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Radio Free Europe's Polish Service and its struggle against communist propaganda

The project entitled “Radio Free Europe’s Polish Service and its struggle against communist propaganda” is my first concerning RFE. Even though Radio Free Europe and its Polish Service played an important role in orchestrating political and social changes in Poland, the radio has not yet been fully researched by historians and other academicians. As I have always been interested in media studies and recent history, as well as international relations, for my academic interests I have chosen RFE as this topic connects all of the above branches of science.

At the beginning I wanted my project to focus on the ideological warfare between RFE Polish Service and Polish Communist propaganda. Since the start of its regular broadcast on May 3 1952, Polish Service had been a constant target of the media at home. Radio, press and later television pursued to picture Polish Service as a traitorous machine, aiming at destroying not just the Communist ideology as such but the entire Polish nation. The ruling party knew very well that the majority of Poles regarded RFE as their main source of information and opinion. According to opinion polls – carried out by both RFE and the Secret Service – very few people believed what they read or heard in the Polish press or radio. This is why propaganda directed at RFE was usually brutal and vulgar.

Advancing in my query at the OSA, however, I realized that interactions between Polish Service and the domestic media were not only limited to propaganda warfare. It turned out that instead of a monologue that would seem right for the struggle between two opposing ideological and media systems, a certain part of dialogue had occurred. This dialogue was carried out not only between Polish Service and its ordinary listeners but also between Polish Service and the ruling elite. Means of communications were manifold. Polish Service learned about its listeners’ tastes and expectations from confidential reports prepared by its bureaus located in major European cities or from surveys carried out on a number of Polish citizens being temporarily abroad. Another way of communication that followed the creation of organized opposition in Poland was underground press. For RFE newspaper titles published

by various opposition groups became the major source of information about events in Poland. Again, the opposition in Poland used underground press to communicate with RFE and the West in general.

The most sophisticated communication, however, occurred between RFE and the ruling party. Both sides tried to influence the other, either by political activity or by their own media. The power of RFE broadcast was proved by the impact of Józef Światło's disclosure of the party's corruption and brutality. Programs with his interview spurred the party's leadership to allow some amount of liberalism within its own ranks and the society in general. At the same time, the party communicated with RFE through the means of its own media. As paradoxically as it may sound, press articles or radio broadcasts criticizing Polish Service can be perceived as a certain form of dialogue with RFE and its Polish Service.

To support my findings I have researched a number of records available at the Open Society Archives. Some of the most valuable information came from the series entitled *RFE Confidential Reports on Poland*. In eighteen containers there are reports produced by various RFE bureaus in the 1971-1987 period. They shed light on how RFE was perceived by its listeners, what they liked in Polish Service broadcast and what they found irritating or boring. Similar questions were answered by the surveys and opinion polls carried out by *RFE East Europe Area and Opinion Research* branch. Questions used in the surveys were various. For example one such a paper asked about the listeners' political sympathies. Another wanted to find out Poles' attitude towards US presidents. Yet another one showed which radio station was the most listened to in Poland. Even though it may be scientifically risky to present the surveys' findings as corresponding with the entire population, they still give a good description of RFE listeners.

Other records came with help as well. A great deal of information could be found in foreign press clippings collected by the Polish Desk. Texts and reports usually from US newspapers, magazines and news services are invaluable source of facts on the history of RFE, starting from the early 1950s and ending in the early 1990s. They contain – among others – official reports on RFE, quotes from US political leaders and opinion texts by leading journalists. At the same time clippings from the Polish press play quite a different role by enabling a researcher to read the minds of the country's political elite. Press, as well as other media, heavily depended on the party and thus represented the official position of the regime. The same can be drawn from the monitoring of the Polish Radio. I have put special attention to the period of September 1980 – December 1981 as the events from that time caught both RFE

and the regime by surprise. For the communication between the two sides it meant a sudden change and the necessity to adapt to new challenges. As it turned out both RFE and the domestic media had undergone reforms but only the former had succeeded.

Another collection that produced many interesting findings was the *Polish Underground Publications Unit*. The query not only allowed me to learn the content of the most important samizdat titles but also helped to understand the connections and interactions between the underground press and Radio Free Europe. Ever since the first issues of Workers' Defence Committee's press were published, an important tool of communication was established between the Polish opposition and RFE and the West in general.

My research would not be possible without the help of all the OSA staff. However, I would like to give special thanks to Piotr Wciślik who was not as much of my supervisor as a friend and guide through all the OSA records. To him I owe some of the most interesting findings. I am also deeply indebted to prof. Istvan Rev. His advice and help let me shape my project in the right direction. Again, I would like to thank Robert Parnica, Kati Gadoros and everyone whom I had the joy to meet and talk to.

To conclude, the materials I have found at the Open Society Archives have been of great importance for my project. Without them, it would be impossible to understand the complexity of Radio Free Europe's functions and goals.