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Interning Abroad: Connecting Public and International Relations

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As early as my first year studying Public Relations at Boston University, I became aware of its link with International Relations. I have spent half of my life living in Serbia and the other half in the United States, so the connection between the two was perhaps more apparent to me than to some of my other classmates. The ramifications of public relations extend far beyond satisfying our clients and securing media coverage: I believe that the work we do has the potential to influence our society, as well as countries beyond our borders. In the era of globalization, it seems impossible to ignore the international aspect of the work that public relations professionals do, especially if they practice outside of the United States.

During the summer of 2003, I worked as an intern at a Serbian PR agency, New Moment, New Ideas. My experiences at New Moment prompted me to recognize the importance of practicing public relations in the framework of international relations, especially with regard to the work we did with our client, U.S. Steel. During that summer, the multi-billion dollar corporation had purchased a bankrupt state-owned steel plant, Sartid, located in the city of Smederevo. This purchase was one of the largest investments made by an American company in Serbia, so the economic benefits of direct investment, job opportunities and future foreign investment were considerable.

However, some political parties opposed this purchase because they understood U.S. investment in Serbia to be almost an imperialistic gesture. These political parties cited a less than amicable historical relationship between the two nations and denounced the purchase openly in the media. Other factions recognized this as a positive, and hoped that the purchase would draw more private investment into Serbia, thereby opening up the country to foreign capital and economic prosperity. What became obvious to us, at the time, was that much of the media attention drawn to the case was the result of the Serbian presidential elections, which were scheduled for that year. The various parties used the purchase of Sartid as a platform for their pro- or anti-American political agenda, and it was important to recognize this element in our strategic analysis.

As an intern at a Serbian PR agency, my role was more significant than what it might have been in the United States. I monitored media stories and reported directly to our client, translated articles from Serbian to English, and helped organize press conferences in Belgrade and in Smederevo. I was also directly involved with the strategic process and was present at every client meeting, which is not common for interns in the U.S. Working so closely with this client and others, however gave me such a good understanding of what its like to practice public relations that the experience was immeasurably beneficial.

Without a sophisticated understanding of the international framework and constraints, it would have been impossible for our team to develop a successful strategy for our client. These experiences led me to understand the importance of the public relations-international relations framework, and influenced my decision to pursue a Masters degree in International Relations. From my continued studies, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which we practice public relations, and my internship at New Moment helped me grasp the various nuances of international communication. I would recommend to any student of public relations that they consider interning abroad, as it has provided me with a strong background for both public and international relations.