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RFE Broadcasts May Be Backfiring

Radio programs broadcast to Soviet-bloc countries by two U.S. government-financed stations in Munich often insult the people they're trying to win and contain questionable criticism of the United States and its allies, according to internal congressional reports.

The problems with the two stations—Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty—stem more from mismanagement than malice, concluded one congressional staff memo obtained by our associate Indy Badhwar. But the memo notes that the problems are serious, involving the broadcasting of "unacceptable material . . . characterized as anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic or even anti-western."

When the two stations were established by the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1950s as an antidote to Radio Moscow, their shrill anti-Soviet propaganda gave them little more credibility than the Kremlin's broadcasts.

So Congress took the two stations away from the CIA and created an independent Board for International Broadcasting to fund and supervise them. The board's guidelines recommend avoidance of "emotionalism, vindictiveness, belligerency, condescension, propagandistic argumentation, unsupported criticism of the communist system, incitement to revolt, programs based on rumors, sweeping generalizations and gratuitous value judgments."

Unfortunately, the programs prepared by refugees and other East Europeans often reflect their prejudices. Here are some examples:

- In one broadcast, a staff memo says, "there are

implications that the Russians as a people are responsible for the evils of communist rule." The same broadcast also offended Poles when it stated: "It is not only the communist regime, but also a part of the Polish population, including the Polish Catholic clergy, which are responsible for the unenviable fate of the Ukrainian minority in Poland."

- Last January, the State Department felt obliged to issue a formal apology and dissociate itself from a broadcast that compared Poland's military dictator, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, to Adolf Hitler.

- A program last year "rationalized" a series of Cossack pogroms against Jews in the Ukraine in 1919-1920 by noting that many Jews had joined the Bolshevik cause.

- Another broadcast suggested that Poles and Jews were responsible for the triumph of communism.

- One Radio Liberty broadcast gave a "positive description of the Nazi unit Galizien, which was responsible for allowing Ukrainians to murder thousands of Jews in Lvov."

- An "anatomical obscenity" was used to describe a Polish government official, and vulgar expressions were so frequent that the American consulate complained to RFE-RL management.

Footnote: Board member Ben Wattenberg conceded that there might be problems with some of the broadcasts but added, "What's at issue here is 10 or 15 broadcasts out of countless thousands in a two-year period. On the whole I believe the quality of our programs is getting better and we have more controls over these radios than many other journalistic organizations."