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The long 1968 in Hungary and Romania. “The Nylon Curtain”: Radio Free Europe and its broadcast for teenagers.

The context of creation of the primary source.

During my research mission at the Open Society Archives from Budapest, I used the OSA Audience Reports in order to understand the relationship between RFE and its audience from Eastern Europe. The Fond ‘HU OSA 300-60-2 East Europe Area And Opinion Research, Box 1-4 was started in early 1960s in order to better understand the impact of RFE and Voice of America in East-Central Europe. Understanding the listening patterns and the impact of RFE in the respective countries became of central interest. In this context, Radio Free Europe started their research into audience opinion.¹ RFE had a special division, entitled Department of Audience and Public Opinion Research (after 1981, a slight change, Department of East European Audience and Opinion Research) that lead an extensive research, based on repeated sampling which later on was corroborated with results from other institutions.² Starting from 1960, visitors or refugees

¹ “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 3, File 3.” OSA Archivum / Collections Catalog, January 1968, <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/Oo2K2Vle>.

² Lechoslaw Gawlikowski, “The Audience to the Western Broadcasts to Poland During the Cold War” A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe : A Collection of Studies and Documents* (Central European University Press, 2010), 122–23.

coming from East-Central Europe could fill a multi-level questionnaire in which they were asked about their listening habits, preferences and interest for various themes.³

RFE Audience Department then evaluated these questionnaires by using a sophisticated methodology based on continual and comparative sampling. Yet, this truly reflected the realities of the public only in the moment in which the visitors or refugees coming from the respective countries were large enough to offer a representative sample. In this sense, methodologically speaking, these inquiries reflect to a limited extent the reality from the satellite states. On the other hand, these results were particularly relevant because RFE tried to adapt its broadcasts according to such information. The Department of Audience and Public Opinion Research was clearly aware about the limits of the information. The reliability of a report also depended on the country of origin. For instance, a report about the listening habits of 487 respondents from Romania clearly stated the limits of the document:

“the reliability of the findings presented here is strictly limited. However, the results can at least serve as an index to the listenership patterns of the educated and of older urban males in the higher occupational groups, inasmuch as it was possible to subject the sample to corroborating procedures in the following manner”

First reports wanted to understand to what extent people listened to RFE and their listening habits in general⁴. From 1963, another concern was to understand what they thought about internal political debates, about the socio-economical realities and about the Sino-Soviet rivalry.⁵ The first set of questions wanted to understand more the political debates that could affect the stability of the Communist regimes and to what extent the local population was really interested by them. In this regard, the first reports explained the interest (or the absence of

³ “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 3, File 3.” Box 1.

⁴ “Radio Listening Habits of 1143 Hungarians”, August 1963, Listening Patterns and Related Attitudes of Bulgarian Listeners to Western Broadcasts, August 1963, “Charts and Tables of Listening Times to RFE” “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 1, File 2.” OSA Archivum / Collections Catalog, August 1963, <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/Oo2K2Vle>.

⁵ “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 3, File 3.” Box 1, File 1, “The Sino-Soviet Conflict in the Light of the Audience Research Findings”, p.3.

interest, depending on country) in topics such as *future of Communism*⁶, *Sino-Soviet split*⁷ and the *role of RFE in eroding the Communist unity*⁸. Through asking the opinion about such topics, RFE hoped to adapt its broadcast to the need of the public.

‘yet, no programs for youth’

The first reports initially were showing that RFE was mostly interested in the political opinion of the public from East Central-Europe. However, the audience department realized that such political debates stirred the interest only for a particular segment of people: adult, educated and politically-engaged people. Indeed, the daily audience of the RFE was composed mostly of intellectual people:

In the noncommunist intellectual circles of Budapest, opinion about RFE has become very favorable lately, and very many people listen to it. The anti-RFE attitude which set in after 1956 has vanished, largely as the result of the intelligent programming policy pursued by RFE⁹

In early 1960s not all segments of population listened to the broadcasts of RFE. A great problem for RFE was attracting the interest from the younger generation as the Opinion Reports revealed. Cultural programs were limited to symphonic music and in the best case, jazz. Entertainment programs, including musical ones, had a very little impact for the people.¹⁰ For instance, a 1963 report that concerned the interests of Romanian youth brought into light that youngsters wanted to programs that suited their tastes. The report argued that RFE youth programs ‘were badly written and, worse, contained too much of the same fare which was disseminated by Romanian youth organizations’.¹¹ The complain was that RFE’s broadcasts

⁶ “The Future and Communism in Bulgaria”, June 1963, “Some Key Attitudes of a Sample of Hungarian Respondants”, January 1963 “HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 1, File 1,” OSA Archivum / Collections Catalog, July 1962, <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/Oo2K2Vle>.

⁷ “The Sino-Soviet Conflict (as seen by 4093 respondents from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania” October 1964 “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 1, File 5.,” OSA Archivum / Collections Catalog, October 1964, <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/Oo2K2Vle>.

⁸ “RFE’s Part in the Erosion of Communist Unity” November 1964 “HU OSA 300-6-2. Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute. Media and Opinion Research Department. East Europe Area and Opinion Research Box 1, File 5.”

⁹ “HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 1, File 1,” 2 Box 1, File 1 “Illustration of Radio Free Europe’s Effectiveness”, October 1962.

¹⁰ “HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 1, File 1,” 16 “The Radio Listening Habits of 487 Respondents from Rumania”, October 1962.

¹¹ “HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 1, File 1” Box 1, File 3, “ Young Rumanians view RFE Programs”, November 1963, p.2.

tended to have a 'lecture form' and did not cover the realistic interests of young. In turn, young people were interested about a specific form of entertainment:

The respondents in this age group apparently felt that an effective youth program would be one which did not try to lecture the young but instead dealt with subjects and transmitted programs which were of real interest to youth. These are, in the opinion of our young sample, good and colorful sports broadcasts, *modern music, jazz, and programs dealing with the life of young people in the West.*¹²

In this context, the first RFE broadcast that was dedicated to youth materialized. The Czechoslovak music program that started its broadcast in June 1965 learned that the new project attracted a new segment of audience, teenagers:

Great news. During the second week the new Czechoslovak music program was on the air, it received more mail than it had received in the previous two years. To date, they have received 170 letters with the number increasing daily. Responses come from all over Czechoslovakia, are mainly from youth, are often signed by many individuals, ninety percent of them contain requests for music and many also contain items of political interests. (...) They tell of listening in groups, of discussing the program the next day in school, of their delight that they now have their "Own Luxembourg station" as compared to Radio Prague.¹³

This measure was stirred a strong debate inside the RFE broadcasting team, but as the letters show, the change from jazz to rock'n'roll proved to be a fruitful tactic because it became appealing to a larger segment:

Bellus and Pechacek [RFE staff] are overwhelmed by it all and of course delighted. Bellus feels vindicated, has distributed letters to those on the B.D. who opposed this new move, and feels the opposition has been silenced. Firt has instructed Elias to change his music to conform with the music played in the afternoon because his jazz appeals to a limited audience, which is of course true."¹⁴

¹² "HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research, Box 1, File 1" File 3, "Young Rumanians View RFE Programs" (A Survey of 115 Rumanians under 36 Years of Age), November, 1963.

¹³ Davis Brew and Walter Smith, "MUN-30. March 8, 1965," Radio Free Europe/Free Europe Committee - Encrypted Telex Communication., accessed July 10, 2019, <http://fec.osaarchivum.org/record/27671/#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-3349%2C-224%2C9420%2C4472>.

¹⁴ Brew and Smith.

The impact of the broadcasts for teenagers.

These broadcasts drew the attention of the 1968ers much more than the news. Here I confronted the RFE reports, the letters sent to RFE and my personal oral history fieldwork. One of my interviewees, Radu Nicolescu, born in Bucharest, mentioned that the broadcast of Metronom changed his daily routine. Every evening he asked his family to let him listen his favourite show. Similarly, another group of listeners from Budapest signed themselves “Early Risers are Sleepy All Day” and mentioned that listening to RFE became a routine. By corroborating the oral history sources, the letters sent to RFE and their personal interests, I understood that broadcast for teenagers became a source of information about the latest tops, it was an ‘audience source’ for music sheets, it changed their daily routine and also it was a source of music to be recorded on magnetophone.

My personal supervisor Katalin Szekely and Research Fellow Ioana Macrea-Toma helped me to contextualize these sources and to critically use them. The dialogue with them helped me to ask more profound question and to understand the epistemological framework of Cold War in which these were created. As well, the other bibliographical suggestions will definitely help me for new avenues of research.

Limits of the archival fond.

In my research mission, I could not find the letters of the teenagers sent to RFE’s DJ Cornel Chiriac. Most of the fond available at OSA Budapest contains the letters sent in 1980s which have a strong political content. I know that many of youth sent such letters to RFE because some of them were stopped by Securitate and thus, archived at CNSAS. I checked together with the Reference Archivist Judit Hegedus and the Senior Reference Archivist Robert Parnica about the existence of such letters at RFE. Unfortunately, these are not based here, even though the Audience reports reveal that a number of letters were received to Cornel Chiriac from 1969 to 1975. As well, I had the feeling that I missed the internal debates of the RFE about the impact of such broadcasts.

After the presentation in which I presented the limits of my inquiry, OSA fellows drew my attention to other primary sources that could be interesting for my research. The Senior Audiovisual Archivist Zsuzsa Zadori suggested me to check the oral history interviews from the

Black Box Foundation. This fond contains edited and unedited materials, many of them concerning RFE members such as Cseke László. In this regard, I watched the interviews, which offered me a much more nuanced perspective about the broadcast itself and how the RFE team functioned.¹⁵ As well, the Senior Reference Archivist Robert Parnica suggested me to read the Telex materials, which show the internal structure of RFE.¹⁶

Outputs of the archival material.

The primary sources from OSA, together with other sources, will help me to write a Chapter for my PhD dissertation. In parallel, I presented some of the provisional results at the at Association for Slavic, East European & Eurasian Studies Summer Convention, Zagreb, 14-16 June 2019 and , The Radical Sixties: Aesthetics, Politics and Histories of Solidarity, Brighton, UK, 28-29 June 2019. I also proposed an article for the cultural revue Steaua, which is ought to be published in September 2019.

Finally, I express all my thanks for the help of the Head of Administration Katalin Gádoros and Nora Ungar for their kind invitation to Fortepan and other exhibitions dedicated on the history of Communism, as well as for their patience.

¹⁵Among many others, I mention: Upor Peter, *RFE. Radio Free Europe. Black Box Shot, Interview with Ekecs Géza and László Kasza, William Griffith, Ralph Walter, Borbándy Gyula. Part 3.*, DVD Recording, 1998, <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/Oo2VJBL#findingaids>.

¹⁶“‘MUN-34 December Crypto Message’, 9 December 1966. HU OSA 298-1-2-48-1685; Records of Free Europe Committee: President’s Office: Encrypted Telex Communication between FEC New York and RFE Munich; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest. [Electronic Record],” n.d., <http://catalog.osaarchivum.org/catalog/osa:c3a1747d-adc7-448e-a92c-2fa97619c82d>.