



**THE ROLE OF RADIO FREE EUROPE IN THE IRON CURTAIN COUNTRIES: 1956  
POZNAN UPRISING AND 1956 HUNGARIAN UPRISING**

**Asst. Prof. Dr. Emrah AYDEMİR\***

**ABSTRACT**

The Cold War expanded with the East-West conflict and led to the battle of the great powers. The Soviet Union believed that communism would achieve a victory all around the world and that Western imperialist powers had been historically hostile towards them, and that the Soviet Union was the leading Socialist/Communist state. Thus, the Soviet Union continued to increase its influence and expansionist policies on the Iron Curtain countries. The Americans, on the other hand, tried to intend for the proper tools to reach the communist world under the leadership of the Soviet Union. A global disagreement emerged in the third world countries and ideological conflicts of two superpowers was experienced in the world. In the conflicts, there was no real military intervention between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead of this, there had been a struggle of proxy wars conducted over third world countries. Radio was one of the preferences of the United States of America in this struggle. To this end, the Radio Free Europe was designed and used by the United States of America for achieving the political goals on the Iron Curtain countries. Radio Free Europe was used as a weapon against the Soviet Union in order to prevent the Soviet Union from establishing its political domination through communist governments in the Iron Curtain countries. Radio Free Europe, which caused historical events in the Iron Curtain countries, met the information and news demand of the region. In this study, the role of Radio Free Europe in the Iron Curtain countries will be addressed and its effects on the 1956 Poznań Uprising and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising will be examined.

**Keywords:** Iron Curtain, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 1956 Poznań Uprising, 1956 Hungarian Uprising

**DEMİR PERDE ÜLKELERİNDE RADIO FREE EUROPE'NİN ROLÜ: 1956 POZNAN  
AYAKLANMASI VE 1956 MACAR AYAKLANMASI**

**ÖZ**

Soğuk Savaş, Doğu-Batı çatışmasıyla genişlemiş ve büyük güçlerin mücadelelerine yol açmıştır. Sovyetler Birliği, komünizmin dünyada zafer kazanacağına, Batılı emperyalist güçlerin tarihsel olarak onlara karşı düşmanca bir tavır takındıklarına ve Sovyetler Birliği'nin öncü Sosyalist / Komünist devlet olduğuna inanmışlardır. Böylece Sovyetler Birliği, Demir Perde ülkelerinde etkisini arttırmaya ve genişlemeci politikalarına devam etmiştir. Amerikalılar ise Sovyetler Birliği'nin önderliğindeki komünist dünyaya ulaşmak için uygun araçlar seçmeye özen göstermiştir. Üçüncü dünya ülkelerinde küresel bir ihtilaf yaşanmış ve iki süper gücün dünya üzerinde ideolojik çatışması yaşanmıştır. Çatışmalarda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Sovyetler Birliği arasında gerçek bir askeri müdahale gerçekleşmemiştir. Bunun yerine üçüncü dünya ülkelerinde yürütülen vekâlet savaşlarında mücadele edilmiştir. Bu mücadelede Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin tercihlerinden biri radyo olmuştur. Bu amaçla Amerika Birleşik Devletleri tarafından Radio Free Europe tasarlanmış ve Demir Perde ülkelerindeki politik amaçlara ulaşılabilmesi için kullanılmıştır. Radio Free Europe, Sovyetler Birliği'nin Demir Perde ülkelerindeki komünist yönetimlerin politik hâkimiyetini sağlaması noktasında, Sovyetler Birliği'ne karşı bir silah olarak kullanılmıştır. Demir Perde ülkelerinde tarihe geçen olayların yaşanmasına neden olan Radio

\* Fırat University, Communication Faculty, Department of Journalism, eaydemir@firat.edu.tr, ORCID NO: 0000 0002 3770 0444

Free Europe, bölgedeki bilgi ve haber ihtiyacını gidermiştir. Bu çalışmada, Radio Free Europe'nin Demir Perde ülkelerindeki rolü ele alınacak ve 1956 Poznań Ayaklanması ve 1956 Macar Ayaklanması üzerindeki etkileri incelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Demir Perde, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 1956 Poznań Ayaklanması, 1956 Macar Ayaklanması

### **Introduction**

In the Cold War, during which a long-term tension was experienced between the democracies of the West world and communist countries in Eastern Europe, the West was ruled by the United States, while Eastern Europe was ruled by the Soviet Union. After the outbreak of the Cold War, the use of the radio according to the expectations of the target audience was increased. In this period, radio broadcasts conveyed the policies, ideologies and languages of countries to the public opinion for achieving foreign policy objectives. The aim of the radio broadcasts was to create a perception for the public acceptance of foreign policy objectives. In the Cold War, the radio played a significant role in the ideological conflict of the East and the West and became an important tool for both sides in terms of psychological strategy and political propaganda.

Along with the expansion of the Soviet Union, the United States of America carefully focused on radio broadcasting against communism and the radio came to the fore with its structure that disseminates democratic values and provides an alternative perspective. American radios, which gained a new role in the Cold War period, made history by influencing the world in terms of their content and strategy. The American radios conveyed anti-communist discourse, numerous features such as social, cultural and political features in their broadcasts.

As a result of the uniform media of the communist governments dominated the society in the struggle of the West against the Cold War, American radios gave millions of people, who had been challenged in hearing other political views, hope. In this direction, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, which began its broadcast during the Cold War period, struggled for collapsing the communism.

In the Cold War, Radio Free Europe made comments on the latest news in the Iron Curtain countries and it supported the opponents by offering an alternative view to the propaganda which was under the control of these countries and it was designed to promote the resistance. The RFE had been a key element of the Cold War's psychological operations (Folly 2015:311) and achieved a phenomenal success. The most distinguishing events among these are the 1956 Poznań Uprising and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. The radios, which played an important role in the uprisings according to their point of view, were shaped according to the expectations of the citizens of Poland and Hungary and they focused on influencing those places, where access to data was significantly restrained.

Accordingly, the main problem of this study is to understand the influence of the Radio Free Europe on the target group within the frame of changing or strengthening of attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, examining the 1956 Poznań Uprising and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising is important for the whole world and for evaluating the role of mass

media in history. Because states use their hard or soft power to carry out their foreign policies. Contrary to harsh power sanctions such as military intervention and oppressive diplomacy, soft power uses its persuasion capability. Radio is one of the tools in which the persuasion capability of soft power is used in the Cold War.

In this study, in which the literature review has been made, under which conditions the Radio Free Europe was used, how it conveyed its messages to the foreign public opinion and its persuasion and inspiration capability have been systematically examined and described.

### **Cold War and Propaganda**

The Cold War, which has its origins in the economic policy of the USA, the Soviet policy in Eastern Europe and the Soviet policy in the Far East, and the American-Russian insecurity, firstly felt in Europe with all its elements and then spread all over the world (Sander 2013:229-230). The Cold War, initially and primarily related to Western powers, including the Soviet Union, turned into a traditional power politics game (Iriye 2013:18). After the Second World War, the Cold War, in which there was a partial conflict between Western and Eastern Blocs led by the US and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, became apparent and after the downfall of the Germany, The Soviet Union filled the gap in Central and Eastern Europe and partly in the Balkans (Sönmezoğlu 2010:591). The Cold War that conducted between the East and West Blocs revealed conflicts in scientific, psychological, political and technological fields. A new, bipolar international relations system was established in the competition where propaganda was carried out. In this system, the two-pole bloc between liberalism-capitalism and democracy and communism influenced foreign policies, and the world-states chose either one of the two blocs or tried to stand at the same distance from both blocs.

In the late 1980s, the Cold War, which is annotated in the human rights history as a war in which no armed conflict is observed in general, was a story of human rights due to geopolitics (Iriye 2013:19). The Cold War, which left an indelible impression on human rights, affected the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Socialist supporters of the Soviet Union supported social justice for equality and liberal supporters of the United States supported individualism for freedom. The struggle between the US and the Soviet Union has been characterized beyond military power, and mass media have often played a vital role in making propaganda. The implementation of technology during the Cold War demonstrated its importance in terms of global communication and it created new political developments for supporting the control, manipulation and distribution of information to the public opinion.

The US and the Soviet Union propagated their citizens to instill hatred to them against their enemies and to gain full support of the citizens for the government. The Soviet Union, in particular, used its military ability to influence its citizens against the United States. The Soviet Union used radio, literature and films while making propaganda, but the propaganda was intensively pursued with the preference of demonstrating the military forces. In this context, the Soviet Union tried to convey the message that its army was invincible with its propaganda and the Americans were portrayed as racist, sexist, indifferent to the others and betrayer. Stalin's propaganda

methods were more direct, whereas the United States generally focused on the transfer of values through mass media.

### **Iron Curtain Countries**

The Iron Curtain, which divides Europe into two areas of political influence and ideology, was used to describe the isolation of Eastern European countries from Western Europe. The process of "Sovietization" began in the countries known as the Eastern Bloc since the early 1946s. Access to the Eastern Bloc was tightly restricted and diplomatic contacts were weakened. In due course, the tension between the USSR and the West turned into a public voice, and Stalin told the nations the supremacy of communism over capitalism. In the mid-1947s, the announcement of the Marshall Plan by the Americans revealed that some nations were under Stalin's control.

In confirming this fact, the Communist parties seized power in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania with the help and support of the Red Army. In Yugoslavia and Albania, they seized power without any support. Western states, particularly the United Kingdom and the USA, were disturbed by the Soviet Union, which was in the east of Europe. The Western Europe looked askance at the pro-Soviet tendencies and communist governments were successively established in Eastern Europe (Sönmezoğlu 2010:591). In the meantime, the communist groups in the Eastern Europe were encouraged by the Soviet Union to form agreements and coalitions with other parties such as the socialists and farmers/peasant groups (Philips 2001:33).

As a result of the incentives, there were internal and external preparatory factors affecting the establishment of communist governments in Eastern European countries where there is no democratic tradition. To clarify the internal factors, when the Soviet army entered into the Eastern European countries, most of the communist parties received support of a part of the society and formed strong political organizations (Sander 2013:234). To clarify the external factors, the responsibility of liberation of the region from German was conferred to the Soviets, which is geographically the closest country to the Eastern Europe, and Soviets taken measures to use the Eastern Europe as a "jumping board" against an attack to itself. After these effects, the Soviet army ensured the establishment of communist regimes in the region and the communist regimes continued their uninterrupted power until 1989 with the support and commands of Moscow (Sander 2013: 235-236).

The Soviet Control over the rule of regimes in Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia was further reinforced by the establishment of the Cominform (The Communist Information Bureau) in 1947. The Cominform, founded by the USSR, has been an organization that coordinates communist parties across Europe and is attempting to unite the Soviet Socialist bloc against the Truman Doctrine (Philips 2001: 33).

The Cominform and the Soviet Union tried to weaken their Eastern and Central European allies' relations with the Western and non-communist regions, and the Iron Curtain turned into a political, military and ideological obstacle for the USSR. The implementation of the Marshall Plan during this period further revealed the widening

divisions between the Eastern and the Western Bloc. Thus, the communist world was considered as a threat by the USA and the negative effects of communism were explained to the masses.

### **Radio Free Europe**

Radio Free Europe was established in December 1949. It served to the foreign policy objectives of the United States in order to carry out a propaganda against six communist-controlled regions in Central and Eastern Europe (Holt 1958:3). Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) (Epstein 2005: 3), which start to broadcasting under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the period of Harry Truman in 1950, targeted the conflict zones and tried to address the lack of information in closed systems. At this stage, RFE/RL played important roles in the fight against communism and the collapse of communism (Szondi 2009:292).

The government-initiated RFE/RL broadcasted in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and South West Asia. RFE/RL, which has complicated financing and reporting structures, was designed to promote political change and it disseminated the messages of US to the Eastern Europe and the Soviets (Alexandre 1985:3) by broadcasting to millions of people in local languages (Clearly 2008:698).

The RFE model, which is a Cold War weapon of the US (Puddington 2000:2), is unique in both history of diplomacy and the Cold War. From the propagandist global networks to journalistic services financed by mostly Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, many countries established international broadcasting organizations such as the BBC. Only RFE/RL provided news about countries that were the target of the broadcasting and continued its broadcasting services to change the form of government in foreign nations. These activities were defined as a propaganda tool for the public (Puddington 2000:5-6). In propagandas, the messages were shared with the public opinion in a way that could harm the strategy of totalitarianism, in order to promote evolutionary developments in regions weakly controlled by the Soviets, to support the nationalist movements and to create independent thinking (Pratkanis 2009:214). RFE, which aimed to create an environment for reforms, tried to direct public outrage to the most conservative members of communist parties.

The RFE broadcasted as regular radio stations in the Eastern Bloc countries and worked with a reasonable and well-structured program, which was often based on hourly news service and thematic magazines. The RFE listened to the official communist media, commented on their publications, and refuted and criticized the communist media's claims and political arguments. It was among the missions of RFE to introduce national traditions (history, religion, folklore) as well as the spreading the Western culture. RFE also regarded preserving the civil roots of socialist societies as a precondition for transition to democracy (<https://hungarytoday.hu>).

RFE also played an important role in expanding the protests (Folly, 2015: 311) and transferred the universal values. Communist governments did not keep still about the universal values shared by the radio and attempted to prevent the information broadcasted by RFE from reaching the audience in their country. The Communist

authorities constantly tried to squeeze the radio, producing electronic sounds on the same frequencies, and making it impossible to hear programs from time to time (<https://hungarytoday.hu>) and they conducted jamming on the radio signals. RFE, which broadcasted as an anti-communist source of information, aimed to promote democracy by providing information and news to the public. For each language section, journalists consisting mostly of political migrants were gathered and information was collected about the events in the respective countries. For many people living under communism, publications have waged a war against the uniform, strict socialist media in their own country, and the audience was quickly influenced. RFE, which started to abolish information blockage, focused on providing consensus for those trying to overthrow the regime, and the broadcasts were regarded objective and reliable by the oppressed people. The RFE, which had a large audience in this context, started to publish regularly from Munich to Poland in 1952 and Polish people welcomed the broadcasts with respect. The radio also played an important role in the construction of party leaders and became an integral part of the Polish struggle for freedom. At the time of Nicolae Ceausescu, RFE became Romania's most popular news source. Ceausescu responded this situation with anger and sent teams to assassinate RFE journalists.

As of today, RFE/RL has been broadcasting to twenty countries in twenty-five languages. According to 2018 data, RFE/RL, which is estimated to reach 31.1 million audiences per week, is a non-profit organization. The editorial independence of RFE/RL is protected by US law.

### **1956 Poznań Uprising**

In June 1953, workers in East Berlin prompted their first uprising against the Soviet rules on Eastern Europe. Three years later, an uprising took place in Poznań province of Poland and it became a driving force of the Hungarian revolution, a turning point in the Cold War relations (Chester 1995:119). The effect of RFE on the events in this process was felt strongly and the uprising of the Polish working class in 1956 against Stalinism affected the Eastern Europe. Eastern European workers rebelled against Stalinism and the RFE intervened in their internal affairs. In the rebellions arisen in the worst times of the economy, the broadcasts, and brochures of the RFE encouraged riots and it was accused of provoking the workers.

At the time of the uprisings, the RFE began to broadcast programs aiming to calm the crowd in Poznań and published an answer to the riots on 29 June. In its answer, RFE stated that the struggle for liberty should end with a victory and that precautionary principles are vital in this intervention and that preserving the liberty of Poland and avoiding the actions where hope is lost are important (Steiner 1991:82-83).

The RFE was indisputably the most effective source of information for the Polish people and supporting the liberalization became an inclusive theme of the broadcasts of RFE (Puddington 2000:93). Many RFE programs attempted to calm the environment, and in these programs the Western world's interest and sympathy to their struggle was conveyed to the audiences. Newspaper articles condemning the Polish government were published from Western Europe and America, and the West's senior leaders expressed their sympathy for Polish workers. They gave interviews and made

speeches at the RFE shortly after the riots. RFE was a valuable source in disseminating to the rest of Poland the news and conversations related to the issues that took place in Poland. The three-month tension resulted in a new economic policy, stability, and a change of leadership, and during the crisis RFE supported Gomulka. The RFE believed that Gomulka was the first step towards the liberalization of Poland and regarded this situation as a transition period that would bring Poland closer to the Western-style government. Despite all this, the fact that Gomulka was a communist and he was not in the capacity of clearing up all the problems was also evaluated (Steiner 1991).

### **1956 Hungarian Uprising**

The emerging changes after Stalin were effective in Hungary as well as the Soviet Union. Rakoni, who was closer to Stalin's policies, was replaced by Imre Nagy, who had moderate policy, and became prime minister in July 1953, and during Nagy's prime ministry, liberal practices concerned the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union thought that Hungary would move away from Eastern Bloc policies with the policies implemented and Nagy was excluded from membership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and discharged from his post as prime minister in April 1955. A discontent arose in the country and intense opposition to the Soviet Union could not be brought under control. With the increase of demonstrations and strikes (Sönmezoğlu 2010:462), an anti-Soviet uprising was occurred in Hungary.

RFE played a historical role at this stage. The 1956 Poznań Riots, which emerged in Poland through the broadcasts of the RFE, spread to other parts of Eastern Europe, and the broadcasts also inspired the uprising in Hungary in the same year (Folly 2015:311). RFE/RL's messages of freedom and hope reached its goal after the broadcasts began. The Hungarian uprising, one of the most important and controversial events in the history of RFE/RL, attracted the attention of the whole world. During this important civil commotion in Hungary against the Stalinist government supported by the Soviet Union, radio broadcasts attracted to the Hungarian citizens under Soviet rule and encouraged the people to revolt (Clearly 2008:699). The changes that occurred after Stalin's death were reflected on Hungary and the RFE became one of the symbols of the freedom of expression of the people in Hungary. Although the social and governmental issues in Hungary caused unrest, the RFE, which inspired the people to protest the communist governments, prepared the infrastructure of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. The radio was used to influence the citizens who tried to take action, and in Hungary, which made up only a part of the chessboard for the US and the Soviet Union, millions of brochures, which included explanations and propaganda of Western World, in particular, USA, were published and distributed. The messages emphasized unity, courage, and freedom (Handley 2007).

The most popular radio station of Hungary in 1956 was The Voice of Free Hungary. After the revolution, it was found that more than 50 percent of radio audiences in Hungary listened to RFE and most of the peasants and workers preferred to listen to RFE. The popularity of RFE among the Hungarians was high (Puddington 2000:95-96), but the broadcasts of the RFE did not invite the Hungarians to armed

struggle against the Soviet Army. On October 24, the Hungarian Intelligence Agency raised objections to the Hungarian army many times and called for the police not to fire on the rebels and called for the judges not to impose the death penalty (Johnson 2006:10).

The RFE also carried out a large survey on refugees and at the end of 1956 an Austrian company interviewed with 400 Hungarians. In addition to the study, 220 Hungarian refugees in the UK were interviewed for the BBC. In January and February of 1957, 315 refugees were interviewed for RFE and government offices in Europe and US also interviewed with the refugees. These studies shown that the US broadcasts had been listened, they had provided information sources and information related to the life in the countries, where broadcasts were made, had been obtained from these sources (Webb 2016:82-83).

It was determined in the researches conducted in this field that RFE programs were the most popular programs among the broadcasts and the RFE was the most preferred radio. According to the researches, it is seen that the RFE was listened nineteen hours a day, VOA was listened approximately five hours a day and the BBC was listened two hours a day before the outset of the Hungarian Uprising (Webb 2016:83).

Voice of Free Hungary (VFH), one of the regional stations of RFE, was also used in the Hungarian Uprising. VFH chose students as a target group and motivated students to revolt against the current communist government (Kuliev 2010).

On October 28, 1956 at 5:25 am, the new Prime Minister Nagy participated in a radio broadcast about forming a new government for Hungarian citizens. Citizens were criticized for their guilty behavior and the Soviet Union's abandonment of Hungary was addressed in a part of the Nagy's speech. Nagy stated that he had reached an agreement and expressed his hope that the Soviet Union would be forced to leave Hungary and that the new government would begin to regain the country. Nagy's announcement of a ceasefire decision promised to clear the capital from the Soviet troops led to a joy across the country. On the same day, the RFE stated in a broadcast that military tactics were successful against the enemy. The news began with carefully arranged statements that the military support from the West, especially the United States, was approaching (Handley 2007: 17-18).

RFE emerged as a democracy movement against communism with radio broadcasts and the revolution cost the lives of 4.500 people. The RFE, which became a symbol of democracy war against the authoritarian Communist regime, made direct claims that the Soviet Union was withdrawn, and the victory was close, with messages of hope and inspiration sent by the CIA (Handley 2007:26-27).

### **Conclusion**

The Iron Curtain was the symbol of the division between two rival ideologies and systems that dominated the final half of the twentieth century and it had been the symbol of the competition of these ideologies in dominating the world. The RFE, which was developed as a work of the belief that the Cold War would be addressed politically

rather than military means, became an important part of the psychological war effort in the Iron Curtain countries.

The RFE/RL, financed by the Central Intelligence Agency in the 1950s and 1960s, is a secret “disinformation” media project (Kelley 2009:75). The RFE / RL, which uses refugees in this project and has achieved significant results, (Nye 2005:103) has conveyed the soft power messages of the United States to the Eastern Bloc (Kaid 2008:697). This propaganda-prone radio project of the United States continued until 1977 and the propagandas were repeated in the 1980s. This radio project was also used to support anti-communist measures in Central America, since the propaganda tendencies of public diplomacy, at times, provided an environment for the realization of foreign policy objectives (Kelley 2009:75).

The 1956 Poznań Uprising and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising has been indicators of the fact that radio is used as a common tool in underdeveloped countries, where the access to information is restricted, and plays a key role in the dissemination of information. In the Poznań Uprising and in the Hungarian Uprising, radios reflected the social and political ecology of Polish and Hungarian life and built a mutual understanding among people (Webb 2016:84).

The messages in the RFE were shaped according to the conditions of the period and shared with the target audience. Similar to the survey conducted in 1956, which shows that most of the citizens listened to the RFE, forty-five percent of Serbian adults listened to RFE and VOA in the events emerged in Serbia in October 2000, whereas only thirty-one percent of the adults listened to the Radio Belgrade, which was under the state-control. The demonstrations that led to Slobodan Milosevic to be overthrown (Nye 2005:107) showed that the political information of the United States reached more people both in the Cold War and in the 2000s, and the impact of the messages came to light with the experienced events.

RFE/RL, which has given messages of freedom and hope to the oppressed and less free societies, has continued its missions until today (Kaid 2008:697). The efforts of the communist governments to prevent RFE/RL and the experienced events are evidence of the success of the RFE/RL mission. The power of RFE/RL has demonstrated itself with the uprisings occurred in 1956, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism, freedom and democracy in the Eastern Bloc and it has been understood that the period of the Iron Curtain has expired. RFE / RL has proved to the world that it cannot be artificially stand behind the ideals, walls, and borders.

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