

“The Iron Curtain wasn’t soundproof”: The Council of Free Czechoslovakia and
the RFE broadcast (1949—1967)

Mgr. Dušan Segeš, M.A., PhD.

FINAL REPORT ON THE RESEARCH PROJECT CONDUCTED AT THE OPEN
SOCIETY ARCHIVES

Political exile (also described as emigration) played an eminent role in the history of Slovaks and Czechs in the 20th century. Its representatives have made a decisive diplomatic contribution to the creation of an independent state of Czechs and Slovaks in 1918 – the Czechoslovak Republic. During the Second World War, the Czechoslovak government in exile was the bearer of democratic traditions of the First Republic and personalized the hope for Czechs and Slovaks living under the oppression of Nazi rule. It brought its fight for liberation to a victorious end in 1945. The political challenge of the so-called third exile (1948—1989) was much more difficult, taking into account the logic of bipolar world, the Communist totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia and the omnipresent and predominant Soviet “big brother”.

The democratic representatives of Czechoslovakia, who sought exile in the West after the Communist takeover in February 1948, were trying to unite various political groups of the democratic and anti-Communist exile and to create a central Czechoslovak political institution. Finally, the Council of Free Czechoslovakia was founded in February 1949 in Washington by exiled Czech and Slovak politicians. Its activities were financed by the National Committee for a Free Europe that played a significant role in the origins of Radio Free Europe (RFE) as its parent organization. Czechoslovak exile was the first of the Soviet-satellite countries in Europe under the Communist yoke to form a central political body and last but not least, in July 1950, RFE conducted its first experimental broadcast in Czech.

My research project was generally focused on Czechoslovak Desk of the Evaluation and Research Department of RFE, in particular on its techniques of gaining and analyzing information from the refugees and other sources concerning the political situation, life conditions, the mood of population, regime-propaganda etc. in Communist ruled Czechoslovakia. Particular goals of the project conducted at the OSA were amongst others to examine the links between the Czechoslovak “Cold Warriors” – the RFE’s Czechoslovak Desk and the Council of Free Czechoslovakia, to analyze the echo of crucial events and political trials in Czechoslovakia after the Communist takeover in 1948 in RFE broadcast, and to pay attention to the role of

RFE in promoting some political projects of integration and regional cooperation set forth by the representatives of Central and East European countries, that arose as a reaction to the communization of their countries. Some particular aspects, such as the particular actions realized in the frames of the VETO-operation ("balloon operation", 10 demands of the Czechoslovak peoples opposition, etc.), cases of redefection, impact of RFE-broadcast in Czechoslovakia and listening habits of Czechs and Slovak listeners of Western broadcasts in Communist ruled Czechoslovakia were also reflected in my research project.

It should be stressed that this research project conducted at the OSA in the frames of the Visegrad scholarship was the very first step in my attempt to shift the field of my research interest from the Czechoslovak-Polish relations in exile (the Slovak Question respectively) during World War Two to the Cold War era.

Due to the goals and particular topics of interest presented above, my research at the OSA Archives was mostly focused on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (HU OSA 300 Series). Since this is a very extensive collection, I was primarily exploring the Subfonds connected with the activities and work of Czechoslovak Desk, such as the Subfonds 30 (the papers of Czechoslovak Unit), Subfonds 1 (General Records), Subfonds 6 (Media and Opinion Research Department) and Subfonds 7 (US Office). In dealing with documents from these collections allowed me to get a detailed outline about the mechanisms, which determined the "line" of the Czechoslovak RFE-broadcast and selected topics of transmissions, the relationship between the Czechoslovak Desk (Unit) and the Director of RFE (based on Monthly Directives), further the techniques of information gathering and samples to particular issues (perception of Czechoslovak RFE-broadcast in Czechoslovakia, reactions of Czechs and Slovaks living in Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia to the RFE-leaflet campaign, their opinions regarding the future of Czechoslovakia after the liberation and party preferences in hypothetical free elections in the country [which were more a "wishful-thinking" issues], etc.). In analyzing the work of the Audience and Public Opinion Research Department (no matter, if this was a Czechoslovak, Polish or Hungarian Unit) and the particular materials it produced: audience analysis, audience research, Curtain News questionnaires (for the monthly *News from behind the Iron Curtain*), monthly reports on regime response and information items based on interviews with refugees from Czechoslovakia as elaborated by the field reporters, I came to the conclusion that it was not just "a" department in "a" radio station – it took the role of Institute of Sociology, Political Sciences etc. as we know them today, by using sociological methods, exploring the public opinion in East European countries and the USSR and the attitudes of their inhabitants to various topics, developments and events. This was the first unexpected "surprise" of my research, namely the necessity of paying attention to many sociological aspects, instead of conducting a "purely" historical research of the issue.

The relationship between RFE's Czechoslovak Unit and the Council of Free Czechoslovakia, which was initially postulated as one of the major issues in my research project, had to be revised in the light of my archive query at the OSA; there was neither a strong interaction nor a co-operation of crucial importance between these two bodies. To be more concrete: the question of an eventual dependency-relationship between RFE's Czechoslovak broadcast and the Council (e. g. by determining influence on the "line" of the broadcast by the Council) I have primarily assumed, proved itself as a false scent. US administration perceived RFE as the by far most effective source of anti-communist propaganda; resources devoted to it brought greater return than other projects of anti-communist psychological warfare, i. e. the support of particular national committees (including the Council of Free Czechoslovakia) constituting the Assembly of Captive European Nations.

Excepting the files of the RFE's Research Department, it were the press-clippings from Western (most of them American and Western German) newspapers and the microfilm collection of the *New York Times* at the OSA that were very useful for my project. I collected some articles dealing with the airplane crash close to the city of Levoča (Eastern Slovakia) in 1956 that was used by the Czechoslovak Communist authorities to a large-scale counter-propaganda against Radio Free Europe, especially its leaflet action.

Furthermore, I was focused on heuristics, especially the plenteous book collections of the CEU Library. This gave me the opportunity to complement my archival research at the OSA. Secondary sources have an eminent importance for my research project, since some theories applied by scholars in the context of Cold War broadcasting and propaganda provide an appropriate base for conceptualization of RFE as a "soft power", case of "cultural diplomacy" and a part of a "psychological warfare".

Of great value from the point of view of my research project were discussion with other Visegrad scholars – Dr. Marína Zavacká and Dr. Arséne Saparov, which gave me the opportunity to confront some of my theses and to get a new perspective on some issues included in my research project. Discussion that followed after the presentation of my project paper, especially the questions and comments by Prof. István Rév and my tutor, Dr. András Mink, brought useful suggestions for my research focused on RFE's Czechoslovak Desk.

Last but not least, I very appreciated the advice, help given to me and especially the friendly atmosphere created by the research room staff, Robert Parnica and Örs Lehel Tari. I am also indebted to Kati Gadoros for her assistance in organizing my stay at the OSA.

Overall, I assess my stay at the OSA as very positive, useful and auspicious, regarding my prospective research. Since the research project at the OSA realized

thanks to the Visegrad Scholarship was the very first step in my research activities focused on the After-War period, I look forward to intensify my contacts with the OSA.

Dušan Segeš (1977) is a researcher at the Institute of History (Department of Contemporary History) of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. He took his first degree at the Comenius University in Bratislava, before moving to Warsaw and completing an MA in Specialized East European Studies at the Centre for East European Studies of the Warsaw University. He graduated with a PhD in 2006, which was a study of the history of Slovak question and political and diplomatic relations between the Czechoslovak and Polish government in exile during World War II. He wrote the award winning book *Double-Cross in the Field of Interest of the White Eagle* (Bratislava 2009) and was the co-editor of the book *Neighborhood in the Period of Crucial Changes* (Bratislava 2009). Since 2010, he is the head of the Slovak Section of the Slovak-Polish Committee of Historians.

Dr Segeš's research interest focus on various aspects of the history of Central Europe, such as the foreign policy and political culture, Czech-Slovak and Polish-Czech-Slovak relations, exile politics, national minority issues and historical experience with and roots of federalism in Central Europe. He is currently looking to expand his field of his interest by exploring the history of the Council of Free Czechoslovakia and the Czechoslovak Unit of Radio Free Europe in the 1950s and 1960s.