

‘Religious Freedom’ at the Radio Free Europe in the 1980s

(The Case of the Czechoslovak Unit)

‘Religious freedom’ or ‘religious liberty’ was one of the keywords of the 1980s transnational project of human rights promotion in Central Eastern Europe. Yet scholars of the region’s recent history have, so far, given only passing attention to the exact meanings the concept of religious freedom had for its advocates. The concept of religious freedom as perceived and presented by transnational advocates of religious freedom, such as the Radio Free Europe, is a case in point. In my project I, therefore, aimed to answer the questions of: what concept of religious freedom was dominant in the late 1980s RFE/RL broadcasting policy, in general, and among the staff of the Radios, in particular?

To answer these questions, I have looked at the case of the Czechoslovak unit at the Radi. ¹ Of central interest was the unit’s original research related to observance of religious freedom, or lack of it, in Czechoslovakia, overviews and analyses of the Czechoslovak church policies, church-state relations and Catholic activism, monitoring of Czechoslovak press and the wealth of other materials related to the Radio’s long engagement in the promotion of ‘religious liberty’ in Czechoslovakia. As far as the denominational scope of my research is concerned, I have focused on the Catholic Church in the 1980s.

The history of the construction of religious freedom by Catholic Church and in Catholic Church is, of course, quite a complex one. Recently there has been growing interest in the study of the various meanings religious freedom took on for Catholics, especially as Roman Catholic Church was, as Christian Moyn argues in his very recent account on the history of human rights, *Christian Human Rights*, one of the major actors in internalisation of religious freedom as a human right since the 19th century. ² In the process, the construction of religious freedom in the Catholic context has undergone many changes and was shaped by actors both from within and from without the Church. Despite the fact that RFE/RL was not a Catholic Radio, it played a crucial role in the internationalisation and promotion of religious freedom across Central Eastern Europe. Much of the Radio’s material and intellectual resources were

¹ HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit

² Christian Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2015), pp, 154-164.

mobilised in promotion of greater freedom of the Roman Catholic Church. I have, therefore, been interested in exploring what understanding of religious freedom was dominant especially in relation to the Roman Catholic Church. Was religious freedom understood as independence from the state control or interference? Was it presented as right of the Church to name its Bishops independently of the state? Was it understood as freedom of religious life in all its variety? Was it understood as right to organise religious life without state interference?

My central argument is that the staff at the Radio Free Europe's Research Institute understood and promoted a concept of religious freedom which I call, for the purposes of this report, an „everyday religious freedom,“ or „grass-roots religious freedom.“ The dominance of this concept transpired in close monitoring of grassroots underground communities which were seen as illegal by the communist state and were not unreservedly supported by the Church. This becomes clear especially when Radio Free Europe is compared to, for example, Radio Vatican, which was of course more in line with the official policies of the Vatican towards Central Eastern European Catholic communities. Yet despite the dominance of this grass-roots concept of religious freedom, the RFE advocacy of this distinctive concept lacked consistency over time.

In the following, I shall first sketch out my own personal history of use of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty archives in my own study of the Catholic Church in late socialist and post-socialist Czechoslovakia. In a somewhat self-centric fashion I shall use this to frame a very short account of a broader historiography of the approaches that historians from the target countries of Central Eastern Europe have had towards the station. I will then offer a snapshot of my archival findings---I will focus on several important documents which I have found and which support my main argument. Finally, I will offer, what may appear as explanation of this inconsistency at Radio Free Europe's understanding of religious freedom, but I encourage the reader to consider these as mere points of departure for any proper future explanation. Before I move on to the main body of this report, I would like to appeal to the reader to take the above argument with a big grain of salt— rather than on a close reading of the documents and careful analysis, it is based on impression and rough estimates.

1. Religious freedom at the Archives of Radio Free Europe's Research Institute

I have used Radio Free Europe Research Institutes documents from the very beginning of my research in the contemporary history of Catholicism and nationalism in Czechoslovakia in late socialism and post-socialism. The way I used these files very much reflected the ways in which Radio Free Europe in general, and the Research Institute, in particular, and their work in Central Eastern Europe was approached by scholars of the region's history. As Ioanna Macrea Toma argues in her 2015 essay about the Radio's role in what she calls, „Cold war of ideas“, the radio stations' reputation for „airing the truth“ (and their complex structure of ownership) have until recently deterred historians coming from the stations's target countries from approaching it as a subject of scholarly research.³ As an MA student, working on Catholic „protest“ pilgrimages in the 1980s Czechoslovakia, I needened be deterred; I was happy that I have found some materials in English which gave me some insight into this topic. I returned to many of these reports once again as I began working on the research for my PhD thesis which looked at Catholic nationalism in Slovakia in 1980s and 1990s. As I was allowed more time to look into these sources and, more importantly, had the opportunity to read them together with sources from other actors, I began to see and study them from a slightly different perspective. Whilst I preserved my appreciation of the informative value of the Radio's reports, I began to see them also as representing not necessarily an objective account of the developments in question. In my dissertation I looked at the role of Radio Free Europe in forging a very particular understanding of religious freedom. At that point I had to be satisfied with an observation that Radio Free Europe was an important source and at the same time an important basis for building of transnational solidarity among Catholics from Slovakia, Bohemia (or Czechia perhaps), Moravia, Hungary, Poland. I also observed that the Radio played an important role in fostering a grassroots freedom of religion—a concept of religious freedom whose advocates monitored and greatly appreciated a more democratic understanding of religious life, mapping various grass roots organisations. In short, rather than seeing the Radio as a source of objective truth

³ Ioanna Macrea Toma, 'The Intricacies of a (Cold) War of Ideas: Radio Free Europe from Above and from Below,' in A Bischof and Z Jürgens, *Voices of Freedom—Western Interference, 60 Years of Radio Free Europe* (Munich, 2015), pp. 109-147.

about the state of religious freedom, I now began to see the Radio as communicating and promoting a very specific understanding of religious freedom. Already at this point I was aware of the newest trends in the scholarship on Central Eastern Europe in historicisation of 1989, the ideas and actors that have been deemed to play a crucial political and societal role in the last years of state socialism. Given the rather superficial grasp of the issue in question, I was of course left unsatisfied. I, therefore, decided to apply for Visegrad fellowship at OSA and use this fellowship to examine the understanding of religious freedom in Czechoslovak section of Radio Free Europe's and Radio Liberty's Research Institute.

2. The Original and Eventual Research Strategy at the Archive

My original intention was very ambitious-- I was planning to explore understanding of religious freedom not only among the section's staff but also among the listeners. From my previous research I had had the information that many Catholic activists would regularly telephone their reports to the Radio and I was aware that from 1984 the radio had a special telephone line where listeners could leave their comments and that these comments were recorded and transcribed. I have, however, found very little of interest in these transcripts. It seems that the informants used different lines (most probably personal lines of the RFE staff) rather than this generic one.

I then moved to examine all the documents that were in one way or another related to the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. (I sought to distill the meaning of the concept of religious freedom from a wealth of overviews and analysis of Catholic Church, and that especially by comparing and contrasting these materials with my previously acquired knowledge of what exactly this concept meant for other actors in this transnational struggle for religious freedom. For the most part I compared it with Radio Vatican. I also looked at how this developed over time more specifically before and after 1989.)

As mentioned, at first glance, my impression was that the Radio Free Europe worked with what I call *everyday religious freedom*—they monitored the work of underground groups; they were very well informed about the internal discourse of these groups; they had access to and collected many sources including samizdat journals published by leading underground groups. I have also found materials sent or brought in from Czechoslovakia informing about all major events related to this part of religious

life in Czechoslovakia. This was the case of 1988 Petition for Religious Freedom signed by over 300, 000 people in Czechoslovakia, as well as a demonstration for religious freedom, known as „Candle Manifestation“, I have also found materials on the Candle demonstration in 1988 (the Radio was, in fact, one of the main co-organisers).⁴

3. Limits of everyday religious freedom

Having said that, this focus on this everyday religious freedom was limited to an extent. Here I can of course offer only a very rough estimate—it was my impression that there were events in which the Radio gave much more attention to church-state relations (mostly of confrontational character) than to these underground groups despite the fact that these groups played an important role.

This was clear from their coverage of Velehrad—this was a mass pilgrimage that took place in July 1985 on the occasion of 1,100 anniversary of death of St. Methodius, and was by many presented as the first open demonstration of religious freedom. This demonstration was staged by these underground groups, which had been preparing for the events for some time. In fact, Radio Free Europe, as I have found out, regularly broadcast invitations to this mass pilgrimage. Yet the pilgrimage was also an event where increasingly assertive Pope John Paul II and still rather bellicose Czechoslovak state struggled over the appointment of new Bishops to long vacant bishoprics in Slovakia, Czech Lands and Moravia. Three out of four analysis prepared by the Institute's focused on the exchanges between the Czechoslovak state and the papacy, on the state's attempts to monopolise any celebrations of the anniversary and the state's campaign to repress any attempts to present the pilgrimage as a religious event.⁵

Possible reasons for this inconsistency:

1. First, RFEs policy of avoiding fanning nationalist passions-this is at the time when the Hungarian émigré George Urban, the station's director, made it his mission to curb any nationalism.⁶ Radio Free Europe, had been known for, as Arch Puddington writes, its “general rule to favour those groups which best reflected Western

⁴ See HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit.

⁵ See HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit.

⁶ George Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Struggle for Democracy: My War Within the Cold War* (New Haven, 1997), 114-131.

democratic values as opposed to those of nationalist or populist stripe.”⁷ In fact, as I have found out in my previous research on underground activism in Slovakia, part of the activism of underground groups could be considered as a form of cultural nationalism. Despite the fact that this was indeed only a part of these groups’ discourse, one of the leading Radio Free Europe researchers Alexander Tomsky identified the activism of underground community in Slovakia as nationalistic in its character.⁸ Since then much of the secret Church’s activism remained not covered.

2. Second, despite the fact that the RFE modified its rhetoric in the 1970s--it never abandoned its focus on those aspects of life under communism which were marked by confrontation. Church-state relations were a case in point. Radio Free Europe meticulously mapped this issue-- the great majority of its analysis of religious life focused on the Church. I assume that this must have taken some attention away from grassroots issues.

3. Third, concern in maintaining good relations with other actors in transnational campaign for religious freedom--especially concern about the ambiguous approach of the Vatican to these groups may have deterred the Radio from full support to these groups: as mentioned the RFE coverage of the observance or lack of religious freedom in CEE was characterised by focus on grass roots mobilisation, but it did so only to the extent to which this did not compromise its relationships with other actors in this transnational campaign, most notably the Vatican. This is a mere speculation but this may be why they avoided covering groups which were either ignored or openly rejected and that despite the fact that some of these groups were openly anti-nationalist and were connected with Charter 77 signatories. The RFE was of course well informed about the fact that the Vatican had maintained certain distance from these movements. RFE had its information bureau established in Rome to be updated. (These files are not complete however. There are only materials from 1980s.) Interestingly, Radio Free Europe returned to its focus on underground groups after 1989—it was most probably the only Radio which covered the struggle of underground leaders for legitimacy once they were not allowed to present

⁷ Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: the Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, 2000), p. 268.

⁸ HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit.

themselves in public. It followed their struggle for approval from the official Church which many of them did not get.

List of Consulted Sources

HU OSA 300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files I: boxes: 172-175.

HU OSA 300-30-2 Old Code Subject Files II: boxes: 62-63.

HU OSA 300-30-5 Old Code Subject Files IV: boxes: 2-6.

HU OSA 300-30-6 Old Code Subject Files V: boxes: 113-116.

HU OSA 300-30-7 Old Code Subject Files VI: boxes: 503-522.

HU OSA 300-8-47 Situation Reports: boxes: 9-17.

HU OSA 300-2-3 Subject Files Relating to Czechoslovakia: 9.

HU OSA 300-7 US Office: boxes: 24-25.

HU OSA 300-30-9 New Code Subject Files: boxes: 114-115.

HU OSA 300-30-15 Collection of Documents Relating to the Czechoslovak Opposition and Protest Movement: boxes: 5-6.

HU OSA 300-1-1 Rome Bureau: 6-7.

Conclusion

Some may object to my rather bold claim about the inconsistency of RFE/RL use of the dominant concept of religious freedom. It may be rightly claimed that by criticising the church-state relations, the Radio may well have helped mobilise underground groups into action. In fact this opens up, one of the questions that I will need to answer, in the process of identification of the dominant concept of religious freedom. Can one come to a valid conclusion by looking merely on the Research Institute's documents and not on the everyday practice of the Radio, at transcripts of broadcasting? I suspect the answer is „no“, one cannot. I therefore take my research at the Radio Free Europe's Research Institute archives as a very useful start in this endeavour. In the part of RFE/RL archive housed at OSA I was able to look at this issue in materials produced by the Research Institute, i.e. in materials that presented this issue in the most condensed, concise and analytical way. In my future research I would like to focus on the broadcast transcripts to see what exactly was being transmitted to the listeners.