

# APPENDIX

## A

### SAAOR Survey Methodology: Interviewing Soviet Travelers

Shortly after going on the air in 1953, Radio Liberty began to gather empirical evidence of listening habits in the USSR under the direction of Dr. Max Ralis, the first Director of Audience Research. The first major interviewing effort took place at the Brussels World Fair in 1958. Over 300 Soviet citizens were contacted, of whom 65 turned out to be listeners to Radio Liberty (even more heard VOA and BBC). Interviewing of Soviet travelers continued through the 1960s on an *ad hoc* basis. Though considerable evidence on listening habits was gathered, it was impossible to undertake any statistical analysis of the findings and project them back to the Soviet population.

From 1970 onwards, with greater numbers of Soviet travelers in the West in the period of "détente," SAAOR began to systematize its data collection methods. Interviews were entrusted to independent survey research institutes, and a standard questionnaire was developed. However, because of reluctance on the part of many Soviet travelers to submit to a classic open interview, the institutes working for SAAOR did not find it practical to apply directly an open structured questionnaire in the interview meeting. Rather, the interview was conducted as part of a general discussion on media with the respondent. The interviewer filled out the questionnaire immediately after the conclusion of the discussion. To remove the possibility of any built-in bias, the interview did not focus solely on any single Western radio station but dealt with the broader subject of

**76 ■ Appendix A**

Western broadcasting to the USSR. Interviewers were unaware of a special interest on the part of any specific Western station. In fact, the data was shared with all major Western broadcasters to the Soviet Union: VOA, BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio Canada International and Radio Sweden International all benefited from the research.

The problems involved in interviewing Soviet travelers to the West in the 1970s and early 1980s did not arise when interviewing visiting Eastern Europeans (RFE's East European Audience and Opinion Research unit was separate from SAAOR until September 1990. It carried out an extensive program of interviewing East European travelers). Soviet travelers generally found themselves under some form of group control and could be apprehensive in dealing with non-Soviets. There was evidence that many groups had been given special briefings on how to deal with people they might meet in the West. Additionally, Soviet travelers, especially in the earlier years, were a selective (and "selected") group, less representative of the population as a whole than their Eastern European counterparts.

Receiving permission to travel abroad was difficult and usually involved a screening process for loyalty to the regime. However, the traveling population did include a wide representation from among those groups that Western radios were most interested in reaching, namely urban, educated adults. There was a considerable bias toward members of the Communist Party with about a quarter of the travelers interviewed being Party members, against only 9% of the adult population.

Strict verification of the survey work was carried out at two levels. First, local institutes were responsible for the on-going verification of all data collection by carrying out random spot-checks to ensure that interviews were actually taking place. Careful procedures were developed for this purpose. Additionally, SAAOR field specialists regularly monitored the output of the institutes and conducted numerous on-the-spot checks to ensure the integrity of the data. Secondly, from the late 1970s on, a method of Comparative and Continuous Sampling, originally developed by Dr. Henry O. Hart, Director of Radio Free Europe's Audience and Public Opinion Research Department, was employed. The computerized data were carefully analyzed for internal consistency between sampling points

**SAAOR Survey Methodology ■ 77**

before being accepted for use in analysis. Chi-square tests were applied to sub-sets of the data being gathered in different areas, and if results did not show statistical consistency, the data would not be used for analysis. The purpose was to ensure that travelers to each sampling point belonged, so to speak, to the same “universe,” and that local differences in interviewing conditions did not substantially impact the findings. Dr. Hart’s method represented a major breakthrough that made it possible to use survey techniques on traveling populations to study the behavior of non-traveling populations.<sup>1</sup>

As the traveling population increased in the mid-1980s and became both less supervised and less apprehensive in their contacts with non-Soviets, it became possible to use the questionnaire in the interview meeting. The questionnaire at this point was modified to take advantage of recent technology, and became computer-readable to facilitate rapid processing of the data. In the late 1980s, over 5,000 interviews were taking place each year and provided a rich and unique database for the study of media behavior and attitudinal patterns in the USSR. By the time surveying of travelers ended in mid-1990, SAAOR had built up a database of over 50,000 structured interviews covering the period 1972–1990.

By the late *perestroika* period in 1989, SAAOR was able to move beyond the study of public attitudes on *ad hoc* issues to examine the latent structure of Soviet public opinion. Working with a French institute, Agorometrie, which had developed sophisticated models for studying public opinion structures in Western Europe, SAAOR fielded a supplementary questionnaire that provided data to map the Soviet population along several attitudinal dimensions. This permitted a more sophisticated understanding of the positioning of Western broadcasters, in terms of attitudinal types in the population, media use, and views on a range of topics of the day. This was a major advance from SAAOR’s first attempt to develop an attitudinal typology of the Soviet population in the 1970s.

This work on the analysis of the structures of public opinion and the role of media and Western radio led in 1991–1993 to a strategic cooperation with a leading international research firm based in France and Switzerland, the International Research Institute on Social Change (RISC). By this time SAAOR had become the Media and Opinion Research Institute (MOR) of the

**78 ■ Appendix A**

RFE/RL Research Institute in Munich. Together, MOR and RISC joined in surveys and analysis to study the processes of social change in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during the post-Communist transition period. Furthermore, in collaboration with Central European Market Research (CEM), and Prof. Jan Jerschina of Cracow University in Poland, MOR developed the PSE Expert model, which was also applied to the post-Communist transition processes. Since the PSE model focused particularly on the political dimension, it complemented the RISC study which emphasized the socio-cultural dimension. The findings of both will be analyzed in a later study.

To sum up, SAAOR interviewing of Soviet travelers to the West evolved from modest ad hoc beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, to a systematized but still somewhat unorthodox approach in the 1970s, to a standardized survey approach in the 1980s. From gathering individual accounts of listening in the early days, it advanced to providing a database for estimating audiences for Western radio in the USSR, and finally to placing these Western radio messages in the context of a broader understanding of communication processes and attitudinal structures within the Soviet Union.