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How to Save Radio Liberty

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For over half a century, Radio Liberty (RL) has been a central part of the U.S. government's efforts to support human rights and free expression in Russia and, before it, the Soviet Union. Today, tragically, Radio Liberty—or Radio Svoboda, as the Russians know it—is in turmoil, its Moscow-based staff decimated by deep cuts, and its future uncertain. And RL's listeners are outraged. The damage done to a long-standing U.S. policy is profound.

Much repair work needs to be done, which should include finding ways to bring RL back on the air, restoring its venerable brand, and reversing the appalling treatment of its personnel.

(Lack of) Human Rights in Russia. Along with its sister broadcaster Radio Free Europe (RFE), RL is funded by the U.S. government and has a proposed budget for

fiscal year 2013 of \$92.5 million.¹ It is, however, run as an independent broadcaster out of a main office in Prague. Its mandate, known as “surrogate broadcasting,” is to focus on local and domestic news coverage. RL gave voice to three generations of outstanding Soviet dissidents and built a leading brand in Russian and Eurasian broadcasting.

But two decades after the end of the Cold War, Russia remains a “thugocracy.” To quote a petition intended for the Obama Administration currently circulating on the Internet: “The lack of freedom in [President Vladimir] Putin’s Russia increases every day. Repressive laws are passed, biased trials are held, independent media are closed or become dependent on Russian authorities. *Radio Svoboda*’s voice is crucially important for us, Russians, in this context.”

According to Freedom House, Russia today is “not free” and fails to qualify as an electoral democracy.² Despite the Obama/Clinton “reset” policy, the Russian media today is far from “free.” The Kremlin tightly controls all TV channels.

The Russian government’s public diplomacy has taken an intensely anti-American direction. At the same time, Russia Today (RT), Moscow’s global television news

network, and Voice of Russia radio broadcast unimpeded in the United States despite intense and persistent bias in its news coverage.

Tumult and Turmoil at RL.

During the first Obama term, RL/RFE management changed hands and is now under the presidency of former CNN broadcaster Steven Korn. Vice President for Content Julia Ragona, in charge of RL reorganization, previously ran a lucrative business in Russia in partnership with the Russian government, which some believe may have created a conflict of interest.

In Moscow, an office of some 100 broadcasters who have brought the uncensored news to Russians is now decimated. On September 20 and 21, without warning, over 40 of RL’s staff were summarily fired.³ The way this was done is what one would expect from the Soviet or Russian government. The staffers were blocked from entering their offices and escorted out by armed guards.

The decision was allegedly the result of a new media law that took effect in Moscow on November 10, ending Radio Liberty’s license to broadcast on AM radio.⁴ This change in the media law came soon after Moscow ordered the closing in October of the offices of USAID,

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which it accused of political interference. However, RL management did not attempt to negotiate an exception, collaborate with a Russian media organization, or intervene in Washington in order to apply equivalent treatment to Russia Today TV and Voice of Russia radio.

In addition, the firings came shortly after the selection of a new head of the Russian service of Radio Liberty, Masha Gessen, a Russian American print journalist, the author of a biography of Putin, and gay and lesbian rights activist whom much of the controversy has centered on. Gessen, in her previous, short-term stint of *Vokrug Sveta (Around the World)*, a semi-glossy magazine, had met with Putin just days before the firings took place, giving the impression that the Russian president had potentially exerted pressure on her.⁵

Most importantly, Gessen, who was a consultant to RL for reorganization, managed to land the coveted RL Russian service directorship and then led the service straight into its nosedive by eliminating experienced broadcasters and bringing in with her a team of like-minded elitist

print journalists, with little or no experience in radio broadcasting.

What Can Be Done. The bottom line is that the actions taken by the RL management has caused tremendous damage to the image of the United States as a supporter of liberty and freedom of information around the world.

To address the greatest crisis in RL's history, the Broadcasting Board of Governors should:

- Find a way to continue the 24-hour broadcasting that RL is famous for in Russia—aimed at high-quality coverage of internal Russian politics, regional news, and complex inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, such as in North Caucasus and other ethnic republics of the Russian Federation;
- Explore a joint venture with an established pro-democracy Russian media organization with the aim to cover the majority of Russian cities, not just the saturated Moscow market, through FM broadcasting; and

- Reassemble RL's crack team of experienced radio journalists, including those who were fired, to continue their work in RL's Moscow office on radio as well as Internet platforms. In the process, consideration and opportunities should be provided to journalists who have been fired from state-run TV channels (such as NTV) for "political unreliability."

RL Remaining Relevant. Only by reinventing RL for the post-Cold War, 21st-century highly competitive media environment—and by actively pursuing an on-the-air broadcasting strategy—can the U.S. remain relevant in the increasingly oppressive media environment of Russia and post-Soviet states.

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1. Broadcasting Board of Governors, "FY 2013 Budget Request," <http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2012/02/FY-2013-BBG-Congressional-Budget-Request-FINAL-2-9-12-Small.pdf> (accessed December 13, 2012).

2. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2012: The Arab Uprisings and Their Global Repercussions," http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Table%20of%20Independent%20Countries%2C%20FIW%202012%20draft.pdf (accessed December 13, 2012).

3. See Helle C. Dale, "U.S. Fires Its Own Broadcasters in Russia," The Heritage Foundation, The Foundry, October 15, 2012, <http://blog.heritage.org/2012/10/15/u-s-fires-its-own-broadcasters-in-russia/>.

4. See Helle C. Dale, Ariel Cohen, and Janice A. Smith, "Challenging America: How Russia, China, and Other Countries Use Public Diplomacy to Compete with the U.S.," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2698, June 21, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/06/challenging-america-how-russia-china-and-other-countries-use-public-diplomacy-to-compete-with-the-us>.

5. BBG Watch, "Newly-Selected Director of Radio Liberty Russian Service Masha Gessen Met with Putin, Denies Role in Mass Firing of RL Staffers," September 23, 2012, <http://www.usgbroadcasts.com/bbgwatch/2012/09/23/newly-selected-director-of-radio-liberty-russian-service-masha-gessen-met-with-putin-denies-role-in-mass-firing-of-rl-staffers/> (accessed December 13, 2012).