

SECTION SIX

Some Observations on the Impact of Western Broadcasting to the USSR

An assessment of the overall impact of Western radio in the USSR during the Cold War must remain incomplete in the absence of conclusive evidence from the Soviet archives, which given current restrictions on such data is not apt to be forthcoming in the near future. (However, the paper given at the conference on Cold War Broadcasting Impact at the Hoover Institution in October 2004 based on internal Soviet data from the late 1970s- early 1980s by Dr. Elena Bashkirova, a former researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the USSR academy of Sciences confirms the findings of large audiences to Western broadcasts and some comparisons with SAAOR findings are made in the epilogue section of this study.) But there is ample empirical evidence to support the view that Western radio broadcasts played an important role in helping to inform the Soviet public, and preparing them to go beyond Marxism-Leninism. Four points in particular stand out:

1. Western radio drew surprisingly large audiences in the USSR during the Cold War, as has now been confirmed from both internal and external sources;
2. Western broadcasts were clearly important in the eyes of the Soviet regime. The broadcasts were widely attacked in Soviet media, and the regime attempted to discourage listeners by means of jamming and intimidation, even to the extent of laying down criminal penalties for spreading information heard on Western broadcasts;

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3. Western broadcasters, by their presence and popularity, played a significant role in forcing Soviet domestic media to reform and modernize;
4. Information from Western broadcasts played a crucial role in helping to form or reinforce democratic attitudes in the USSR.

6.1. Large Cold-War Audiences

As this paper has demonstrated, Western radio had sizeable audiences during the Cold War period, with at least 30–40% of the adult population being reached at one time or another. There are few examples of external information sources managing to reach into a modern, industrialized society in such a broad and consistent fashion. The sheer size of the audience to Western broadcasts in the USSR bears witness to the need felt by many members of the Soviet population to go beyond their official domestic media to satisfy their need for information.

6.2. Widespread Regime Attacks

Soviet domestic media, especially the press, constantly published articles (which may have numbered well in the thousands) attacking and criticizing Western radio broadcasts. As well as possibly discouraging listening among some, these media attacks may well have had the unintended effect of publicizing Western radio and thereby increasing curiosity about its programming. This is a topic that is beyond the scope of this study and will be treated in a separate analysis.

6.3. Effect on USSR Media

Western radio shattered the information monopoly to which the Soviet regime aspired. There is widespread evidence that the competition posed by Western radio was one of a number of factors that spurred Soviet media to undertake reform on several occasions, to avoid being sidelined as a source of information by their home audience. Additionally, by depriving Soviet media of an information monopoly, the presence of Western radio influenced the ways in which Soviet media would cover a story, forcing them in many instances to stay closer to the facts.

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According to the American researcher Dr. Maury Lisann, writing in 1975, Soviet media were even then feeling pressure from Western broadcasts:¹

“The Soviets began serious investigation of basic public attitudes and audience reactions around 1965 and in connection with that explicitly cited problems presented by the existence of foreign broadcasting. The salient facts of those investigations, insofar as the limited raw data that were disclosed can be interpreted are as follows. About 40 to 60 million people, with varying degrees of regularity, listen to foreign radio broadcasts. Major questions of public interest that are known mainly through foreign radio coverage reach and are of interest to 50 to 75 percent of various population groups. From 30 to 50 percent of the population consider the response of Soviet broadcasting to be inadequate. In addition, from 20 to 30 percent of the population, and perhaps more, seem generally to doubt the credibility of all Soviet information sources, and by inference, much of the basic ideological legitimacy of the system.”

Lisann’s estimates of audience size, though based on fragmentary data gleaned from Soviet publications, are largely borne out by the SAAOR findings.

Since at least the 1960s, it had been clear to some members of the USSR leadership that Soviet media would have to adapt in order to meet the information challenge posed by Western broadcasters. An article in the official Soviet journal “*Kommunist*” of July 1965 sounded the alarm:²

“Bourgeois propagandists are trying to use foreign radio, press, tourism, as channels of penetration of alien views in our midst. It would be rash on our part to be satisfied that these channels have not justified all the long-range hopes of the anti-Soviet propagandists. It is necessary to study the tactics of enemy propaganda and actively counteract them. . . .”

This was followed by a spate of press articles exhorting Soviet media to improve news coverage and generally make their programs more attractive. The domestic radio station Mayak, founded in 1964, was broadly organized along a Western broadcasting model that combined a new emphasis on news with attractive musical programming, and was seen as a domestic alternative to foreign broadcasts.³ (It was also used to jam these same broadcasts.)

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A new media magazine, RT (*Radio i Televidenie*) was created in 1966 to rebut information contained in Western radio broadcasts. The *Vremya* TV news program went on the air on January 1, 1968 with a new, modern approach to news and current events. The ability of Soviet citizens to find alternative sources of information unquestionably put pressure on Soviet media to improve their performance with regard to the quality and timeliness of the information provided, and the format in which it was presented.

The impetus to improve and adapt Soviet media to compete more effectively with foreign broadcasts continued into the *glasnost'* period. In 1987, major innovations were made in Soviet television.⁴ Programming became more timely, interesting and attractive. By bringing television news and information up to the level of Western radio broadcasts (now widely available to Soviet citizens, since most were no longer jammed), the regime clearly hoped to make domestic television a more valuable tool in the service of the state.

6.4. Influence on Attitude and Opinion Formation

The examples cited in Section Five, though episodic, make it clear that Western radio, by providing information unavailable from domestic sources, played an important role in the complex process of shaping Soviet listeners' opinions on events. High positive correlations, however, are not proof of causality.

Obviously, the process of opinion formation does not depend on any one single factor. It is entirely possible that, during the pre-*glasnost'* period, Western broadcasts did little more than reinforce already existing critical positions among the approximately one in eight Soviet urban adults who were highly critical of the Soviet system, and whom we have typified as "liberals." Nevertheless, the broadcasts served as an informational lifeline which ensured that the existing critical standpoint could be nourished and consolidated.

For the 30% of the urban adult population who were characterized in the attitudinal typology as "moderates," Western radio provided alternative and supplementary information without which a critical thought process might have been inconceivable. It was when the "moderates" and the "liberals" found common ground in the *perestroika* period that change became possible.

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Although Western radio was in communication with the more critically-thinking elements in Soviet society, its audience was not limited to these groups. It was widely heard among the elites of Soviet society, including members of the CPSU, who listened at approximately the same rates as non-members. They tuned in not only to “know the enemy,” but also to obtain the information they needed to function effectively in leadership roles in their own society. Over time, their understanding of events and processes at work in the USSR was inevitably colored by the information and analysis they received from Western broadcasts.

Although Western radio was less effective in reaching the politically apathetic, the less-educated party members, and ideological hardliners, these groups were never part of the audiences the radios were aiming for, which was, broadly speaking, the urban intelligentsia. None of these groups, moreover, played a significant role in the transformational process of the late *perestroika* period.

6.5. Summing Up

Western broadcasters did not have a blueprint for the democratic development of the Soviet Union but, by keeping hope of change alive, and by maintaining a dialogue with those elements of the population that were working for, or at least open to, change, they made an essential contribution to the eventual transformation of the USSR.

International radio communication alone is not enough to bring about basic changes in a society, though it is difficult to imagine that a freer and more pluralistic society could have evolved in the Soviet Union without the contribution of Western radio. But the broadcasts were a means, not an end. They were a channel of information that reported the news, but they didn’t make the news. They helped to keep the flame of hope alive, but there had to be a vessel to contain that flame.

That vessel was the large audience that was receptive to these broadcasts, to the factual information they provided and the implicit message of hope they contained. This was a committed audience that strained to listen through jamming or found ingenious methods to circumvent it. The Soviet peoples themselves, in association with a somewhat and sometimes

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enlightened leadership in the *perestroika* period, saw the necessity for change and transformation, and eventually made it possible to put an end to the Cold War and begin a new chapter in their lives. Western radio played an indispensable part in the process, but in the end real change came from within, not from without.

This is an empirical study based upon available quantitative data, and it is easy to forget that there is a real human being with his or her personal story behind each number. This rather straightforward presentation of statistics and correlations doesn't do justice to the emotions that listeners expressed in thousands of letters to the stations over the years, or in off-the-cuff comments during interviews. That would be a worthwhile topic to explore but it's for another study. In closing, perhaps an Institute Director in Kiev expressed best what Western radio meant to her, and to many like her, in a letter to Radio Liberty in 1989:

"In my opinion, and I speak for a circle of Ukrainian intellectuals in Kiev, we feel that all the changes taking place in the USSR today are in great part due to Western radio broadcasting the truth. Especially Radio Liberty because it devotes so much time to events in the USSR. If the radio stopped broadcasting, we would feel betrayed . . . it would be a disaster."