



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 20

Radio Stalin to Radio One: The first independent station in Czechoslovakia

Stanislav Perkner and Barbara Kent

The story of the first independent radio station in Czechoslovakia starts in November 1989, when the *Velvet Revolution* ended the Communist Party's domination of Czechoslovakia. Ever since the country's first radio stations were established in the mid-1920s, the medium had been dominated by the government. In the period between the two World Wars, broadcasting was the responsibility of a joint-ownership company, with the government holding the majority of shares. In 1948 this joint-ownership company was replaced with a State monopoly. The only exception to more than forty years of de facto control by the Communist Party's Central Committee was a few weeks of free broadcasting in 1968, the year of the invasion by Soviet troops.

There had never been an opportunity for the development of alternative radio stations and by November 1989, the official radio network paid little attention to listeners' needs, tastes and interests.

The political changes of 1989 were accompanied by efforts to break the State's broadcasting monopoly. The pioneering role in these efforts was played by a group of young people, mostly students, led by a sound technician, Vladimir Vintr; the current general manager of Prague's Radio One.

Breaking this monopoly was not going to be easy. In addition to the common problems arising from a lack of money and equipment, would-be independent broadcasters in Czechoslovakia had to cope with the lack of any legal status for their activities. Until recently, no one would have imagined that alternative broadcasting

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systems would one day appear. The law gave Czechoslovak Radio the exclusive right to broadcast and the government was historically more concerned with jamming foreign broadcasters like the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Deutschlandfunk and Vatican Radio, than it was with encouraging new voices.

The Velvet Revolution opened the doors to change for the State radio. News departments took up this option and adapted to their new role but music departments were reluctant. Young people were eager for a radio station that would provide them with rock music and other alternative genres. Restrictions that had limited this music were removed after November 1989, but music programming continued in essentially the same format.

WE WERE FIRST

The State radio's refusal to meet demands for a different type of programming contributed to a sense of frustration. Vladimir Vintř described what happened next.

Our group of radio enthusiasts decided to take action. The father of one member of the group offered to let us use some basic broadcasting and studio equipment he had received from friends in Paris in the spring of 1990. The transmitter was strong enough to cover the city of Prague and its environs. We did not intend to break the law, and therefore we officially asked the radio communications office for a temporary license. We were promised two FM frequencies, but we did not receive a license because of the legal vacuum.

During this time, the government was deluged by requests from dozens of other applicants, both Czechoslovak and foreign. A new broadcasting law, which would provide a solution to the problem, was not forthcoming and the continual delays convinced any and all interested parties that something had to be done. Even a full year after the revolution, bureaucracy blocked the needed solutions.

This inertia contrasted with other creative activities, especially in the field of fine arts. For example, the Linhart's Foundation acted to promote alternative presentations in the arts. The Foundation had been established in 1987 by a group of Prague architects, but legally it was unable to present its creations until after November 1989.

In October 1990 the Foundation lent its support to a festival of independent culture, the *Totalitarian Zone*. One hundred and fifty artists came from some twenty countries to take part in the festival, organised in a very bizarre place – the basement rooms of the razed monument of Joseph Stalin in Prague. The monument had been demolished in 1962, but its three basement floors still kept the warehouse smell of dirty, dusty, moist and dank air. This absurd scene suited a *Totalitarian Zone*.

Vintř's radio group, still trying to get a licence, was invited to take part in the "happening" – a continuous party lasting day and night and well attended.

Our broadcasts started Friday, October 19, at six p.m., and continued until Sunday. We offered music, and covered Festival events continuously on 92.6 FM, a frequency which we knew from previous negotiations with radio communications administrators did not interfere with other Prague stations. Of course, we knew that our broadcasting was pirate, the first in Czechoslovakia.

But we also believed that it was the only way to provoke action from the decision-makers. We operated from the bizarre location of the former Stalin monument; that's why we called ourselves Radio Stalin.

We knew immediately from the heavy telephone response that we had found the solution. Some of the listeners were shocked by our name, but that had been our intention: to appeal to the interest of public participation. The absurdities associated with 'underground activities' allowed us to use an 'absurd' name and awaken the 'living dead'. Our constituency had been born!

The rising popularity of the station was further multiplied by an unexpected episode. Lenka Wienerova, a Radio Stalin producer, remembers the story well.

Even President Vaclav Havel decided to attend the Festival. When he arrived we asked him for an interview and he agreed. He was very kind, despite the physical circumstances; our studio was located in one of the cold, bad-smelling, damp pathways in the underground labyrinth. When we reached the studio, we asked the president to be seated in our only chair for the interview.

Public reaction to the interview was mostly positive; audiences understood it as a gesture of moral support for independent broadcasting. Nevertheless, some reactions were remonstrative, if not negative. For example, the most popular Czech weekly, *Mladý Svět* (The Young World), wrote:

It is slightly striking that President Havel agreed to be interviewed by an illegal radio station. Regardless of whether the president agrees with the law, he should nevertheless abide by the existing law as a citizen, and also as the top representative of State.

The president felt called upon to react to the publicity and he did so with his usual diplomatic elegance and broad mindedness. In one of his regular Sunday afternoon chats for federal radio, he included a few words devoted to the Radio Stalin interview. He said that during his visit to the *Totalitarian Zone Festival* he was convinced by a group of nice young people to answer several questions for their station. He said that he had not known that the broadcast was not legally constituted. Nevertheless, he added, he thought there should be not only State-run stations, but independent ones as well.

Following the Vaclav interview on Friday, the station continued its *Totalitarian Zone* broadcasting until it received another official visitor.

On Sunday, one of the local government officials came into our quarters and started to intimidate us, saying that we must immediately cease activities. He sat down in the same chair the president had used and eventually admitted, 'As a private citizen, I agree with your efforts, however, in my official capacity, I *must* comply with the law, and insist that you cease operations.'

Wienerova recalls that station personnel argued that since there was no law expressly forbidding independent broadcasts, the station could not be illegal. She doesn't know if the official accepted the argument, but the following Friday the police arrived at the station and seized the equipment.

We didn't see it again for several weeks, and we were even fined for the misdemeanour. Fortunately, we had chosen an unused frequency and not interfered with

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any other broadcasting, which had been the main argument against us. The legal proceedings against us were actually only symbolic.

Immediately after the episode with President Havel's interview, and after the seizing of the station equipment, a huge campaign in support of the right for independent broadcasting started. The Radio Stalin affair became a front-page event for several days in Czechoslovakian newspapers. It became a symbol not only of the struggle for freedom of expression in actual practice, but also the struggle for independent, noncommercial cultural activities. Protest petitions went to politicians, members of parliament, radio and television outlets and major newspapers. The spontaneously-established Union of Independent Broadcasting Applicants was heavily engaged in these efforts as well.

As a result of this campaign, the seized equipment was returned to Vladimir Vintř and his colleagues. TRS, a subsidiary of the Linhart Foundation, provided the station with a new headquarters in downtown Prague, directly across the river from the original site of broadcasting.

After the Velvet Revolution, Czech and Slovak cultural institutions, for years subsidised by government as propaganda tools, became free. But the threat of commercialisation quickly developed. As for broadcasting, the immediate approval of a new broadcasting law by the Federal Parliament was of primary importance. It was proposed that independent broadcasters would receive a portion of the licence fees paid to the State by owners of radio and television receivers. Such a solution was expected to allow the non-State stations to act not only as commercially operated ones, but also to provide certain cultural services to the public. Lenka Wienerova recalls:

In the first days of the year 1991, it became clear to everyone that the government would finally act. Subsequent to our proposal that the government issue temporary licenses to selected applicants, there were eight stations licensed in March. In the meantime, we decided to start again with our broadcasts from the new site, on the new frequency 91.9 FM. We changed our name from Radio Stalin to Radio Ultra, and now recently to Radio One. We were the first!

YOUTH RADIO

Most of the other new stations, including those outside of Prague that had been licensed later, did not begin operations until the Fall of 1991.

The State radio, for the first time in its history, had competitors, although it still had the trump cards: three nationwide networks (Federal, Czech, and Slovak), several simultaneously operating programmes, ten regional studios and, most importantly, a government-secured budget. The Union of Independent Broadcasters required that a part of the fees paid by listeners went to the independent producers, reducing the government budget for State-run radio.

Now the new stations (for example: Radio RIO, Radio Plus, Radio Bonton, Radio Vox, Fun Radio) have to vie for listenership among themselves as well as against the State radio. Most of them are oriented toward "easy listening" programming, highlighting MOR formats. In this, there is the danger of homogenised sound, making it difficult for

the listener to differentiate one station from another. The exception is Radio One. It has opted for its own specific programme philosophy and strictly serves the tastes of the younger generation.

Lenka Wienerova, now a producer at Radio One, says:

We now employ eleven disc jockeys, all of whom had been volunteering their services until September, when we were able to begin providing them with salaries. They are absolutely free to choose the musical material and comment on it. All of them came from the underground music clubs and they have good sensitivity to their generation's desires. Their selection of programmatic material is authorised by their own personal tastes; if one likes Madonna, he or she plays Madonna with the conviction that others will like Madonna as well. We believe in a second value: we deplore indifference or indolence regarding the painful issues of our world. Therefore, we organise public events such as concerts supporting the Kurd nation, or the Czech National Library. During these events, we have a chance to meet our listeners, who are mainly highly educated youth of the city of Prague and its vicinities.

Eighty-five per cent of our broadcasting time is devoted to music. Besides six-hour blocks of a disc jockey's time, our listeners are offered documentaries or special features dealing with lesser-known music, musicians, and styles. Three times weekly we schedule shorter presentations of classical music – opera, organ concerts, and devotional music – with accompanying explanations. A part of our log is our own 'hit parade', as well as an 'anti-parade'. We provide air time to the editors of two music journals.

The rest of the schedule is filled with various interviews, reports, and commentaries broadcast under the title of *Pot-Pourri*. There is a short news summary every hour; our news department consists of four editors.

We stopped paying the official Czechoslovak news agency (CTK) because its services were not compatible with our needs. Our information sources are: monitoring of other broadcasters, newspapers, and the services of the East European Information Agency (VIA). During dramatic world events, we invite the news editors of VIA to come to our studio for direct, live broadcasts. It was used, for example, during the USSR's 'coup' attempt in August 1991.

Hot news is broadcast immediately; we don't feel bound by any rules or regulations as do the news editors at the State radio. Twice a day, the English portion of the news is broadcast by the editors of *Prognosis*, the Prague-based English language newspaper.

HOW TO SURVIVE AND PROSPER

The big advantage enjoyed by VINTR's radio group was that they had the technical equipment at their disposal from the first moment of broadcasting. Nevertheless, the station is expensive to operate. Vladimir VINTR explains:

Until September 1991, none of us received any salary whatsoever. Our commercial income was immediately reinvested. For the time being, we are able to cover about 25% of our costs with advertising revenue. We need to

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cover about 50% of our costs through it. After a year of broadcasting, we are realising about 70-80% of our potential commercial revenue. Our prices are very reasonable, both because we understand that we are a community station and because we want to support smaller business ventures. Our licensing agency, TRS, borrowed millions of crowns from the bank. We receive some money from government, taken from listeners' licence fees. We intend, also, to borrow money from abroad, but we would like to stay independent in our decision-making. This is the only way that we can survive in an over-crowded ether in our broadcast area.

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PS.: According to the latest polls, from Winter 1991-1992, Radio One is now in third place in listenership in Prague!