

Paweł Sowiński

**Accelerating peaceful revolution. Polish samizdat and Western broadcasting,
1977-1989**

I'm a Polish historian who was a Visegrad Found grantee at the Open Society Archive from February through April, 2011. In the course of two months I worked on my second dissertation on banned publications of anticommunist opposition in 1970's and 1980's Poland. Polish underground scene was more active this period than any time since the Second World War. Unlike its war time predecessors, this resistance fought with ideas, not bullets. Literature, newspapers and visual prints were secretly produced within so called samizdat system to bypass a state censorship and promote a freedom of expression.

During my operations OSA staffers enabled me to have a non-limited access to the archive and gave an excellent opportunity to discuss my fresh hypothesis at a seminar. What I found especially beneficial was a constant exposure to the Radio Free Europe records □ the primary source of knowledge on my topic. I was studying a variety of written materials from RFE Research Department background reports through the scripts of radio programs to the very extensive press collection.

My research was focused on tracking connections between Western radio broadcasting and the development of Polish anti-totalitarians at late stage of communist rule. An impact of Western broadcasting on the Eastern Europe Society is widely covered by latest literature (see *Cold War Broadcasting*, ed. Ross Johnson, CEU Press, 2010). But some points still can be added or broadened.

First, an impact on the so called ordinary people in Poland was probably greater than samizdats publication □ not only in the sense of bigger dissemination capacity of the radio waves but also in terms of quality. Variety of news made the radio much more attractive for listeners. News was more balanced and so to say more objective to catch more skeptical or neutral audience as well. For instance, not only good news but sometimes bad news was provided. Not only Polish but also Western press coverage were transmitted. It was a mixture of Polish and Western journalism culture tailored ethnically and linguistically to the Polish audience.

Broadcasting was a vast contribution to the revolution of consciousness that took place in Poland's "Solidarity" heyday. Orality and literacy seemed to act together in the process of shaping people's mind into being more disappointed with the communist authorities. But it did not necessarily push people to more direct actions against dictatorship. Most of the listeners and readers participated in the polish underground scene only on broadcasting and reading level. They were connected to the underground culture but stayed relatively passive. In other words they were more ready of direct action in case the chance for political change came up on the horizon.

Second, we can not say that Western broadcasting created an opposition movement in Poland. Radio Free Europe journalists were surprised by their sudden appearance in 1980 not less than veterans of dissidence. Radio helped, however, already existed core groups of protesters. RFE was a sort of communication hub for the Polish underground. Samizdat dealers were well informed about the latest development; sometimes they communicated each other through the radio which was quicker than door-to-door samizdat flow or direct, personal contacts. On psychological level they felt safer in a sense that someone outside Poland supported their fight.

Third, the Polish government usually tried to comment on what was said in Western radio what make the whole story more reactive and complicated. My speculation is that thanks to samizdat and broadcasting network the state media were considerably losing circulation. According to Polish official surveys people were more reluctant to read official press and did not very much believe government-controlled media. This in turn led official media to provide the general public with more accurate and more open information than it was before samizdat era.

Thus a sort of a subtle balance emerged between pro-dictatorship literature, most critical samizdat writings and Western broadcasting. Polish government was not able to ignore unofficial media and after some time was more willing to publish some of samizdat authors officially. This was a zigzag policy: one author was recognized as safe enough to be published officially, and another was denied this right. But this flexibility had positive effects on the public sphere. The Party's cultural policy stayed relatively liberal and society became less controlled by official propaganda than ever in Polish after-war history.

In broader sense the Radio broadcasting combining with the samizdat can be seen as part of non-violence strategy of XX-centuries civil movements. Although civilians did not have a power all over the world, they indeed were extremely successful in taking over the power in Eastern Europe. Without the existence of the vital opposition culture, changes of 1989 would not be so dynamic, so peaceful and so channeled by intellectuals. The Polish case is one of the best examples of the process.

Paweł Sowiński

Institute of Political Studies

Polish Academy of Science

ul. Polna 18/20, 00-625 Warszawa

e-mail: sowinski@isppan.waw.pl