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## Opponent's Report

Aleksandar Momčilović's "Literary Politics of the Radio Free Europe in Czechoslovakia in the Period of 'Normalization'" is a well-researched and engagingly written MA thesis that relies on a wide range of sources, brings original observations, and represents a topical contribution to current scholarship.

The thesis looks at the aesthetic and political background of Radio Free Europe (RFE) during the so-called normalization period and within a wider Cold War dynamic. It analyzes the way this cultural organization chose texts and presented them to its listeners. The author claims in the introduction that "juxtaposing the official literary canon and that of the RFE and analyzing their relation could shed new light on who we see the period of the so-called 'normalization,'" and this ambitious promise is fulfilled.

The five chapters also cover textual analysis of the chosen cultural artifacts in order to show how "giving voice to the oppressed" as the RFE would have it (18), also meant shaping this voice (and defining who the oppressed was), sometimes even relegating literature to a mere "allegory against the regime" (47) in the process. The thesis also brings up—and challenges—received narratives of the Czechoslovak past: the myth of the First Republic, the "kidnapping from the West" and subsequent "return to Europe," and "real Czechoslovak literature and culture" happening in exile or underground. While these have been challenged before, they remain in the popular consciousness. It is especially in the last chapter where the potency of these narratives is demonstrated and it is also in this chapter when a strong authorial voice shines through, turning this part into a political essay.

The text forms a coherent narrative: unfortunately, the absence of subheadings makes it difficult to orient oneself in the text, especially given the length of some paragraphs and the fact that the chapter headings are not numbered. The language is clear and concise, with small, rare typos in the footnotes, such as "většina student" (43, footnote 144) "Vladimír Švestka" (67, footnote 211). On p. 5, "štvavá vysílačka" is translated as

“annoying transmitter” – perhaps something along the lines of “seditious” might work better here?

There are three points on which I would like to hear further thoughts from the author:

1. Also, on p. 59 and again in the abstract, you state that comparative studies “comparative research is usually concerned with how cultural material or values travel from one national culture to another.” What then, in your opinion, is the difference between the transnational and comparative approach?
2. On pages 5 and 35, the thesis mentions Auerbach’s distinction that you paraphrase as “the whole world culture was entrenched in two cultural patterns – Anglophone-Western and Russian-Bolshevik.” You are interested in showing “the process of displacing the work from one ‘pattern’ to another and back to the first one, detecting the changes that occur to the work during the process.” (5) Within the complexity of the thesis, this dichotomic relationship seems unreflected and unproblematized. Where does this definition of the “world” leave the territories outside of these cultural patterns?
3. On page 42, a generation of authors is, somehow ironically, cast as “men of their time”. While there were women working in RFE – and you quote some of them – what was the gender dynamic and politics of the organization and the writers and text it presented? Do the current reconsiderations of gender structures of the Czech dissent(s) have some relevancy there or was there a different dynamic at play?

If the author decides to expand on his project, there are many possible directions. Personally, I would be curious to hear more about the funding of RFE and its authors and whether that played a role in the cultural production (the thesis does this on a general political level, less a personal-material one). While the thesis has a clear temporal framework of the so-called normalization period, it would also be fascinating to see what happens to the content, funding, and dynamic of organizations such as RFE post-1989. The project could also contribute to the current reconsiderations of exile/exiles (conceptual and historical) and/ or elaborate on the notion of censorship, a term that has also undergone changes in the last years especially in connection to Cold War Czechoslovakia. The authors suggests the way radio as a medium has shaped the content: this is a fascinating streak and an interesting research has been done on this recently in connection to Czech exile poets in Germany. These are just a few possibilities amongst many which only demonstrates the potential of this interdisciplinary, topical project.

For the reasons cited above, I recommend the mark of 1 (výborně) for this MA thesis.



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