

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The following study is based on more than 50,000 interviews conducted with Soviet citizens traveling outside the USSR during the period 1972–1990, under the auspices of the Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research Unit (SAAOR) of RFE/RL. Projections of Western radio audience estimates on to the population of the USSR were done through the mass media computer simulation methodology developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and adapted to the requirements of RFE/RL.
2. The data show that audiences to Western radio in the USSR were large. In the period 1978–1990, the weekly reach of Western radio was in the range of 25% of the adult population. In 1989, Western radio was reaching ca. 25 million people on an average day and over 50 million in the course of an average week.
3. From 1972 to 1988, Voice of America (VOA) had the largest audiences (with a weekly reach of around 15% of the adult population). Weekly audiences to BBC and Radio Liberty fluctuated between 5 and 10% of the adult population. Deutsche Welle audiences were in the 2–5% range.
4. When jamming ended on Radio Liberty in November 1988, its audience immediately spiked, and in 1989–1990 its weekly reach—at ca. 15–16%—was the highest of all

xx ■ Executive Summary

Western broadcasters to the USSR. It was reaching about 35 million people a week at this point.

5. Jamming had significant impact on the ability of Soviet citizens to listen to Western broadcasts. Intensification or cessation of jamming of Western radios was a barometer of East-West relations. Nonetheless, both broadcasters and listeners found ingenious ways to circumvent the jamming.
6. When surveys on Western radio listening were first able to be conducted within the USSR by Western clients, the results confirmed large audiences during the Cold War period and were largely consistent with SAAOR estimates. Internal surveys estimated that during the Cold War ca. 30–40% of the adult population had heard Western radio broadcasts.
7. Audiences to Western stations were dominated by urban males in the 30–50 years age range with at least secondary education. Listening rates were highest in Moscow, Leningrad, the Baltic States and the Trans-Caucasus. They were lowest in Central Asia, Moldavia and the provincial RSFSR. Interestingly, Communist Party membership, *per se*, was not a predictor of listening to Western radios. Party members and non-members listened at similar rates.
8. Personal political orientation, however, was a strong determinant of Western radio listening. Those who could be considered “Liberals” in the Soviet context listened most to Western radio and made up a majority of the audience to Radio Liberty, which was viewed as the most politically engaged station, given its focus on internal Soviet developments. “Moderates” also listened to Western radio at high rates, dominating the audiences to the other Western stations. “Conservatives” and “Hardliners” listened considerably less.
9. Western stations found a definite niche in the Soviet media environment during the Cold War. They were heard primarily for information, with entertainment playing a secondary motivational role according to SAAOR data (this might be a result of the methodology employed and differs somewhat from Soviet internal findings). They were sought out especially for information not available from the official media, and also as a check on that media,

Executive Summary ■ xxi

to verify or refute information found there. Western radio listening had a high correlation with “word-of-mouth” communication, which meant that Western information was “amplified” to a far larger part of Soviet society than just the listening audience.

10. A number of case studies are examined in this paper to shed light on the role played by Western radio as an information source, and to determine what impact it might have had on attitude and opinion formation. Case studies on the war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), the *samizdat* phenomenon (1970s), the Korean Airliner incident (1983), the Chernobyl disaster (1986), *glasnost* and *perestroika* (1985–1989) all demonstrate the importance of Western broadcasts in providing an alternative version of events and thereby contributing to attitudes that were at variance with those expressed by official Soviet media. The case study of attitudes to Solidarity in Poland (1990–1991), however, demonstrates the difficulty faced by Western radio when the Soviet population perceived itself to be under direct threat, and Soviet media played on their fears.
11. The question of validating the unorthodox methodology employed by SAAOR to study media and attitudinal patterns in the USSR is approached in several ways, primarily through comparisons with studies that were carried out either officially or unofficially in the USSR. This paper examines correlations between SAAOR studies on media use and internal Soviet studies on the topic and finds a strong congruence. It presents results of SAAOR survey data alongside those of unofficial polls carried out in the USSR on attitudes to Andrei Sakharov and to the Solidarity movement in Poland, and finds a striking similarity. Western media organizations were able to commission a few polls in the late *perestroika* period (1988–1989): these are compared with SAAOR findings, and again show essentially the same results. Estimates of listening to Western radio in SAAOR polls and in internal studies in 1990 also show a high degree of consistency. Findings from the traveler database of ca. 50,000 respondents are internally consistent with interviews conducted among ca. 25,000 Jewish emigrants from the USSR. While none of

xxii ■ Executive Summary

these comparisons provide formal statistical proof of the validity of SAAOR data, they strongly reinforce the credibility and feasibility of SAAOR findings.

12. Analysis based on information from Soviet archives was presented for the first time at the Hoover–Wilson Center Conference in October 2004. The findings largely confirm SAAOR data on large audiences to Western radio in the USSR in the late 1970s early 1980s. It is apparent from these two different data sources—East and West—that Western broadcasts played an important, and at times, critical role in the path of the Soviet Union toward a freer society.

DISCOVERING

T H E H I D D E N

LISTENER

AN ASSESSMENT OF RADIO LIBERTY AND
WESTERN BROADCASTING TO THE USSR
DURING THE COLD WAR

**A Study Based on Audience Research
Findings, 1970–1991**