

“Americans Do Not speak Chechen”: The Causes and Consequences of the 2002 RFE/RL Caucasus Broadcasting Scandal

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Introduction

Two moments can be said to represent an apex and nadir of America's liberalizing influence on the Russian state. The first occurred on 27 August 1991, when Boris Yeltsin, flushed with radical excitement less than one week after Soviet hardliners had failed to seize control of the USSR, issued a decree declaring that Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) would be allowed to open a permanent bureau in Moscow and operate legally in Russia.¹ The decree stated: "Radio Liberty / Free Europe, funded by the U.S. Congress, [has been] objectively informing citizens of the RSFSR and the world community about the course of democratic processes in Russia, events in the country and the world, [and] the activities of the legal leadership of the RSFSR in the period of the coup in the USSR."² With this decision, all RFE/RL journalists were cleared from official blacklists.³ The decree had been proposed by Yeltsin advisor Sergey Shakhray, and its text was written by three RFE/RL journalists in Moscow.⁴ One of these was the 27-year-old reporter Andrei Babitsky, who had been working inside the Russian parliament building during the attempted coup.⁵ Babitsky and his colleague Mikhail Sokolov "broadcast round-the-clock from the 11th floor of the White House for all three days of the coup," relaying to Russian listeners "'news, statements, telephone reports...reviews of the Western press and speeches of leaders of foreign countries.'"⁶ A 1991 survey of Moscow reported that 30 percent of the city's population had received its news from Radio Liberty during the August coup attempt, "most listening constantly or several times a day."⁷ When the crisis was over, Yeltsin expressed gratitude for what these journalists had done. "I owe this victory to CNN, who broadcast me to the world, and to Radio Liberty, who broadcast me to the Russian people."⁸

¹ Thomas Rosenstiel, "Radio Liberty to Get a Moscow Bureau: Broadcasting: Yeltsin Also Gives Go-Ahead to Radio Free Europe. Services May Go on AM or FM.," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-08-29-mn-1840-story.html>.

² President of RSFSR, "O byuro nezavisimoy radiostantsii 'Svoboda'/'Svobodnaya Yevropa,'" August 27, 1991, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&prevDoc=102078214&backlink=1&&nd=102012375>.

³ Natalia Rostova, "Rastsvet rossiyskikh SMI: Ukaz o «Radio Svoboda»," <http://www.yeltsinmedia.com/>.

⁴ Ibid; Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 398.

⁵ Rostova, "Rastsvet rossiyskikh SMI."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2013), xv.

⁸ "Russia: Former Radio Liberty Head Praises Yeltsin's Courage," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, April 25, 2007, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1076080.html>.

On 4 October 2002, Vladimir Putin revoked this decree.⁹ The decision was a culmination of nearly three years of increased Russian government hostility toward RFE/RL, and was triggered by an event that had occurred six months earlier. On 4 April, RFE/RL had begun broadcasting to Russia's war-torn province of Chechnya in the Russian, Chechen, Avar and Circassian languages. The origin and implementation of the agency's "North Caucasus Unit" was not the result of a policy consensus in the U.S. government. Although Congress had appropriated money for the project in 2001, it was greenlighted by Secretary of State Colin Powell only after significant delay.¹⁰ The originally scheduled launch date for the program had been 28 February, but it was postponed by more than a month after the intervention of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage at the eleventh hour.¹¹ Armitage and Powell feared that broadcasting to Chechnya would undermine the United States' claim that it had no intention of violating Russian sovereignty and strain an important bilateral relationship in the War on Terror. On 27 February, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher stated that the Bush administration believed broadcasting in Caucasian languages would be "counterproductive" to resolving the Chechen conflict.¹² In January, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov had told Powell that RFE/RL broadcasting in the Caucasus, in which the Russian military was heavily involved in insurgency suppression operations, would be considered a significant provocation.¹³ When RFE/RL began broadcasting on 3 April, there was major backlash across Russian officialdom. Kremlin press secretary of Chechen affairs Sergei Yastrzhembsky accused the United States of "indulgence in extremism and terrorism" and further promised that "some kind of reciprocal action within the framework of Russian legislation" would be forthcoming.¹⁴ When

⁹ President of Russia, "O priznanii utrativshim silu Ukaza Prezidenta RSFSR ot 27 avgusta 1991 g. N 93 "O byuro nezavisimoy radiostantsii "Svoboda"/"Svobodnaya Yevropa,"" October 4, 2002, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&firstDoc=1&lastDoc=1&nd=102078214>.

¹⁰ "Radio station fuels diplomatic row," *CNN*, April 4, 2002, <https://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/04/04/georgia.radio/index.html?related>.

¹¹ Ibid; "Freedom in the World: Chechnya," *Freedom House*, 2003, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2003/chechnya>.

¹² "Newslines - February 28, 2002," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, February 28, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142625.html>.

¹³ Ariel Cohen, "Radio Liberty Launches Controversial Chechen Service," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 27, 2002, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/7034-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2002-3-27-art-7034.html>.

¹⁴ Roman Stershev, "'SVOBODA' TERRORISTAM?" *Krasnaia Zvezda*, April 4, 2002, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:5141/browse/doc/3915890>.

Putin revoked the 1991 decree, RFE/RL's broadcasting to Chechnya was cited as a core justification.¹⁵

These contrasting events represent two different historical moments for both Russia and the United States. Yeltsin's decision to allow RFE/RL to open an office in Moscow was an extraordinary reversal of Soviet policy of the past four decades. The agency, which began broadcasting into the USSR in 1953 and had been jammed by authorities until 1988, was a dogged nemesis of the Soviet regime.¹⁶ State propaganda castigated RFE/RL and other Western broadcasters in a decades-long attempt to discredit these organizations and discourage listeners. In a study assessing the Soviet response to the U.S. information campaign, Simo Mikkonen remarks that "[i]n 1958, the [Soviet] Central Committee mentioned that the sum spent on jamming was *greater* than the sum spent on domestic and international broadcasting combined."¹⁷ For those who clandestinely worked or informed for American radio, the punishments were severe; in the early years of the Cold War some Eastern Bloc countries, like the GDR, resorted to execution.¹⁸ Later, beginning in the 1960s, governments throughout the communist world also developed sophisticated counterprogramming, usually mimicking Western broadcasting formats and techniques.¹⁹ These and other initiatives, such as inviting left-leaning American artists and activists to participate in state-organized cultural events, were part of an effort to draw citizens away from illicit consumption and toward officially-vetted alternatives.²⁰ Neither the carrot nor the stick ultimately succeeded. By the 1980s, American and British content was regularly listened to by up to one third of all urban Soviet citizens, half of all Eastern

¹⁵ Steven Lee Myers, "Putin Annuls Decree Allowing Radio Liberty's Broadcasts," *New York Times*, October 5, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/05/world/putin-annuls-decree-allowing-radio-liberty-s-broadcasts.html>.

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were originally separate organizations with the same function. The former targeted Eastern European countries, and the latter targeted the Soviet republics. The agencies were fused into a single entity, RFE/RL, in 1976.

¹⁷ Simo Mikkonen, "Stealing the Monopoly of Knowledge?: Soviet Reactions to U.S. Cold War Broadcasting," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no. 4 (2010): 786, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2010.0012>. (Emphasis original.) For later Soviet foreign propaganda expenditures, see: Media Ajir and Bethany Vailliant, "Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (2018): 72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26481910>.

¹⁸ For further information on the GDR's harsh reprisals against suspected collaborators, see: Nicholas J. Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves: the Radio Propaganda War against East Germany* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 124; Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "Der DDR-Schauprozess gegen RIAS," *Politische Meinung* no. 427 (June 2005): 65, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_6766_1.pdf/f8d2feeb-a70e-476e-0de4-7fd99732a5c6?version=1.0&t=1539665984491.

¹⁹ Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 86-88.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

European adults, and even many party elites.²¹ This was the case even though as late as 1988 only 20-35 percent of RFE/RL broadcasts were clearly picked up by radios in the western RSFSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic republics.²² When RFE/RL formally established itself in Moscow, on the invitation of the government of the RSFSR, this represented the final defeat of the Soviet propaganda apparatus, and of the Eastern Bloc's forty-year struggle to prevent a cultural convergence of the communist and capitalist worlds.²³

For the United States, Yeltsin's decree was also an event of great significance. When the announcement was made, the director of RFE/RL's governing body, Mark Pomar, remarked: "[t]his makes us a legitimate news service within the country... This will help us to intensify our coverage of domestic affairs and will facilitate such things as interviewing of cultural and political leaders first hand."²⁴ Thus RFE/RL cemented its status as one of the most trusted sources of news in the Soviet Union, and as the voice of an ascendant United States whose institutions enjoyed broad credibility and goodwill throughout the Eastern Bloc. RFE/RL did not only report on the events at the end of the Cold War; it played a significant role in shaping them. According to R. Eugene Parta, "USSR President Gorbachev said he relied on the broadcasts of Radio Liberty, the BBC and Voice of America for information on events in Moscow and reactions around the world during his three days of imprisonment at his Crimean dacha."²⁵ Moreover, like Yeltsin, the post-communist leaders of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Estonia and others all explicitly credited RFE/RL in helping to facilitate the fall of their nations' respective dictatorships.²⁶ Polish revolutionary leader and president Lech Wałęsa directly attributed Solidarity's coordination and success to RFE/RL, stating "The degree [of

²¹ Linda Risso, "Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War," *Cold War History* 13, no. 2 (May 2013): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.757134>.

²² Malcolm S. Forbes et al., *The Board For International Broadcasting 1988 Annual Report on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc.* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 48.

²³ R. Eugene Parta has noted the remarkable reversal represented by the Yeltsin government inviting RFE/RL to Moscow. See: Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener*, xvii. For a broader discussion of the impact of American culture on Soviet society and government, see: Sergei Zhuk, "Hollywood's Insidious Charms: The Impact of American Cinema and Television on the Soviet Union during the Cold War," *Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (October 2014): 593, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950252>.

²⁴ Rosenstiel, "Radio Liberty to Get a Moscow Bureau."

²⁵ Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener*, xvi.

²⁶ Christopher Felix, *A Short Course in the Secret War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), xviii-xx; G. R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War within the Cold War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 147-148.

importance] cannot even be described. Would there be earth without the sun?”²⁷ RFE/RL thus assumed a mythological status for a generation of citizens in the communist world.²⁸ Soon after the broadcaster’s activity was formally legalized in the RSFSR, RFE/RL’s deputy director reported a surge in applications from Soviets and Eastern Europeans hoping to work for the organization. In September 1991, RFE/RL “received 10 times as many applicants as it can handle.”²⁹ From an information dissemination standpoint, this was the high point of the United States’ genuine influence in the Soviet world. It was the culmination of four decades of careful cultivation of trust in audiences through a set of conscious editorial techniques that Nicholas Schlosser has described as “the atmosphere of objectivity.”³⁰ With its ability to impact, structure and even help generate protest and civil resistance movements across Eurasia, the United States affirmed its status as a “cultural juggernaut” that enjoyed uncontested preeminence in global soft power.³¹

Yeltsin had once explicitly praised RFE/RL for “objectively informing citizens” about the unfolding events of 1991, and credited the agency for its role in generating an epochal shift in Russian history. One decade later, RFE/RL’s credibility with the Russian government had significantly deteriorated, as had its liberalizing influence on Russian policy. This became especially apparent in the context of Russia’s extended military campaign in Chechnya. In January 2000, RFE/RL journalist Andrei Babitsky—the same man who had helped draft the 1991 decree—was arrested by Russian security forces on the outskirts of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. He was taken thirty miles northwest to the Chernokozovo prison camp, where he was beaten by guards with rubber truncheons and interrogated.³² Prior to his release several weeks

²⁷ Lee Edwards, *Mediapolitik: How the Mass Media Have Transformed World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 126.

²⁸ Paul B. Henze, “RFE’s Early Years: Evolution of Broadcast Policy and Evidence of Broadcast Impact,” in *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 3.

²⁹ Linda Feldmann, “Yeltsin Welcomes Radio Liberty’s Presence in Russia,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 4, 1991, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1991/0904/04032.html>.

³⁰ Nicholas J. Schlosser, “Creating an ‘Atmosphere of Objectivity’: Radio in the American Sector, Objectivity and the United States’ Propaganda Campaign against the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1961,” *German History* 29, no. 4 (November 2011): 610-627, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghr067>.

³¹ Markos Kounalakis and Andras Simonyi, *The Hard Truth About Soft Power* (Los Angeles, CA: Figueroa Press, 2011), 26.

³² “The Ordeal of Andrei Babitsky,” floor speech of Christopher H. Smith on March 14, 2000, in *Proceedings and Debates of the 105th Congress, Second Session*, vol. 146, no. 28 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), <https://archive.vn/20121213054636/http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&Cont>

later, Putin was asked about Babitsky's ordeal in an interview with *Kommersant*, and said: "He worked directly for the enemy. He was not a neutral source of information. He worked for bandits, he worked for bandits."³³ When Radio Liberty began broadcasting to Chechnya in 2002, Roman Stershev, a writer for Defense Ministry publication *Krasnaia Zvezda*, captured the Russian government's point of view in a reaction piece titled "'Liberty' of Terrorists?": "[T]he dissemination of 'Liberty's' broadcasting to the already restless North Caucasus is intended to consolidate a pro-Western informational niche...with the help of which one can significantly increase pressure on Russian policy pursued in the region. This is evidenced by the entire experience of 'Liberty's' broadcasting, which has always served as a tool for promoting American interests."³⁴ At the beginning of Putin's administration, few Russian political figures were speaking positively about RFE/RL. Far from hailing RFE/RL for its "objectivity" and liberal principles, Russian authorities reverted to leveling the Soviet Union's old accusations against the agency: that it was merely a pawn in a meddling American foreign policy—"a tool for promoting American interests."

It is noteworthy that the Russian government came to this conclusion, because the Clinton and Bush administrations had studiously tried to *avoid* meddling in affairs relating to the Second Chechen War, both before and after the 11 September attacks. Before the attacks, the U.S. executive branch remained ambivalent about responding to the war because the Clinton and Bush administrations did not want to isolate Russia and risk a reversal of democratic gains in that country. Later, as the War on Terror escalated, the promotion of liberal values and democratic principles became a secondary concern for American policy toward Russia. According to Elizabeth Bagot, the United States elected to remain uncommitted about both Chechen wars throughout the 1990s and 2000s: "Despite reports of major human rights abuse perpetrated by Russian soldiers against ethnic Chechens, the U.S. took a noncommittal stance, making only the occasional rhetorical appeal to Moscow. U.S. ambivalence toward the Russian-Chechen conflict arose from a strategic interest in supporting the new democratically-elected Russian government, courting an important ally in the War on Terror, and avoiding a 're-frosting' in relations between

[entRecord_id=187&ContentType=S&ContentRecordType=S&Region_id=101&Issue_id=0&CFId=74886581&CFToken=21428909](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/142144).

³³ Natalia Gevorkyan and Andrei Kolesnikov, "Zheleznyy Putin: Spetszadaniye spetskorov Natalii Gevorkyan i Andrey Kolesnikova," *Kommersant*, March 10, 2000, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/142144>.

³⁴ Stershev, "'SVOBODA' TERRORISTAM?"

the U.S. and Russia...[The U.S.] has not imposed economic sanctions, proposed the suspension of Russia's membership in international institutions, or intervened militarily."³⁵ If the American government was consciously trying to avoid antagonizing Moscow about the Chechen crisis, how did a situation arise in which one of its own agencies—RFE/RL—began controversial broadcasts into Chechnya, which aggravated Russian authorities and caused a disruption in U.S.-Russian diplomatic relations? This puzzle is emblematic of the lack of coordination between America's foreign policy and its soft power institutions one decade after the end of the Cold War.

The case study of this thesis recounts the genesis of RFE/RL's North Caucasus Unit, and does so in service of a broader proposition: *if the actions of the United States' soft power institutions are not in alignment with the intentions of American leaders, this will produce incoherent outcomes that may be counterproductive to U.S. foreign policy.* The thesis' argument proceeds as follows. During the Cold War, RFE/RL's broadcasting *was* in alignment with the long-term goals of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. Fundamentally, the U.S. government desired a political transformation in the communist world along liberal democratic lines, and RFE/RL was an instrument toward this end. However, once the Cold War concluded and the communist bloc disintegrated, U.S. policy toward the former states of the Soviet Union began to be pursued on an individual, case-by-case basis. Sometimes, for any number of complex reasons, the promotion of humanitarianism was not a top priority of the United States toward a specific country or region; in the case of Chechnya, U.S. leaders chose not to punish the Russian government in service of several perceived "greater goods." Meanwhile, RFE/RL continued to perform the instrumental purpose it had acquired during the Cold War: promoting the principles of democracy and free media to its broadcasting targets. Once the struggle against global communism was no longer the driving factor of American foreign relations, RFE/RL gradually moved away from being an anti-communist, Eastern Europe-focused organization and toward a diversified role as a champion of free speech, democracy and liberal values in a variety of societies across Eurasia, including Iran, Bosnia, Macedonia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.³⁶ However, the end of the Cold War weakened the shared

³⁵ Elizabeth Bagot, "US Ambivalence and the Russo-Chechen Wars: Behind the Silence," *Stanford Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 33, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8e30/be94851e607ad2fa48954e1df1d3ee77076f.pdf>.

³⁶ RFE/RL had also broadcast to Afghanistan from 1985-1993 in the context of the Soviet war in that country.

vision that kept RFE/RL's decisions parallel with U.S. policy, and—in a case such as the North Caucasus Unit's—removed a clearly conceived teleology for what political outcome a broadcasting program hoped to achieve. The implementation of the North Caucasus Unit therefore caused friction, uncertainty and policy incoherence within the Bush administration. In part due to its Cold War experience with RFE/RL, the Russian government interpreted this incoherence as evidence of American duplicity and clandestine support for Chechen separatism—even though the Bush administration explicitly tried to avoid giving this impression—and relations were damaged.

This thesis contains two chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter covers the history of RFE/RL's relationship to the U.S. government during and after the Cold War. Using the case study of Chechnya, the second demonstrates how RFE/RL's intentions were “decoupled” or “disconnected” from those of the executive branch after 1991, and considers the consequences for U.S.-Russian relations. The conclusion evaluates the potential implications of the “decoupling” for the practice of American foreign policy. The findings of the thesis suggest that, whatever set of policies is ultimately chosen, consistency of vision and clarity of purpose are essential for success and credibility. Conversely, inconsistency and a lack of clearly visualized end-goals undermine both the prosecution of foreign policy and the United States' ability to project soft power: in other words, a disconnect between broadcasting institutions and the State Department produces “lose-lose” outcomes for both.

Chapter I: From Alignment to Disjointedness

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first concerns the alignment of RFE/RL's Cold War mission and editorial strategy with the United States' long-term goals and political aspirations for the Eastern Bloc. RFE/RL was an instrumental tool of U.S. policy, pursuing a desired end-state of the Cold War. Its function was to provide Eastern Bloc listeners access to information and political debate that state-controlled news agencies did not provide. Its goal, dictated and shared by the executive branch of the U.S. government, was the liberalization of the communist world. This goal served both ideological and strategic purposes. While the United States was publicly invested in promoting a certain set of ideas about political and economic freedom, within the intelligence community and State Department, such a campaign was also seen as a means of destabilizing and undermining the political cohesion of communist countries. The alignment of American broadcasting institutions and higher-level foreign policy was an essential institutional relationship that American diplomats and elected officials worked hard to preserve; as Olesya Tkacheva et al. put simply, "An important element of RFE/RL success was their linkage to the broader U.S. Cold War strategy."³⁷

The second part concerns the weakening of this linkage after the fall of communism and its implications for U.S. foreign policy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the elimination of the Warsaw Pact, RFE/RL lost a clear *raison d'être*. In the 1990s, the agency attempted to reinvent itself as a general purpose pro-democracy, pro-free speech organization—without a specific anticommunist, subversive persuasion—that would mentor and continue to refine nascent journalistic communities in Eurasia. However, this looser, more open-ended mission was no longer structurally connected to specific geopolitical aims of U.S. foreign policy, which was itself undergoing major transformations in response to the events of 1989-1991. Like RFE/RL, American foreign policy also reinvented itself, transitioning from containment and political destabilization of the communist world toward "democratic enlargement," the protection of human rights, and several other goals. However, the United States did not pursue these policies evenly throughout Eurasia, due to a prioritization of Russia's democratic development and, later, the War on Terror. As the case study illustrates in Chapter II, this

³⁷ Olesya Tkacheva et al., "Information Freedom During the Cold War: The Impact of Western Radio Broadcasts," in *Internet Freedom and Political Space* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 150, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt4cgd90.14>.

unevenness brought U.S. foreign policy into conflict with RFE/RL over the question of Chechnya, a case illustrating how the threads connecting RFE/RL and the executive branch became more frayed following the end of the Cold War. This is not to say that there was a total severance of purpose between the two; rather, their visions of foreign affairs were “decoupled,” becoming less consistent and more prone to friction and disagreement, with important consequences for Russian-American relations.

1. Cold War alignment of RFE/RL and U.S. communist policy

A. RFE/RL's mission

Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL) had a clearly identified mission and honed a strategy to pursue this mission that was aligned with the intentions of American presidents and their subordinates over the course of the Cold War. RFE and RL—the former targeting Eastern Europe and the latter the Soviet Union—were created by acts of Congress during the nascent phase of the Cold War and were merged into one organization in 1976. Between 1950 and 1960, RFE was supplemented by the “Crusade for Freedom” propaganda campaign which sought to generate support for the agency among American citizens.³⁸ RFE commenced broadcasts on 4 July 1950, while RL, which was called “Radio Liberation” until 1959, began broadcasts on 1 March 1953 (the day of Stalin’s fatal stroke).³⁹ The Radios were intended from the outset to advance American foreign policy in Eurasia. The two agencies were largely independent of direct congressional or executive branch oversight, but were nevertheless designed and largely perceived by listeners as representatives of American values and freedoms in the emerging global ideological struggle. This aligned RFE’s and RL’s fundamental orientation and editorial strategy with Washington’s long-term policy toward the Soviet bloc, even if broadcasting content was not always written with the goal of advancing a specific aim of the State Department or White House. Broad alignment did not mean that radio programming always avoided interference with the plans or intentions of U.S. leaders. Hungarian listeners, for instance, interpreted RFE’s reporting during the 1956 uprising as a promise of American

³⁸ Dawn Spring, “The Crusade for Freedom,” in *Advertising in the Age of Persuasion: Building Brand America, 1941–1961* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99–113, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339644_7.

³⁹ Sig Mickelson, *America’s Other Voice: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1983), 30; Gene Sosin, “Goals of Radio Liberty,” in *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 17.

assistance that the White House had not made, and during the 1980s, RFE/RL's new management "began to overstep [Reagan administration] guidelines on acceptable commentary."⁴⁰ However, the agencies' mandate was clearly delineated and usually pursued faithfully, and if the Cold War is taken as a whole, disagreements between RFE/RL and the State Department generally did not escalate to the point where foreign policy experienced dysfunction. Most importantly, the Radios were driven by a relatively straightforward conception of their desired end goal: the liberalization and, ideally, democratization of communist countries. When specifically this end-state would come to pass was, of course, unknown, but the agencies were prepared to continue operations indefinitely until it did.

The outlines of RFE/RL's mandate can be found in several documents of the early Cold War. Soon after RFE's founding in 1949, a briefing delivered to the office of Deputy CIA Director William Jackson outlined the agency's goals:

Essentially an instrument of psychological warfare, Radio Free Europe's purpose is to prevent, or at least to hinder, the cultural, political and economic integration of the satellite states with the Soviet Union...Radio Free Europe has been developing programs aimed at:

- (1) Keeping alive the hope of liberation in the satellite states and telling the various peoples that they are not forgotten by the free world;
- (2) Stimulating and increasing the difficulties of the satellite regimes in their efforts to achieve full control of production and economic integration with the USSR;
- (3) Creating doubts and fears among the quislings of the satellites by character assassination and talk of ultimate retribution, and at the same time drawing a distinction between Communist puppets and those who follow the party line in order to survive, thereby encouraging high level defections among the latter;
- (4) Developing an atmosphere favorable to the growth of resistance movements, for ultimate exploitation in war, or, at a propitious moment, in peace time.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Scott Lucas, review of *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*, by Arch Puddington, September 2000, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/30136/lucas-puddington-broadcasting-freedom-cold-war-triumph-radio-free>. Arch Puddington has described the coverage of the Hungarian revolution as "RFE's first—and last—major public scandal," and argues that the agency's professionalism and attention to detail usually prevented it from causing problems for U.S. leaders. Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 114. Lucas, on the other hand, contends that for some years after 1956, "the State Department protested vehemently that RFE was threatening the conduct of US diplomacy in Eastern Europe."

⁴¹ "Memorandum for: Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Subject: Radio Free Europe," secret class CIA memorandum, November 22, 1950, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001137561.pdf. Radio Free Europe's and Radio Liberty's connections to the CIA are controversial. The agencies were covertly funded by the CIA until 1972, and communist propaganda frequently alleged this. Stacey Cone has argued that although the Radios were successful in convincing Eastern Bloc audiences of their objectivity, they were nonetheless "CIA conduits," and that when the American domestic press reported on the activity of RFE/RL for the U.S. readership, connections to the CIA were intentionally ignored, downplayed or obscured by journalists who knew of them.

The goals on this list, especially the first and fourth, are as good a summation as any of RFE/RL's long-term strategy: the discrediting of communist news agencies, leaders and power structures in order to generate resistance to communist rule and, if possible, regime collapse. The outlines of this project had been articulated by George Kennan as early as 1948, who said of American plans to broadcast to the communist bloc: "What is proposed here is...[to create] organized public support of resistance to tyranny in foreign countries."⁴² In 1950, RFE/RL issued a "Policy Guidance Memorandum" that further described this anticipated end-result: "For the peoples of the prisoner states [i.e. Eastern European nations under Soviet control] everything hinges upon the question of liberation. This is for them the vital preoccupation. Accordingly, liberation must be the predominant theme in any effective long-range program of propaganda... We believe that the prisoner states must be freed of Russian domination. This means for us as a minimum the withdrawal of the Soviet Army and its Secret Police, free elections effectively supervised, and the repeal of all measures illegally adopted."⁴³

Over the course of four decades, the United States' strategic and diplomatic approach to its superpower rival varied considerably, ranging from outright confrontation to conciliation and détente. Nevertheless, the U.S. government's basic orientation toward the Soviet bloc remained roughly constant for the duration of the Cold War. This orientation was predicated on several core assumptions. The communist regimes of Eastern Europe were sustained by the threat of Soviet occupation, and were thus illegitimate; Eastern Bloc peoples, including those of the Soviet Baltic republics, were "captive nations" or "prisoner states" whose governments had not been constituted through a democratic process; Soviet ideology and expansionism were a threat to the "free world" and needed to be resisted and contained; and the United States should, to the best of its ability under the circumstances, promote and encourage the liberalization of the communist world. That these axioms existed did not, of course, mean that American diplomats and elected leaders interacted with their Soviet counterparts with the realistic intention of overthrowing the Soviet government or those of its satellites. After an initial period of

Stacey Cone, "Presuming A Right to Deceive," *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (January 1999): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.1999.12062497>. For further discussion of RFE/RL's connections to the CIA, see: A. Ross Johnson, "Managing Media Influence Operations: Lessons from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 31, no. 4 (2018): 681-701, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2018.1488498>.

⁴² Lucas, review of *Broadcasting Freedom*.

⁴³ Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 316-319.

uncertainty in the 1940s and early 1950s, when it was unclear how solid the Soviet Union's hegemony over Eastern Europe was, American administrations gradually accepted the limitations of their ability to influence politics and events in the communist world.⁴⁴ Until the last years of the Cold War, United States did not conceive of a concrete timeline for when liberalization would occur, nor deploy any immediate "revolutionary" plans for effecting such liberalization by its own actions.

These limitations necessitated a gradual approach in which Eastern Bloc weaknesses would be exploited on a long-term basis.⁴⁵ John Foster Dulles said of this in 1957: "The best course is to promote peaceful evolution among the satellites away from the USSR."⁴⁶ This strategy also extended to the Soviet Union itself. A 1969 CIA analysis prepared for the 303 Committee, which oversaw covert propaganda operations targeting the USSR, stated that "[t]he primary objective is to stimulate and sustain pressures for liberalization and change from within the Soviet Union."⁴⁷ It went on to note three pressure points in communist societies that the United States should focus on: "[t]he neuralgic points of this disaffection -- desire for personal and intellectual freedom, desire for improvement in the quality of life, and the persistence of nationalism in Eastern Europe and among the nationality groups in the Soviet Union -- are the main issues exploited by these projects."⁴⁸ This was a continuation of the mandate described in the Jackson memorandum two decades earlier: RFE would work to establish conditions "favorable to the growth of resistance movements," and once these conditions were in place, it would simply be a matter of waiting until such movements emerged. However, RFE and RL would not directly incite revolt—this was deemed too risky, despite some early support from figures such as CIA operative and Eisenhower advisor Charles Douglas Jackson—and would instead broadcast with the hope that organized opposition and liberalization pressure would eventually arise on their own.⁴⁹ Tkacheva et al. wrote of this: "It was hoped that contact with the

⁴⁴ Tkacheva et al., "Information Freedom During the Cold War," 154-155.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 155.

⁴⁶ Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The US Crusade Against the Soviet Union, 1945-56* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 267.

⁴⁷ "Memorandum for: The 303 Committee, Subject: United States Government Support of Covert Action Directed at the Soviet Union," secret class CIA memorandum, 1969, 3, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/AERODYNAMIC%20%20%20VOL.%207%20%20%28DEVELOPMENT%20AND%20PLANS%29_0006.pdf.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Tkacheva et al., "Information Freedom During the Cold War," 152-155.

outside world would introduce modern concepts and reform ideas to key social groups, spurring an open discussion of liberal ideas inside the Communist world. The hope was that these discussions would shift Soviet policies in a direction favorable to the United States.”⁵⁰

B. “The atmosphere of objectivity”

Although there was agreement that Eastern Bloc liberalization was the desired goal, and that the Radios were an instrument for the pursuit of this goal, it was another matter entirely for RFE/RL to develop an effective mechanism or strategy by which to accomplish it. RFE/RL sought to convince listeners of the United States’ moral, political, and social superiority, and especially of its intellectual and media freedom. However, American propagandists quickly realized that this had to be done in a careful, methodical manner. In the early Cold War, U.S. information agencies were prone to invective and fierce condemnation of communist authorities.⁵¹ The long-time Radio Liberty executive Gene Sosin noted that critics found the agency’s nascent years to be “too militant and aggressive, its tone too shrill and hostile, its alleged aims too apocalyptic and revolutionary.”⁵² This was partially due to Radio Liberation’s relative inexperience, but also to the predomination of highly motivated and politically caustic Eastern European émigrés in the broadcasting lineup, whose frequent sarcasm and hyperbole gave Radio Liberty a harsh tone.⁵³ However, moderating voices in the Radios’ management as well as data collection on audience responses convinced the State Department, and eventually the broadcasters, to promote what Nicholas Schlosser has called the “atmosphere of objectivity,” which favored fact-gathering and balanced presentation over ideological argument.⁵⁴ After RFE’s controversial Hungarian programming in 1956, the State Department sought to ensure that the agency would not again interfere with U.S. diplomacy in the Eastern Bloc, and a directive was sent out to this effect. In Scott Lucas’ description, “The shift in US policy was evident by the autumn of 1957. Official broadcasts to the Soviet orbit were governed by the edict that ‘evolution, not revolution, [was] the only programming policy now justified by political realities and audience temper.’”⁵⁵ Although hardline anti-communist employees of the Radios resisted

⁵⁰ Ibid, 155.

⁵¹ Sosin, “Goals of Radio Liberty,” 18.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 18-19.

⁵⁴ Schlosser, “Creating an ‘Atmosphere of Objectivity,’” 610-14.

⁵⁵ Lucas, *Freedom’s War*, 267.

these directions, as did Charles Douglas Jackson and his supporters, by the 1960s the debate had largely been settled in favor of programming moderation.⁵⁶

The successful creation of the atmosphere of objectivity was the central reason for the success of American broadcasting during the Cold War, and was the basis for the widespread trust that Eastern Bloc audiences placed in RFE/RL and its sister organizations Radio in the American Sector (RIAS) and Voice of America. The U.S. information warfare apparatus established early on that an “objective” reporting of the news would be more effective in building up Western credibility and cultural attractiveness than ideological proselytization would. Joseph Nye has summarized this theory with the maxim: “[t]he best propaganda is not propaganda.”⁵⁷ According to Puddington, “The radios [RFE and RL] understood that their audience preferred accurate news and restrained commentary to blatant propaganda. The radios did, of course, retain a clear point of view. Eventually, they evolved into something akin to National Public Radio (NPR), a radio network devoted to public affairs and culture, but with a clear anti-Communist perspective.”⁵⁸ In fact, both RFE and RL were designed to appear to Eastern Europeans as “what a national radio station would sound like if it came from a free country,” the idea being to portray the United States itself as a country allowing a free exchange of ideas and rational, balanced discussion of political matters.⁵⁹ Although the goal of eventual Eastern European liberation was retained, this cultivation of the atmosphere of objectivity necessitated a more patient and measured corpus of broadcasting content: in other words, trading “revolution” for “evolution.”⁶⁰

The outlines of an “objectivity” strategy were already evident in the early 1950s, in both the public sphere and in the internal discussions of the U.S. information apparatus. In an April 1950 address to a room of newspaper editors, Harry Truman gave the warning: “You cannot make up people’s minds for them. What you can do is to give them the facts they need to make

⁵⁶ Ibid, 267-269.

⁵⁷ Joseph S. Nye, “What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>.

⁵⁸ Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 311.

⁵⁹ Tkacheva et al., “Information Freedom During the Cold War,” 151-152.

⁶⁰ Lucas, review of *Broadcasting Freedom*. See also Tkacheva et al., “Information Freedom During the Cold War,” 151-155. Lucas takes pains to note that this process was not as simple or smooth as is commonly assumed in the literature.

up their own minds.”⁶¹ In 1953, U.S. Information Agency analyst Ralph K. White distributed a memorandum to employees of RIAS, a GDR-focused broadcaster based in West Berlin. Schlosser states that the document “recommended that reporters present stories with frankness and honesty. In comparison to Soviet propaganda, White contended, American broadcasts needed to avoid a black-and-white picture of the world. He argued that nuance and candour were a more effective means of winning the loyalty of listeners.”⁶² This “nuance” included periodically offering measured praise of Eastern Bloc governments and institutions, and paying close attention to sentence structure, word choice, and subtle matters of tense and conjugation in order to ensure that the atmosphere of objectivity was maintained.⁶³ At RFE, a centralized database of news items from the Eastern Bloc was put into place soon after the agency’s founding, with assessments about the credibility of each story and claim.⁶⁴ Although RFE’s management was of a “strongly anti-Communist orientation,” its editors usually declined to run sensational accusations against communist governments if they were unable to corroborate the information.⁶⁵ Sosin recalled how “[w]e were aware of the pitfalls of hostile and blatant propaganda that would literally turn off our listeners. We spoke frankly and empathetically about their daily problems, and articulated their hopes for a better future.”⁶⁶ At the same time, RFE not only dealt with particular issues and news items but also aggressively marketed its own role as a source of “truth” in a more general sense. Between 1951 and 1956, the Crusade for Freedom produced six million so-called “Freedom-Grams” signed by ordinary American citizens which were dropped by balloon across the Eastern Bloc, each bearing the message: “Do you listen to Radio Free Europe? I hope you do, for I am one of millions of American citizens who has voluntarily contributed to build these stations, which bring Truth to you who are deprived of it. In America millions voluntarily pray for an understanding between our peoples.”⁶⁷ These kinds

⁶¹ “Address on Foreign Policy at a Luncheon of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 20, 1950,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 260.

⁶² Schlosser, “Creating an ‘Atmosphere of Objectivity,’” 614.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 616.

⁶⁴ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies: The Battle Over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 89.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sosin, “Goals of Radio Liberty,” 19.

⁶⁷ Richard H. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe’s “Crusade for Freedom”: Rallying Americans Behind Cold War Broadcasting, 1950-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 86.

of stunts are a reminder that while the Radios were committed to factual reporting for practical reasons, they were also agenda-driven agencies that strategically conditioned their listeners and enticed them with tantalizing glimpses of American life.

C. Alignment of RFE/RL with long-term vision of American leaders

The logic of the atmosphere of objectivity reflected American leaders' aspiration to systematically present an alternative way of life to peoples living under communism, and to counter the effects of communist propaganda on the United States' reputation. That aspiration was formulated in similar ways by presidents and politicians of both parties; this analysis cites the examples of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Adlai Stevenson, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan.

Truman offered an early evaluation of the place of broadcasting in Cold War foreign policy in his April 1950 address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, where he said the following:

Our task is to present the truth to millions of people who are uninformed or misinformed or unconvinced. Our task is to reach them in their daily lives, as they work and learn...This task is not separate and distinct from other elements of our foreign policy. It is a necessary part of all we are doing to build a peaceful world. It is as important as armed strength or economic aid...We must make ourselves known as we really are—not as Communist propaganda pictures us. We must pool our efforts with those of other free peoples in a sustained, intensified program to promote the cause of freedom against the propaganda of slavery. We must make ourselves heard round the world in a great campaign of truth. We have tremendous advantages in the struggle for men's minds and loyalties. We have truth and freedom on our side. The appeal of free institutions and self-government springs from the deepest and noblest aspirations of mankind.⁶⁸

Crucial to Truman's analysis is his observation that "free institutions" generate their own appeal based upon a universal human desire to govern oneself. However, this natural attractive power was not enough to convince the millions of "uninformed" on its own, and could be overridden by communist propaganda if the United States did not defend its reputation and vigorously promote its institutions to citizens of the Eastern Bloc. Truman prefigured the underpinnings of America's emerging soft power campaign: consciously "weaponizing" the attractive potential of American culture, values and institutions and channeling it to specific target audiences through broadcasting media. The president referenced "tremendous advantages" in this ideological contest, but these were advantages only, not a promise of victory.

⁶⁸ "Address on Foreign Policy," 264.

In 1952, both Dwight Eisenhower and his Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson used similar language to justify and praise the operations of Radio Free Europe, then in its nascent stages. Six days after the 5 November presidential election, Eisenhower and Stevenson recorded a joint statement declaring unity against the communist states that was broadcast on domestic American radio networks.⁶⁹ In his remarks, Eisenhower argued that “[t]he Communists have isolated their people to keep them from ever hearing the truth...The only way to frustrate this evil manipulation of human minds and emotions is to supply the truth, which gives the oppressed people a measuring stick to lay against each lie that is told to them.”⁷⁰ Stevenson, similarly, attacked “the enemy’s walls erected to keep out the truth” and praised RFE’s programs for having “a spontaneity and freshness, which no official information agency can have.”⁷¹ Echoing Truman’s argument that a successful information campaign was equally important as economic and military might, Stevenson also noted that “[f]reedom is shielded by other things than steel and gunpowder. Vigilance in freedom’s defense is served by other than military means.”⁷² Later, in 1959, Eisenhower signed legislation inaugurating an annual “Captive Nations Week” that, in Stephen Garrett’s description, was “to fall annually in the third week of July until such time as the captive nations achieve their freedom.”⁷³ Captive Nations Week received criticism from some, such as Kennan, who considered it an unwarranted provocation that conferred the status of “nation” to ethnic peoples within the Soviet Union that did not have a previous history of distinct statehood (prefiguring the controversy over Chechnya’s political status after 1991).⁷⁴ Others, especially Russian-Americans, objected to the fact that the list of peoples put forth in Congress’ captive nations resolution omitted Russians, which they read as implying that the spread of communism was tantamount to Russian imperialism.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the legislation once again

⁶⁹ Cummings, *Radio Free Europe’s “Crusade for Freedom,”* 85-86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Cummings, 85.

⁷³ Stephen A. Garrett, “Eastern European Ethnic Groups and American Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 305–306, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2148611>. Captive Nations Week survived the Cold War and has been proclaimed by every president since.

⁷⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 554. A similar objection was also lodged by a group of American historians in *The Russian Review* in 1961. See: Arthur E. Adams et al., “A Statement on U.S. Public Law 86-90,” *The Russian Review* 20, no. 1 (January 1961): 97–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/126589?seq=1>.

⁷⁵ Bernard Gwertzman, “‘Captive Nations’ Sting Lost,” *The Washington Star*, July 20, 1966, text reprinted in *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 89th Congress, Second Session*, vol. 112, no. 14 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), 19149-19150.

reinforced the publicly propounded notion that pressure should be sustained on the communist bloc indefinitely until a liberal political transformation was effected.

In December 1964, Lyndon Johnson invited a group of 80 prominent American “supporters of Radio Free Europe” to attend a White House luncheon. In his address to this group, Johnson affirmed his support for RFE, emphasized that the organization’s mission was a long-term one, and put forward an eventual goal for the agency to work toward. “I have watched [RFE] grow and become a major link between the world of freedom and the brave peoples of Eastern Europe. Radio Free Europe has helped to keep alive their longing for freedom...When the peoples of Eastern Europe are again able to enjoy radio broadcasting from their own capitals which tells them as much as Radio Free Europe does, then Radio Free Europe will have finished its job. Until then, RFE has work ahead of it, day in day out, year in year out.”⁷⁶ Johnson thus articulated a key teleology of the American information campaign: that RFE’s mission would conclude when free media became available in the communist world; and, by implication, when that world had itself become free. His remarks echoed both the plan of action laid down in the Jackson memorandum and the notion of prisoner state “liberation” in RFE’s policy guidance memorandum, indicating that this desired end-state of the Cold War had remained constant since 1950.

Ronald Reagan’s history of public support for RFE/RL extended as far back as 1955, when he, as a private citizen, recorded a public service announcement for the Crusade for Freedom urging Americans to donate money to the cause.⁷⁷ Early in his presidency, Reagan expressed concern that RFE/RL had been neglected by prior administrations and that, like Voice of America, the agency’s transmitter equipment was out of date and badly needed replacement.⁷⁸ A key speech detailing Reagan’s political expectations of American broadcasting was given by the president in the Roosevelt Room in July 1986, on the occasion of renewing Captive Nations Week. He said:

⁷⁶ “Remarks at a Luncheon for Supporters of Radio Free Europe, December 2, 1964,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President, 1963-64* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1965), 1626-1627.

⁷⁷ Alex Mayer and Zach Peterson, “Remember, the Iron Curtain Is Not Soundproof,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, September 4, 2009, https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/remember_iron_curtain_not_soundproof/1814963.html.

⁷⁸ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, “Remarks on Signing the Captive Nations Week Proclamation,” July 19, 1982, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/71982b>.

Meaningful progress can be realized by facing our differences, not glossing them over. Human rights and humanitarian issues cannot be ignored or trivialized...Until all peoples are free to travel and speak with each other, it behooves us to keep Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Marti, and Voice of America broadcasting the truth to those who are denied it...Until the Soviets stop trying, through force of arms, to turn Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and other Third World countries into colonies of their empire, we'll continue to support freedom fighters who are struggling for their independence. Until the people of the Baltic States and Eastern Europe are free to choose their own system of government, we will continue to speak up for their rights and champion their cause. That's what Captive Nations Week is all about.⁷⁹

Several aspects of this speech are noteworthy. First, Reagan situated RFE/RL's operations alongside the totality of America's other Cold War containment operations. This was an expression of what Lucas, Kenneth Osgood and others have called a "total Cold War," which according to Lucas "brought together diplomacy, economic and financial power, military activity, and culture."⁸⁰ In this regard Reagan inherited Eisenhower's conception of an all-encompassing struggle against communism that entailed "[waging] peace with all the vigor and resourcefulness and universal participation of wartime."⁸¹ Second, Reagan paired Soviet domination of the Baltic States with that of Eastern Europe, signaling that the makeup of the USSR itself should be challenged. He therefore confirmed an expansive definition of "captive nations" to include political subunits of the enemy superpower. Third, Reagan once again articulated the union of RFE/RL's instrumental purpose—providing news and promoting American values to its audiences—with broader U.S. liberalization ambitions for the USSR and its satellites. The agency would continue to operate "[u]ntil all peoples are free to travel and speak with each other" and until Eastern Europeans "are free to choose their own system of government."

Thus Truman, Eisenhower, Stevenson, Johnson, Reagan and many others suggested that broadcasting institutions were an indispensable branch of American foreign policy, and had both a "defensive" and "offensive" purpose. They tasked the agencies with battling enemy narratives about the evils of capitalism, but also, crucially, with winning over those who were "uninformed or misinformed or unconvinced" due to the Iron Curtain's information cordon. Truman and Reagan, in particular, characterized this as a project of great proportions, involving millions of individuals and entire nations; this offers some insight into the scope of the information war that

⁷⁹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, "Remarks on Signing the Captive Nations Week Proclamation," July 21, 1986, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/72186a>.

⁸⁰ Lucas, review of *Broadcasting Freedom*; for a comprehensive study of the topic, see Kenneth Alan Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (University of Kansas, 2006). See also Tkacheva et al., "Information Freedom During the Cold War," 150-151.

⁸¹ Osgood, *Total Cold War*, 235.

the United States undertook in the early 1950s. With Eurasia separated into two distinct ideological blocs, the target area of the American campaign spanned dozens of societies, all held together by the “common denominator” of communist rule. This provided a connective thread between all of RFE/RL’s programs—which were otherwise distinguished from one another by peculiarities of language, culture and geography—and also between RFE/RL and American leaders, who shared the common purpose of combating global communism across four decades. It was this second connective thread that was weakened by the end of the Cold War.

2. The “Decoupling” of RFE/RL and U.S. Eurasia Policy After 1991

A. RFE/RL after the Cold War

The 1950 RFE/RL policy guidance memorandum posed a question: “After Liberation, What?”⁸² The text that followed laid out a set of conditions that RFE/RL hoped to help bring about by broadcasting to the communist bloc: namely, the retreat of the Soviet military from Eastern Europe, the holding of free and fair elections, and institution of a legal code created by democratically-chosen assemblies and executives.⁸³ The revolutions of 1989-1991 represented a spectacular realization of these long-term aims. The realignment of Eastern Europe away from the Soviet sphere and toward the American one signaled a fulfilment of the United States’ major geopolitical goals of the Cold War. In addition, RFE/RL had itself fulfilled the role assigned to it in the Jackson memorandum; that is, to aid the emergence of resistance movements “for ultimate exploitation in war, or, at a propitious moment, in peace time.” It is the latter scenario that unfolded, and during the critical turning points of the revolutionary wave, RFE/RL functioned as a key resource for the Eastern Bloc resistance movements that had emerged in the 1980s, including Poland’s Solidarity, the Singing Revolution in the Baltic countries, Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution, and many others.

Yet with this victory came the question from four decades earlier: “After liberation, what?” By invoking an end-goal for RFE/RL, both Johnson and Reagan also suggested there would be a time when the agency would no longer be necessary: the former saying that the broadcaster “will have finished its job,” the latter using the formulation “Until x, we will continue y.” Following the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet

⁸² Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 318.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Union, some voices within the U.S. government and media indeed began considering the possibility of disbanding RFE/RL, which they viewed as having completed its mission. Although these calls for its disbandment did not come to fruition, the agency was forced to confront fundamental questions about what it ought to do, and to be, in a post-Cold War media universe. Without the ideological battleground and civilizational struggle of the Cold War, RFE/RL's broadcasting lost its unifying purpose and widespread appeal in the former Soviet bloc. At the end of the 1980s, RFE/RL was frequently the most important source of news in Europe's communist societies; since that time, the agency has drawn in a diminishing fraction of listeners across its broadcasting range.⁸⁴ RFE/RL's original target audiences largely moved on from the agency as nascent free speech protections spread to Eastern Europe and lustration policies prohibited the political resurgence of communism. Within twenty years of 1991, a much-downsized RFE/RL had abandoned its programming in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic States, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.⁸⁵ In place of those countries, the agency switched focus first to the Yugoslav successor states, and later to the Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world.⁸⁶ RFE/RL underwent these major changes amid tightening funds and a shrinking pool of human resources. In 2000, the broadcaster was operating on only one third of the budget it had had in 1995, and had experienced a 75 percent reduction in staff.⁸⁷

The available data suggest that the liberalization of the communist world reduced Eastern European listeners' interest in consuming American radio content. Globally, RFE/RL's weekly listenership was 33 percent lower in 2000 than it was in 1992, and most of this drop was attributable to the decrease in listeners from formerly communist countries.⁸⁸ Moreover, although Radio Liberty's model of broadcasting is designed to flourish in environments hostile to free media, the return of authoritarianism during the Putin era has not significantly improved its performance in Russia. In 2002, a Gallup survey reported that the number of Moscow

⁸⁴ Ibid, 310.

⁸⁵ A. Ross Johnson, "History Of RFE/RL," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, December 2008, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/history>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Testimony of Thomas L. Dine, "Hearing: The War in Chechnya: Russia's Conduct, The Humanitarian Crisis, and United States Policy," Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 106th Congress, Second Session, February 29, 2000 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg63578/html/CHRG-106shrg63578.htm>.

⁸⁸ "Hearing: Broadcasting: The Review Of Priorities," Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 106th Congress, Second Session, April 26, 2000 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), 37.

residents who listened to Radio Liberty daily was 130,800, or about 1.5 percent of the city's population in that year.⁸⁹ In 2007, the agency was only reaching 2.6 percent of all Russian radio consumers, well below five percent, “[which] is viewed as a minimum standard of success.”⁹⁰ (Radio Liberty employees have argued that even if one does not listen to the station regularly, “one knows that it is available around the clock, and ‘that when you need the truth, you can get it’ and that they are there ‘just in case.’”)⁹¹ By contrast, in 1988, Radio Liberty had been reaching an estimated 21 million weekly listeners in the Soviet Union, or about 7.3 percent of the country's population.⁹² Of these developments, RFE/RL communications director Paul Goble controversially stated in a June 2001 hearing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission: “the Russian people were not as interested in or supportive of media freedom as many in the West had expected.”⁹³

Without an explicit geopolitical, anticommunist mission attached to its broadcasting, RFE/RL was forced to reconstitute itself as a more generalized pro-democracy, pro-free speech organization. According to Thomas L. Dine, who directed the agency between 1997 and 2005, RFE/RL developed two new functions in addition to that of surrogate news source in unfree societies.⁹⁴ In testimony presented to a Senate hearing in March 2000, Dine stated:

[R]ecently, we have acquired two additional roles: as a kind of insurance policy for countries making the first halting steps toward democracy and a free media and as a model for how journalism should be conducted. With regard to the first, our very existence tends to moderate the behaviour of officials inclined to censorship. They know that if they try to silence someone, he or she can turn to us. And that possibility works against a return to the past. And with regard to the second, our journalists work closely with journalists in many countries, showing them what professional journalism is all about and helping to give them the courage to practice it in the face of enormous odds.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Arina Borodina and Oleg Hohlov, “Prezident RSFSR ne pomog ‘Svobode,’” *Kommersant*, October 5, 2002, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/344529>.

⁹⁰ *Report of Inspection: Broadcasting Board of Governors' Operations in Russia*, United States Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, May 2007, <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/104101.pdf>, 12.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Forbes et al., *The Board For International Broadcasting 1988 Annual Report on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc.*, i.

⁹³ Prepared Statement of Paul Goble, “Hearing: Troubling Trends: Human Rights in Russia,” Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 107th Congress, First Session, June 5, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), 6, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/TROUBLING%20TRENDS-%20Human%20Rights%20in%20Russia.pdf>.

⁹⁴ “Dine Departs as RFE/RL Head, Trimble Named Acting President,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, November 8, 2005, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/1105829.html>.

⁹⁵ Testimony of Thomas L. Dine, “Hearing: The War in Chechnya.”

For four decades, RFE/RL had been an agent of subversion in all of the societies in which it operated. Yet the RFE/RL that Dine described was now devoted to the maintenance and cultivation of a free press in fragile democracies, rather than to the systematic destabilization of authority structures. Puddington characterized RFE/RL in this capacity as “instruments that taught the rudiments of democracy and free markets to societies with little experience of either.”⁹⁶ Keeping with the trend of the past decade, Dine also envisioned a phased reduction in broadcasts to various countries contingent on improvements in press freedom, though he took care to emphasize that “such a happy future is still a long way off in many countries.” This represented a major change in—perhaps even an inversion of—the agency’s operating mission. While the distant hope of producing robust democracies through a free press remained, the idea now was to gradually improve the quality of existing structures, rather than to chip away at them. This is not to say that an undercurrent of subversion did not persist among some voices within RFE/RL; the case study addresses this point at length with respect to Paul Goble’s history of sympathy for Chechen separatism. Many Russians continued to view RFE/RL as a tool of subversion due to its history of being one, irrespective of the mutations it underwent in the 1990s.

It is worth noting Dine’s use of the term “acquired.” When the Radios were founded, they had been *assigned* specific functions by the State Department and CIA, and although micromanagement of broadcasts from these higher bodies diminished over the course of the Cold War, RFE/RL was still working toward the original anticommunist goals set forth in its policy guidance memoranda from the early 1950s. After 1991, just as the United States struggled to define its national mission following the disappearance of its chief ideological and military adversary, RFE/RL was compelled to improvise new roles for itself, without dictation from the administration or intelligence services and with the real threat that Congress or the State Department could potentially be convinced of the agency’s obsolescence. Dine himself said as much in his testimony: “In the aftermath of the collapse of communism in Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many thought that our radio station had lost its *raison d’être*. They believed that with communism out of the way and the Soviet empire in ruins, there was no need for what some called a ‘relic’ of the Cold War.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 307.

⁹⁷ Testimony of Thomas L. Dine, “Hearing: The War in Chechnya.”

The new roles that were settled upon retained the *instrumental* aims of Cold War broadcasting—in RFE/RL’s current homepage description, offering “uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate”⁹⁸—but did not have the concentrated *geopolitical* aims that anticommunism had provided (liberation of the “captive nations” and the end of communist dictatorship in Eastern Europe). While RFE/RL could still say that it aimed to improve the quality of democracy in Eurasian countries, this was a significantly more diffuse and vaguely-defined objective, and one much more loosely aligned with the realities of U.S. foreign policy, which varied on a case-by-case basis. This led to significant divergences of vision between the U.S. executive branch and RFE/RL’s leadership, which, as subsequent sections will describe, could result in quite severe public criticism of the former by the latter. The cord connecting RFE/RL with U.S. foreign policy became more frayed, and, in the case of Chechnya, the lack of coordination between the two resulted in negative outcomes for both sides.

B. Changes in U.S. Eurasia policy

Meanwhile, the onset of a unipolar global system altered the nature and operating conditions of American foreign policy. The lack of a Soviet challenge to American hegemony allowed the United States to pursue strategies crafted for the regional, state or even sub-state levels that were not necessarily integrated into a broader framework of global foreign policy. In a much-cited 2000 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Stephen Walt remarked on this fact: “America’s unrivaled strategic position has several important but paradoxical implications for the conduct of foreign policy. First, U.S. preponderance gives it tremendous freedom of action...This situation stands in marked contrast to the Cold War, when the Soviet threat gave U.S. leaders a clear set of priorities and imposed discipline on the conduct of foreign policy. But with the Soviet Union gone, U.S. leaders can pursue a wide range of goals without worrying very much about how others will respond.”⁹⁹ Walt went on to list four themes driving the Clinton administration’s foreign policy: continuing a military presence in Europe; preventing the proliferation of WMDs; facilitating global economic growth; and the promotion of democracy and human rights, if necessary enforceable with military power.¹⁰⁰ In September 1993, Clinton advisor Anthony Lake

⁹⁸ “About Us: Our Mission, Journalism and Editorial Independence,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us>.

⁹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, “Two Cheers for Clinton’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 2 (2000): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20049641>.

¹⁰⁰ Walt, “Two Cheers for Clinton’s Foreign Policy,” 66-67.

attempted to summarize the new direction of U.S. foreign policy under the catchphrase “from containment to enlargement”: that is, a transition away from the security-centered considerations of the Cold War and toward a multifaceted policy centered on economic development, security cooperation and democracy promotion.¹⁰¹ (Lake also described this as “pragmatic neo-Wilsonianism,” though his invocation of Wilson has been criticized as inapt.)¹⁰² The Clinton administration’s foreign policy was favorably reevaluated after the contrast of the George W. Bush years, but during the 1990s it prompted a negative reception from scholars including Richard Haass, Stephen Schlesinger, Lawrence Korb, Michael Mandelbaum and others.¹⁰³ Chief among the criticisms was that U.S. foreign relations had lost a unifying geopolitical theme and were instead crafted on a largely *ad hoc* basis under an ill-defined notion of promoting “democratic enlargement” across the world and belatedly reacting to various human rights disasters as they occurred. Henry Kissinger remarked that Clinton appeared to have made “a series of seemingly unrelated decisions in response to specific crises.”¹⁰⁴ Walt, however, credited Clinton for his handling of an unprecedented international environment and argued that he had been hampered by an increasingly isolationist Congress.¹⁰⁵

The reformulation of American foreign policy toward “democratic enlargement” began in the late Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations, and specifically in response to a landmark December 1988 speech to the United Nations by Mikhail Gorbachev, who signaled that the Soviet Union would no longer pursue the cause of world revolution.¹⁰⁶ John Mueller has argued that the USSR’s renunciation of ideological expansionism, which prompted Bush to express the goal of “integrating the Soviet Union into the community of nations,” signified that the Cold War had effectively ended by the spring of 1989.¹⁰⁷ It should be remembered that the

¹⁰¹ Frank L. Jones, “Engaging The World: Anthony Lake and American Grand Strategy, 1993-1997,” *The Historical Journal* 59, no. 3, (September 2016): 889, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X15000436>.

¹⁰² Michael Mandelbaum, “Foreign Policy as Social Work,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1 (1996): 17-18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20047465>; Jones, “Engaging The World,” 882.

¹⁰³ Julien Zarifian, “U.S. Foreign Policy in the 1990s and 2000s, and the Case of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia),” *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11135>; Lawrence J. Korb, “Clinton’s Foreign Policy Woes: A Way Out,” *The Brookings Review* 12, no. 4 (1994): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20080501>; Mandelbaum, “Foreign Policy as Social Work,” 16-32.

¹⁰⁴ Zarifian, “U.S. Foreign Policy in the 1990s and 2000s,” 3.

¹⁰⁵ Walt, “Two Cheers for Clinton’s Foreign Policy,” 65-66.

¹⁰⁶ John Mueller, “What Was the Cold War about? Evidence from Its Ending,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 4 (2004): 611-612, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20202432>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 617-618.

revolutionary events that followed were unforeseen by virtually every Western analyst of the Eurasian world.¹⁰⁸ Many had wrongly predicted that a successful *perestroika* would lead to worsened U.S. relations with a reinvigorated USSR.¹⁰⁹ The upheaval of 1989-1991 was received in America with considerable shock and bewilderment, which then morphed into a wave of optimism as the communist alternative to liberal democracy suddenly vanished. The *New York Times* described Yeltsin's December 1991 proposal that Russia one day join NATO as nothing less than an act "turning global politics upside down."¹¹⁰ Many in Washington remained suspicious of Russian intentions, but there was considerable excitement across the foreign policy establishment about the potential of a democratized, economically liberalized Russia, which would signal the ultimate victory of American culture and political values in the global ideological contest that began in the 1940s.

This pregnant atmosphere of radical possibility shaped how Eurasia policy was conceived and pursued in the 1990s. After spending decades undermining the integrity of the communist bloc by promoting ethnic nationalism within and without the Soviet Union, the United States began to give much greater weight to improving security cooperation with Russia, as well as aiding that country's democratization. According to Jason D. Ellis: "[of] central importance to Washington's emerging Eurasian policy was the predominance of Russia in strategic planning, initially at the expense of the other NIS [newly independent states]. In practice, this meant the active support of first Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin in U.S. regional policy..."¹¹¹ In fact, while the Bush administration welcomed independence movements in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States,¹¹² it was skeptical about the wisdom of a complete Soviet breakup, and Bush had warned against the dangers of "suicidal nationalism" in a well-known August 1991 address to the Ukrainian parliament that was later derided as the "Chicken

¹⁰⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (1992): 5-6; 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539129>.

¹⁰⁹ Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 284.

¹¹⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, "SOVIET DISARRAY; Yeltsin Says Russia Seeks to Join NATO," *New York Times*, December 21, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/21/world/soviet-disarray-yeltsin-says-russia-seeks-to-join-nato.html>.

¹¹¹ Jason D. Ellis, *Defense by Other Means: The Politics of US-NIS Threat Reduction and Nuclear Security Cooperation* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 50.

¹¹² Dimitri K. Simes, "Losing Russia: The Costs of Renewed Confrontation," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (November-December 2007): 38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032507>.

Kiev” speech.¹¹³ Later, Clinton would also be harshly criticized by congressional Republicans for appearing too accommodating of Yeltsin, though scholars have questioned whether this is an accurate representation of reality. Dmitri Simes has accused Clinton of behaving with imperial arrogance and assuming that when “[he] needed Russian cooperation, [he] could secure it without special effort or accommodation. The Clinton administration in particular appeared to view Russia like postwar Germany or Japan—as a country that could be forced to follow U.S. policies and would eventually learn to like them.”¹¹⁴ Such criticisms must be viewed in the context of the widespread Russian narrative that the country’s colossal economic and social problems of the 1990s had been caused by the crude and ineffective transplantation of Western models onto Russian society.¹¹⁵ According to this worldview, these failures happened due to the confluence of internal treachery or incompetence (culprits include Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and privatization masterminds Yegor Gaidar, Gennady Burbulis and Anatoly Chubais) and duplicitous Americans who promised prosperity and cultural enrichment but delivered exploitation and the debasement of Russian life (oft-cited individuals include Lawrence Summers, Jeffrey Sachs, Jonathan Hay, and members of the Harvard Institute for International Development).¹¹⁶ The controversial expansion of NATO in the 1990s and early 2000s, which was vehemently and vocally opposed by Yeltsin, Putin and almost all Russian politicians, also factors into a notion of “Western betrayal.” Nevertheless, the degree to which the United States may or may not have mistreated, misled or cannibalized post-Soviet Russia—an issue that has been extensively debated for decades—does not change the fact that U.S. administrations had high hopes for Russian democratization, and that these hopes sometimes made American leaders unwilling to criticize or challenge Yeltsin and Putin on sensitive matters for fear of squandering

¹¹³ Susan D. Fink, “From ‘Chicken Kiev’ to Ukrainian Recognition: Domestic Politics in U.S. Foreign Policy toward Ukraine,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (1997): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41036641>. This was a source of friction with RFE/RL, which continued to cultivate ethnic nationalism in the USSR’s constituent republics throughout 1991.

¹¹⁴ Simes, “Losing Russia,” 37.

¹¹⁵ For Putin’s views on this matter, see President of Russia, “Interview with the Izvestia Newspaper,” July 14, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24171>.

¹¹⁶ Janine R. Wedel, “The Harvard Boys Do Russia,” *The Nation*, May 14, 1998, <https://www.thenation.com/article/harvard-boys-do-russia/>.

hard-gotten democratic gains (an approach that some scholars have called contradictory and counterproductive).¹¹⁷

In 2000, Walt made note of the messy international reality that Clinton confronted in the 1990s. Part of this reality was that both “democratic enlargement” and the protection of human rights could not be pursued evenly or consistently, and were necessarily compromised by a litany of prioritizations, security concerns, and limitations due to barriers of sovereignty. On the issue of Chechnya, these two goals of the post-Cold War United States appeared to come into conflict with one another (though RFE/RL, Human Rights Watch and others harshly criticized this conclusion as a false dilemma). Clinton and George W. Bush both chose to preserve cordial relations with Russia rather than punish its government for violations in the Caucasus, and indeed, did this in the name of preserving the fragile institutions of Russian democracy, and, later, destroying the threat of Islamic terrorism. Ironically, the consequences of this tradeoff even included restricting USAID election monitoring in Chechnya in order to avoid aggravating Putin (see case study). Whether American inaction was an unavoidable consequence of prudent diplomacy and deference to Russian sovereignty, or a historic moral failure—both perspectives have been argued—it proved that though State Department rhetoric may have insisted otherwise, America did not pursue a liberalizing agenda for all of Eurasia in the post-Cold War era. This reality generated friction with RFE/RL, whose efforts to promote a free media in Chechnya—and possible sympathy for Chechen separatism—proved incongruous with the Clinton and Bush administrations’ courtship of Moscow.

¹¹⁷ Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes: Wrestling History in the White House* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 197; Sarah E. Mendelson, “Russians’ Rights Imperiled: Has Anybody Noticed?,” *International Security* 26, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 52-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092101>.

Chapter II: Case Study

This chapter illustrates the tension that arose between RFE/RL and post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy by focusing on the case of Chechnya. Prior to 1991, the United States had encouraged the growth of ethnic nationalism and political freethinking in the “prisoner states,” as it was believed that this would be the basis for organized resistance against Soviet domination. RFE/RL was one of the U.S. government’s primary instruments in generating this nationalist sentiment, especially in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Baltic States. The end of the Cold War changed this calculus; after 1991, Washington began to prioritize improving relations with the Russian Federation and believed that diplomatic isolation would damage that country’s democratization process. Later, issues pertaining to counterterrorism also factored into U.S. leaders’ desire to pursue warmer relations with Russia. These facts carried important implications for U.S. Chechnya policy, which has been characterized as “strategic non-commitment.” State Department officials were aware that promoting ethnic nationalism in the Caucasus would be interpreted by Moscow as U.S. support for the further disintegration of the Russian polity, and that active efforts to democratize or liberalize Chechnya would be likewise interpreted as an expression of favor for Chechen separatism. Moreover, unlike the countries of the Eastern Bloc or the former republics of the USSR, Chechnya was not considered to have a persuasive argument for statehood under international law.

RFE/RL, however, disagreed vehemently with the United States’ noncommittal position toward Chechnya, and made this disagreement known to Congress. RFE/RL furthermore sought to penetrate Chechnya’s closed media environment in order to improve Chechens’ access to accurate information, and in 2001 was granted funds by Congress to perform this task. This execution of RFE/RL’s instrumental purpose did not include a concrete geopolitical teleology, as had been the case during the Cold War. While certain RFE/RL employees, such as director of communications Paul Goble, insinuated personal sympathy for Chechen separatism, the agency as a whole was never committed to this outcome, as this contravened U.S. policy. Nonetheless, the introduction of American broadcasting to Chechnya was seized upon by a large swath of Russian officialdom as evidence that the United States had a secret agenda of destabilizing the Russian Federation: an allegation informed by Russia’s previous experience with RFE/RL broadcasting, which contributed to the political and territorial dissolution of the Soviet Union.

These accusations, in turn, forced American diplomats to deny the existence of a secret plot to undermine Russia and interfered with the State Department's delicate balance of condemning human rights abuses in Chechnya without doing anything that could be construed as an intrusion on Russian sovereignty.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first is an overview of the Russian-Chechen conflict, which provides context for the remainder of the discussion. The second is an account and analysis of the reaction of U.S. leadership to both the First and Second Chechen Wars. The third part covers several topics: it examines RFE/RL's disagreements with U.S. policy as expressed in the testimony of Paul Goble to the Senate; the role of the arrest of Andrei Babitsky in galvanizing congressional support for broadcasting to the Caucasus; and the appropriation of funds for the North Caucasus program in June 2001. The fourth part is an account of how RFE/RL commenced broadcasting in the North Caucasus and how U.S. and Russian leaders framed this event.

1. Overview of the Russian-Chechen conflict

The history of a Russian imperial presence in the Caucasus extends to the sixteenth century, when the Khanate of Kazan and the Khanate of Astrakhan were annexed by Muscovy in the reign of Ivan the Terrible.¹¹⁸ Later, in the eighteenth century, Peter the Great and Catherine the Great launched successive campaigns to permanently subjugate the entire Caucasus; Russian southward territorial expansion reached its limit by 1829.¹¹⁹ Organized Chechen resistance to rule by Russia occurred as early as 1785 and has waxed and waned in intensity for more than two centuries. The long-running nineteenth century Caucasian War (1817-1864) spanned the rule of three emperors and concluded with the definitive annexation of the North Caucasus.¹²⁰ During this period, Russian writers such as Mikhail Lermontov and Leo Tolstoy romanticized Chechens in their works as a race of mountain-dwelling "noble savages" who futilely resisted the tide of Russian civilization.¹²¹ A number of scholars have argued that these literary depictions heavily

¹¹⁸ Murat Yaşar, "The North Caucasus between the Ottoman Empire and the Tsardom of Muscovy: The Beginnings, 1552-1570," *Iran & the Caucasus* 20, no. 1 (2016): 106-107, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1573384X-20160107>.

¹¹⁹ Farid Shafiyev, *Resettling the Borderlands: State Relocations and Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 25-42.

¹²⁰ Mikail Mamedov, "From Civilizing Mission to Defensive Frontier: The Russian Empire's Changing Views of the Caucasus (1801-1864)," *Russian History* 41, no. 2 (2014): 142-62, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763316-04102003>.

¹²¹ Gail W. Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty: The Tragedy of Chechnya," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539261>. For salient examples of a Russian poet romanticizing the Chechen people

shaped Russian stereotypes and beliefs about Chechnya and the Chechens, including in Soviet times and up to the present day.¹²² Russia's conquest of and dominion in the Caucasus has been described as a form of colonialism, and its rule there was heavily shaped by a Russian Orthodox Church that sought to "re-Christianize" the Islamic region, held to have once been a "cradle of Christianity" prior to the arrival of the Mongol horde.¹²³ In this way Russia developed the concept of a "civilizing mission" similar to those of Western European empires, which was used extensively by successive emperors to justify Russian expansion.¹²⁴

When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, a state called the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus briefly governed the region independently until it was reconquered by the Red Army in 1921.¹²⁵ Between 1940 and 1944, an insurgency against Stalin's regime broke out under the leadership of the Chechen nationalist Hasan Israilov, which, after 1941, inspired largely baseless Soviet accusations that Chechens were German collaborators. In February-March 1944, the entire Chechen and Ingush populations of some 500,000 people were deported to Kazakhstan or Siberia; between one quarter and one third of the Chechen people died as a result of this forced resettlement. Beginning in 1957, the survivors were allowed to return to their homeland, resulting in episodes of rioting and misunderstanding between Chechens and ethnic Russians who had moved to the Caucasus since the end of the war. Numerous scholars have characterized the Chechen deportation as a genocide, and in Chechnya it has been the source of deep, long-felt fury at and fear of the Russian state.¹²⁶ In Robert Seely's words, "This is the

and the Caucasus, see the Lermontov poems "10 July" (1830) and "Demon" (1829-1839). For a Western media discussion of this phenomenon, see Catherine Brown, "How Russia's Writers Saw the Caucasus," *Financial Times*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/b17fbef0-8cda-11e3-8b82-00144feab7de>.

¹²² Aglaya Snetkov, "The image of the terrorist threat in the official Russian press: the Moscow theatre crisis (2002) and the Beslan hostage crisis (2004)," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 8 (2007): 1351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130701655192>; Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty", 8; Shafiyev, *Resettling the Borderlands*, 17.

¹²³ Alicja Curanović, "Guarding the Motherland's Frontiers: The Russian Orthodox Church in the North Caucasus," *Problems of Post-Communism* (published online March 20, 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1734471>.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹²⁵ Syed Adrian Ali Shah, "The Genesis of The Chechen Conflict," *Strategic Studies* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242327>.

¹²⁶ Elena E. Pokalova, *Chechnya's Terrorist Network: The Evolution of Terrorism in Russia's North Caucasus* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 16-17; John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 103-104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993766>.

defining factor in their history and, to Chechens, carries the same significance as the Holocaust does to Jews.”¹²⁷

The proximate origins of the Russian-Chechen conflict of the 1990s and the 2000s are traceable to as early as 1988, when the planned construction of a biochemical plant in an exurb of Grozny led to the formation of a “Chechen-Ingush Popular Front” that quickly assumed a nationalist cause.¹²⁸ In November 1991, amidst the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Soviet air force officer and Chechen separatist Dzhokhar Dudayev declared Chechnya a sovereign state independent of the USSR.¹²⁹ Although Moscow did not accept this declaration, the chaos and political complexities attending the collapse of the USSR prevented the Yeltsin government from stopping Dudayev’s bid for independence.¹³⁰ A period of protracted negotiation ensued in which Moscow attempted to come to a settlement with the breakaway province, but ultimately was left to pursue a policy of “benign indifference” and “conflict avoidance” when no solution was forthcoming.¹³¹ Meanwhile, political conditions in Chechnya deteriorated rapidly as parliament deputies who supported a negotiated settlement were silenced by the Dudayev government in June 1993, leading to a vicious factional street battle in Grozny that left hundreds of civilians dead.¹³² An opposition movement to Dudayev, clandestinely supported by Russian security forces, developed in the subsequent year and launched a botched effort to overthrow the government in November 1994. Although the opposition forces attacked Grozny with Russian-supplied armored vehicles, they were repelled and defeated, causing embarrassment for Moscow and convincing Yeltsin to use military force to end Chechen secession.¹³³ On 29 November, the Kremlin concluded internal deliberations on the matter, and on 11 December, Russian troops entered Chechnya.¹³⁴

The First Chechen War lasted for nearly two years and has been universally described as a disaster for both the Russian Federation and the Yeltsin administration. Despite overwhelming

¹²⁷ Robert Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict, 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 9.

¹²⁸ Shah, “The Genesis of The Chechen Conflict,” 108.

¹²⁹ Mike Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 224-225.

¹³⁰ Russell, “Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves,” 105.

¹³¹ Shah, “The Genesis of The Chechen Conflict,” 108; V. S. Drozdov, “Chechnya: Exit from the Labyrinth of Conflict,” *Russian Social Science Review* 37, no. 6 (1996): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RSS1061-1428370628>.

¹³² Shah, “The Genesis of The Chechen Conflict,” 111.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 111-112.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 112.

numerical and technological superiority, Russian forces were unable to subjugate Chechnya. An initial assault on Grozny was repelled, causing loss of morale among Russian soldiers¹³⁵; after severe aerial and artillery bombardment—which included the shelling of civilian dwellings and government buildings—the city was conquered by March 1995, after which Chechen guerillas retreated to mountainous terrain. Many of those killed during the destruction of Grozny were ethnic Russians. Throughout the war, Russian soldiers were observed to engage in torture, rape, looting, hostage-taking and indiscriminate execution of civilians; more than one hundred thousand people were displaced. Chechen fighters committed similar crimes, including a well-known June 1995 incident in the southern Russian town of Budyonnovsk, when fighters under command of the warlord Shamil Basayev took a hospital hostage and killed many patients. Basayev’s men were also alleged to have possessed crudely improvised bacteriological and radiological weapons.¹³⁶ The war was an incubator of Islamist radicalization in Chechnya, and attracted foreign fighters such as the Saudi Arabian-born jihadi Ibn al-Khattab.

Russia’s military failure in the First Chechen War, combined with reports of human rights violations and the international embarrassment they caused, generated heavy public and elite backlash against Yeltsin’s government. Public opinion prior to the war had already been overwhelmingly opposed to the use of force: according to a survey taken in summer 1994, just 5 percent of Russians believed that Russia should become militarily involved in Chechnya, and immediately before the war began, 59 percent desired a “peaceful solution to the conflict.”¹³⁷ One December 1994 survey conducted just days after the beginning of the invasion indicated 65 percent disapproval of the operation, while another from January 1995 indicated 71 percent disapproval.¹³⁸ The Russian press was also highly critical of the war from its beginning.¹³⁹ Over time, high losses of Russian soldiers, military stalemate and a series of violent hostage crises

¹³⁵ Timothy L. Thomas and Charles P. O’Hara, “Combat Stress in Chechnya: ‘The Equal Opportunity Disorder,’” *Army Medical Department Journal* PB 8-00-1/2/3 (January-March 2000), <https://archive.is/20070801170345/http://leav-www.army.mil/fmso/documents/stress.htm>.

¹³⁶ Thomas and O’Hara, “Combat Stress in Chechnya”; “Loose Nukes Timeline: Izmailovsky Park Moscow, Russia,” *PBS Frontline*, 1995, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/nukes/timeline/tl11.html>.

¹³⁷ Jason Clinton Vaughn, “Russian Public Opinion and the Two Chechen Wars, 1994-1996 and 1999-2002: Formation and Evolution,” PhD diss. (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 2007), 54. According to Lapidus: “the Russian leadership’s decision was by no means a ‘last resort’ after all avenues for a peaceful resolution of the conflict had been exhausted.” Lapidus, “Contested Sovereignty,” 7.

¹³⁸ Vaughn, “Russian Public Opinion and the Two Chechen Wars,” 55; 60.

¹³⁹ Emil Pain, “From the First Chechen War Towards the Second,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590171>.

further eroded the Russian public's limited support for military action. As Jason Vaughn writes, "the Chechen war did nothing to help, and much to nearly destroy, [Yeltsin's] political standing."¹⁴⁰ These pressures convinced Yeltsin to sue for peace, and an uneasy ceasefire, resulting in the continuation of *de facto* Chechen independence, was declared in the Dagestani city of Khasavyurt on 30 August 1996.

The Second Chechen War began on 1 October 1999, when Russian forces were again deployed to Chechnya. This occurred in response to several triggering events, some of which are hypothesized to be false flag operations by the Russian government designed to create public justifications for a renewal of military engagement in Chechnya. On 5 August, an Islamist jihadist organization called the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB) crossed the border from Chechnya into Dagestan with the goal of generating an uprising against Russian control and establishing a separate sharia state. David Satter has cited the opinion of Russian journalists Vitaly Tretyakov and Alexander Zhilin, the latter of whom had connections with the Ministries of Defense and Interior, that Chechen fighters had been "lured" by Moscow into invading Dagestan; this has been debated in Western media and scholarship, but remains unconfirmed.¹⁴¹ Soon after this, in September, four apartment buildings in the Russian cities of Buynaksk, Volgodonsk and Moscow were damaged or destroyed in enormous explosions, and over three hundred Russian civilians perished. A multitude of suspicious circumstances, not least that the destruction was caused by military-grade hexogen bombs that would have almost certainly been unavailable to Chechen terrorists, have fueled widespread suspicion that these events, too, were false flag attacks perpetrated by the FSB to generate renewed support for a war in Chechnya.¹⁴² This theory has also been debated, but consensus on its validity likewise remains elusive.¹⁴³ In any case, although the Caucasus has in fact been a font of terrorist activity in Russia—much of it exacerbated and reinforced by Russian war crimes—Moscow's counterterrorism narrative was widely described as pretextual in nature. In 2001, Carnegie

¹⁴⁰ Vaughn, "Russian Public Opinion and the Two Chechen Wars," 77.

¹⁴¹ David Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 63-64.

¹⁴² Ibid, 66; Mendelson, "Russians' Rights Imperiled," 49-50; Greg McLaughlin, *Russia and the Media: The Makings of a New Cold War* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 98.

¹⁴³ Bowker, "Western Views of the Chechen Conflict," 231; Gregory Feifer, "Russia: Three Years Later, Moscow Apartment Bombings Remain Unsolved," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, September 6, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1100714.html>.

Endowment associate and future Bush advisor Thomas Graham wrote that “Moscow’s Chechen operation is not an ‘anti-terrorist’ campaign, but a war against Chechen separatism,”¹⁴⁴ which was also the key political motivation behind Yeltsin’s launch of the first war in 1994 (though Michael McFaul has argued that Yeltsin also viewed the campaign as a means of staying in office).¹⁴⁵ It was feared in elite Russian military and political circles that allowing an independent Chechnya would fatally compromise the territorial stability of the new Russian state and encourage further secessionism among Russia’s many minority groups.¹⁴⁶ As Robert Legvold wrote of the situation in 2007, “[Putin] imagines a linked set of dominoes: If Chechnya is lost, the entire North Caucasus will be next, and then the Muslim territories in the middle of the country, severing Siberia and the Russian Far East from its European core.”¹⁴⁷

Russia’s renewed involvement in the Caucasus has been cited as a critical event in Putin’s rise to power, and his handling of the conflict was an initial source of popularity for the new president.¹⁴⁸ Unlike the First Chechen War—which was launched to great skepticism in the Russian press, at a time when a majority of Russians believed in a political solution for the problem¹⁴⁹—the second began with nearly universal support in the Duma and media, and nearly two-thirds support from the Russian population.¹⁵⁰ However, within months the new war transformed into a quagmire that few Russian political elites had anticipated. Putin’s early prosecution of the conflict as Yeltsin’s prime minister had catapulted him to national acclaim, but as president he soon found—as one Central Asian academic noted in April 2000—that his “future is essentially hostage to his success in Chechnya.”¹⁵¹ The campaign received widespread

¹⁴⁴ Thomas E. Graham, “Can Russia Win In Chechnya?,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24590172>.

¹⁴⁵ Christi Bartman, *Lawfare: Use of the Definition of Aggressive War by the Soviet and Russian Federation Governments* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 148.

¹⁴⁶ Some scholars have argued that the Kremlin’s fear of a secessionist “domino effect” was unfounded. See Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 228; Graham, “Can Russia Win In Chechnya?,” 24-25.

¹⁴⁷ Robert Legvold, “Russian Foreign Policy During Periods of Great State Transformation,” in *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century and the Shadow of the Past*, ed. Robert Legvold (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 100-101.

¹⁴⁸ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, “Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context: Russian Views of the Second Chechen War, 2001-2004,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2008.tb00616.x>.

¹⁴⁹ Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 225.

¹⁵⁰ Pain, “From the First Chechen War Towards the Second,” 7-8; Graham, “Can Russia Win In Chechnya?,” 27.

¹⁵¹ P. L. Dash, “Chechnya: War Has No End,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 18 (April-May 2000): 1517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4409225>.

support from parties across the Russian political spectrum,¹⁵² but some television, radio and newspaper outlets were criticizing the conflict by November 1999,¹⁵³ and Levada polling from 2001-2004 indicated that the Russian public developed highly negative opinions about the conflict (though this does not seem to have adversely affected Putin's approval rating, which was buoyed by strong economic growth). Support for engagement was at only 40 percent in October 2001, and by July 2004 a plurality of 49 percent believed that the Kremlin should either come to a negotiated peace with the Chechens or withdraw its forces from the Caucasus.¹⁵⁴ In addition, Theodore Gerber and Sarah Mendelson report that Russian survey respondents actually had lower casualty tolerance for soldiers on the front than the American public did for those fighting in Iraq during the same period, contrary to a conjecture circulating in Western academia that "Russians are less sensitive to death, given their history of especially brutal wars, political upheavals, and famines."¹⁵⁵

Like the first, the Second Chechen War featured brutal human rights violations by both separatist forces and the Russian military (though the latter committed the bulk of the crimes), including rape, wholesale massacre, ethnic cleansing, artillery bombardment of civilian dwellings, suicide bombings, abduction and forced disappearance, executions of non-combatants, roadside ambushes, looting of homes by roving bands, the use of human shields, assassinations of officials, the planting of IEDs in populated areas, the arrest and beating of journalists, and the displacement of several hundred thousand people.¹⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch and other humanitarian organizations alleged Russian government use of mass graves and even chemical weapons against civilians.¹⁵⁷ Some scholars, such as Francis Boyle, began describing the Russian campaign as genocidal within months of its commencement.¹⁵⁸ After the fall of Grozny in February 2000, Putin declared direct rule of Chechnya from Moscow in May and the Russian war effort shifted to counterinsurgency operations. This phase of the war continued in

¹⁵² Thomas E. Graham, "A U.S. Role in Chechnya," *New York Times*, December 10, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/10/opinion/a-us-role-in-chechnya.html>.

¹⁵³ Laura Belin, "Politics and the mass media under Putin," in *Russian Politics Under Putin*, ed. Cameron Ross (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), 134.

¹⁵⁴ Gerber and Mendelson, "Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context," 51.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42; for hostage-taking and abduction, see Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 107-126.

¹⁵⁷ Mendelson, "Russians' Rights Imperiled," 50-51.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

varying degrees of intensity until April 2009, by which time Chechen militants' ability to keep fighting had been largely broken. However, periodic small-scale bombings, police-militant clashes and episodes of unrest continue to occur in Chechnya and Dagestan, and several terrorist attacks in Moscow, Volgograd and other locations have been perpetrated by individuals from the Caucasus since 2009. By 2007, when Chechnya's current leader Ramzan Kadyrov formally assumed power, Chechnya was already largely pacified and began to recover economically from the devastation of the war.¹⁵⁹

2. U.S. Chechnya policy

The violence of the Chechen Wars attracted outrage from human rights organizations and from various elected officials in the Western world. However, these expressions of concern did not substantially impact U.S. policy toward Russia. Economic sanctions, though discussed, were not put into place; foreign aid to Russia was not suspended; NATO military intervention was never seriously considered as it was in the case of Yugoslavia; and unlike the U.S. response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, neither financial nor military assistance was funneled by the American government to any rebel organization in Chechnya.¹⁶⁰ Throughout both the First and Second Chechen Wars, the United States kept its response to the human rights disaster in the Caucasus largely within the realm of rhetorical condemnation of Russian behavior, which waxed and waned with shifting political priorities. One of the chief pre-9/11 hypotheses of American officials was that genuine punishment or diplomatic isolation of the Russian Federation would endanger the country's fragile democratic system by giving its government an excuse to retrench and restrict nascent freedoms. Other, more specific concerns, such as uncertainty over Chechnya's sovereign status under international law and the matter of ensuring that Russia's nuclear stockpile remained in responsible hands, also factored into U.S. policymaking. Later, the overriding rationalization for American inaction centered around the need for counterterrorism cooperation with Russia, though Moscow had already attempted to frame the conflict as part of a broader Western terrorism problem prior to the 11 September attacks. At no time did these or any other shifting justifications result in a significant change in U.S. willingness to confront Russia over its military campaign in Chechnya. The United States made a series of strategic choices

¹⁵⁹ Anna Matveeva, "Chechnya: Dynamics of War and Peace," *Problems of Post-Communism* 54, no. 3 (2014): 4-9, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216540301>.

¹⁶⁰ Bagot, "US Ambivalence and the Russo-Chechen Wars," 33.

to de-emphasize punishment of Russia in service of a variety of perceived greater goods. The purpose of this section is not to render moral judgment about these decisions; it is to demonstrate the contrast that they represented with RFE/RL's reaction to the Chechen crisis.

Western hesitation to decisively respond to events in the Caucasus originated during the First Chechen War, and was largely caused by a reluctance to criticize Russia's newly liberalized government. In early 1999, Svante Cornell described the United States' lukewarm reaction to the conflict:

The United States was from the beginning very careful in its stance towards the conflict. US secretary of state Warren Christopher even made a misplaced statement comparing the war in Chechnya with the American civil war, in obvious support of Russia's purposes with the intervention. However, as the human rights violations were blatantly exposed in mass media, it became increasingly difficult to defend this view. By early 1995 the United States government saw itself compelled to voice mild criticism of Russian conduct... The US administration, however, never even threatened to put conditionality on economic aid to Russia, although Congress repeatedly advocated this. The criticism remained weak, as the USA contended that Russia had 'not fulfilled all of its commitments under the OSCE and the Helsinki final Act', which clearly is an understatement of gross dimensions.¹⁶¹

Scholarly observers characterized this weak response to the conflict as being the result of a tradeoff rooted in a desire to maximize the probability of successful Russian democratization. In 1997, Peter DiPaola wrote that "the international community is making a considerable gamble. They are wagering that the potential positive consequences of doing nothing (e.g., the continued development of Russian democracy and a stable Caucasus region) will outweigh the certain negative consequences (e.g., the undermining of the rule of law and the subjugation of the Chechen people)."¹⁶² Indeed, Cornell goes so far as to describe Bill Clinton as having had a "fixation" with Yeltsin as a champion of Russian liberalization, which made him unwilling to even criticize the Russian president over his conduct in the Caucasus, though he eventually relented after pressure from Congress.¹⁶³ (In 1991, the Ukrainian nationalist Ivan Drach had similarly accused George H. W. Bush of being "hypnotized" by Gorbachev's liberal persona.)¹⁶⁴

A second source of hesitation stemmed from Chechnya's unclear status as a political entity. With the singular exception of Afghanistan (whose Taliban was itself regarded as

¹⁶¹ Svante E. Cornell, "International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 1 (January 1999): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139999137>.

¹⁶² Peter Daniel DiPaola, "A Noble Sacrifice? 'Jus Ad Bellum' and the International Community's Gamble in Chechnya," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 437, <https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol4/iss2/7>.

¹⁶³ Cornell, "International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations," 91.

¹⁶⁴ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014), 60.

illegitimate by all but three countries), no nation or international organization recognized the Dudayev government between 1991 and 1994.¹⁶⁵ This was partially because of the undemocratic nature of the Chechen secessionist proto-state: the election that had originally brought Dudayev to power was riddled with irregularities and opposition intimidation, and by 1993 Dudayev had assumed dictatorial authority by presidential decree.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, the majority scholarly position in the 1990s was that Chechnya did *not* have an argument for sovereignty under international law; some, like Cornell and the French scholar Marie Bennigsen-Broxup, dissented from this view.¹⁶⁷ According to Mike Bowker, given the widespread opinion that Chechnya was not entitled sovereign recognition, it followed that when Yeltsin launched the First Chechen War in December 1994, “Western leaders were ready to reiterate their view that Russia had a right to defend its own territorial integrity against nationalist rebels in Chechnya...the official Western position was in line with international law, which opposes anything other than mutually agreed and democratically determined secession.”¹⁶⁸ This argument was made with increasingly less ease as accounts of atrocities perpetrated by Russian forces began to surface, and discussion shifted toward the question of whether international involvement could be predicated on the basis of human rights obligations. Nonetheless, on a trip to Moscow in April 1996—just four months before the 30 August Khasavyurt Accord that effected a ceasefire—Clinton again referred to the war as an internal matter of the Russian Federation.¹⁶⁹ As Christi Bartman has written, the United States “continued engagement with Russia so as not to jeopardize its relationship with Yeltsin and Russia’s perceived political democratization and economic reform.”¹⁷⁰

When Russia’s second military incursion in Chechnya began in October 1999, American leaders reacted in similar fashion and provoked similar criticisms. In December of that year,

¹⁶⁵ Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 225; Lindsay Maizland and Zachary Laub, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 11, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

¹⁶⁶ Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 227.

¹⁶⁷ Cornell, “International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations,” 87. Cornell directs the reader to several papers considering the status of Chechen statehood. For an argument against, see Tarcisio Gazzini, “Some considerations on the Conflict in Chechnya,” *Human Rights Law Journal* 17, no. 3-6 (October 1996): 93-104. For two arguments in favor, see Svante E. Cornell, “A Chechen state?,” *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 2 (1997): 201-213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634939708400984>; Marie Bennigsen Broxup, “Tchetchenie: Une Guerre Coloniale,” *Politique Internationale* 67 (1995): 107–119.

¹⁶⁸ Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 225.

¹⁶⁹ Bartman, *Lawfare*, 150.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Carnegie Endowment associate Thomas Graham described a U.S. government that was grappling with a comparable set of concerns: “The United States, senior administration officials claim, has few levers to push. And they say that if we use the levers we have, like suspending financial aid to Russia, we will undermine our larger national interest in helping Russia build a democratic, free-market society and safeguarding its nuclear materials.”¹⁷¹ Three months later, on 29 February 2000, a senior employee of Human Rights Watch, Peter Bouckaert, testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations about the West’s failure to aggressively respond to the ongoing atrocities. He said: “[There] is the lack of a strong Western response to the abuses in Chechnya. Instead of using its relationship with Russia to bring an end to the abuses in Chechnya, the Clinton administration has focused on cementing its relationship with Acting President Putin, the prime architect of the abusive campaign in Chechnya...The administration is understating the amount of influence and power it has over Moscow, because the administration wants to continue with business as usual, and mend its ties with Moscow in the wake of the NATO bombing campaign in the former Yugoslavia.”¹⁷²

In 2000, when the perceived strategic imperatives of Russian allyship were less pressing than they would later become, U.S. executive branch officials did perceive some rhetorical room for maneuver. There was, for instance, relatively serious and sustained criticism of the Russian government in response to the arrest of RFE/RL journalist Andrei Babitsky (Congress’ discussion of the case will be covered in the next part of this chapter); this was likely deemed an acceptable response because the incident directly implicated an employee of a U.S. institution. The Babitsky arrest also elicited comment from then-candidate George W. Bush, who stated in a 13 February 2000 interview with NBC that “We ought to figure out how to get [Babitsky] out [and] keep the pressure on the Russians.”¹⁷³ Echoing a relatively common Republican criticism of Clinton’s Chechnya policy, Bush also advocated for suspending foreign aid to Russia due to reports of massacre and war crimes.¹⁷⁴ However, the uproar over the Babitsky arrest did not convince the Clinton administration to seriously entertain punitive measures of this nature.

¹⁷¹ Graham, “A U.S. Role in Chechnya.”

¹⁷² Testimony of Peter Bouckaert, “Hearing: The War in Chechnya.”

¹⁷³ Frank Csongos, “U.S.: Bush Advocates Tougher Stand On Russia,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, February 2, 2000, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1093279.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

A notable pre-9/11 example of the State Department's caution and reliance on rhetorical condemnation over punishment can be found in an 8 March 2000 *Washington Post* opinion by Madeleine Albright. According to Albright, she chose to publish the article, titled 'Clear on Chechnya,' in response to accusations that the "Clinton administration has actually 'endorsed' Acting President Vladimir Putin and that we have hesitated to criticize Russia for what it is doing in Chechnya."¹⁷⁵ The article may have been specifically prompted by Bouckaert's Senate testimony from nine days earlier, which included a severe criticism of Albright's 31 January trip to Moscow: "Secretary of State Madeleine Albright traveled to Moscow while bombs were raining down on Grozny, and chose to focus her remarks on Acting President Putin's qualities as the new leader of Russia, rather than on the brutal war in Chechnya."¹⁷⁶ The article places a heavy emphasis on how Clinton officials, including Albright, had verbally decried Russian abuses. It carefully relies on vague platitudes such as "we will continue to tell it like it is," "we have not minced words," "getting to the bottom" of reports on human rights violations, and sending a "strong message" to Putin. Apart from demanding "full and transparent investigations...and punishment for those responsible," Albright did not describe any definitive action that the Clinton administration had taken beyond issuing reprimands. At the same time, she offered a nod to Russian sovereignty, stating, "We respect Russia's territorial integrity, and we don't question its duty to combat terrorism on its own soil."¹⁷⁷ Thus Albright conveyed the essence of U.S. policy on Chechnya during this period: monitor and condemn human rights abuses, but studiously avoid any action that could be construed as a violation of Russian sovereignty. The State Department, moreover, was uncertain about Putin's temperament and leadership style early in his presidency—it had reportedly sent Albright to Moscow to "size up" the new Russian leader—and therefore felt the need to exercise special caution until further information could be gathered.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Madeleine K. Albright, "Clear on Chechnya," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2000/03/08/clear-on-chechnya/72ded6e2-c44f-44e3-8361-dea8d343417f/>.

¹⁷⁶ Testimony of Peter Bouckaert, "Hearing: The War in Chechnya." Bouckaert's characterization omits the fact that Albright had discussed the Chechen issue with Putin during her trip, and included references to it in her public remarks. See "Albright Blasts Russia On Chechnya," *CBS News*, January 31, 2000, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/albright-blasts-russia-on-chechnya/>.

¹⁷⁷ Albright, "Clear on Chechnya."

¹⁷⁸ "Albright Blasts Russia On Chechnya."

After al Qaeda's historic strike against the United States, the Russian war in Chechnya was reexamined in Western governments and media through the prism of counterterrorism. This was partially the result of the Western public's heightened interest in the Islamic world's ethnic and religious subgroups, but also due to a Kremlin propaganda campaign designed to situate the violence in Chechnya as a theater of the War on Terror. On 5 October 2001, the Russian government publicly "alleged that some of those who took part in the 11 September terrorist attacks had been trained in Chechnya"; the 9/11 Commission report found evidence that several of the hijackers had aspired to wage jihad in Chechnya, but that only two had "had documentation suggesting travel to a Russian republic," which the report could not specify.¹⁷⁹ The U.S. media response to the 11 September attacks included an escalating "rumor mill" of unsupported assertions about al Qaeda's connections to Chechen militants, which in reality were scant, though not absent.¹⁸⁰ According to Brian Glyn Williams, "[i]n the United States in particular, many nonexperts on the Chechens discovered this ancient Caucasian highlander enemy of Russia only *after* bin Laden's 9/11 attacks. They were quick to see all Muslims with weapons or engaged in rebellions or terrorism, from Palestine, to Bosnia, to Kosovo to the ex-Soviet Caucasus as being 'Al Qaeda' or 'Taliban,' or both. This was a misunderstanding the Russians were only too happy to propagate to convince the West that their ancient mountain enemies were actually the West's enemies as well."¹⁸¹ Since 1994, U.S. and European public interest in the Chechen region and people has usually spiked only in reaction to a terrorist attack perpetrated by Chechens, such as the Budennovsk hospital hostage crisis (1995), the Kizlyar-Pervomayskoye hostage crisis (1996), the Moscow Dubrovka theater crisis (2002) and the Beslan school siege (2004).¹⁸² However, the crises that preceded 2001 were usually framed as rebellious reactions to Russian imperialism, while those that followed 2001 were almost always referred to as terrorist attacks.¹⁸³ As John Russell put it in 2005, "The 'rebels', 'armed resistance'

¹⁷⁹ Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), 265; Thomas H. Kean et al., *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004), 165-166; 233, <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Brian Glyn Williams, "Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth: Part I," *North Caucasus Weekly* 4, no. 35 (October 2003), <https://jamestown.org/program/shattering-the-al-qaeda-chechen-myth-part-i-2/>.

¹⁸¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2015), 109.

¹⁸² Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves," 101-102.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 102.

and ‘freedom fighters’ of the first war have been replaced in the public perception by the ‘Islamic terrorists’ of the second.”¹⁸⁴

Although the pre-9/11 concerns about interfering with the development of Russian democracy did not disappear, they were largely pushed to the background and became secondary issues as the U.S. launched its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. In the words of Jennifer Moroney and Theodore Karasik, “After the USS *Cole* attack and 9/11, there was a short-lived rapprochement between the United States and Russia on Chechnya, characterized by a toning down of the Bush administration’s criticisms of Russia’s tactics in the North Caucasus.”¹⁸⁵ The administration’s willingness to set aside a democracy promotion agenda with regard to Chechnya can be seen by the lack of USAID election monitoring in that region in the early 2000s. According to Gerber and Mendelson, “Western leaders rarely criticize the Kremlin’s Chechnya policies. Diplomats report that President Putin ‘gets emotional’ when they broach the topic, so they prefer to avoid it. Western governments have even occasionally refused to fund non-governmental organizations working in Chechnya for fear of upsetting the Russian government...USAID would not support local efforts to monitor provincial elections scheduled for October 2003 in Chechnya, later widely viewed as fraudulent. USAID has supported election-monitoring efforts elsewhere in Russia since the early 1990s.”¹⁸⁶ This decision suggested that, as late as 2003, the administration’s *de facto* position was that the wellbeing of Chechnya could be sacrificed for the sake of Russian democracy. That the United States put a hold USAID’s democracy promotion programs in Chechnya, but allowed RFE/RL to commence broadcasting to the North Caucasus, only further illustrates the inconsistency and lack of coordination between America’s executive leadership and various of the country’s “values-centered” institutions.

Bush’s conscious decision to de-emphasize a liberalization imperative in Russian-American relations can be seen in an interview that the president gave to RFE/RL on 18 November 2002, less than two months after Putin revoked Yeltsin’s 1991 decree. Where once Bush had called for the suspension of foreign aid over Moscow’s actions in Chechnya, now he

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 102.

¹⁸⁵ Jennifer Moroney and Theodore Karasik, “Case Study: The North Caucasus,” in *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 209.

¹⁸⁶ Gerber and Mendelson, “Casualty Sensitivity in a Post-Soviet Context,” 44.

carefully avoided making any explicit condemnation of Russian operations in the region, and did so in the context of counterterrorism efforts.

Q. Russian President Vladimir Putin has equated his war in Chechnya with the U.S. war on terrorism. Do you agree with that equation, or do you still feel, as was stated during your election campaign, that Russian forces are committing brutalities against innocent Chechen civilians?

The President. I think that Russia should be able to--or hope that Russia should be able to solve their issue with Chechnya peacefully. That's not to say that Vladimir shouldn't do what it takes to protect his people from individual terrorist attacks. But this is a different kind of war that we face. This is a war where we're dealing with people who hide in caves and kind of shadowy corners of the world and send people to their suicidal deaths. It's a war that I believe can lend itself both to chasing those people down and, at the same time, solving issues in a peaceful way, with respect for the human rights of minorities within countries. I said that in the campaign. I also say it to Mr. Putin every time I see him.¹⁸⁷

In this interview, Bush signaled that his view of the Chechen conflict was now thoroughly steeped in the issue of counterterrorism. As Williams has noted, the Putin administration had been aggressively encouraging such an interpretation of the war in hopes of removing Western scrutiny from the Chechen conflict as international focus shifted to Afghanistan. Bush's new understanding of the Second Chechen War was paired explicitly with an admonition against excessive distrust of Russia in view of the potential for security cooperation. The president went on to say: "Russia is not our enemy. NATO doesn't need to be constructed to prevent the Warsaw Pact from invading Europe. After all, the Warsaw Pact doesn't exist. As a matter of fact, the Warsaw Pact is becoming NATO, slowly but surely. We don't need that type of mentality, and we've got to have a military strategy that addresses the true threats."¹⁸⁸ With this statement, Bush even rekindled the dormant possibility of Russian NATO membership, though this was ultimately just a gesture.

Later, in September 2003, Bush stated in a Camp David press conference with Putin that "Russia and the United States are allies in the war on terror. Both of our nations have suffered at the hands of terrorists, and both of our governments are taking actions to stop them. No cause justifies terror. Terrorists must be opposed wherever they spread chaos and destruction, including Chechnya. A lasting solution to that conflict will require an end to terror, respect for human rights and a political settlement that leads to free and fair elections."¹⁸⁹ While Bush did

¹⁸⁷ "Interview With Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty," in *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 38, no. 47 (November 25, 2002): 2053-2056, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-2002-11-25/html/WCPD-2002-11-25-Pg2053.htm>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ "President Bush Meets with Russian President Putin at Camp David," White House Archives, September 27, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030927-2.html>.

not exclude a token reference to a liberalization agenda in his remarks, these aims were notably secondary to the eradication of terrorism in Chechnya. A similar formulation had earlier been used by Colin Powell in a press conference of 28 May 2002. When Powell was asked whether the Chechen conflict was “the final act of the Cold War, or a new front in the war against terrorism,” he responded that “Russia is fighting terrorists in Chechnya, there’s no question about that, and we understand that. But at the same time, we believe that a political solution is really what Russia also needs to find a way to achieve. And we have always said to the Russians that in their prosecution of this campaign against terrorism, they have to make sure that the troops participating in it and other elements of the Russian armed forces and security forces have to meet the highest standards of human rights that one would expect from a civilized country.”¹⁹⁰

United States Chechnya policy—alongside that of the other NATO states—evolved considerably in justification, but not in outcome. In the 1990s, the question of ensuring Russian democratization dominated the U.S. response, while counterterrorism was an important but secondary issue. After 2001, these justifications were reversed, with counterterrorism dominating and democracy promotion becoming secondary. The consistent policy that these varying considerations produced was strategic non-commitment and, indeed, qualified support of Russia’s military campaigns in the Caucasus. As Bowker wrote in 2005, “There have always been differences in Western policy towards the war in Chechnya, but among the Western governments, at least, the differences have been in emphasis rather than substance. Throughout the crisis Western governments have always publicly backed Moscow’s policy on Chechnya.”¹⁹¹ The U.S. government sought to avoid antagonizing Moscow over Chechnya, and indeed sacrificed some of its credibility as a defender of global human rights in order to do so. As shall be seen, this fact was disconcerting to employees of RFE/RL, who expressed their dissatisfaction to Congress in a series of hearings following the start of the Second Chechen War. These differences in vision created tension between that agency and the executive branch, generating an outcome in which RFE/RL’s attempt to provide free reporting in Chechnya clashed with U.S. leaders’ desire to stay out of the conflict. This was, in turn, pounced upon by Russian

¹⁹⁰ “Press Briefing by Secretary of State Colin Powell,” White House Archives, May 28, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Press Secretary, 2002), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/05/text/20020528-5.html>.

¹⁹¹ Bowker, “Western Views of the Chechen Conflict,” 223.

officialdom as proof that Americans had a hidden ‘imperial’ agenda, and interfered with Washington’s ability to effectively conduct bilateral foreign policy with Moscow.

3. Paul Goble’s congressional testimony, Babitsky case, and appropriation of funds for North Caucasus program

Despite the Clinton administration’s lack of interest in confronting Moscow over its conduct in the Second Chechen War, RFE/RL made clear its position on the conflict soon after hostilities broke out in the autumn of 1999. In fact, RFE/RL employees played a leading role in criticizing U.S. government for its caution and inaction, which they believed to be predicated on a misguided set of calculations and assumptions about Russian politics. The most publicized instances of this criticism occurred during congressional testimony about the ongoing war in late 1999 and early 2000. In these hearings, RFE/RL repeatedly made the case that U.S. government action—including suspension of foreign aid, economic sanctions, and restricting Russian influence in international bodies and groups—was necessary to alleviate the humanitarian and information crisis in Chechnya. The RFE/RL employees also brought to legislators’ attention the existence of a Kremlin-enforced “information blackout” in Chechnya, which, in their view, necessitated the intervention of U.S. broadcasting organizations. Legislators’ own commentary suggests that there was sympathy for RFE/RL’s position in Congress. This section covers two essential moments in the pre-history of the North Caucasus program, both of which have been selected to illustrate certain facts about the mindset of RFE/RL and its supporters in Congress.

Examined first is the 4 November 1999 Senate testimony of RFE/RL communications director Paul Goble. Through his criticisms of the Russian government’s suppression of the free press, Goble praised the efforts of RFE/RL to provide informed news to both ethnic Russians and peoples of the North Caucasus. In his testimony, he also skirted close to expressing open sympathy for Chechen separatism, and in doing so revealed the friction that emerged from seeking to expand RFE/RL’s instrumental mission in the Caucasus without a U.S. policy encouraging an independent Chechen state. Examined second is the congressional response to the arrest of Andrei Babitsky. The Babitsky case exemplified for many in Congress the political regression of the Russian Federation and the continuing importance of an American media presence in that country. At the same time, the galvanization of support for Caucasus broadcasting that the Babitsky arrest caused was not predicated on any strategic or geopolitical

vision for the eventual outcome of Chechnya's conflict with Moscow. Finally, information is provided about the appropriation and subsequent renewal of funds for the North Caucasus Unit in July 2001, with a brief commentary about the lack of a clear long-term plan for the Unit's operations.

A. The Senate Chechnya Hearing of 4 November 1999

The first in-depth congressional discussion of the renewed conflict in Chechnya took place during a hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 4 November 1999. The hearing, titled "Chechnya: Implications for Russia and the Caucasus," covered a variety of topics, including the Russian government's justification for military action, human rights abuses, and the broader significance of the emerging Second Chechen War for democracy and civil society in Russia. Testifying at the hearing were three experts: Elena Bonner, widow of Andrei Sakharov and chair of his eponymous foundation; Stephen Sestanovich, an advisor to Madeleine Albright on newly independent countries; and Paul Goble, director of communications for RFE/RL.¹⁹² The hearing was presided over by Senator Gordon Smith, who submitted the following opening interpretation of the war in Chechnya: "[T]his military campaign is important to understand the state of Russia's civil society today. Almost a decade since the end of the cold war, why is the campaign against the Chechens, a campaign that has resulted in the death of hundreds of innocent civilians, so popular among the Russian people, that is much more popular than the war in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996? This could be taken as a sign that tolerance and pluralism in Russia are on the decline."¹⁹³ Smith thus signaled that he was already predisposed to the idea that the renewal of war in Chechnya posed a serious risk to the success of Russian democratization, suggesting that the Russian public itself had become less sensitive to bloodshed in the Caucasus than it had been several years earlier. Later in the hearing, this proposition would be explained with reference to the erosion of the free press in the late Yeltsin years, re-establishing the need for a stronger American media presence in the Russian information sphere.

¹⁹² "Hearing: Chechnya: Implications for Russia and the Caucasus," Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 106th Congress, First Session, November 4, 1999 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1999), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-106shrg61866/html/CHRG-106shrg61866.htm>.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

In terms of generating support for direct U.S. engagement with the Caucasus, the key testimony of the hearing was that of Paul Goble. In his opening statement, Goble argued that Moscow's policy in Chechnya signified that Russia was still far from true democratization, and that the war itself was eroding the gains toward that end that had been achieved during the earlier Yeltsin years: "The Russian Government's recent actions have simultaneously undermined the likelihood that Russia will move in a democratic direction any time soon, threatened the prospects for stability between Russia and her neighbors, and reduced the chances for the development of the kind of cooperative relationship between Russia and ourselves that we had hoped so much for."¹⁹⁴ Goble also presented a picture of a bleak media environment in Russia generally and a total absence of a functioning press in Chechnya specifically. He argued that although Moscow's elevation of condemnatory rhetoric toward the Chechen people had thus far been popular among Russians and strengthened Putin's political position, "not all Russians have the access to the kind of information which allows them to make [a] judgment" about the truth of official narratives about Chechnya.¹⁹⁵ In his prepared statement submitted to the congressional record, Goble asserted that the Kremlin's heavy-handed regulation of information had resulted in a wholesale "collapse of the Russian regional media, thus making Moscow's official voice often the only one many people here [sic]." These erosions of independent media, he went on to state, suggest that "[T]he Putin government clearly believes that it can not only get away with the management of the news but that it will be the primary beneficiary of doing so. None of this bodes well for the future of democracy in Russia."¹⁹⁶ Goble's accusation that the Russian government was instating widespread information controls doubled as a moment of advocacy for RFE/RL. He clearly suggested that Soviet media conditions were returning to Russia and, consequently, that his organization's historical mission as a source of accurate information and promoter of democratic principles must continue. Goble stated: "I am very proud that the organization I work for, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, has had reporters on the ground to cover what is going on in the North Caucasus and elsewhere and to give the Russian people a more accurate picture of what is going on. It is a measure of the times and something I personally think we can take pride in that Russian media outlets now are attacking RFE-RL and

¹⁹⁴ Testimony of Paul Goble, "Hearing: Chechnya: Implications for Russia and The Caucasus."

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

its Russian language service in precisely the ways those services were attacked in Soviet times.” Goble was presenting to senators a renewed justification for RFE/RL’s existence and activity: an argument that, from an information warfare standpoint, the Cold War had returned (or perhaps had never truly ended).

While Goble did not explicitly express support for a Chechen liberation movement from Russia, he came very close to making such a statement when he referenced the Chechen people’s “centuries’ old struggle for freedom” and “their resolve to live in an independent Chechnya.”

Neither the Russian military campaign against Chechnya nor police actions against Chechens as a group, however, has broken the will of the Chechen people or lessened their resolve to live in an independent country of their own. If anything, the current Russian assaults against civilians in Chechnya itself and the portrayal of the Chechen nation as a whole as uniquely criminal or terrorist has only redoubled the resolve of the Chechens to escape from Russian domination. Consequently, the Chechens are certain to redouble their centuries-old struggle for freedom, whatever victories Moscow and its supporters there or elsewhere may report or claim.¹⁹⁷

This was not the first time that Goble had used language of this nature, nor even the most thorough accounting of his sympathies for Chechens and their effort to gain statehood.¹⁹⁸ In a 1995 article in *Post-Soviet Affairs* discussing the fallout of the First Chechen War, Goble wrote that “The Chechen people...will win the struggle for independence even though the forces arrayed against them appear overwhelming.”¹⁹⁹ He argued that the borders of the Russian Federation were “the most artificial of the post-Soviet states,” that they had been drawn by Stalin “with explicit political goals,” and suggested that the West should be open to a potential redrawing of Russian territory.²⁰⁰ Goble also contended that “Chechens have demonstrated that they can fight and resist, and that they are thus credible as a state,” a statement made in response to the widespread belief in Russia and the West that the *de facto* independent Chechnya was prone to lawlessness and criminality.²⁰¹ Goble even went so far as to say that “[Dudayev] and his soldiers have also behaved far more honorably than the Russian forces arrayed against them,”²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Goble was also heavily involved in advocacy for Baltic independence from the Soviet Union and was honored with an award from each of the three states.

¹⁹⁹ Paul A. Goble, “Chechnya and Its Consequences: A Preliminary Report,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1995): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.1995.10641392>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 24-26.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 24.

²⁰² Goble, “Chechnya and Its Consequences,” 24.

belying the litany of crimes committed by Chechen fighters that included kidnapping, hostage-taking and the use of human shields.²⁰³

In his 1999 testimony, Goble stopped short of openly praising Chechen separatists as he had four years earlier, but drew upon a similar lexicon referring to the Chechen people's ancient yearning for autonomy from imperial control. The argument he advanced was that brutal Russian policies reinforced the determination of Chechen separatists, but perspectives such as his would later feed into hyperbolic Russian accusations that RFE/RL was sympathetic to terrorists. Goble's use of the terms "struggle for freedom," "independent," Chechens' "will" and "resolve," "Chechen nation," and "Russian domination" all strikingly recalled the original purpose of RFE/RL as outlined in the Jackson memorandum: "Keeping alive the hope of liberation...and telling the various peoples that they are not forgotten by the free world." Goble's invocation of an underdog Chechen nation seeking liberation from Russia leaves one questioning whether he saw RFE/RL's current activity as being in some way connected to this struggle. At the very least, it is understandable how Russian officials may have come to this conclusion. Third party analysts have noted that such commentary, which exists in continuity with RFE/RL's historical role as an incubator of ethnic nationalism within the Soviet Union,²⁰⁴ was liable to be very negatively received in Russia. A later report on the Second Chechen War prepared for the Switzerland-based peacekeeping NGO Swisspeace offered the following assessment: "[M]any among the Western community see the causes for resistance as entirely motivated by repressive actions of the Russian military and its Chechen collaborators...Russia, in turn, reads in this a tacit approval of religious radicalism and...covert attempts to undermine Russia's standing in the world."²⁰⁵ Moreover, this would not be the first time that RFE/RL would seem to lend credibility to Chechen statehood. Eleven days after Goble's testimony, Ilyas Akhmadov, who briefly served as foreign minister of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria under Aslan Maskhadov, gave a press conference at RFE/RL's Prague headquarters to denounce the West's response to the war. He

²⁰³ Tishkov, *Chechnya*, 107; 114-115. Russell has noted that because the Chechen separatists "were much more accommodating to both Russian and Western journalists and human rights activists than were the federal forces, the insurgents got more than their fair share of positive reporting and were generally held to have won the propaganda war," which can help explain Goble's relatively positive impression of the Chechen resistance effort in early 1995. Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves," 105.

²⁰⁴ Tkacheva et al., "Information Freedom During the Cold War," 153-154.

²⁰⁵ Anna Matveeva, "International Actors and the Conflict in Chechnya," in *Searching for Peace in Chechnya - Swiss Initiatives and Experiences*, ed. Rita Grünenfelder and Heinz Krummenacher (Bern and Basel: Swisspeace, 2006), 33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11108.11>.

compared the situation in Chechnya to that of the Balkans and called for military intervention in the Caucasus by the United Nations and the Western countries. “Why, in the case of Kosovo was it possible, but in our case it is not possible? Do we differ from them? Aren’t the same bombs falling on us?...When we apply for help, we are answered ‘You are a subject of the Russian Federation, and all that is happening in your country is entirely an affair of Russia.’ But the murder of the whole population cannot be a matter of Russia.”²⁰⁶ While Goble and other RFE/RL employees did not go so far as to advocate American military involvement, the agency was nonetheless giving a platform to views and proposals significantly outside the range of options that the State Department considered acceptable.

From a policy standpoint, the most important aspect of Goble’s testimony was his discussion of the United States’ obligations toward both the Russian and Chechen people. He issued a call to action for American lawmakers to “[make] contingent any future assistance to Russia on better behavior toward Russian citizens and the principles of democracy” and warned that “[f]ailure to do that [would] further lower our moral influence in Russia and that region...” He also suggested, through his severe criticism of Russian media policies and praise for RFE/RL’s work, that it was in the interest of the United States to supply both Russians and Caucasians unfiltered information about the conflict and the motivations of the Russian government. Echoing the sentiment of many in the media and human rights advocacy community, Goble accused Western governments of being insufficiently responsive to the human rights disaster of the First Chechen War due to fears that criticizing Yeltsin’s conduct would damage Russia’s fragile democratic institutions. He advised those present that the West’s previous Chechnya policy had emboldened the Kremlin into believing that it could prosecute a second war with impunity: “During the first Chechen war...most Western leaders were either silent or supportive, in the hopes that President Boris Yeltsin would soon turn again toward democracy. But the events of recent months suggest that that hope was misplaced. Indeed, some have suggested that the reason Moscow has acted in the way it has against Chechnya and against the Chechens is precisely because in the past the West appeared to be so willing not to object.”²⁰⁷ The United States and its allies, he claimed, had once again been “reluctant to impose real

²⁰⁶ Susan Caskie, “Russia: Chechen Foreign Minister Calls For UN Mediation,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 9, 1999, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1092659.html>.

²⁰⁷ Testimony of Paul Goble, “Hearing: Chechnya: Implications for Russia and the Caucasus.”

penalties on Russia by restricting aid, loans, and other assistance, lest such a cutback lead Moscow to turn away from reform elsewhere” as the new operation in Chechnya unfolded; he emphasized that such inaction would have devastating consequences for Russian democracy and for Western relations with an authoritarian Russia, with which it would be “difficult if not impossible to cooperate at all.” Goble’s plea for a more robust response from the U.S. government was presumably favorably received by Smith, who singled him out for praise at the hearing’s conclusion and commended his “excellent testimony.”

Through Goble, RFE/RL thus presented itself to Congress as deeply opposed to the United States’ noncommittal Chechnya policy. It is worth noting that Goble did not provide a clear outline of what RFE/RL would achieve in either providing access to reliable information in Russia and the Caucasus or imposing financial and diplomatic penalties on Moscow, except insofar as such projects would aid the recovery and further development of an ailing Russian democracy. This, of course, directly contravened the State Department’s Chechnya policy that Goble had harshly criticized, which held that punishment or interference would isolate Russia and encourage the revocation of civil liberties and freedoms. Goble’s lack of exactitude about what a change in U.S. policy would achieve, alongside his history of sympathy for Chechen separatism, is an instructive example of the tension inherent in RFE/RL’s post-1991 operations. During the Cold War, RFE/RL’s media freedom campaigns had been explicitly linked to a goal of securing Eastern European independence from Soviet control; in 1999, Goble’s impassioned support for promoting media freedom in Russia and Chechnya remained, but could not be connected to an extant U.S. policy supporting Chechen independence from Russia. Goble may have felt reluctant, in his capacity as an employee and representative of the U.S. government, to openly declare advocacy for Chechen separatism despite appearing to sympathize with this cause.

B. Congressional and RFE/RL response to arrest of Andrei Babitsky

The arrest of Andrei Babitsky in January 2000 by Russian security forces caused a significant stir in diplomatic, political and media circles in both Russia and the United States. Babitsky, a veteran reporter for RFE/RL who worked in Chechnya during the first war, had gone to Grozny to investigate Russian government claims that civilians had been evacuated from the city prior to artillery bombardment (he found that these claims were false). On 16 January, he

was arrested by Russian security forces as he attempted to leave the city through its eastern quarter of Staraya Sunzha, and the footage he had shot was confiscated.²⁰⁸ He was then imprisoned in the Chernokozovo “filtration center,” and described his experience as follows:

I believe I am the only journalist of those who covered the first and the second Chechen wars who has seen a filtration center from the inside. I must say that all these horrors that we have heard from Chechens who had been there have been confirmed. Everything that we read about concentration camps of the Stalin period, all that we know about the German camps, all this is present there...As a journalist I was ‘registered’, as they say, only once. They have this procedure there. When a new detainee is being taken from his cell to the investigator he is made to crawl all the way under a rain of blows with rubber sticks. It hurts but one can survive it. This is a light treatment as compared with the tortures to which Chechens are subjected day and night...²⁰⁹

The reporter remained in custody for several weeks, during which time news of his arrest caused consternation in Russia’s community of journalists and attracted international outrage. At the end of January, Russian officials made a public statement to the media that Babitsky had been charged with participation in an armed insurrection.²¹⁰ Soon after, U.S. Senators Jesse Helms and Joseph Biden sent a letter to Vladimir Putin urging him to immediately free Babitsky, and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was visiting Moscow, expressed concern about Babitsky’s detention to her Russian counterpart, Igor Ivanov.²¹¹ On 4 February, Kremlin Press Secretary Sergei Yastrzhemsky claimed that the reporter had been involved in a prisoner swap with the Chechens, and that the Russian government was no longer responsible for what happened to him.²¹² In reality, this was a staged event in which Babitsky was handed over to a pro-Kremlin militant Chechen faction, which prolonged his imprisonment in the Russian government’s stead for three more weeks.²¹³ Babitsky was eventually flown from Dagestan to Moscow on 28 February, and returned to his home “in poor health and mentally exhausted.”²¹⁴ Shortly before Babitsky’s release, Putin sat for an interview with *Kommersant*. Asked about the Babitsky case, Putin called him a traitor and replied: “He worked directly for the enemy. He was not a neutral source of information. He worked for bandits, he worked for bandits...It is not good

²⁰⁸ “The Ordeal of Andrei Babitsky.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ “A Chronology of Events Surrounding the Disappearance of RFE/RL Correspondent Andrei Babitsky,” “Hearing: The War in Chechnya,” 30.

²¹¹ Ibid, 29.

²¹² Ian Traynor, “Alarm as Moscow Swaps Journalist for Soldiers,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/feb/04/chechnya.iantraynor>.

²¹³ Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 148; Laura Belin, “Politics and the mass media under Putin,” 135.

²¹⁴ “A Chronology of Events Surrounding the Disappearance of RFE/RL Correspondent Andrei Babitsky,” 25.

to cooperate with the bandits and write that they cut off the heads of our soldiers to show the horror of this war...Who asked him to go there without accreditation from official authorities?...What Babitsky did is much more dangerous than shooting machine guns...You say that he is a Russian citizen. Then behave according to the laws of your country, if you expect that the same laws will be respected in relation to you.”²¹⁵

The Babitsky case was widely discussed in Washington and prompted a series of resolutions, floor speeches and hearings condemning the event and considering its implications for media freedom in Russia.²¹⁶ The arrest was central in galvanizing support for the establishment of an RFE/RL North Caucasus program, and received attention from many senators and congressmen of both parties, including Helms, Biden, Paul Wellstone, Michael DeWine, Christopher Smith, Russell Feingold, Trent Lott, Christopher Dodd, William Roth and others. Wellstone (D-MN) decried the fact that “Russian authorities maintain a virtual ban on access to Chechnya by international and local journalists” and drew a causal connection between a lack of information among the Russian public and support for Putin’s policies in the Caucasus.²¹⁷ DeWine (R-OH) suggested that the United States continued to have a moral responsibility to inform and educate populations without access to a free press, and—crucially—that broadcasting targeted content in local languages was the optimal way to accomplish these tasks.²¹⁸ In the House of Representatives, Christopher Smith (R-NJ), whose career has featured a strong emphasis on human rights legislation, criticized Clinton for stating that the United States “can do business with Putin,” and argued that “If Mr. Putin is aware of the state of affairs at Chernokozovo and condoning it, I would submit that our business with Mr. Putin should be extremely limited.”²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Gevorkyan and Andrei Kolesnikov, “Zheleznyy Putin.”

²¹⁶ “Senate Resolution 261--Expressing the Sense of the Senate Regarding the Detention of Andrei Babitsky by the Government of the Russian Federation and Freedom of the Press in Russia,” February 24, 2000, *Congressional Record* 146, no. 18 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), S825, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2000-02-24/html/CREC-2000-02-24-pt1-PgS825.htm>.

²¹⁷ “Chechnya,” floor speech of Paul Wellstone, February 8, 2000, *Congressional Record* 146, no. 10 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), S478, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2000-02-08/html/CREC-2000-02-08-pt1-PgS478-2.htm>

²¹⁸ “Kazakhstan,” floor speech of Michael DeWine, February 7, 2000, *Congressional Record* 146, no. 1 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2000), 694-697, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CRECB-2000-pt1/html/CRECB-2000-pt1-Pg694.htm>.

²¹⁹ “The Ordeal of Andrei Babitsky.”

Soon after Babitsky's release, a hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations was convened by Jesse Helms (R-NC) on 29 February 2000 with three witnesses: Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch; Karen Konig AbuZayd of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; and Thomas L. Dine, director of RFE/RL. Dine recounted Babitsky's ordeal and argued that the episode constituted a return to Soviet era practices: "media freedom is far from guaranteed in Russia. In fact, what we are witnessing is regression...officials under Putin far too easily slip back into Soviet era patterns...[RFE/RL's three correspondents in the Chechen warzone] report totalitarian tactics, harassment, threats, violation of the human being, the human body, the human spirit..."²²⁰ In his prepared statement submitted to the congressional record, Dine similarly contended that the Babitsky arrest was compelling proof RFE/RL's continuing relevance as a source of free media in Eurasia: "the last few years and especially the last few months have demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that our reinvented communications company will have a role to play well into the 21st century...the path toward human freedom has never been without its twists and turns, its retreats as well as its advances. And I pledge to you that we at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty will continue the fight."²²¹ Helms enthusiastically agreed with Dine's testimony, saying: "At a time when Western governments have turned a blind eye to this conflict, the ability of journalists to report objectively on this war and its horrors has become all the more important...Our ability to help Russia evolve into a stable democracy cannot be effective if we ignore such systematic repression of the press and the brutal campaign of terror Russia has conducted."²²² He then castigated the Clinton administration for its handling of the war and expressed praise for the work of RFE/RL in Russia. Helms would later become a vocal advocate of establishing an RFE/RL North Caucasus Unit, and in the words of Ariel Cohen, indeed "led the charge for its creation."²²³

These hearings and floor speeches, as well as several unanimously approved resolutions condemning the Babitsky arrest, indicated an emerging bipartisan consensus that Russian media conditions had deteriorated in alarming fashion and that the United States had an obligation to confront the problem. RFE/RL played a central role in convincing Congress of this, both through

²²⁰ Testimony of Thomas L. Dine, "Hearing: The War in Chechnya."

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Speech of Jesse Helms, "Hearing: The War in Chechnya."

²²³ Ariel Cohen, "Radio Liberty Launches Controversial Chechen Service."

the testimony of Dine and the fact that Babitsky himself was employed by the broadcaster. That Congress was receptive to this messaging, when several years earlier it had reduced RFE/RL's funding and contemplated shuttering the agency, is suggestive of the continuing influence of Russo-skepticism in the body even prior to Putin's ascendance to the presidency. This Russo-skepticism also manifested in the belief that Chechens were an oppressed minority, scapegoated and stereotyped as terrorists by a sadistic and retrogressive Russian government. That narrative had antecedents from the First Chechen War and had firmly taken hold in Congress prior to the 11 September attacks, though such characterizations lessened in number afterwards. As Williams has written: "In 1999 the Chechen insurgents were typically portrayed in the United States as Afghan-style 'freedom fighters' engaged in a heroic David-versus-Goliath struggle against the neo-Russian imperium."²²⁴ These sentiments also formed part of a broader movement away from cooperative engagement with Putin on account of his undemocratic behavior. The rationale for Caucasus broadcasting in Congress, then, was increasingly based on the "non-negotiability" of the Putin government and the need to penetrate the Russian information blackout. At the same time, the eruption of the Second Chechen War rekindled Congress' conception of the United States as a promoter of human rights and free speech. Condemnations of Putin and Russian conduct in Chechnya were as much about drawing a contrast with the United States as they were about the facts of the case, although senators and congressmen were likely moved by testimony of human suffering in Russia.

Missing from these discussions was a clear conception of what broadcasting to the Caucasus would accomplish. The reaction to the Babitsky arrest was predicated on Russia's violations of human rights, not on political support for the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Notwithstanding the romanticized portrayal of Chechens described by Williams, no senator or congressman openly expressed support for Chechen separatism, as such a position would have been in complete contravention of State Department policy. In a marked contrast to broadcasting plans of the Cold War, it was never satisfactorily explained either by RFE/RL employees or their supporters in Congress what listeners in the Caucasus would be expected to do with the "objective reporting" and "accurate information" that would be provided to them. It was not specified whether Chechens would be expected to organize parties or resistance organizations

²²⁴ Williams, "Shattering the Al Qaeda-Chechen Myth, Part I."

around such reporting (the Solidarity and Afghani mujahedeen models, respectively), and whether it was appropriate for the United States to aid in the creation of such organizations. Instead, access to unfiltered information was simply presented as a human right that Caucasus peoples were being deprived of by a retrenching Russian state. Whatever the merits of this moral argument, it once again illustrated the confusion of purpose that RFE/RL was experiencing ten years after the fall of communism. Officially speaking, the agency sought to perform its instrumental function of advancing press freedom in the Caucasus as an end in itself; but the Russian government would interpret its actions as proof of clandestine U.S. government support of Chechen resistance to Moscow. The undercurrent of sympathy for Chechen separatism expressed by figures like Goble gave these accusations the appearance of additional weight, and complicated diplomatic relations between Moscow and Washington.

C. Appropriation of funding for the RFE/RL North Caucasus Unit

Following calls to increase support for broadcasting activity in Russia, funding was allocated for RFE/RL to open a North Caucasus Unit in 2001. In its budget request to Congress for fiscal year 2002, RFE/RL formally invoked the Babitsky case as justification for an appropriation to broadcast in the Caucasus. “RFE/RL correspondent Andrei Babitsky was detained by the Russians because of his on-the-scene coverage of the war in Chechnya, which told the Russian people and others in the region the facts behind the war, including the carnage among Chechen civilians, the drama of the refugees, and the death toll among Russian soldiers. Mr. Babitsky’s own human drama brought to light the work that is being done around the world by the correspondents of each of RFE/RL’s language services, bringing news and information to societies that do not enjoy the free flow of information.”²²⁵ The Senate Committee on Appropriations approved this request on 20 July 2001, and explained the allocation as follows: “The Committee believes an opportunity exists to reach important and isolated minorities in the Northern Caucasus. RFE/RL has in the past broadcast in native languages to this region. The Committee believes that doing so today would not be financially prohibitive, and further believes that the Chechen crisis has created a genuine need in this region for objective, uncensored information. The Committee directs RFE/RL to expand broadcasting to the Northern Caucasus

²²⁵ “Justification of the Budget Estimates: Broadcasting Board of Governors,” in *Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations for 2002*, 107th Congress, First Session (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), 24.

and to develop programming in Avar, Chechen and Circassian. To the degree desirable, RFE/RL should exploit VOA-TV assets [VOA-TV was appropriated \$19,508,000 for 2001-02].”²²⁶ In addition, RFE/RL requested and received \$414,000 to prepare the North Caucasus Unit for operations in 2001.²²⁷ After broadcasting commenced, the Appropriations Committee received a report on the program from RFE/RL; it subsequently renewed funding for 2003, saying: “The Committee commends Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) for developing programming in Avar, Chechen, and Circassian and for expanding broadcasting to the North Caucasus. The Committee recognizes the continuing importance of reaching the isolated minorities of the Northern Caucasus in their native languages. The Chechen crisis is ongoing and there is still a great need in this region for objective, uncensored information. Within the funding provided for RFE/RL, not less than \$2,400,000 shall be for the North Caucasus Unit.”²²⁸ Nearly identical language was used when renewing the program in the following years, though the amount of funding varied over time. It should be noted that, reflecting the congressional discourse that preceded funding of the North Caucasus Unit, the Appropriation Committee’s justifications did not include any specific end-goals for the program, referring only to the importance of providing “isolated minorities of the North Caucasus” with “objective, uncensored information.” This was presented as an end in itself without specified strategic or geopolitical purpose.

Following the appropriation of funds, RFE/RL began broadcasting to the North Caucasus on 3 April 2002. The programming was disseminated from RFE/RL’s Prague headquarters,²²⁹ primarily in the Russian, Chechen, Avar and Circassian languages, with sporadically-produced additional content in Adyge, Ingush, Karachai-Balkar, Karakalpak, and Ossetian.²³⁰ Broadcasts in Avar and Circassian were halted in 2016, but content in Chechen continues to be produced as of April 2020.²³¹ Radio programming in Russian, Chechen, Avar and Circassian was transmitted

²²⁶ “Broadcasting Board of Governors,” in *Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, The Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2002*, 107th Congress, First Session, July 20, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2001), 142-144.

²²⁷ “Justification of the Budget Estimates: Broadcasting Board of Governors,” 27.

²²⁸ “Broadcasting Board of Governors,” in *Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, The Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2003*, 107th Congress, Second Session, July 24, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2002), 150-152.

²²⁹ “RFE/RL’s North Caucasus Service,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 2020, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/rferl-north-caucasus-service>.

²³⁰ “Register of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty broadcast records: North Caucasus Service Records, 1993-2013,” Online Archive of California, University of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt996nd6jz/dsc/?query=chechnya#ref62>.

²³¹ A. Ross Johnson, “History of RFE/RL.”

on short wave and typically took the form of daily fifteen minute segments that were each repeated once, for a total of 2 hours of content.²³² Geographically-speaking, the North Caucasus program serves the area spanning from the northwestern shore of the Caspian Sea to the eastern shore of the Black Sea, a distance of roughly one thousand kilometers. According to RFE/RL, the political units and subunits covered by the North Caucasus program in whole or in part are Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Krasnodar Krai, Adygeya, North Ossetia, and Stavropol Krai.²³³ The program has had the same director, Aslan Doukaev, since operations began. In June 2002, soon after the launch of the radio service, RFE/RL began to publish a semimonthly English-language “RFE/RL North Caucasus Report” that summarized the content of recent broadcasts to the region to online readers; this report ran until 2008.²³⁴ For speakers of Russian and Chechen, the RFE/RL branch website “Kavkaz.Realii” went online in 2017.²³⁵ RFE/RL describes the North Caucasus program as “one of the few independent media outlets reporting in this predominantly Muslim region...[and] the only international, Chechen-language broadcaster providing an independent alternative to the tightly controlled official press in this notoriously arbitrary region of Russia.”²³⁶

4. American and Russian reaction to the North Caucasus program

A. Troubled implementation

The implementation of North Caucasus broadcasting saw a series of stumbles that reflected the contradictions the program posed for U.S. policy toward the Chechen conflict. Operations were originally slated to begin on 28 February 2002. Prior to this date, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage lodged an objection to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), RFE/RL’s governing body, about the upcoming launch. On 25 February, Sarah E. Mendelson obtained the text of a 21 December 2001 letter by Armitage detailing these misgivings, and described the letter in a spring 2002 issue of *International Security*: “U.S. policy continues to be dominated by concerns that focusing on the war in Chechnya would have a negative impact on U.S. foreign policy. For example, a recent letter from Deputy Secretary of

²³² “Justification of the Budget Estimates: Broadcasting Board of Governors,” 24.

²³³ “RFE/RL’s North Caucasus Service.”

²³⁴ “Caucasus Report: June 24, 2002,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, June 24, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1343866.html>.

²³⁵ “RFE/RL’s North Caucasus Service.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

State Richard Armitage to Marc Nathanson, director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, makes clear that the administration will press Congress to ‘delay or suspend the start of’ RFL/RL broadcasting in ‘North Caucasian [sic] languages.’ The letter expresses the administration’s concern that these broadcasts would affect U.S. ‘credibility’ and result in a ‘perception that we have shifted our support to one side.’”²³⁷ On 27 February, Armitage intervened to temporarily postpone the launch, which was ultimately delayed by more than a month.²³⁸ Nathanson publicly assented to the delay, citing “‘serious’ and ‘real’ security issues.”²³⁹ According to RFE/RL’s own 28 February account of events on its online series *Newsline*, “Nathanson said his Broadcasting Board of Governors expects to meet ‘in a few weeks with the [Bush] administration’ following White House consultations with the U.S. Congress, which has already approved funding for the broadcasts.”²⁴⁰

The State Department signaled that it was uncertain about the utility of the venture and the diplomatic tension it could cause or exacerbate. Speaking to reporters on 27 February, department spokesman Richard Boucher noted that the Bush administration “felt that perhaps broadcasts in these local languages...could be counterproductive to the overall effort to get a dialogue started in Chechnya.”²⁴¹ He went on to say that “We believe that the only way is to solve the problems [in Chechnya] is a political solution. We want to make sure that everything we do contributes to that goal and doesn’t detract from it.”²⁴² When first implemented, the delay was meant to go on “indefinitely” until internal disagreements involving Congress, the White House, the State Department and RFE/RL’s governing body could be resolved.²⁴³ Of particular concern was the potential appearance of provocation. Armitage and Secretary of State Colin Powell feared that the broadcasts would diminish the United States’ ability to appear forthright in its intentions and interfere with bilateral coordination in the emerging War on Terror, given Moscow’s narrative that the war in Chechnya was a counterterrorism campaign. A subsequent

²³⁷ Mendelson, “Russians’ Rights Imperiled,” 51.

²³⁸ “Freedom in the World: Chechnya.”

²³⁹ “Newsline - February 28, 2002.”

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ariel Cohen, “US Postpones Chechen Broadcasts in Goodwill Gesture Towards Russia,” *Eurasianet*, March 6, 2002, <https://eurasianet.org/us-postpones-chechen-broadcasts-in-goodwill-gesture-towards-russia>.

²⁴³ Cohen, “Radio Liberty Launches Controversial Chechen Service.”; “Newsline - February 28, 2002; Martin Ritchie, “US Radio Begins Chechen Broadcasts,” *BBC News*, April 3, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1909273.stm>.

Congressional Research Service report stated that the Bush administration feared “that the broadcasts might harm U.S.-Russian relations.”²⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the State Department eventually relented and ended the delay. This was because, *de jure*, RFE/RL is guaranteed editorial independence under the International Broadcasting Act of 1994, which granted the BBG authority to “direct and supervise all broadcasting activities” and to “review and evaluate the mission and operation of...all such activities within the context of the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States.”²⁴⁵ The purpose of this law is to institute a “firewall” insulating the reporting of RFE/RL and sister agencies from political manipulation.²⁴⁶ Although the law allows the Secretary of State to “provide information and guidance on foreign policy issues to the Board,” which gave Armitage authority to intervene through Nathanson, the State Department does not have a final veto.²⁴⁷ Consequently, the North Caucasus Unit commenced operations on 3 April, and on that day, Dine gave his assurance that Radio Liberty would be “accurate, impartial, and respectful of the human rights of all persons in this war-torn region.”²⁴⁸ According to a CNN report on the event, “U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters in Washington the United States had looked very carefully into all possible implications before giving the go-ahead for Radio Liberty.”²⁴⁹

The commencement of North Caucasus broadcasting put the State Department into a politically sensitive position. The situation necessitated producing assurances of good faith to the Russian Foreign Ministry while avoiding disavowals of RFE/RL’s activity, for which the U.S. government was ultimately responsible as the agency’s sponsor and source of funding. The approach taken was to maintain that the North Caucasus program was the product of an independent organization over whose actions the State Department did not have a final say. According to a BBC report of 3 April 2002, “The US State Department stressed that the radio

²⁴⁴ Author name redacted, “Russia’s Chechnya Conflict: Developments in 2002-2003,” Congressional Research Service Report, April 16, 2003 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2003), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20030416_RL31620_3bf304d515c1db7f056e0ab6cb0225378da612ee.pdf.

²⁴⁵ International Broadcasting Act, Public Law 103-236, 103rd Congress, Second Session, Passed April 29, 1994, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/oversight/legislation/international-broadcasting-act/>.

²⁴⁶ Matthew C. Weed, “U.S. International Broadcasting: Background and Issues for Reform,” Congressional Research Service Report (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2016), 3-4, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43521.pdf>.

²⁴⁷ International Broadcasting Act.

²⁴⁸ “Newline - April 4, 2002,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 4, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142648.html>.

²⁴⁹ “Radio station fuels diplomatic row.”

station, although funded by the State Department and mandated by the US Congress, was not a tool of foreign policy” (a contestable claim; the 1994 law situates RFE/RL’s mission “within the context of the broad foreign policy objectives”).²⁵⁰ Department spokesman Philip Reeker said of this: “[RFE/RL is] a news and information service. [It] represents an effort to provide objective reporting and information to the region.”²⁵¹ Powell himself sought to assure the Russian diplomatic corps that the launch of the North Caucasus service was “not intended to harm Russia or damage Russian-American relations.”²⁵²

B. Russian response

Further complicating matters was the vociferous objection of the Russian government before, during and after the program’s launch period. These objections centered around the themes that the United States was interfering in Russia’s internal affairs; that RFE/RL was enabling, or worse, sympathizing with terrorists; and that the broadcasts would need to be countered and indicated that the United States was not acting in good faith. Moreover, many interpreted the broadcasts as a return to form, in which RFE/RL resumed the subversive mission it had conducted during the Cold War.

Early in 2002, the Kremlin vigorously signaled to Washington that broadcasting would be viewed as extremely provocative. Russian officials claimed that such a move would jeopardize the fragile cordiality and spirit of cooperation that prevailed between the Russian and American governments in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks. In January 2002, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov “reportedly spent half an hour complaining to Colin Powell about the pending broadcasts...”²⁵³ Around the same time, the Kremlin “reportedly threatened to pull Radio Liberty AM/FM broadcasts off the air and shut down [RFE/RL’s] Moscow bureau” if broadcasting commenced, though Putin’s press secretary for Chechen affairs, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, publicly denied this.²⁵⁴ On 27 February, one day before the originally-scheduled launch date, Putin delivered remarks at a meeting of the Russian Security Council that mentioned the need to improve the reach of the Russian broadcasting apparatus in Chechnya. Although

²⁵⁰ Ritchie, “US Radio Begins Chechen Broadcasts.”

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Aleksei Marinin, “«Svoboda» govorit po-chechenski,” *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, April 4, 2002.

²⁵³ Cohen, “Radio Liberty Launches Controversial Chechen Service.”

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

Putin's comments were framed in terms of conducting a robust counterterrorism operation, their timing also implies that potential American inroads into the Caucasus information sphere would need to be matched with Russian "media support."²⁵⁵ According to Kremlin records, "President Putin...said it was important to resume Russian television and radio broadcasts in Chechnya, to establish a republican radio station and to print newspapers there. He said the information vacuum was being eliminated rather slowly and that there was no media support in the counter-terrorist operations zone."²⁵⁶

When the program went online on 3 April, the Foreign Ministry issued a warning that the action would sour relations, a loud chorus of elected officials condemned Russia's lack of reciprocal broadcasting in the United States, and Vladimir Putin's office declared that RFE/RL's programming will be monitored "very seriously and attentively."²⁵⁷ The Foreign Ministry dispatched a message to the U.S. embassy in Moscow, which said of the matter: "The initiation of specific propaganda broadcasts to the region, including Chechnya, where, as part of the anti-terrorist operation, active steps are being taken to counter extremism and religious fanaticism, may complicate the efforts of the federal authorities to stabilize the situation in this area."²⁵⁸ In a 3 April Moscow roundtable on relations with the United States, the political scientist and Putin advisor Gleb Pavlovsky remarked that "America pays little attention [to the fact] that Russia is trying to move from a militarized life to a more peaceful state," implying that American meddling would prolong and worsen, rather than shorten, the war in the Caucasus.²⁵⁹ Yastrzhembsky accused the broadcasts of "one-sidedness" and vowed that "Moscow will not disregard indulgence in extremism and terrorism."²⁶⁰ He went on to say that, in the long term, "some kind of reciprocal action within the framework of Russian legislation" would be needed.²⁶¹

The Kremlin seized upon the public statements of Jesse Helms and Paul Goble to portray Radio Liberty as the puppet of radical Russophobes on a crusade against the Russian state.

²⁵⁵ "Newslines - February 28, 2002."

²⁵⁶ President of Russia, "President Vladimir Putin Chaired a Meeting of the Russian Security Council," February 27, 2002, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/26960>.

²⁵⁷ Ritchie, "US radio begins Chechen broadcasts."

²⁵⁸ Floor speech of Sergey Shishkarev to Russian Duma, April 24, 2002, <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/1719/>.

²⁵⁹ "Newslines - April 4, 2002."

²⁶⁰ Marinin, "«Svoboda» govorit po-chechenski."

²⁶¹ Stershev, "'SVOBODA' TERRORISTAM?"

According to a contemporary analysis by Ariel Cohen of 27 March 2002, “Russian officials viewed the genesis of the service in conspiratorial terms. They suggested that Helms’s staff member for Russia Ian Brzezinski, spearheaded the effort together with Paul Goble, then-Director of Public Affairs at Radio Liberty. The two are supporters of the Chechen independence, the Russian officials alleged.”²⁶² By analogy, the United States was even implicitly accused of seeking regime change in Russia. Cohen went on to report that “Vremya Novostei, a Moscow weekly with ties to the Kremlin, compared the Chechen broadcasting to Radio Liberty’s Radio Free Iraq and the Farsi Service, which broadcasts to Iran. The weekly pointed out that the broadcasts are calling for regime change in these countries.”²⁶³ Moreover, Russian and pro-Kremlin Chechen officials immediately assumed that the broadcasts would be sympathetic to the rebels. Aleksei Volin, a senior functionary responsible for mass media, alleged that “broadcasting in the Chechen language will be carried out by representatives of radical Chechen groups. One has to consider that there aren’t people in the United States who know the Chechen language.”²⁶⁴ This statement, of course, echoed the Soviet-era accusation that RFE/RL was staffed by defectors and traitors. Akhmar Zavgaev, one of Chechnya’s two representatives in the Federation Council (the upper house of Russia’s legislature), remarked that “the Radio Liberty broadcasts will not bring any good [to Chechnya]” and “might somehow work to the benefit of extremism and banditry.”²⁶⁵ The pro-Kremlin head of administration in Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, expressed his worry that RFE/RL would “focus on criticizing the official authorities and the federal center’s efforts to rebuild the economy...and to uproot terrorism in Chechnya,” which would amount to “political sabotage against the Russian Federation as whole.”²⁶⁶

In the Duma, condemnation of the broadcasting, as well as pressure to act against it, mounted across the ideological spectrum. United Russia member and deputy chairman of the International Committee Sergey Shishkarev accused the United States of pursuing a duplicitous policy of “double standards” and “double morality.” In a speech of 24 April 2002, Shishkarev

²⁶² Cohen, “Radio Liberty Launches Controversial Chechen Service.”

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ “Officials Denounce Radio Liberty’s Broadcasts to the Caucasus,” *The Jamestown Foundation Monitor* 8, no. 67, <https://jamestown.org/program/officials-denounce-radio-libertys-broadcasts-to-the-caucasus/>.

²⁶⁵ “Newline - April 4, 2002.”

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

declared to the floor of the Duma, “[The] decision to broadcast to Chechnya in the Chechen language [ignores] the official position of the [United States], which they call a partner in the fight against international terrorism. These frivolous decisions, based on the individualistic approach of the United States to international politics, we regard as a manifestation not only of double standards, but of double morality...Such a manifestation of disrespect for the political will of Russia cannot remain unanswered.”²⁶⁷ Shishkarev furthermore questioned the integrity of the United States’ commitment to the fight against international terrorism and accused American politicians of trying to draw a distinction between Osama bin Laden and Maskhadov, “who, by the way, is sitting with [bin Laden] in the same trench.”²⁶⁸ Shishkarev suggested that the United States Senate was RFE/RL’s puppet master, and that “the will of the [Senate]...will be broadcast on the ‘Liberty’ radio station, which means that the radio station will not be able to maintain information neutrality.”²⁶⁹ Thus Shishkarev advanced the idea that RFE/RL remained the subversive instrument of U.S. leaders, who with one face publicly propounded unity against a common foe, and with another supported Russia’s terrorist enemies. This paralleled the *Krasnaia Zvezda* article of Roman Stershev, which contended that “[b]y giving the go-ahead to broadcasting to the North Caucasus, the United States again demonstrates a policy of ‘double standards’ in relation to international terrorism and extremism.”²⁷⁰

Russia’s lack of reciprocal broadcasting in the United States, and the necessity of controlling the latter’s media activity in Russia, were also key matters of discussion. On 24 April, Shishkarev motioned to submit a notice of disapproval to Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, with the message: “We are interested in the way in which the radio station ‘Liberty’ received a license for broadcasting on Russian air and on what basis this radio station operates in the territory of the Russian Federation...Why does our radio station, for example, Voice of Russia, not have similar rights in the United States? What does the Government of Russia plan to do to neutralize the very likely negative effect of the radio station ‘Liberty’ broadcasting to the North Caucasus?”²⁷¹ On the same day, communist party deputy Yury Nikiforenko accused Yeltsin of opportunistically betraying Russia when he signed the 27 August 1991 decree

²⁶⁷ Floor speech of Sergey Shishkarev to Russian Duma.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Stershev, “‘SVOBODA’ TERRORISTAM?”

²⁷¹ Floor speech of Sergey Shishkarev to Russian Duma.

legalizing RFE/RL's presence in the country. "The fact is that there are no Russian radio stations on the air in the United States. The FSB and foreign intelligence do not finance anyone against the United States. And here we experienced a humiliating act of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin in August 1991: he needed help in his struggle against Soviet power. And now we got a radio station that is fighting against the Russian people, Russian culture, the Russian state, and not only in connection with Chechnya, but in many positions."²⁷² Nikiforenko was asserting that Radio Liberty had never stopped being a hostile agent; that it was resuming a multipronged assault on Russian society; and that it was a symbol of the country's continued cultural and geopolitical humiliation by the United States. He also noted Russia's lack of reciprocal broadcasting in America, something that Putin had also remarked upon in an earlier press conference of 18 July 2001. Responding to a question about international media cooperation, the president stated, "I would say that we are totally open, whereas we ourselves sometimes meet with obstacles. For instance, I am sure representatives of Radio Liberty are present here. Radio Liberty is operating here as a national radio station. But when our Ministry of the Press asked the US authorities to allow Radio Russia or Radio Mayak to operate on the same terms, we were turned down."²⁷³

Interestingly, calls for censorship or retaliation were not universally supported in the Duma, and the dissenting voices diagnosed the problem as a question of not adequately learning the lessons of the Cold War. Fatherland – All Russia deputy Konstantin Kosachev delivered a case to the International Committee rooted in upholding press freedom: "Of course, it's impossible to agree with many assessments of Liberty journalists, but if we follow the principle of freedom of speech, then we must defend our positions and interests not through prohibitions and jamming, but with the help of transparency and legitimacy of actions by federal forces in Chechnya."²⁷⁴ More provocative was the dissent of Union of Right Forces deputy Andrei Wolf, whose strikingly forthright speech centered less on principle and more on the practical shortcomings of censorship.

²⁷² Floor speech of Yury Nikiforenko to Russian Duma, April 24, 2002, <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/1719/>.

²⁷³ President of Russia, "Excerpts from the Transcript of a Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists," July 18, 2001, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21291>.

²⁷⁴ Floor speech of Konstantin Kosachev to Russian Duma, April 24, 2002, http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/api_search/?kodz=612&kodvopr=32.

I am also against the propaganda of terrorism in the mass media, but I want to draw the attention of my esteemed colleagues to the reason why the Liberty radio station's broadcasting in the Chechen language will definitely find its audience. It is in a certain information vacuum which has formed in the territory of the republic, where the only source of information about the current situation of the counterterrorist operation is one – the official point of view. Unfortunately, this point of view is one-sided and not always objective. And in this situation, naturally, other, alternative points of view will be heard and will be popular... We have very bad memories related to how we jammed Radio Liberty and Voice of America, but, despite this, the intellectuals in the kitchens tried to listen. Let's not go on the same prohibitive path. And if we say that we are losing the information war in Chechnya, then we are losing it not because we did not ban something in time, but because we cannot prepare truly high-quality journalists working professionally in this field who could adequately and objectively cover the events taking place in Chechnya from all sides.²⁷⁵

In his address, Wolf argued that the Russian political sphere had inherited distrust of RFE/RL from Soviet times, and was in danger of adopting the same prohibitive policies that had failed the USSR's security services. While Wolf understood the source of this distrust, he believed that Russia needed to draw upon its experiences to effectively meet the present challenge of RFE/RL's involvement in the Caucasus. Weak journalism, Wolf claimed, would always leave Russia vulnerable to such intrusions, and the cycle would not be stopped until the Russian media itself achieved a higher degree of professionalism and objectivity. Wolf did not seek to defend RFE/RL, which by 2002 would have been a political risk. He did not dispute that RFE/RL was acting against Russia's interests, nor that the agency was once again exploiting the country's weaknesses. Instead, he offered an opinion about how Russia could best mitigate the effectiveness of RFE/RL's Caucasus programming and limit U.S. influence in the region. This is instructive: both those who sought to censor and retaliate against RFE/RL, and those who called for moderation, believed that the agency was, as Stershev put it, "a tool for promoting American interests." With a likeminded president and a clear example of what could be framed as a premeditated infringement on Russian sovereignty and an interjection into a sensitive domestic crisis, it was a matter of time before the North Caucasus program would be used as a pretext to nullify Yeltsin's August 1991 decree, especially in light of Yastrzhembsky's promise of "reciprocal action."

Six months later, on 4 October, Putin revoked the decree.²⁷⁶ The goal of this act was to signal to RFE/RL and the United States that it would no longer enjoy "special" status within the context of Russian media law, and that the agency would be required to register as a foreign

²⁷⁵ Floor speech of Andrei Wolf to Russian Duma, April 24, 2002, http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/api_search/?kodz=612&kodvopr=32.

²⁷⁶ President of Russia, "O priznanii utrativshim silu Ukaza Prezidenta RSFSR ot 27 avgusta 1991 g. N 93 "O byuro nezavisimoy radiostantsii "Svoboda"/"Svobodnaya Yevropa."""

information service alongside the others operating in the Russian Federation. The president's information office released a statement through *RIA Novosti* with the explanation: "Despite the end of the Cold War and the rise of Russian-American relations to a new level of trust and cooperation, the editorial policy of Radio Liberty / Free Europe has not only not lost its ideological orientation, but has also acquired in recent times an even more tendentious character. This is clearly seen in its broadcasting to Chechnya and Ukraine, when information is often presented selectively and one-sidedly."²⁷⁷ Putin's decree, the release stated, "restores justice in the Russian information space and puts all players on an equal footing...[RFE/RL is] in a privileged position in relation to other foreign media working in Russia."²⁷⁸ The journalist Elena Glushkova, of Radio Liberty's Moscow office, replied by denying that RFE/RL had had any privileges in the Russian sphere.²⁷⁹ She also noted that RFE/RL's decision to broadcast in the North Caucasus was made in the United States by senior management and that her office had not been involved in deliberations.²⁸⁰ A *New York Times* article of 5 October described the Kremlin's press release: "[T]he statement reiterated criticisms that Russian officials have leveled against [RFE/RL] for its coverage. It singled out the station's reporting on Chechnya, where Russia is mired in a civil war, and on Ukraine, a former Soviet republic."²⁸¹ Although Putin's revocation of the 1991 decree raised the question of whether Radio Liberty's right to a Moscow office would be jeopardized, no action on this front was ultimately taken. It should be noted that although Radio Liberty employees in Moscow expressed uncertainty about their employer's future in Russia, the Ministry of Communications and Informatics had renewed the agency's broadcasting license in June for a further five years, suggesting that outright eviction was not being considered by the Russian state. Instead, in the following years the Putin government intensified its campaign of harassment and legal obstacles against Radio Liberty employees that began with the arrest of Babitsky, although that case arguably remains the most brazen display of intimidation on record.

²⁷⁷ "Privilegii radio "Svoboda" zakonchilis'," *RIA Novosti*, October 4, 2002, <https://ria.ru/20021004/236952.html>.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Borodina and Hohlov, "Prezident RSFSR ne pomog 'Svobode.'"

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Steven Lee Myers, "Putin Annuls Decree Allowing Radio Liberty's Broadcasts."

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is not to render judgment about whether the United States should (or could) have done more to stop the carnage in Chechnya, or whether RFE/RL should have begun broadcasting to the North Caucasus in 2002. The merits of both these decisions are debatable, and as the controversy surrounding them indicates, both sides can be defended on either question. Instead, the thesis has sought to demonstrate that foreign policy produced by disconnected components of state machinery, and without a unified goal, will be incoherent, less effective and potentially a source of diplomatic embarrassment or disruption. In the future, if the U.S. government is serious about holding Russia to account for human rights abuses or democratic failures that occur in that country—and is willing to act on its beliefs with concrete economic or legal punishments—then RFE/RL should be considered a useful tool in a broader campaign of liberalization. On the other hand, if American leaders have a strategic reason for overlooking Russian abuses—as the Clinton and Bush administrations felt was necessary—then Congress should curtail RFE/RL’s sensitive activity in Russia if unwanted disruptions of the U.S. foreign policy agenda are to be avoided. An incoherent, mixed-message policy undermines U.S.-Russian relations on all fronts. This final discussion offers some concluding thoughts about the pitfalls of “disconnected” or “decoupled” soft power projection.

First, friction between soft power institutions and State Department policy exposes the U.S. government and its diplomatic corps to believable accusations of duplicity and bad faith, and forces American officials into a disadvantaged position of denying the accusations. These denials, in turn, retroactively damage the credibility of previous bilateral discussions and of assurances that American diplomats had made to Russian counterparts. Thus, when Armitage expressed concern that the broadcasts would affect U.S. “credibility,” he referred to the risk that they would invalidate the State Department’s carefully-crafted noncommittal stance on Chechnya by giving the “perception that we have shifted our support to one side.” Further, when Powell was forced to publicly deny that RFE/RL’s Caucasus broadcasting represented an effort to “harm Russia or damage Russian-American relations,” Russian officials and spokespeople could and did impute that previous U.S. promises to respect Russian sovereignty had been empty. These diplomatic complications damaged the already fragile trust between U.S. and Russian officials.

Second, the disconnect is also damaging to soft power institutions themselves, because it gives hostile authorities ammunition to discredit them as mere pawns of a two-faced foreign policy, as opposed to credible sources of information. This was reflected in the Defense Ministry article by Stershnev, who accused RFE/RL of being nothing more than a “tool” with which the United States could “increase pressure on Russian policy pursued in the region.” While such allegations were routinely made during the Cold War, they were ultimately ineffective because Eastern Bloc audiences usually perceived RFE/RL as being representative of the American government’s liberal-democratic values. Incoherence generates the risk that audiences will eventually become aware of the discrepancy between the liberal ideals propagated by RFE/RL and the reality of American foreign policy. During the early Cold War, the most salient example of this problem was RFE’s 1956 pledge to Hungarian listeners of American assistance that was not forthcoming, a “broken promise” whose negative effects on RFE’s reputation took years of careful reporting to erase. The North Caucasus service has high journalistic standards and the information that is broadcast to Chechnya and published on its North Caucasus *Newsline* service has been used in many academic books, peer reviewed articles and government reports due to the service’s rigorous editorial process and fact-checking. However, the major policy disagreements between Washington and RFE/RL were pounced upon by Russian authorities, who conspiratorially alleged that the disagreements were a ruse and that Washington’s true intentions were the subversion of Russian sovereignty, territory and counterterrorism efforts. A history of statements by RFE/RL employees that were inconsistent with U.S. policy, such as Paul Goble’s flirtation with support for Chechen separatism, did not help matters. These unresolved tensions made more difficult RFE/RL’s task of establishing trust with Caucasian audiences, who were confronted with a radio service documenting Russian human rights abuses representing a U.S. government that had no intention of stopping them, and a Russian government that had been given ammunition to call the former biased and the latter hypocritical and scheming.

Third, it is essential for state-affiliated soft power institutions to have a well-defined vision of what they seek to be, and how this self-conception relates to U.S. foreign policy. In the early 2000s, RFE/RL was an organization devoted to identifying and confronting local sets of problems in Eurasia, and in the case of Chechnya, did so in tension with what the State Department considered to be the interest of the United States. RFE/RL did not publicly produce a well-defined set of political goals that its North Caucasus program sought to accomplish, beyond

promoting free speech and humanitarian values as ends in themselves. Whatever the moral desirability of those outcomes, it was increasingly unclear what distinguished RFE/RL from a humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO). While such NGOs may pursue admirable goals and may even accept government funding, in principle their activities are not usually designed to redound to the benefit of U.S. foreign policy, though this may occur as a secondary effect. Instead, NGOs undertake tasks they identify as worthwhile for their own reasons, such as relieving suffering, conserving a whale population or stopping the use of harmful fertilizer. Without the “discipline” of the Cold War (to use Walt’s term), RFE/RL began to act more and more like such an organization, and its mission was loosely linked to U.S. foreign policy only by an ill-defined, unevenly practiced commitment to “democratic enlargement.” Yet RFE/RL was not only funded by the U.S. government, but had historically been bound to it at the hip through a shared strategic vision for Eurasia: a unity of purpose that the Soviet security state had considered extremely threatening. As the State Department rediscovered in April 2002, although that shared vision was gone, RFE/RL was still very much perceived by Russian authorities as a subversive and disruptive agent, and assurances to the contrary were not believed. As Shishkarev said of the matter, “attempts by US officials to calm the Russian side do not suit us.”²⁸² Government-affiliated U.S. broadcasting organizations, such as RFE/RL but also Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, Radio y Televisión Martí and Alhurra, should be aware that decisions they make will be perceived as expressions of U.S. government policy, whether or not this is the case.

Finally, one must ask whether the post-Cold War “firewall” established by the International Broadcasting Act allows for too great a divergence between RFE/RL editorial policy and U.S. foreign policy. While there are clear journalistic benefits from at least maintaining the perception that politicians are barred from manipulating content—as the “atmosphere of objectivity” proved—there are also risks in allowing such a divergence to become too great. In the absence of direct subordination of RFE/RL to the State Department, the only effective coordinating mechanism between the two is simply agreement on the goals of foreign policy, which is far from a given. If there is a fundamental divergence in vision between the U.S. government and its “voice,” the former must weigh whether the latter ought to remain

²⁸² Floor speech of Sergey Shishkarev to Russian Duma.

so. Simply put, it may be unrealistic to expect that RFE/RL can have complete editorial independence, but also remain a *de facto* representative of government. If, in the future, clashes of vision become too numerous, there may come a time when RFE/RL and its sister organizations will be obliged to make a choice between those two options: that is, move closer to the State Department's vision of foreign policy, or shed formal affiliations with the American state.

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