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# Radio Liberty's Fate Unclear

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Radio Svoboda is ending its AM radio programming in compliance with a law coming into effect on Nov. 10 that forbids foreign control of broadcast licenses.

Soviet listeners tuned in to Radio Liberty, Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corp.'s Russian service to get objective information.

But since Voice of America and the BBC nixed their Russian radio broadcasts in favor of an online-only regime in 2008 and 2011, respectively, Radio Liberty, known domestically as Radio Svoboda, has been the last major Western station to broadcast in the nation.

Now those days are numbered.

Radio Svoboda is ending its AM radio programming in compliance with a law coming into effect on Nov. 10 that forbids foreign control of broadcast licenses, Steve Korn, president of the station's parent company, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, wrote in The Moscow Times earlier this week.

He described the entering into effect of the law, which "is similar to laws in the United States and in many Western nations," as "not a calamity" but "an opportunity ... to accelerate our plans to move to digital platforms."

He said that the station would focus on a target Russian audience of "urban, educated people in their 20s to 40s" and that the broadcaster would "become an interactive forum where our audience can engage in an ongoing dialogue."

But the changes have not come without drama: Last month, more than 40 members of Radio Svoboda's Moscow staff were laid off, leaving the station's new director, Masha Gessen, with roughly 10 journalists to do the job spelled out by Korn.

Much criticism was heaped on Gessen, an opposition-minded writer who had advised the station for several months before her appointment as director.

Gessen, who resigned last month as editor of the magazine Vokrug Sveta (Around the World) over her refusal to report on President Vladimir Putin's stunt with endangered cranes, has denied having anything to do with the Radio Svoboda firings, which happened before she took up her new job on Oct. 1.

But the shake-up triggered wider accusations against Korn and the broadcaster's Prague-based management as well as against the United States, which provides funding to Radio Free Europe, although the station is officially a private nonprofit corporation.

Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov accused the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama of caving in to Kremlin pressure, linking the staff cuts to the closure of USAID's operations in the country. Taking Radio Svoboda off the air would "be a blow to freedom of the media in Russia," Ryzhkov wrote in The Moscow Times earlier this month.

Helle Dale, an analyst for the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington-based think tank, said the U.S. was firing its own broadcasters. The firings reflect "terribly on the U.S. as a nation that respects human rights and free expression," she wrote in a blog post this week, adding that the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the station, should reverse the firings.

Korn vehemently denied that RFE/RL, as the organization is called, is retrenching. He said the station's budget would not be cut but used more efficiently.

"The cessation of our AM signal and the switch to a digital service requires new ways of working with fewer people and people with different skills," he wrote.

Critics also maintain that broadcasts could continue despite the law. Mario Corti, one of the station's former directors, said that RFE/RL managers were offered an AM transmitter in the Baltic states. "They refused the offer," he wrote in a blog post on usgbroadcasts.com.

Radio Svoboda remains available on shortwave radio and satellite dish, but experts agree that its main and most loyal audience listened over AM.

"Those who listen to AM broadcasts do not use the Internet much. They are a big part of Russian society that will be lost," said Nikolai Zlobin, an analyst for the Washington-based

World Security Institute.

Zlobin said Internet users are ephemeral, easily and often switching to other programs.

Statistics show that Radio Svoboda's listener numbers in Moscow have strongly declined over past years. The station's daily reach sank from 140,000, or 1.5 percent market share, between July and September 2007 to 104,100, or 1 percent market share, in the same period this year, according to data from market research firm TNS Global.

By contrast, the commercially run Ekho Moskvy, a critical radio station owned by Gazprom Media, had just over 1 million listeners in Moscow between July and September this year.

Zlobin agreed that Radio Svoboda would have to reform its content to attract a younger audience of "intelligent Russian citizens."

But others said this would be an uphill task.

"They will have to develop where the BBC and Voice of America already found their niche," said Konstantin von Eggert, a political pundit and radio journalist who used to work for the BBC Russian Service.

Danila Galperovich, who was among the Radio Svoboda reporters laid off last month, said competition in the media market for urban intellectuals is extremely tough.

He named online television channel Dozhd, websites Snob.ru and Slon.ru, Kommersant FM and Bolshoi Gorod as strong competitors.

"There are already a lot of them. The market is full," he said.

Eggert added that the task became even more complicated when so many staff members, especially in the online department, were laid off.

It was unclear whether the station would hire new journalists and, if so, how many. Attempts to reach Gessen or Prague-based RFE/RL representatives Wednesday and Thursday for this article were unsuccessful.

Many mourn the loss of a unique station that was shaped by the Soviet-era intelligentsia.

"Radio Svoboda was a vital part of the Russian sociocultural sphere," said media analyst Anna Kachkayeva, who had been one of the station's most prominent journalists until she resigned for "moral reasons" last month.

Galperovich, who worked at the station for six years, said Radio Svoboda would never be the same.

"The very spirit has been destroyed," he said.

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