

Era Ends With Closure of BBC Radio Service

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When Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was exiled to a Black Sea island during a short-lived coup in 1991, the BBC Russian Service broadcasts on his pocket radio was the only way he got news.

This was perhaps the ultimate victory for the radio station, which the KGB jammed for decades, trying to prevent it from voicing an alternative view on politics and society that, for many, offered a respite from the official propaganda.

But on Friday, the era will come to an end.

The BBC Russian Service, on air since 1946, will cease radio broadcasts because of drastic budget cuts by the British government, now bent on economic austerity measures at home rather than ideological standoffs with Russia.

Only the agency's Russian-language web site, featuring online broadcasts, will remain in operation. Four other BBC foreign-language services will also be closed: the Azeri, Turkish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese bureaus.

Public and media figures contacted by The Moscow Times were unanimous in their disappointment over the closure, praising the BBC Russian Service for its balanced coverage, lack of preaching and willingness to go beyond propaganda.

"I can't advise the British government on how it should spend its money, but this is a sad thing," Leonid Gozman, co-chairman of the pro-business Right Cause party, said by telephone.

"Now we are able to listen to variety of radio stations, but possibly a day will come when we would again have to turn to foreign radio stations for the truth," Gozman said.

Still, the closure was not entirely unexpected after the Russian BBC left the FM broadcast band in 2007, switching to middle waves and losing a chunk of its audience in the process.

BBC representatives cited technical issues at the time, but the shift coincided with a spat over the death of former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned in London by what British authorities suspected were Kremlin agents. The killing seriously soured Russian-British relations.

"I think we have already lost the majority of our audience, when we switched to medium waves. I don't think so many people will notice the disappearance," a BBC Russian Service employee told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

About 30 percent of the service's 100-plus staff in Moscow and London face layoffs, said the employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment to the media.

The BBC is aiming to cut expenses by 16 percent by 2014, when its current government grant ends. Axing the five foreign-language broadcasts is expected to result in net savings of £46 million (\$74 million) – and the loss of some 30 million listeners worldwide, the broadcaster said in a January statement.

"I believe that the BBC World Service was the jewel crown of the British media, and I don't like what's happening now," said Natalya Babasyan, a former freelance reporter for the company's Russian service. She admitted "nostalgic feelings" about her BBC stint.

Kommersant radio host Konstantin Eggert, who headed BBC's Russian bureau from 2002 to 2009, also expressed regret about the move. But Eggert, who will host a farewell show on the BBC Russian Service on Friday, also said the station's Russian online service has "huge potential."

Indeed, the BBC is the only foreign media outlet to win the prestigious Runet prize, awarded to Russia's best web sites. Moreover, it won the prize only last year, adding weight to a prediction by Eggert that "the BBC brand in Russia will be preserved and developed."

Gozman, who became an avid BBC listener while still in school, said the broadcaster is a part

of Russia's cultural heritage.

"When people tell stories about a station, it means it has achieved cult status," he said.

The broadcaster is, indeed, featured in the works of many leading postwar Soviet writers, including Sergei Dovlatov and Mikhail Weller. It was known outside intelligentsia circles, too. Dissident Vladimir Bukovsky recounted in his 1978 book how his old female neighbors in Moscow asked him to make the BBC criticize bad communal services in their housing — something the state-run media, eager to promote the advantages of communism, were unlikely to do.

Admittedly, the BBC trailed the U.S.-sponsored Radio Liberty in popularity, but some preferred its editorial stance. Media analyst Alexei Pankin said he always felt more comfortable with the BBC since he felt its editorial line was more diverse. "You could listen to it and not feel irritated," Pankin said, adding that, unlike Radio Liberty — whose Russian service is still on air — "the BBC was not trying to teach us."

The programming was not limited to politics, either. Among the service's most popular programs was music show "Rok-Posevy" ("Rock Seeding"), hosted by iconic rock journalist Seva Novgorodtsev since 1977.

The Soviet propaganda machine denounced Novgorodtsev as an "agent of the West," but leading music critic Artyom Trotsky dubbed him last year as a "spiritual guide" to millions of Russian rock fans. Novgorodtsev's broadcasts, featuring music unavailable elsewhere in the Soviet Union, were instrumental in fostering Russia's own rock movement, which burgeoned during perestroika.

"Unlike many other 'enemy voices,' the BBC dedicated more time to music and culture," political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said.

Eggert said he developed an interest in Novgorodtsev's shows at the age of 16 and considered him and other BBC hosts to be real media legends.

For Belkovsky, also a long-term listener, the first hook was even more exquisite — a show dedicated to 17th-century English philosopher Francis Bacon.

While Belkovsky called the closure of the BBC Russian Service a "negative decision," he acknowledged that it was an inevitable consequence of the West "losing interest in Russia."

"Russia is turning from a country whose people the West wanted to lead to a run-of-the-mill Third World country," he said.

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