



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 8

How to Make an Echo... of Moscow

Serguei Korzoun

If a year ago someone had told me that the most prominent personalities in the world of politics, diplomacy, the economy, science and culture, could be called upon to settle into our microscopic studios in the heart of Moscow, I would have laughed very hard. Such nice dreams. I wouldn't have believed them at all.

Today I don't laugh, because I'm well aware of its price. It's not measured in rubles or dollars, but in overworked days for our team of twenty-odd people, in sleepless nights spent reflecting long and hard on free radio broadcasting in our country, and in our small radio station in particular. How do you make an Echo of Moscow a free echo in a country which isn't, and among people who aren't?

The fame and the almost worldwide interest which Echo of Moscow is now enjoying, are no doubt connected to the events of August 1991, in Moscow. Events which some term the "coup d'état" or the "*putsch*", others call the "revolution," while the third and largest group refer to it as the "continuation of the eternal mess." From August 19th to 21st 1991, Echo of Moscow, cut off from its transmitter four times, was the only radio station in Moscow to follow, broadcasting live, the vicissitudes of the "theatrical coup" which appears to have brought profound changes to our country, the former Soviet Union. I will come back to these three days after a small historical detour along the winding roads of independent radio in Moscow.

2 / A Passion for Radio

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT RADIO IN MOSCOW

As I write these lines, there is no law regulating the distribution of broadcast frequencies for radio and television in the state of Russia. This law is foreseen for 1992. But in 1990 – the year when the idea for our radio station began to take shape – the Soviet State’s domination of television and radio broadcasting was absolute.

The first swallows announcing the coming of spring for independent radio in the USSR came on April 30, 1990.

On this day, two radio stations appeared almost simultaneously on Moscow’s airwaves – on frequencies granted by the all-powerful Gosteleradio (the USSR’s State Committee for Radio and Television). The two stations were commercial music stations. Both had French backing and both, initially, were very dependent on State structures. Europe Plus is doing well today and expanding its programming. Nostalgia-Moscow recently had to redefine itself while collecting a second wind. Today, you can tune in to almost ten music stations in Moscow.

On August 1, 1990, a law regulating the press and other media came into effect. It said little about the broadcast media, and thus had the merit *of* not hampering radio’s birth or development. On August 22, the first truly independent radio station began broadcasting. It was radio Echo of Moscow. The station would certainly never have been launched without the support of its sponsors. The newspaper *Ogonyok* provided the start-up funds; the Radio Association offered the medium-wave transmitter, antenna, frequency and transmission lines; the local municipality (the Soviet of Moscow) provided essential support and (mostly moral) assistance; and the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow University gave moral support as well as promises to provide help of all kinds. Once born, the child was thrown, without trumpets or fanfare, into the deep waters of political and financial insecurity. “Learn to swim on your own,” the sponsors seemed to say. This could not have corresponded better with the most ardent wishes of the team as it settled itself into the studio furnished with rudimentary equipment. We had our work cut out for us, but what did it matter if, in the eyes of any radio professional, the equipment could have passed for museum pieces?

In a sense, all of Soviet radio and television could have been described as a museum in 1989, but a private museum belonging to the *apparatchiks*. Serguei Bountman and I had other ideas of what was possible. We had both worked at the French language service of Radio Moscow International for over ten years – a small part of the elephantine Gosteleradio. Gorbachev-style perestroika had given us the opportunity to travel a bit, to *go* to France on several occasions and to get to know something of its radio landscape. I even had the chance to work at the Paris station, Kiss-FM, for twenty days, with a group of Soviet radio journalists. Understandably, we felt a bit confined upon our return. In our “museum” the release of each programme necessitated the signatures of a thousand directors. Their biggest concern was to avoid making a political faux-pas which would jeopardise their positions in the hierarchy of the Communist Party and the State. And the best way to avoid such faux-pas as we know very well, is to not do anything at all.

With other journalists, we tried to change things by proposing new programmes for Radio Moscow International. But the inertia of the State radio machine was such that,

even in the throes of perestroika, anything new was engulfed in the never-ending sea of official commentary, called “bricks” in our professional jargon.

During this time I put a good deal of effort into finding ways to get a transmitter and a frequency, as well as funding for a station such as the one I conceived of, but until 1990 it was all in vain. Then in April 1990, luck smiled upon me. A friend proposed that I become Editor In Chief of a new radio station whose technical and financial bases seemed to be covered. I immediately arranged a meeting with the people responsible for this initiative. For the most part they were audio professionals who had no notion of radio programming. After talking to them, I accepted the offer without hesitation.

What did I lose? A more or less comfortable position, it’s true, in a large State radio station with a highly developed, but inept, infrastructure. I lost almost all my social security, not altogether unimportant – believe me in a country where the society is everything, and the individual, nothing. I also lost the few dozen francophone listeners who tuned into my programme. Should I have regretted it?

What would I find in this new venture? Well, I wasn’t sure, but I supposed I would find freedom of action and of speech. And I did. The feeling of freedom began to dull a bit as the months went by, but I still remember the second day of broadcasting when I spoke simply, just like this, live on-air to people who simply wanted to phone in and say something to other listeners and myself. This was the first type of programming we broadcast. I felt myself flapping my wings. At first, listeners did not believe – didn’t want to believe – that everything was happening live, even as they heard their own voices on their radio receivers. A few even went so far as to suppose that we were working for the KGB, and that our frank discussions were being taped for secret service files. Such were the first steps toward freedom as we tried, along with our listeners, to explore the vast expanse of possibilities that were offered to us.

Freedom – one gets used to it quickly. But as time goes by, the feeling of responsibility becomes heavier and heavier. Far from radically improving, the situation of the free media in Russia seemed to reverse itself. After a notable opening up, we observed more and more insistent measures to tighten the screws on the media whose publications and programmes did not correspond exactly with the expectations of the new power-holders. The authority of these power-holders in a newly sovereign Russia seemed to have replaced “the iron fist” of the old USSR. Power always seems to aspire to monopoly... And so in a situation where not everything that will affect the station is under your control, the responsibility that you feel towards the people who have followed you and your recalcitrant radio station is perhaps the hardest thing to bear.

What’s needed to create a radio station? A transmitter, a microphone, a turntable, people who have something to say... The reality of radio in our country is much more complex. To begin operating a station, at least two thousand eight hundred and forty-eight agreements, from a thousand three-hundred and twenty-three organisations and institutions are needed. I’m not joking. Transmitters, for example, are not sold, but rather, “accorded” or “attributed,” as are broadcast frequencies. And the designation of frequencies depends not on the application of the law but upon the good or bad will of the telecommunications officials. A cable link between the studio and transmitter isn’t good enough for FM stereo broadcasting, but a hertzian hook-up isn’t authorised in Moscow

4 / A Passion for Radio

“for security reasons”. Renting an office which will respond to the needs of a radio station is no small feat in Moscow, while using a State studio means risking being arbitrarily cut off from it at some point. This actually happened to us when Gosteleradio broke our contract without prior notice.

And I haven't even mentioned the question of funding yet. It's a matter of time, perhaps. In the beginning, the sponsors of Echo of Moscow provided start-up funds. This was a charitable gesture, a gesture of goodwill, of support for democracy, as we wouldn't really be able to depend on their money in the future. We have all the features of a free radio station, both politically and journalistically, but we finance ourselves like a commercial station. So we are fuelled by advertising, while the programming is non-commercial in nature. These last few months we've even made a small profit, so that we can develop without having to borrow.

We are aware of the ravages of advertising, but we still follow a general private radio model. The journalists hold 40% of the stocks in the station, with the rest belonging to the founding parties. The prestige we've won allows us to look to the future with optimism. We are strong enough and vigilant enough not to let ourselves be swallowed up by domestic or foreign capitalists. If the announced economic reforms go well and an advertising market is formed in Russia, we'll be in a good starting position. As for other funding sources, we foresee selling programmes to other stations and perhaps obtaining income through publications (our first book has just come out). Other financially viable activities are also planned, but that's up to the station's management. As journalists, we are first and foremost committed to refining our programming and not becoming simply a support mechanism for advertising.

Our original and eclectic programming reflects the wishes of the journalists at Echo of Moscow to compete with the national general radio in all areas, across all age groups. We're doing well according to the most recent poll of Moscow listeners, which gives us a loyal listenership of 7% (more than 12% among people in higher education), and 21 % who listen to us periodically. The highest listenership is in the morning with up to three million listeners.

Politics, the economy, business, sports, culture, entertainment, commentary, readings and plays – in principle, all these subjects have the right to be broadcast at our station. But our main efforts are dedicated to the news. While news in the form of bulletins, reports and magazine programmes occupies only a tenth of our air time, its production occupies up to two-thirds of our staff. We have news agencies, special correspondents, stringers, and contact personnel in different spheres at our disposal in order to provide objective news coverage. This requires a lot of skill and money, but it's worth it in the long-run. The desire to be a quick and reliable source of information remains one of the greatest reservations for our journalists.

THE ECHO OF AN ARMED ATTACK

During the night of January 13, 1991, programme host Serguei Bountman was awakened by a phone call from a friend in Vilnius who told him that gunfire could be heard in the city. At the time we were broadcasting only three hours of programming a

day, in the evenings. However, at a dawn meeting in our studio, having learned of the army and KGB attack on the Lithuanian radio and television building, we decided to hook up the transmitter well before normal broadcasting time.

We knew perfectly well that our voice would be the only echo of this armed attack. We were lucky enough to have two correspondents in Vilnius. It was a Sunday – and the daily newspapers don't publish Sundays or Mondays. And, as we expected, the State radio and television didn't breathe a word about the events. Without us, the coup would have passed unnoticed by the larger public. We were determined to speak out that day, from morning to night. And we were heard. Not only by our 300,000 daily listeners, but by some millions of Muscovites who were turning their radio dials searching for objective information.

We brandished our weapon of information and at the same time won the sympathies of Moscow's intelligentsia. Before these events, we had to explain at length what the station was about when we invited someone to participate in our programming. From January 13 on, it was enough to say "Echo of Moscow" in order to hear a "yes, of course." A "no" as well, at times, but much more rarely. A few days later, we expanded our programming to eight hours a day, and continued at this pace, all the while awaiting an order of technical equipment which would permit us to broadcast 24 hours a day

AUGUST 1991

Given our reputation it was no surprise that Echo of Moscow was the first medium to be closed down on the day of the attempted coup d'état in Moscow, on August 19, 1991.

On that morning, at 6:20 a.m., I entered the building which houses our offices and studio, located a few steps away from the Kremlin. I was replacing a programme host who was ill. It was only then that I heard the national radio announce President Gorbachev's illness and the introduction of emergency measures "in some regions of the country." My first thought was: "This time, they will certainly silence us, the lesson of Vilnius must have been learned." I was slightly wrong, for two minutes later the transmitter technicians assured me that we'd be on-air at 7:00 a.m., as usual. My second thought was: "What are they stirring up? This coup d'état will be the *coup-de-grace* of Communism in the USSR, for it will never succeed!" Here I was correct. My third thought was that all the programming initially planned for the day would have to be cancelled – nothing was accurate anymore. It would all have to be replaced.

After alerting our whole team, I telephoned a few people who would be capable of analysing the situation on-air. I selected a few Soviet "social" rock songs as support music, valuable not so much for their music as for their anti-totalitarian lyrics.

At exactly 7:00 I took my seat in front of the console and the microphone, and my first few words went something like, "It's a bad morning today. If you've just woken up, we'll tell you why." We broadcast official information as well as dispatches from our correspondents about the movement of troops throughout the city. I awaited the arrival of my guests and, at 7:45, a group of people appeared in the studio. The face of one of them seemed very familiar to me and, taking advantage of a musical break, I rose to shake their

6 / A Passion for Radio

hands and invite them to take a seat in front of the mike. A few seconds later, I realised that the familiar face belonged to one of the higher-ups at the telecommunications service (whose offices are just next door). The others introduced themselves as officers of the KGB!

– “Is this the place where the programme is being done?” one of them asked me.

– “Yes, this is it, strange as it may seem,” I replied, taking a look around me – our decrepit equipment could have led anyone to believe they were mistaken.

– “You must cease broadcasting.”

– “Why?”

– “The Emergency Measures -you know.”

– “Show me the papers that entitle you to close us down.”

“But you know that with the announcement of Emergency Measures all the media must go under control.”

– “Wait,” I replied, reading from a copy of the official text, “it states that the Emergency Measures are being introduced in certain regions. The city of Moscow isn’t mentioned here.”

– “But that goes without saying. You must terminate.”

– “No, I can’t do that. In the absence of the appropriate papers I’ll do nothing of the sort.”

The KGB man continued to insist, but without doing anything to stop the show there in the studio. His team – five or six people, all of slight build and in civilian dress did not have the appearance of a commando. I was already thinking that despite any dispute, I was going to continue the program, and was ready to hand the mike over to my real guest who had just arrived. just then one of our journalists entered and told us that the control receiver was dead – the radio signal was not being transmitted any longer. I looked at my watch – it was two minutes to 8:00.

They had stopped us by disconnecting the studio from the transmitter. The programme was cut off. But the real work was just beginning. Probably having judged their task accomplished, the KGB men disappeared without a trace, but the technicians upon whom the connection depended flatly refused to reconnect us to the transmitter, claiming that it was a technical failure. Still, the departure of the KGB men left us room to manoeuvre and the hope of reconnecting later.

We had three exhausting days of work ahead of us. Exhausting, but in many ways very easy and fruitful. The fact is that none of the channels of information were cut by the army: the telephones didn’t stop ringing, the fax emitted an uninterrupted stream, all the agencies did their best to function under an emergency regime. A real bargain for the journalists, Cut off from our antenna on the first day, we ourselves functioned as a press agency by retransmitting news digests to other media, including foreign stations, notably the BBC and Radio Liberty. At the same time we waged a real fight for our own airwaves. On the second day of the coup August 20 – we succeeded in reinstating our programming thanks to the support of a team of technicians. It was at 1:40 p.m., and I

remember this moment very well, as I had never before been moved by such a rush of forces. I hosted the programmes that day and the first three hours went by without a hitch. Agency information, music, live phone calls from the Russian Parliament which was barricaded and under siege, guests in studio – all of these followed one another at a crazy pace. Our listeners telephoned us as well and brought us cake, coffee and cigarettes to help us hold our ground.

That evening, on the televised news, we learned some significant official information – a decree of the coup leaders imposed the closure of several media outlets. Echo of Moscow was mentioned as “the radio station which is not contributing to stabilising the situation.” We would have liked to carry another of their attempts to close us down live but this time our transmitter was disconnected . We mobilised all our friends and managed to reconnect one hour later. The third disconnection hit us at 1:00 a.m. – during the tensest moment of the coup. We had at least had the time to inform our listeners of the first blood shed in the streets of Moscow.

The news of the violence, and being closed down at such a crucial moment, left us disheartened. In addition, we knew from information continuing to reach us that things were not going well in the vicinity of the Russian parliament, and that a direct attack was being prepared. What’s more, an unknown radio station using the name Echo of Moscow was broadcasting misinformation on our airwaves! In that night’s disorder, we didn’t take the time to tape their programmes. But there was no doubt that it was a “radio game” of the secret service who were controlling the assault. The question of who did it remains officially unanswered. The KGB replied to all the other questions of the inquiry commission, but not that one. And any hope of ever getting an answer has been dampened by the reorganisation of the secret service.

At around 3:00 a.m. we received a call from a supporter within the Ministry of Telecommunications asking us if we were ready to begin broadcasting again. My response was, “yes, of course.” And so technicians arranged to connect our little studio to a transmitter located ten kilometres away, via a simple telephone line. It worked! It worked so well that the coup leaders were stumped. How could a disconnected station continue to broadcast? They resorted to sending a KGB commando to destroy the transmitter and finish us off once and for all. But it was already August 21, and a few hours later the defeat of the coup was evident to everyone. On their own initiative the technicians reconnected everything they could, including a back-up transmitter.

In the same remarkable spirit, soldiers from a detachment outside Moscow, having discovered that our transmitter was silent, loaded a similar one onto a truck, with the intention of bringing it to us! They were already heading our way when they heard our signal start up and turned back. Hats off!

A month later the journalists who came to interview us were more numerous than those in our editorial room. Falling down from fatigue, tired of answering the same questions, we never turned any of them away. The publicity was a chance to become known around the world. Not too bad for a “commercial” station that’s as poor as a mouse.

8 / A Passion for Radio

FUTURE ECHOES

We now know that the future of Echo of Moscow is in the hands of its journalists, and we are delighted. It is clear that we can operate as a commercial station without abandoning our journalistic ideals. In the post-coup period the monopoly of the USSR State Radio-Television, along with the Soviet Union itself, disappeared completely. But a new monopoly is trying to take root – the Russian State Radio-Television. It hoards the best frequencies, the most powerful transmitters, and uses advertising to the fullest in order to inflate journalists' salaries. In short, a perfidious competition is unfolding and the State has the position of advantage. At the same time, private music stations, often created through State participation, are growing like mushrooms, making full use of the facilities offered by the high authorities. For the moment, Echo of Moscow is holding its ground. The latest poll placed us second in all of Moscow, just behind Europe Plus. The other stations are lagging far behind.

Because we were avoiding the involvement of large entrepreneurs, we lost a bit of time in re-equipping ourselves. In the end, we were able to obtain a well-equipped studio with the help of the American foundation, Soros. So we will have one less problem. With the consent of the original funders we have adopted a policy of investing 40% of revenue in news production. The financing of the station is ensured by advertising which, since the coup, has brought in one million rubles a month. The ruble isn't a strong currency however. Its free-fall worries us and we're pinning our hopes on the economic reforms instituted in Russia.

One of our greatest advantages is that none of the new radio stations has dared to challenge us on our territory – the area of serious news. We have a huge network of correspondents, contacts throughout the country and in the old republics of the USSR, and we are beginning to build an international network. In effect we have a monopoly in Moscow because the State radio, though better equipped, doesn't take as much care with the speed or format of its news programming. While this position threatens to spoil us, we are determined not to succumb to the temptation of loosening up, even a bit.

The future won't be easy for us, we know. The new authorities see us more and more in a negative light. But none of this prevents us from gathering into our studios all types of minorities, from having a good time when we want to, and from cursing between our teeth as we kick our broken old equipment while presenting a calm front to our listeners.

We keep going with the Echo of Moscow, which is more than a passion -it's a veritable drug. But not one that kills. One that reinvigorates, that stimulates us and drives us forward, crazy people that we are. Only a crazy person could believe in making an Echo... of Moscow.

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