

# Radio Free Europe as part of Central European political migration in the context of the Cold War

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**Abstract** | Introduction: Looking at events from the perspective of the “official” US Government during the specific historical “era of imperial rivalry” – it seems that the US recognized the political potential of Central European refugees, who made a very remarkable contribution to keeping the ideological Cold War alive. Within two decades, Central European political emigres in the USA had gone through heaven and hell. First, they were attractive tools in American political warfare during the 1950s and 1960s. Then they were rapidly abandoned by official America in the 1970s. Objectives: The present study focuses on the issue of how the US Government looked at and treated Central (or East) European political emigres during the Cold War period. Conclusion: Looking through historical glasses at these processes, we can identify a gradually declining influence of Central European emigres in the West and in especially in the USA. With the passing of time, Central European emigres gradually lost their political bases first at home (in their respective home countries) then in their “shelter” countries.

**Keywords** | Central Europe, political émigré, Cold War, political warfare, propaganda

## Introduction - Central Europe as a politically significant region

In the post-1945 period, Central European political emigres made a very remarkable and valuable contribution to keeping hope alive in their Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian, etc. homelands, ruled by Soviet-type communism.[1] The political potential of Central European emigres, seen with the eyes of some post-1947 American policy makers in key positions, was enormous. Probably one of the best examples of how the Central European political emigre community was operating in the West, and how it was used by American and Western political actors, is the broadcasting station Radio Free Europe (RFE).[2] As it has been stated by several scholars, RFE was a unique combination of a seemingly independent media outlet (P. Tomek 2006; M. Junek 2011) and a network of Central European emigre organizations, operating under the umbrella of American political advisers. (Cummings 2009) The social connections of the editors of the radio, with their Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian national exulant political representatives (Johnson-Parta 2010), were certainly very lively in the early years of the radio. Yet, the situation changed significantly over the time, and under the influence of the American leadership, the originally cooperating network of emigre organizations gradually split up, and they sometimes became even each others' rivals. (Mazurkiewich 2019)

Radio Free Europe was a radio station, broadcasting programs toward Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. Its organization started in the USA in 1949, and it began operating as a full-day radio station in 1951, broadcasting in respective languages of "Five Target Countries" or "Five National Desks" from München, Federative Republic of Germany (or West Germany). Czechoslovak broadcasts from München started on May 1, 1951; the Hungarian and the Bulgarian ones in October 1951; and the Polish on May 3, 1952.

The history of the radio, analysed and evaluated here on the basis of primary corporate archival sources, is a unique one since it provides rich scientific ammunition both to the diaspora politics as well as to the history of the psychological warfare during the Cold War. When we research the activities of the RFE, we contribute to a history of a very specific emigre community, and what makes this research even more interesting is that the RFE emigre community used to have a very international character, practically from all over Eastern Europe. In fact, it is a rarity that a collection of corporate archival materials provide us with such a diverse knowledge on historical processes, including post-1945 political migration from Eastern Europe.

The station was designed and founded in the USA, with an endorsement of influential Central European emigres, as a private entity. Even if the involvement of the US Government in establishing the radio station was kept secret at the time, it was quite clear from the very beginning that the programs of the station were "in full line" with the foreign policy of the US Government which secretly financed the station. Between 1951 and 1989, Radio Free Europe operated as a "federation" of five respective "National Desks" (the Czechoslovak, the Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian), and it employed hundreds of emigres, mostly political emigres of Central European origin - of course, under the broadcasting policy and political umbrella of the American management.

Having been subordinated both professionally and politically to the American management, RFE was not at all an independent broadcast station. In fact, RFE was a perfect example how the official US helped to establish a semi-official media outlet through the assistance of Central European emigre groups for propaganda purposes. As a consequence, Radio Free Europe was indeed the longest operating, the most peaceful, the cheapest, and probably the most successful Central European propaganda and emigre project of the US during the Cold War.

## Emigres as part of psychological warfare

Radio Free Europe is a fine example that the US Government treated the Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, and Romanian political emigres not as representatives of individual nations but as representatives of a *region* - a

particularly interesting region at the time which was geographically and ideologically neighboring the Soviet Union. Willingly or unwillingly, Central European emigres at the station became part of organized political warfare.

The idea of the National Committees as the official co-founders of the radio station, directing their “free and anti-communist voice” toward Central Europe, came from the Central Intelligence Agency’s Office of Policy Coordination department in 1948. Political refugees in general (as human resources, a skilled labor force) and political refugees in particular fleeing from Central Europe after the Soviet takeover in the region, constituted a unique tool in the hands of the US to wage psychological warfare.[3] Organized political warfare was a perfect implementation of the Truman Doctrine – this was the unanimous notion among practically all high positioned American politicians of the time, from George F. Kennan to John F. Dulles, Wild Bill Donovan to Charles Bohlen and Clark Clifford.

Direct involvement of Central European political emigres in many organized political warfare activities and projects, arranged by the US Government, can be easily proven. Radio Free Europe was deeply involved in, for instance, the “Crusade for Freedom” campaigns, also in several clandestine hot air balloon operations that carried millions of leaflets into Central Europe. In these cases, fake Czechoslovak banknotes and millions of leaflets were written by RFE employees, many of whom were personally and directly involved in their launching by hot air balloons from West Germany, too. In later years, the directors of American psychological warfare projects started to use some smoother methods, more in the form of political pressure rather than in the form of direct involvement.

When we speak about a US foreign strategy in relation to Central European political emigres during the Cold War, we have to note that it never was a coherent “grand strategy”. On the contrary, sources show massive improvisation on the American side. Sources prove improvisation in decision-making regarding not only the RFE, but also regarding, for instance, American policy toward postwar Germany, or other propaganda issues. As Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht puts it bluntly: “US propagandists in Europe were often confused about what they wanted”[4], especially when comparing American postwar propaganda policy with the Soviet one.

Indeed, in the post-1945 period, the US government did not see much political potential in Central European political emigres. After all, the initial post-1945 generation of Central European emigres were typically influential individuals, most of them have had lively contact with the political emigration from the mid-War period. And this was not what US policymakers were dreaming about in the postwar world. In fact, neither West European governments, nor the US Government had coherent foreign policy answers for much “bigger” or burning issues than the RFE or “East European” political emigres. Central European emigres were just another factor aggravating an already confused post-war situation. It may have seemed for some superficial spectators that a grand foreign policy narrative existed; in fact, it did not.

One of the main reasons why the US Government (Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower) and the Central Intelligence Agency had changed their position on Central European political emigres is that they appeared to be suitable “tools” in waging propaganda battle against international communism at the onset of the Cold War. Yes, the US Government created jobs for members of renowned Central European intelligentsia in a form of an international media outlet. But Americans also intended to keep firm control over them.

American “control” over the emigre communities in general and the employees of the RFE in particular can be proved through several issues. The RFE staff may have consisted of some 30 nationalities (beyond the five national desks, it included employees from the Baltics, the Balkans, and several parts of the Soviet Union), yet, the policy planners and the political advisers of the radio (yes, RFE always had them) were always Americans.

Another telling feature is the location of the main headquarters of the RFE. Even if the everyday operation of the broadcasting station took place and was directed from München, the main decision-making body, the National Committee for Free Europe (NCFE) where the general political line of the radio was decided upon, was in New York right from the beginning up until the early 1960s. In the case of the Czechoslovak Desk, for instance, RFE programs in

the early 1950s were prepared in München dominantly by Michal Múdry and Ján Stránský, but they were authorized to air by Ferdinand Peroutka in New York. It was the same in the case of the Poles, where Jan Nowak-Jezioranski was one of the most renowned and influential editors in München. Nevertheless, the Polish RFE staff in New York, namely Jacek Kalabinski and Stefan Gacki, were obliged to report not to him but to the New York Director, Robert Lang; the same was true for Tom Keri in the case of the Hungarians. The domination of the National Committee for Free Europe New York was also expressed in the fact that programs concerning the Soviet Union were always authorized there. Interestingly enough, the Czechoslovak RFE headquarters in New York was operating (under consequent directors such as Ferdinand Peroutka, Ludovít Šebesta, Karl Reyman, Karel Jezdinský, and Miroslav Neoveský) up until 1993.

## Diversity of the RFE emigre community

The United States Government between 1949/1951 and 1989 created jobs for members of renowned Central European intelligentsia in the form of the international propaganda outlet that the RFE was. This Central European emigre community, however, working at and for the RFE was never a monolith. We are talking about a rather big group of people. Around 1980, RFE may have had some 1750 employees: approximately 1,000 employees in München, 100 employees in New York, with the remaining 650, mostly technical staff at the broadcasting stations in West Germany, Spain, and Portugal (from where the broadcasting technical equipment was operating). Roughly half of the München staff, i.e., some 500 people were Central European emigrants, including writers, editors, speakers, producers, translators, typewriters, secretaries, etc. By the over time, newer and newer waves of emigres arrived in München, meaning different generations, different political and private interests as employees, etc. Beyond that, different ethnic groups had different legal status in West Germany; Poles and Czechoslovaks, for instance, as members of war-winning states had more privileges than Hungarians or Romanians.

Many RFE emigres obviously did not like the political system from which they came or escaped.[5] Some even were sentenced to jail or were threatened with jail time had they stayed at home. Jaromír Netík was sentenced to life imprisonment in Czechoslovakia in 1955 in absentia, for belonging to an illegal political group. A prominent Bulgarian RFE employee, the founder of the Bulgarian RFE Desk, Georgi Markov was sentenced to six and half years in absentia. Others, such as Jiří Dostál, used to be loyal citizens; Dostál used to be a speaker at the Czechoslovak Radio Hradec Králové until May 1969, when he escaped to the West, for which he was sentenced to prison in 1970.[6] Pole Zdzisław Najder was sentenced to death for breaching curfew in 1981. As to the political engagement of the Central European RFE employees, post-1965 American management tolerated almost any legitimate political streams or party affiliation, including ex-communist, excluding only “nationalists.” For instance, Miloš Vanek (alias Bašta Pravdomil) used to be a communist in his younger years, allegedly had met Lenin, and was an ardent Komintern man. On the other hand, “Slovak separatists” were not welcome.

The relation of the RFE employees with their respective national emigre political communities in Germany, in the USA, and at other places throughout the world, was probably the most decisive factor that mattered to the American management.[7] Initially, at the time of organizing the station, different influential emigre elites were strong enough to have an impact on the RFE management.[8] Nevertheless, it gradually dawned on the American management that it was a mistake to leave influential but outsider emigres to have an impact on their respective RFE Desks. Already in early 1960s, but more typically in the 1970s, the American management forced the Chiefs of National Desks to completely neglect or at least ignore their respective emigre communities. Instead, they demanded national editors to remain aware that they had to serve first of all US foreign policy and secondly RFE’s listeners at home, behind the Iron Curtain. Being a professional broadcasting station that was indeed keen on the persistency of its listeners, this is quite understandable. After all, for the American political advisers the impact of the radio was more relevant than the opinions of the emigres.

## Political emigres losing their significance

Central European political emigres in and around the RFE started to lose their significance when US foreign policy made shifts toward the peaceful coexistence with the “Eastern Bloc” in general and with the Soviet Union in particular. Commencing from the late 1960s, we can speak of declining influence of Central European emigres – definitely at the station, but also in general in the West.

This situation was caused by several factors. After Nikita Khrushchev’s era, some new faces of socialism emerged, and some degree of liberalization took place in Central Europe, which received popular support. Also, over time, emigres started to have fewer and fewer former co-workers alive, less and less reliable knowledge of the political events. Thus, as time passed, political emigres gradually lost their political basis at home: first in their “old homes” and consequently in their “new” ones.

The most decisive factor, however, causing decline in emigres’ influence could be found in the changing “temperature” of international relations, meaning the dynamically changing overall international context as a framework to any process during the Cold War. The Cold War was certainly an era of strong “imperial rivalry”; nevertheless, it was also a time of “superpower cooperation”[9], as Mark Kramer puts it when referring to the conciliatory cooperation between the two superpowers that resulted in a mutually beneficial appeasement-kind-of relations. “Superpower cooperation” meant that the strategic line of the US–Soviet bilateral relations from the late 1960s, was a line of a “tacit settlement.”[10] The international relations of the US and the Soviet Union as superpowers in the post-1956 period differed significantly from those of the early 1950s. This is the period referred to as *détente*, or with a later term by Lyndon B. Johnson (but used by Richard Nixon too) as “building bridges”[11] with Central and Eastern Europe.

As one of the results of the cooperating world order, by the 1980s, the classical emigre techniques such as election pressure groups, or endorsing lobby groups, etc. did not seem to work anymore. In fact, “old” emigres gradually became an obstacle in the smooth “superpower cooperation.” The US Government now needed a fresh approach that was on the one hand less exposed to “old” Central European emigre elites and thus was more convenient in the time of new superpower relations. After all, it was the time of Henry Kissinger’s age of “real politics” where the big questions of power circulated around issues such as “soft political power,” “influence” and “control,” etc. In the new situation, superpowers were ready to share the leadership in certain fields; this is what Slavomír Michálek calls an American policy of platonic sympathy and verbal protests.[12]

As the East-West confrontation took on new forms in the mid-1960s, some émigres came to the conclusion that Central European countries could be peacefully transformed perhaps by civil rights movement activism (which was an illusion, of course). On the one hand it is true that human rights issues became a major point in international relations in the 1970s. Several Central European emigre organizations, such as the Council for Free Czechoslovakia, had kept human rights issues on their agenda long before 1975. This voice was made even more audible through the process of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. On the other hand, however, human rights efforts meant a problem (or at minimum an obstacle) in the way of the Helsinki process, which was considered by some emigres as an opportunity, but for others as a dishonest appeasement. One may remember Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s strong criticism over Helsinki; Solzhenitsyn publicly declared it as “betrayal of Eastern Europe.”

Beyond all these international processes, in the second half of the Cold War, roughly from 1965 on, Europe as a continent gained declining importance, and especially Central Europe became an increasingly insignificant territory for the US foreign policy (which gradually shifted its attention to regions such as the Middle East, Asia, or Central America). This also contributed to the fact that Central European political emigres became less significant. In other words, jeans, rock music, and Coca Cola became more influential than the old political values of the emigres.

## Conclusion

Historical sources reflect the fact within four decades, Central European political emigres at the Radio Free Europe went through heaven and hell. Initially, the US welcomed Central European emigre ethnic groups, not because of their own capabilities, but because the post-1945 period was a historical moment when emigres fit into the overall American foreign policy strategy. Emigres were attractive “tools“ in the American political warfare during the 1950s and 1960s. At the beginning of the Cold War, Europe and the fate of Central European emigres were important both for maintaining tension on the international scene and in order to provide sense to “fighting for freedom” in domestic American policy. In the second half of the Cold War, however, under the influence of the factors mentioned above, from the perspective of the US Government, Europe in general and Central European emigres in particular lost a lot from their initial significance. Looking through historical lenses at these processes, we can conclude a gradually declining influence of Central European emigres in the West and especially in the USA.

Finally, it is important to point out here that even if some “psychological warfare” techniques as well as the activity of the US Government may have diminished in intensity over the years (as it happened for instance after 1956), the main intention, i.e., undermining the enemy’s general confidence, never ceased during the Cold War (and perhaps not even after its end).

### Acknowledgments

Preregistration and data sharing is not applicable to this article.

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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[1] At the beginning of my study, I would like to point out to two complex terminological issues regarding political emigres / refugees / exulants / dissidents, and also to the terminological debate over Central / Eastern / East Central / Central Eastern Europe. Despite being aware of both conceptual differences and the wide ranging scholarly debate regarding both terminuses, here I will make it simple and will use “Central Europe” and “political emigres” as general concepts. See more on both terminology, e.g. at MAZURIEWICZ, Anna (Ed.). *East Central European Migrations During the Cold War. A Handbook*. Berlin – Boston : De Gruyter, 2019; MICHÁLEK, Slavomír. – ŠTEFANSKÝ, Michal. *Age of Fear. The Cold War and Its Influence on Czechoslovakia 1945-1968*. Stuttgart : Ibidem Verlag, 2019, pp. 13-32; HORVÁTH, Sándor – KECSKÉS, D. Gusztáv – MITROVITS, Miklós (Eds.). *Magyarország külkapcsolatai (1945-1990)*. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Történettudományi Intézet, 2021.

[2] See further literature on the activities of the RFE, for instance, at CUMMINGS, Richard H. *Cold War Radio-The Dangerious History of American Broadcasting in Europe 1950-1989*. USA : McFarland and Company, 2009; JUNEK, Marek et al. *Svobodně! Radio Svobodná Evropa 1951-2011*. Praha : Vyd. Radioservis, 2011; JOHNSON, A. Ross – PARTA, R. Eugene (Eds.). *Cold War Broadcastings – Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*. Budapest-New York : CEU Press, 2010; TOMEK, Prokop. *Československé bezpečnostní složky proti Rádiu Svobodná Evropa - „Objekt ALFA“*. Praha : Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinu komunismu, 2006; VAJDA , Barnabás: *Rádío Slobodná Európa a jeho činnosť vo východnej Európe*. Komárno : Univerzita J. Selyeho – Selye János Egyetem, 2013; VAJDA, Barnabás. *Egy szabad hang Kelet-Európában – A Szabad Európa Rádió tevékenységéről a hidegháború alatt*. Dunaszerdahely : Nap Kiadó, 2011; VAJDA, Barnabás. *Communist Czechoslovakia and Radio Free Europe*. In SZARKA, László (Ed.). *A Multiethnic Region and Nation-State in East-Central Europe. Studies in the History of Upper Hungary and Slovakia from the 1600s to the Present*. [East European Monographs No 787] Budapest : Atlantic Research and Publications Inc. & Balassi Institute, 2011, pp. 269-294.

[3] See more on psychological warfare e.g. at KÁDÁR LYNN, Katalin (Ed.). *The Inaguration of Organized Political Warfare - Cold War Organizations sponsored by the National Committee for a Free Europe / Free Europe Committee*. USA : Helena History Press, 2013; JUNEK, Marek et al. *Svobodně! Radio Svobodná Evropa 1951-2011*. Praha : Vyd. Radioservis, 2011; MICHÁLEK, Slavomír. *Rok 1968 a Československo - postoj USA, Západu a OSN*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV,

2008; REISCH, Alfred A. *Hot Books in the Cold War*. Budapest–New York : Central European University Press, 2013; TOMÉK, Prokop. *Československé bezpečnostní složky proti Rádiu Svobodná Evropa - „Objekt ALFA“*. Praha : Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinu komunismu, 2006; VAJDA, Barnabás. *Egy szabad hang Kelet-Európában – A Szabad Európa Rádió tevékenységéről a hidegháború alatt*. Dunaszerdahely : Nap Kiadó, 2011; VAJDA, Barnabás. *Rádió Slobodná Európa a jeho činnosť vo východnej Európe*. Komárno : Univerzita J. Selyeho – Selye János Egyetem, 2013; ZAVACKÁ, Marína. *Kto žije za ostatným drôtom? Oficiálna zahraničnopolitická propaganda na Slovensku, 1956-1962: teórie, politické smernice a spoločenská prax*. Bratislava : Ústav politických vied SAV, Vydavateľstvo SAV, 2005.

[4] GIENOW-HECHT, Jessica C.E. Culture and the Cold War in Europe. In LEFFLER, Melvyn – WESTAD, Odd Anne (Eds.) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 407.

[5] MAZURIEWICZ, Anna (Ed.). *East Central European Migrations During the Cold War. A Handbook*. Berlin – Boston : De Gruyter, 2019, e.g. on pp 6-8.

[6] On the RFE and a new waves of emigres in it, see ORSÁG, Petr. *Mezi relitou, propagandou a mýty. Československá exilová média v západní Evropě v letech 1968-1989*. Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 2016, mainly pp 75-80.

[7] SIMPSON, Christopher. *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945–1960*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1996.

[8] One example of a rivalry among a certain emigre community was that of Bulgaria. The initial emigre group around Georgi Markov, called the Bulgarian National Committee, involved in the grounding the Radio Free Europe, had to face a rival The Free Bulgarian, created in Paris in 1950 by Jorad Peyser, Dianko Sotirov, et al.

[9] KRAMER, Mark. Power, politics, and the long duration of the Cold War. In PONS, Silvio–ROMERO, Federico (Eds.). *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War. Issues, interpretations, periodizations*. London, New York : Frank Cass, 2005, p. 28.

[10] Of course, the relaxation in US–Soviet superpower relations applied only in sociocultural relations, while e.g., on the military field, high tension remained. We must refer here to a concept regarding interpretation of the Cold War introduced by professor Csaba Békés, who argues that Cold War international relations should be viewed much more dynamically than a constant monolith. See on this e.g. BÉKÉS, Csaba. *East Central Europe 1953–1956*. In LEFFLER, Melvyn – WESTAD, Odd Anne (Eds.) *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 175-225; BÉKÉS, Csaba. *Enyhülés és emancipáció. Magyarország, a szovjet blokk és a nemzetközi politika, 1944–1991*. Budapest : Osiris Kiadó – MTA TK, 2019; KALMÁR, Melinda. *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjetrendszer 1945–1990*. Budapest : Osiris Kiadó, 2014.

[11] MICHÁLEK, Slavomír. *Rok 1968 a Československo - postoj USA, Západu a OSN*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2008, 63-64.

[12] MICHÁLEK, Slavomír. *Rok 1968 a Československo - postoj USA, Západu a OSN*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV, 2008, 55, 64.

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