

Digging an Early Grave for Radio Liberty

By [Tatiana Yankelevich](#)

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In October 2004, I stood next to my mother, Yelena Bonner, at an elegant dinner at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and translated her keynote remarks addressed to the participants of a conference on the impact of Cold War broadcasting. This three-day conference brought together the veterans of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty and those, who like my mother and myself, represented the audience on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Our lives and the fates of the countries we lived in were directly affected by the independent news coverage and analysis coming from these programs.

My mother, in her usual direct manner, was not afraid to utter words that were not exactly in sync with the festive and pleasant atmosphere. I did my best to convey the sense and style of her remarks, though, as often with translators, it was not easy to overcome the temptation to smooth over the rough edges. She predicted that should the plans to reorganize Radio Liberty materialize, they would alter its image beyond recognition and put an end to Radio Liberty as we know it.

Two months later, in December 2004, Bonner, together with dissident Vladimir Bukovsky,

wrote a comment in The Moscow Times about the danger of ignoring the reality of the times: "The Constitution has been demolished. The two-chamber parliament has been destroyed. Elections were violated. Federalism has been annihilated. Independent courts are being liquidated. The Orthodox church is coalescing with the political authorities and threatening the secular nature of the state. ... Public officials at all levels are being replaced by veterans of agencies like the NKVD, KGB and FSB. ... All this is taking place while almost all the independent media, the press as well as radio and television are being wiped out."

Mothers are usually right, and in the eight years that followed I had many chances to confirm this. Still I have not felt the need to get involved directly until now. Today a grave and gross error of judgement is taking place with Radio Liberty.

It would not be an overstatement to say that Radio Liberty has been a source of free speech and free thought over the years, allowing a unique, albeit dangerous, chance to those behind the Iron Curtain to exercise the right to a free flow of information and ideas.

Today, when the regime of President Vladimir Putin has initiated a new attack on freedom of speech and the democracy movement in Russia, human rights organizations have been declared "foreign agents," and USAID has been ousted from Russia, the U.S. management team of Radio Liberty has ended its medium-wave broadcasts and dismissed its top journalists, whose broadcasts attracted hundreds of thousands of listeners.

These actions go against the spirit and the mission of Radio Liberty. These actions dig an early grave for Radio Liberty as free and independent radio broadcasting. They put an end to the collaboration of people of high public repute, essential for a democratic public discourse, and they completely compromise the station's moral authority.

This is why I am raising my voice against these policies. They are foolhardy at best and cynical at worst. They will quickly lead to a sad day when, to paraphrase writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, Radio Liberty will have only one future: its past.

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