

Rebuilding Radio Liberty

By [Gregory Feifer](#)

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It's no revelation that success breeds success in journalism, as in most professions, if only because calls from reporters at influential media outlets tend to be returned. My calls were returned promptly several years ago when I was working for the U.S.-funded broadcaster Radio Free Europe — or Radio Liberty as it is better known in Russia — covering Russia and other former Soviet republics.

People such as Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev, then a Cabinet minister who laid on considerable charm on short notice, made me realize just how respected Radio Liberty remained among the people of those regions. Free from state control and ownership by tycoons, it stood out among media outlets at which political allegiances determined editorial lines.

Carrying on its Cold War-era mission of transmitting uncensored news to the Soviet bloc, Prague-based Radio Liberty still broadcasts to most of the former Soviet Union and other countries, including Iran and Afghanistan, in their own languages.

Thanks to their reporting and landing of exclusive interviews, Radio Liberty staffers played

a visible role during recent elections in Moldova, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. The ballots proved critical in the little-noticed but sometimes bitter tussle between Russia and the West for influence over development in those countries.

But Radio Liberty's reputation has been seriously damaged during the past year — less by obstruction from hostile governments than by the station's own leadership.

In 2011, Steven Korn was appointed president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty partly to help shepherd a merger with other U.S. international broadcasting networks whose budgets were also shrinking. He used the pressing need to build the radio's competitiveness in the global media marketplace as justification to do the opposite by firing some of Radio Liberty's most qualified journalists.

A corporate lawyer who spent many years at CNN, Korn announced his resignation in late December. The critical question now is whether the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the oversight agency for U.S. international broadcasting, will proceed as carelessly in finding a successor as it did in its last effort. Wasting the new opportunity to restore the broadcaster's standing as an important lever of U.S. soft power would be more than sad.

Unfortunately, that prospect comes only after the loudest scandal of Korn's tenure provoked dismay among Russia's embattled opposition and former Radio Liberty executives. He gutted the station by firing 37 highly respected journalists from the Russian service. Four journalists resigned in solidarity.

"Regardless of how Korn tries to spin it, the shutdown will be a blow to freedom of the media in Russia," wrote opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov in an [Oct. 2 column](#) in The Moscow Times. "Once a powerful radio station that millions of Russians tuned in to for alternative views and discussions will be diluted by key staff reductions and lost in the huge expanse of the Internet."

This is not to say Radio Liberty had no problems before Korn's arrival. Thanks partly to the nature of the beast — more than 20 services competing for shrinking resources, managed from various bureaus in addition to the Prague headquarters — the radio's Byzantine, often sclerotic way of conducting its affairs posed huge challenges to its previous presidents. Funded almost entirely by Congress, the company's lack of any real need to compete for listeners or advertising deprives it of the kind of pressure that forces other media organizations to develop or die.

What happened at the Russian service under Korn is only part of the story, however. He promised to shake things up in the Prague central newsroom, where I once worked, by dedicating the department to improving original reporting that would be a model for how news should look.

But Korn promoted a new director who had showed scant promise of effecting the needed change, under whom reporting began to drift away from the serious, enterprising journalism Radio Liberty's mission promises to more light and lively fluff that was supposed to appeal to younger audiences. Much of the news is churned out as rewritten wire copy.

Even under authoritarian governments in Radio Liberty's broadcast regions, such

information is usually available on the Internet. To justify its existence, therefore, the radio must raise newsroom standards by appointing experienced journalists to feed the company's national services with sound-rich radio stories, multimedia video and live reporting from the field. But its most crucial role may well be teaching them to do that for themselves. More than helping them compete in their markets by augmenting the traditional work they already do well, Western-style reporting would make them unique.

Therefore Radio Liberty's new president must be not only a media veteran who knows those needs but also someone who understands the radio's potential and problems. That's essential for navigating the old internal politics that have helped bring it so low.

Still greatly respected in many former Soviet republics, Radio Liberty is also admired in Russia. Rebuilding it as a model of journalistic freedom would much serve U.S. interests there.

Gregory Feifer was senior correspondent at Radio Free Europe from 2009 to 2011. His new book "Russians" will be published in June.

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