, both groups of Thai students named “honesty” as an important attribute of the profession. Thus, an ethical
component of public relations is explicit in the case of Thai students. This is where they differ from Russian students. Why was “honesty” missing from the responses of Russian participants? We think that in this case it can be attributed to a cultural difference in the perception of “professionalism”. Honesty in Russian culture is not generally seen as a professional quality; it is seen as a general human value. Russian respondents have a narrower understanding of professionalism as an ability to effectively perform complicated actions. It is worth noting that when listing ethical prohibitions, Thais mentioned “being lazy” and “being irresponsible” (wider categories), while the Russians focused on more specialized prohibitions (“not to disseminate false information”, “not to treat competitors unethically”).

2. Despite an overall low evaluation of the social prestige of the profession, Thai participants’ responses explicitly mentioned the ethical component, which was evident in their description of the profession, professional qualities, and characteristics of unprofessionalism. Russians perceive the prestige of the profession as much higher, but the ethical component in its explicit form is missing.

3. It is interesting that the most commonly listed ethical prohibitions (lying and disseminating false information) was universal for the respondents from different countries and cultures, but the formulation of the second prohibition was clearly influenced by cultural differences. At the same time, differences in age, education level, and professional experience did not have any significant impact. The majority of Russian students in both the first and the fourth year mentioned the unacceptability of unethical treatment of competitors, while the majority of Thai students in both groups noted being biased. We attribute that to the fact that the ethical value of “objectivity” in the Russian PR tradition is not directly related to the profession; it is assumed that a PR practitioner first and foremost pursues the interests of the client – providing optimized information, creating a manageable image, etc. At the same time, the Russian practice of PR, political PR in particular, provides multiple examples of unethical competition – and this problem is actualized in the views of Russian participants.
4. There was also a significant disparity in responses to the questions about hypothetical situations that may require ethical compromises. This disparity is also caused by cultural differences: Students from Russia and Thailand demonstrated different attitudes towards ethical compromises. Perhaps, the key here lies in the word “compromise” itself – for Thai business culture, compromise is a way to avoid conflicts, to save face and reputation, and is generally much more acceptable. However, for Russians, compromising means giving up one’s principles. It is also interesting that more Russian students found ethical compromises acceptable when the success of the PR project depended on it. That is, a compromise was required for achievement of the main goal.

Conclusions

Thai students overall demonstrate a more explicit connection between ethics and professionalism in PR, while Russian students, in turn, insist on a more persistent realization of ethical principles, and demonstrate less dependence on the conditions of ethical dilemmas.

Generally, we can conclude that despite certain similarities in business cultures between Russia and Thailand, cultural differences have a greater influence on participants’ views of professional ethics than do education and practical experience.
References


Endnotes

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