PREFACE

August 1991: The Coup, the White House and Radio Liberty

> ". . . And during the 3–4 days of this coup, Radio Liberty was one of the very few channels through which it was possible to send information to the whole world and, most important, to the whole of Russia, because now almost every family in Russia listens to Radio Liberty . . ."
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> Russian President Boris Yeltsin speaking in a special edition of Radio Liberty's "In the Country and the World" program of August 24, 1991

Perhaps Boris Yeltsin exaggerated when he said that every family in Russia listened to Radio Liberty during the August 1991 coup attempt, but he didn't overstate its significance. A survey carried out a few weeks after the coup by *Vox Populi,* a leading Moscow research institute, showed that 30% of Muscovites heard Radio Liberty during the crisis days of August, 19–21 most listening constantly or several times a day.[1] The figures were even higher among Moscow elites. Among the elite groups surveyed, an average of 43% turned to Radio Liberty for information on the crisis (40% of the People's Deputies, 28% of high government officials, 55% of political activists and an overwhelming 70% of media and cultural professionals).[2]

During the three crisis days Radio Liberty had provided unique coverage of events through two of its reporters holed up

on the 11th floor of the White House, the Russian Parliament building which was under siege. They telephoned a steady stream of reports to Munich from where they were broadcast back to the Soviet Union on powerful un-jammed shortwave signals, providing detailed accounts from inside the coup's seat of resistance. Yeltsin's call for a general strike against the coup leaders was broadcast by Radio Liberty within minutes to all corners of the country. The extensive, newly-formed network of Radio Liberty stringers in Moscow and throughout Russia were on the job feeding information to broadcast headquarters in Munich, covering the entire political spectrum from coup opponents on the barricades to hard-line backers of the coup.[3]

Typewritten news bulletins entitled "Radio Liberty Informs . . ." were posted on walls around the barricades.[4] According to People's Deputy Oleg Adamovich, "In these days Radio Liberty was the most important source of information for the Soviet people."[5] USSR President Gorbachev said he relied on the broadcasts of Radio Liberty, the BBC and Voice of America for information on events in Moscow and reactions around the world during his three days of imprisonment at his Crimean dacha.[6]

For its role in informing the Soviet peoples during the coup, Russian President Yeltsin issued a decree on August 27, 1991, directing the authorities to permit Radio Liberty to open a permanent bureau and assign it office space in Moscow, accredit it throughout the Russian Republic and provide it with the necessary channels of communication.[7] The preamble states:

> "In connection with a request by the administration of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which is financed by the Congress of the United States of America, and taking into account its role in objectively informing the citizens of the RSFSR and the world at large about the course of the democratic processes in Russia, the events in the country and the world, the activities of the legal leadership of the RSFSR during the coup d'etat in the USSR, I decree:"

How did it happen that Radio Liberty—most vilified of Western broadcasters in the official Soviet press, target of relentless jamming during most of its existence—had amassed such a vast audience, who so trusted its broadcasts, that it was able to experience

its finest hour defending the same democratic forces that it had nurtured over almost four decades of broadcasting? Once the pariah among Western broadcasters during the Cold War, Radio Liberty was now accepted as a legitimate participant on the Russian media scene by the authorities themselves.

That question has yet to be answered in all its complexity, although many books and articles have looked at the fascinating story of Radio Liberty, its early years and political history, its many colorful and exceptional personalities, and its multi-faceted, and in many ways unique, programming. This short study has a different perspective. It focuses on the listeners to Western radio and to Radio Liberty. How many of them were there? Who were they? Why did they listen? How did they listen? What did Western radio and Radio Liberty mean to them? Did they make a difference?

What follows here should be understand only as a broad quantitative overview of the topic. A subsequent study will treat the complex subject in significantly greater detail. Missing here is any real mention of the eloquent testimonials listeners gave in the interviews (and their many letters) on what the radios meant to them. That too must wait.