

IS THAT A ROCKET UNDER YOUR KIMONO? BLASTING OFF FROM JAPAN'S VINTAGE SPACE CENTRE

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issue 28, volume 03
NOVEMBER 09

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page 007

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page 010

HOW TO SET UP SHOP
page 018

FINDING THE FUNDS: HOW TO SECURE INVESTMENT FOR YOUR NEW START-UP
page 021

THE BEST COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT A NEW VENTURE
page 022

BUILD A HANDSOME OFFICE
page 028

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UK £5	SEK 95
USD \$10	JPY ¥2,310
EUR 12 (GER)	AUD \$12.95
EUR 10 (ITA)	SGD \$19.90 (w/gst)
DKK 122	CDN \$10.00



REPORT
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

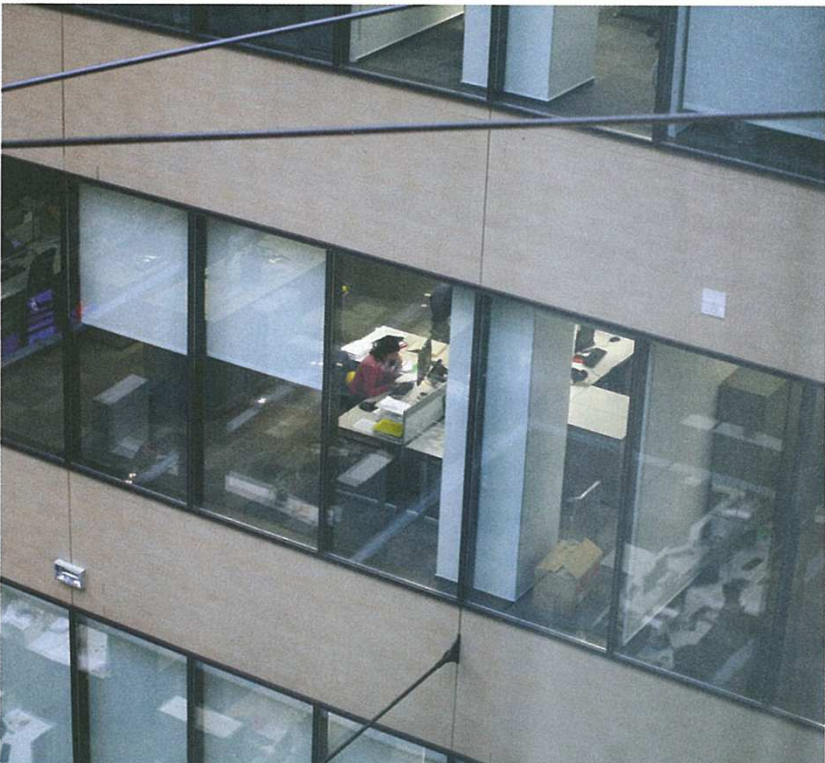


01

- 01 Broadcaster
Qadir Habib
- 02 Prague HQ in district 10
- 03 The new Prague
broadcast centre



02



03

AIR RESCUE —Prague

Preface

Twenty years ago, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was a busy place as the Iron Curtain was pulled back. Today, its signals are still focused on Russia as well as Iran and Afghanistan.

WRITER

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When Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, agreed to take part in the country's first live election debate there was no argument about which station could guarantee the biggest audience: Radio Free Afghanistan (RFA). RFA's Kabul bureau, part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), hosted President Karzai, Ashraf Ghani and Ramazan Bashardost in a two-hour discussion in August, also broadcast on state television. The country was transfixed as its leader was called to account in front of an audience of millions. "President Karzai listens to us at 06.30 every morning when he has his breakfast. Every shopkeeper listens to us, every taxi driver, even the Taliban listen to us," says Hashem Mohmand, the station's deputy director.

Calling Afghan officials to account is a far cry from RFE/RL's original mission. RFE/RL was founded in 1950 to broadcast behind the Iron Curtain, funded by the US Congress through the CIA, and during the Cold War RFE/RL employed hundreds of emigrés from across Eastern Europe in its Munich headquarters. RFE's steady flow of information to the Soviet bloc corroded the communist system from the inside, and eventually helped bring down the totalitarian regimes. Today, its \$90m annual budget is funded entirely by the US Congress but RFE/LE says that it is independent of the US government.



REPORT
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

To those who question its continuing relevance, RFE/RL replies that it has a new mission: to broadcast accurate information to post-Soviet authoritarian regimes from its new, state of the art headquarters in Prague's district 10. Vaclav Havel, the former Czech president and famous dissident, was so grateful to RFE/RL that he offered to house its former headquarters in Prague, where it moved in 1995. Its new HQ opened for business this February.

Designed by Prague-based Cigler Marani Architects, the building reflects the values of RFE/RL: strength, openness and transparency. Granite corners are linked by glass façades, while a canvas shaped like a sail greets visitors at the entrance. The site's hub is the newsroom, located on the ground floor, in the centre of the atrium, with a ceiling five floors up.

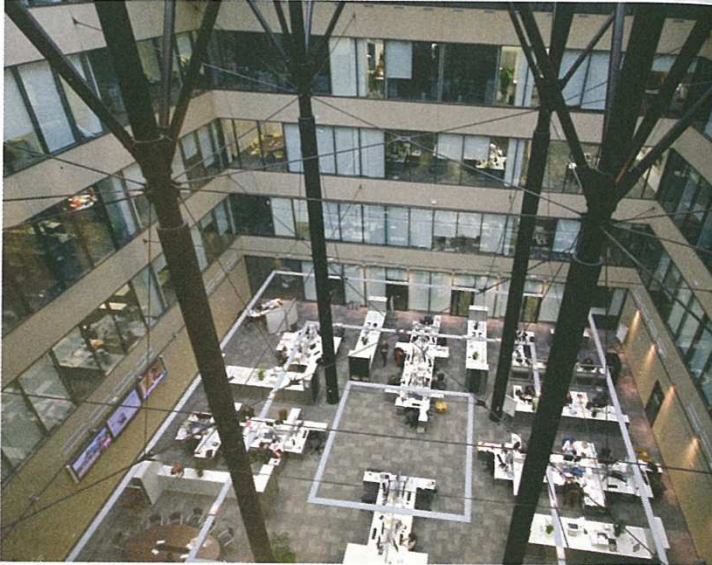
"Authoritarian regimes are growing in self-confidence because of Russia's invasion of Georgia. Putin's success has encouraged similar regimes in Eurasia," says John O'Sullivan, RFE/RL's executive editor and a former speechwriter for Margaret Thatcher. "After 1990 many authoritarian regimes felt they were on the wrong side of history and moved towards democracy, but now they are becoming emboldened."

The steel and glass building feels like a mini-UN. Each station has its own area, decorated with large news photographs of elections and demonstrations, and the corridors and lifts echo to a babel of languages. Despite RFE/RL's commitment to openness, its new HQ has a similar level of security to some US embassies. The building is set far back from the entrance. Visitors pass through two security checks to enter. Many of RFE/RL's journalists are unwilling to be photographed, fearful of retribution against them or their relatives.

RFE/RL's critics, especially in regimes unfriendly to the West, charge that it is an arm of American propaganda. During a visit to the studios, Hillary Clinton described RFE/RL as "smart power. What you do here is an instrumental, essential part of everything America stands for."



01



02



03



04



05



06



07



08

- 01 RFE/RL journalists at work
- 02 Atrium of the Prague offices
- 03 Broadcaster Asmat Sarwan
- 04 Meeting in progress
- 05 Hashem Mohmand
- 06 Gordana Knezevic
- 07 Golnaz Esfandiari
- 08 Recording studio

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in numbers

Countries broadcast to: 20
Languages broadcasted in: 28
Language services (separate stations): 18
Platforms: Radio, internet, television
Broadcast hours: 1,040.8 a week (2008)
Audience: 24.6 million a week (radio, web, streaming audio) (2008/09)
Employees: 500 at Prague headquarters and Washington office; 400 plus full-time journalists and 750 freelancers and stringers in local bureaux
Budget: Approximately \$90m (2008/09)

O’Sullivan is a prominent Atlanticist and a former editor of the *National Interest*, an influential American conservative magazine. RFE/RL’s defenders say that transparency, accurate information and accountability are universal concerns.

“We are seen as a means of projecting soft power and western values,” says Joanna Levison, senior media adviser. “We are aware that that affects our funding, but we do not see ourselves as a mouthpiece for US government policy. Our aim is to promote human rights and provide accurate, balanced, information.”

The internet has transformed RFE/RL’s work. Facebook, SMS messages and YouTube allow its listeners to send instant information and video footage, which RFE/RL’s editors can then repackage for broadcast. For Gordana Knezevic,

director of RFE/RL’s South Slavic and Albanian services, cyberspace’s potential for change came 15 years too late after the wars of the early 1990s. “Events in the former Yugoslavia would have been very different if the internet had the role then it has nowadays,” she argues.

Working for RFE/RL under authoritarian regimes can be perilous: its journalists have been beaten, detained and arrested. RFE/RL correspondents in Uzbekistan, which has one of the world’s worst records on press freedom, were denounced on state television, which broadcast their personal details and those of their relatives. Other regimes use slightly more subtle methods: in 2005 RFE had 33 affiliates in Russia. It now has six.

RFE/RL has no bureaux in Iran but its listeners are its reporters. Radio Farda,

RFE/RL’s Persian language service, is the only station to broadcast 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Radio Farda plays a continual cat and mouse game with the Iranian authorities, sometimes switching shortwave frequencies every hour. Farda’s website (radiofarda.com) is blocked so uses proxy servers to allow listeners to dodge Iran’s censors. At the height of the turmoil during the June elections the server hosting Radio Farda and Voice of America had 340 million hits in one day.

For Iran’s media-savvy youth, Radio Farda is also an outlet to the world. The station has 17,000 fans on Facebook. Its listeners upload videos and send SMS messages to the station, which its journalists then repackage and broadcast back to Iran. “Our mission is to promote democracy and our coverage made it clear that the election was pre-planned and fraudulent,” says Rod Shahidi, the station’s director. A 10-year veteran of RFE/RL, Shahidi formerly worked for several hi-tech companies in Silicon Valley. “Our job is not to have an impact on political parties but to deliver news in an unbiased way. Our listeners trust us.”

Soft power has its limitations, and for now the regime remains in power, but something fundamental has shifted, says Shahidi. “This process is just starting. Facebook and YouTube have given us instantaneous media interaction. When there is a demonstration it is posted immediately on the internet. The Iranian political scene has been changed for good. The fear factor has been broken.” And when cowed populations start to find their courage, dictators across the world should start to worry. — (M)