



# IT'S OUR JOB TO GO OUT OF BUSINESS

At the end of the year **Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty** is moving out of its headquarters in the old communist parliament into a brand-new state of the art building. It's like getting into a new car, says RFE/RL president **Jeff Gedmin**. In his first year in office his quest has been for great standards of professional journalism, greater visibility and more funding

**T**o be absolutely candid, the two biggest challenges in the first year have been the drop of the dollar, and keeping our journalists safe and protected. We pay people in dollars, and for broadcasters who have families it is difficult to make ends meet. That is why we are getting more resources - but I thought I would be getting more resources for greater strategic objectives. The second challenge is one

that I was aware of, but not intimately I suppose. During my first eleven months here we have had two murders in Iraq and one kidnap, two go missing in Turkmenistan, one beaten up in Armenia, one arrested in Azerbaijan, journalists intimidated in Russia, and so on.

On the positive side, our visibility is increasing with articles in the International Herald Tribune, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post and the Economist. ►

### Do you need visibility with stakeholders in the US or with your target audience?

Our primary audience is in the broadcast regions. That's what the budget is about, that's why people come to work for this company. People want to broadcast in Russian to Russia, and in Farsi to Iran, so that has always been, is and will be our primary audience.

Having said that, I think we have a very important parallel audience, and that is Europe and the US for general purposes of information – we'd like to be a resource for people. And last but not least, since the US Congress is our funder and since there are media, politics and think-tanks in Washington, they need to be aware of what we are doing, how we are doing it and how effective. Otherwise we have a problem.

### Most of the world's history is currently being written in the Middle East - are we forgetting about other places that aren't going towards democracy?

I am hesitant to say that we are applying too much resource and energy in the Middle East because it's important for all the right reasons. However, I think a somewhat subtler and somewhat deeper take on these issues does remind you that for example Russian history hasn't ended. Putin has proven that any kind of democratisation that had taken place under Yeltsin can indeed be reversed.

From an American point of view, a certain level of participation activity in Russia, in Central Asia, in the countries we cover – Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq – is an operating cost for peace and stability. We are in the soft-power business, the information business, we know you can't do it with soft power alone, but I think broadcast must be an important element.

### Does one mission apply across the whole of RFE/RL's work?

Broadly, it is a single mission - accurate, objective, independent

**I want to see us keep moving with broadcasts to the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa**



journalism which supports democratic values and institutions. Now, drill deeper and you see that there are different categories of countries we are broadcasting to. In the category of unfree or largely unfree, you might put Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Then you have countries that are becoming increasingly unfree, let's say Putin's Russia. As an example of countries that are somehow in between, in transition, take Armenia – they are freer than Egypt but less free than Georgia and Turkey. We broadcast to Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship - you quite naturally become more of an opposition radio as we were during the Cold War.

The freer the country and the richer the landscape, the more challenging it is to do what we do. When a country gets to a certain point where we can argue that they have a reasonably well established free independent media, we go out of business. And that's it, that's our job, to go out of business.

### How are you counteracting the difficulties of getting signals into those countries?

Every case may be a little different. Iran is a place where we are not permitted to have a bureau by the Iranian authorities, we do broadcast but we are jammed, we do have internet but we are blocked and we are experimenting now with SMS communication with our audience. In Iran you have a regime which is generally hostile to free and independent media and very specifically hostile to us, they intimidate our journalists.

In Russia, three years ago we had about 30 affiliates, today we have about 5. The Russians have used much softer, shrewder tactics, they will send a health inspector or a fire inspector.

The argument will always be 'we are operating in the framework of the rule of law' but the law is either inconsistent with our objectives to practise free journalism or the law is applied in such a way that makes it very



difficult for us to do our job or the affiliates to cooperate with us. In the case of Armenia - we have a bureau there - you have a government that clamped down fairly aggressively on demonstrators, and to be very blunt, the Armenian government has accused us of doing reporting that led to the atmosphere in which violence took place.

In fact one government spokesman actually said that Radio Liberty must take some responsibility for having 'blood on our hands'. We reviewed the transcripts word for word and we found that by no stretch of the imagination could one accuse us of inciting violence.

In each of these countries, which are not democracies, there is a rather prickly and difficult relationship with the authorities. This ranges from not letting us in, blocking us and jamming us, through to sometimes allowing us in but then there is a rather ambivalent and sometimes aggressive relationship.

#### **Are FM and MW affiliates the principal way of getting programming into Central Asia and Russia?**

They are when they are available to us. One thing that we are looking at more and more is using internet as a central platform, with text, with audio, with video. We have to figure out who the audience is and what their technological access and capabilities are. We have to think about where our countries are going and where we want to be in two, three or four years from now.

In Russia for example we are almost certainly going to move to internet, with video and audio attached. In many instances people may not have access to internet at home but they will at work - we are talking about certain professions, doctors, lawyers, engineers, politicians and so forth.

The shift from audio to video in RFE/RL has been slow and painful. We have now brought on board a terrific TV and video producer to help develop the visual strategy for the company. It's an important area

▲ Far left:  
Radio Farda  
reporter in the  
field

Top middle:  
RFE/RL  
newsroom,  
Prague

Bottom middle:  
Jeff Gedmin  
Far right:  
Gathering  
opinion in  
Helmand  
province

- you either get on and participate or you get left behind.

#### **Looking ahead – what's your preferred future?**

I think that eventually we will be out of Europe altogether. The future of RFE/RL will be a great deal more video, robust internet, radio where relevant. I think we will still be in Russia, Belarus and Central Asia, I have no doubt we will still be needed in Afghanistan, that's a huge market for us: over 50% market share.

But I like to think there is going to be a new intense conversation with our board and with the US Congress on the value of surrogate broadcasting – giving people news and information that their own governments deny them, mostly domestic news.

I hope that conversation emerges about greater surrogate broadcasting in the Middle East and in sub-Saharan Africa. I'd like to see us keep moving.

**Jeff Gedmin, thank you very much. ■**