

INTERVIEWS/ INTERVIURI

RFE/RL never had a separate broadcast service in Romanian for Soviet Moldavia...

Interview with A. Ross Johnson - Former Director of RFE



A. Ross JOHNSON is a History and Public Policy Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and Senior Adviser at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Johnson was a senior executive of RFE/RL from 1988 to 2002, serving as director of Radio Free Europe, director of the RFE/RL Research Institute, acting president, and counselor of RFE/RL. He was a research fellow at the Hoover Institution from 2002 to 2016 and senior staff member of the RAND Corporation from 1969 to 1988, where he specialized in East European and Soviet security issues. He is author of the book *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. The CIA Years and Beyond*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010 and coeditor of *Cold War Broadcasting; Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*; *A Collection of Studies and Documents*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010. He has overseen the deposit of the RFE/RL archives at the Hoover Institution, the Blinken Open Society Archives, and other archives. He initiated the Cold War Broadcasting Research Google Group, which brings together interested scholars to share ideas, research, and new publications.

When did you start your career at the RFE/RL, and in which circumstances did you decide to work in the field of broadcasting?

I specialized in Eastern Europe during my Ph.D. studies at Columbia University and wrote my dissertation on Yugoslavia under Tito. Since I was inclined to research rather than teaching, my advisors, Zbigniew Brzezinski and William E Griffith, suggested that I take a position at RFE as an analyst of Poland. I did that for three years in the late 1960s and then moved to the RAND Corporation, an American think tank. In 1988 I was offered the directorship of RFE (by then part of RFE/RL, Inc., alongside Radio Liberty). I started the job on November 1, 1988.

What was the role of RFE/RL in fighting the totalitarian regimes and in promoting democracy during the Cold War?

RFE/RL's role then, as now, focused on providing information, especially about their own countries, denied to citizens of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. In the words of RFE policy advisor William E. Griffith back in 1952,



Foto 1. Presentation of the Laural Award by the PM of Poland 2001

RFE aimed to be “Radio Prague and Radio Budapest as they would still be were Eastern Europe free and democratic.” It sought to inform through objective journalism while keeping East Europeans in touch with their suppressed national history and culture and promoting political freedom, free markets, and tolerance.

Why were most policy papers of the RFE/RL National Services focused specifically on the individual language services rather than on specific geographic areas?

RFE/RL was a network of substitute or “surrogate” uncensored domestic radios focused on the countries of Eastern Europe and the “socialist republics” of the USSR. RFE/RL policy and management documents were concerned with these organizational units. Regular policy and editorial meetings considered the regional context of developments in individual countries. The RFE and RL research departments, and later the RFE/RL Research Institute, focused on geographic areas as well as individual countries.

Why was irredentism such a sensitive issue for RFE/RL policy?

Both superpowers accepted the principle that respect of the borders established after World War II was necessary for geopolitical stability. RFE/RL was guided by U.S. government policy in this regard. Addressing its listeners, RFE/RL sought to help overcome and not reignite nationalist irredentist passions of the past. RFE programs were based on that principle. Radio Liberty followed a policy of “non-predeterminism” toward the USSR, which meant that while the peoples of the constituent republics had their own histories and aspirations, they could only exercise their rights of self-determination once Soviet rule had ended.

What do you think about the impact of RFE/RL and about its role in subverting the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and in contributing to their collapse?

RFE/.RL comprehensively reported on Soviet “new thinking” about Eastern Europe under Gorbachev and the change from quiet dissent to open opposition in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s. It provided a megaphone that let dissidents speak to their fellow citizens even though they were banned from regime-controlled media. It publicized throughout the region the re-emergence of Solidarity in Poland and also publicized non-Communist candidates, ignored in the official media, who triumphed in the June 1989 elections. RFE alone re-

ported from Wenceslas Square on the first days of the Velvet Revolution demonstrations in Prague as they spread throughout Czechoslovakia. The Romanian service reported on the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989 and helped prepare the way for, and then comprehensively reported on the demonstrations and ouster of Ceausescu in December. Overall, RFE/RL served as a crucial communications link within and between East European countries in 1989, as they regained their freedom. It contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War.



Foto 2. Checking the archives that arrived at Hoover from Prague 2000

How would you describe your position as one of the RFE/RL executives? Could you please talk about one of the most important days / moments at RFE/RL during your time there?

I was fortunate to be RFE director as the East European states regained independence in a “Europe whole and free.” This had been the aim of RFE since it started its broadcasts in 1950. In the fall of 1989 I helped open an RFE bureau in Budapest – which was unimaginable two years earlier. In September I travelled to Warsaw to meet Prime Minister Mazowiecki and to Gdańsk, to meet Lech Wałęsa. I helped open RFE bureaus in Warsaw and Prague in early 1990. I worked with the Romanian Service in December 1989, as it broadcast the famous recording of the killing of demonstrators in Timișoara and then the demonstrations in Bucharest that forced the ouster of Ceausescu. I was impressed then and later with the professionalism and restraint of the Romanian Service programs. Some of them were replayed on the 25th anniversary of those events at the Romanian Embassy in Washington.

How would you characterise your cooperation with national services, especially with the Romanian desk of RFE?

RFE/RL was indeed a network of national services, and its strength was the devolution of authority to the individual broadcast service directors. In newspaper terms, we American executives were the publisher, but the broadcast service directors were the chief editors. As RFE director it was my job to hire (and sometimes



Foto 3. With Walesa in Gdansk September 1989

ing the dramatic days of December 1989. I also benefitted from the excellent papers of the Romanian research analysts, including Michael Shafir and Vlad Socor.

Why did RFE/RL move its broadcasting center from Munich to Prague in 1995?

With the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Government cut RFE/RL's budget in half, and the White House and some people in Congress thought of closing RFE/RL. Other members of Congress, especially Senator Joseph Biden, saw the importance of RFE/RL during the post-Communist transition. Germany had become too expensive for RFE/RL to continue there with half the budget. Fortunately, Czech President Vaclav Havel offered RFE/RL the empty Czechoslovak parliament building in Prague as a new home, and RFE/RL was able to shift operation of all its broadcast services there in mid-1995. The change was traumatic for the organization, and many valued employees retired, but the broadcasters

that moved to Prague were the core of a revitalized RFE/RL.



Foto 4. With Havel at the opening of the RFE/RL Prague Bureau, January 1990

dismiss) the chief editors. In the case of the Romanian Service, I arrived after the death of Vlad Georgescu. Nestor Rateș, who was the chief Romanian Service editor in Washington, transferred temporarily to Munich to head the service. Nicolae Struescu then became director, and we worked well together dur-

As one of the most experienced employees of the RFE/RL, what do you think about broadcasting in the 21st century and about its future trajectory?

Professional, objective, independent media are crucial to free and

democratic societies. As democratic development has regressed in much of the former Soviet orbit and as media independence has declined, the role of RFE/RL and other independent media has become more important. Short wave radio has been supplemented and in many countries replaced by multi-media delivered over the internet. But, whatever the medium, it is the message that is important: independent, professional, objective information credible to the audience.



Foto 5. Receiving a piece of the Iron Curtain from a member of the Czech Civic Forum (with RFE/RL President Gene Pell and Czechoslovak Service deputy director Ivan Cíkl).

What happened to the RFE/RL Romanian Service?

The U.S. Administration and Congress adopted a policy of ending funding for U.S.-funded broadcasts to countries that became EU members. So the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Slovak, and Bulgarian Services ended in 2004. RFE/RL had never had a separate broadcast service in Romanian for Soviet Moldavia, but the Romanian Service reached Soviet Moldavia and then the Republic of Moldova with focused programs. Since RFE/RL continued its Ukrainian and Belarus Services, along with others, it was able to persuade the U.S. government in 2008 to convert part of its Romanian Service into the present-day Moldovan Service, providing independent information in Romanian to Moldova, including Transnistria.

Why is the history of RFE/RL not very attractive for most scholars?

Many scholars in Europe and the United States are doing research on the cultural Cold War and on communications across the Iron Curtain. The U.S. Library of Congress has started a Cold War Radio Preservation Project. The RFE/RL institutional and broadcast archives at the Hoover Institution, the research archives at Blinken Open Society Archives, and the national archives offer rich materials for a documentary history. I hope more scholars will undertake research on this history. Most needed are studies of specific kinds of broadcasts, based on detailed research of the texts (scripts) and recordings of broadcasts of the individual language services.

Thank you!

Interview by Sergiu MUSTEAȚĂ