

## **Office and its functioning: Office of Letters in Polish Radio and Television (1951–1989)<sup>1</sup>**

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### **KEY WORDS**

Polish Radio and Television, Polish People's Republic, letters of complaints, communism, Polish society, social history

### **ABSTRACT**

The subject of the article is the analysis of the functioning of the Office of Letters in the structures of the Polish Radio and Television in the years 1951–1989. The office belonged to several of the most important central institutions in Poland at that time, to which the citizens of the PRL wrote the most complaints. The functioning of the Office faced many difficulties of an organizational nature. Letters were the basis of many radio programs of intervention nature and bulletins, intended for persons holding the most important offices in the country.

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Researchers interested in the history of Polish society in the years 1945-1989 have many problems, and one of the most important is the question of sources. Reconstruction of various segments of life of “ordinary people”, showing the dilemmas of their functioning in the working reality of this period, turns out to be especially difficult for the years just after the war and the period of Polish Stalinism. This is mainly due to the deficit of standard sociology research. Reported sources used for this purpose, created by numerous state and party institutions, despite their high importance, due to the methodology of their creation, are contaminated with a top-down perspective. From the point of view of a “ordinary man”, letters (mainly complaints) written by PRL citizens to authorities at various levels, in particular to central offices and institutions, are very important to the writing of *history from below*.

This epistolography concerned various aspects of reality. Authorities treated the letters from citizens as important signals on the functioning of the state at a local level. However, correspondence has rarely survived in the original version - in the archives, bulletins are most often preserved, which include discussions, along with more or less extensive quotes.

Letters sent to central state institutions was a practice used for many centuries. In the case of Poland, this form of contact with citizens was institutionalised at the beginning of the 1950s<sup>2</sup>. The date of 14 December 1950 is the resolution of the State Council and the Council of Ministers “on the consideration and settlement of appeals, letters and complaints of the population and press criticism”<sup>3</sup>, which established the rules for dealing with this type of correspondence by offices and institutions. Citizens could address them in every case, they were not bound by any deadlines and they did not incur any stamp duty<sup>4</sup>. According to art. 5 of the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic of 22 July 1952, all authorities and state administration were obliged to carefully consider and take into account legitimate applications, complaints and wishes of citizens “in accordance with applicable laws”<sup>5</sup>.

The use of letters for the study of the history of the People's Republic began in the 90s.,

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<sup>2</sup> D. Jarosz, *Listy do centralnych instytucji państwa stalinowskiego jako źródło do badań życia codziennego w Polsce* [Letters to the central institutions of Stalin state as the source for the study of everyday life in Poland], “Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej” 1996, no. 3, pp. 297–302; by the same author: *Akta Biura Listów i Inspekcji KC PZPR jako źródło do badań rzeczywistości społecznej w Polsce w latach 1950–1956* [Files of the Office of letters and Inspection of the Central Committee as a source to study social reality in Poland in years 1950-1956], “Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i materiały” 1997, vol. II, pp. 191–216.

<sup>3</sup> A. Kochański, *Polska 1944–1991. Informator historyczny* [Poland 1944-1991. Historical guide], vol. 1, Warszawa 1996, p. 358; MP 1951 no. A 1, item 1, repealed on 4.12.1972 (MP 1972 no. 58, item 311).

<sup>4</sup> A. Adamus, *Problemy wsi w Polsce w latach 1956–1980 w świetle listów do władz centralnych* [Problems of the village in Poland in the year 1956-2980 in the light of letters to the central authorities], Warszawa 2017, pp. 38–39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Since then, many works of different nature were created, in which the correspondence with the authorities is the only, primary or secondary source<sup>6</sup>. So far, however, offices that dealt with the inflowing correspondence and its quantitative and qualitative analysis enjoyed little interest of researchers.

The purpose of this paper is, first of all, to present the evolution of the office created at the Polish Radio, dealing with letters of citizens, and to provide a general description of this correspondence, which has been partially preserved in the Archives of Documentation and Programme Collections Centre of TVP SA (ODiZP). It seems that it can serve as an important source material for representatives of various disciplines interested in the study of People's Poland.

The findings were made primarily on the basis of the archived materials of ODiZP, which had not been previously used in scientific research, including the documentation of the Office of Letters, the General Secretariat of the "Polskie Radio" Radio Committee (KdSR) and the Committee of Radio and Television "Polish Radio and Television" (KdSRiT).

### History of the office

The first information about the existence of a unit dealing with letters in the structures of the KdSR comes from 1951 - the Committee was established on the basis of the decree of 2

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. A.M. Adamus, *Akta biur listów centralnych instytucji partyjnych oraz państwowych jako źródło do badań rzeczywistości PRL* [Files of the letter offices of central party and state institutions as the source for the study of reality in PRL], "Polska 1944/45-1989. Studia i materiały" 2013, vol. 11; by the same author: *Doświadczenie gospodarki niedoboru w PRL – na przykładzie listów do władz centralnych w sprawie masła i margaryny z lat 1956–1978* [The experience of the economy of shortages in the People's Republic of Poland – on the example of letters to the central authorities concerning butter and margarine from the years 1956-1978], "Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i materiały" 2011, vol. 10; by the same author: *Peerełowskie pisanie do władzy* [Writing to authorities in PRL] [in:] *Letnia Szkoła Historii Najnowszej 2012. Referaty* [Summer school of modern history 2012. Papers], ed. K. Dworaczek, Ł. Kamiński, Warszawa 2013; D. Jarosz, *Akta Biura Listów i Inspekcji KC PZPR jako źródło...*, op. cit.; I. Miernik, *Codziennosc w powiecie kieleckim w latach 1956–1975 w swietle listów do instytucji peerełowskich* [Everyday life in the district of Kielce in 1956-1975 in the light of letters to the PRL institutions], "Studia Humanistyczno-Spoleczne Akademii Świętokrzyskiej" 2007, no. 2; G. Miernik, *Codziennie troski Polaków w okresie gierkowskiego „dobrobytu” w swietle listów „do Warszawy”* [Everyday concerns of Poles during the Gierek's "prosperity" in the light of the letters "to Warsaw"] [in:] *Życie codzienne w PRL (1956–1989)* [Everyday life in PRL (1956-1989), ed. G. Miernik i S. Piątkowski, Radom 2006; K. Rokicki, *Listy i skargi na działalność MSW w latach sześćdziesiątych, siedemdziesiątych i osiemdziesiątych XX w. w analizach Biura Skarg i Listów MSW* [Letters and complaints about the activities of the Ministry of the Interior in the sixties, seventies and eighties of the twentieth century in the analyses of the MSW's Office of Complaints and Letters], "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość. Pismo Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej" 2013, no.1; P. Szulc, *„Ładną gwiazdkę nam rząd zgotował!” Grudzień’70 w listach do Radiokomitetu* ["Nice Christmas the government prepared for us!" December 70. In letters to the Radiocommittee], "Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość. Pismo Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej" 2010, no. 16; N. Jarska, *Listy do władz i instytucji jako forma komunikacji w stalinizmie* [Letter to authorities and institutions as a communication form during Stalinism] [in:] *Komunikowanie się Polaków w latach 1944–1989* [Communication of Poles in 1944-1989], ed. K. Stępnik, M. Rajewski, Lublin 2011; T. Wolsza, A. Zaćmiński, *Ludzie listy piszą... Referendum i wybory do Sejmu w korespondencji Polaków (1946–1952)* [People sending letters... The referendum and elections to the Sejm in the correspondence of Poles], Bydgoszcz 2013.

August that year. The chairman was appointed by the President of the Republic of Poland at the suggestion of the chairman of the Council of Ministers<sup>7</sup>. However, in the bulletin of the Department of letters and correspondents of KdSR we find the date 1 June 1951. What is even more intriguing, this earliest chronologically bulletin preserved in the collections of ODiZP TVP SA has number 5, which means that the four earlier (impossible to be found) had to be released before June 1951. This means that the Department of Letters and Correspondence was actually functioning before 2 August<sup>8</sup>.

Internal documents of KdSR from 1952 show that the Office (and not the Department, as in 1951<sup>9</sup>) of Letters and Correspondents (BLiK) was managed by Eugenia Brun<sup>10</sup>.

The description of work of the Office of Letters and Correspondents from that time certifies that the correspondence from listeners was read, then allocated to the editors according to topics, qualified to answer by the radio and approved for the bulletin. Letters were also “politically qualified”, which consisted in “extracting essential pages [...] and preparing a brief summary [...] on the imprint“. Each editor filled the appropriate “daily statistical summary sheet”.

The letters office had 11 editors, their average yield was 15 letters a day. The average time of dealing with one correspondence (“from the entrance to the exit”) was supposed to be 20 days<sup>11</sup>.

The President of the KdSR in July 1952 ordered a reorganisation of BLiK, that from this point on, in connection with the liquidation of the Faculty of Correspondents, received a new name: the Office of Letters (BL)<sup>12</sup>. From 1 August 1952 “for a transitional period” for a test, a new structure was introduced, consisting of: Selection group, Intervention group, Bulletin editors, Radio program editors, the Office and the Secretariat. Each unit was managed by a manager.

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<sup>7</sup> The decree of 2 August 1951 r on the creation and scope of the activities of the “Polskie Radio” Radio Committee, Journal of Laws no. 41, item 308.

<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis is supported by the fact that, according to the information obtained in the Archives of Documentation and Programme Collections Centre of TVP SA the unit engaged in correspondence with radio listeners (from 30 June 1951 under the name of the Department of Letters and Correspondents) was already present in Przedsiębiorstwo Państwowe Polskie Radio before the Committee.

<sup>9</sup> The first bulletin released not by the Department, but by the Office of Letter and Correspondents is dated 1.02.1952. See the Archives of Documentation and Programme Collections Centre of TVP SA (hereinafter: ODiZP), Bulletin of Letters and Correspondents (hereinafter: BL), 1050/2, Bulletin no. 5, 1.02.1952.

<sup>10</sup> AODiZP, Committee of Radio "Polish Radio". General Secretariat (hereinafter: KdSR), 609/6, minutes of meeting on 16.01.1952, unnumbered; *ibid.*, 545/1, Regulation no. 68/52 of 4.10.1952, unnumbered.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Description of work of the Office of Letters and Correspondents [1952], unnumbered.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 545/1, Regulation no. 57/52 [of Chairman of the Committee Romuald Gadowski] on the introduction of full internal reorganisation in the Office of Letters, Warszawa, 30.07.1952, unnumbered.

The cited regulation allows to understand what was the nature of the Office's work. It stated that the Selection group shall first read the letters from listeners and institutions, fill specially designed "metrics" for letters (providing short description of contents and the agreed symbols) divide the letters according to topics and urgency and forward them for further processing. The group's mandate was also to signal to the BL management and editorial office of the "Bulletin" the new "particularly acute" problems raised in the letters.

The tasks of the Intervention group (there were five of those: 1 – rural affairs, 2 – work affairs, 3 – social affairs, 4 – youth and education affairs, V – other affairs) included forwarding the complains to proper institutions of the party, national councils, state administration, cooperation with proper radio editorial offices ("selecting letters for radio broadcasts"), answering the senders and preparing analytical materials.

The editors of the BL Bulletin formulated analytical conclusions based on both correspondence and materials developed in Intervention groups, as well as other letters and signals from the Selection group. Analysis related to the subjects covered in letters, the frequency of their appearance, the territorial distribution of incoming mail. It was discussed how broadcasters treated important resolutions of the party and government's moves and to what extent they succumbed to the arguments of "hostile propaganda". The editors prepared material "for signalisation" for the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR) and for the Council of Ministers; edited the bulletin; draw up the overall reporting of BL; ran the archive of problematic letters (not forwarded to intervention). The tasks of the Radio Program Editors Office included developing radio programs based on the letters of listeners and Office interventions<sup>13</sup>.

However, this structure did not last for long. A note preserved in the KdSR files from February 1954 shows that BL, in addition to the Directorate and the Secretariat, consisted of 11 organisational units. These included: Bulletin editorial office; General mailbox editorial office; Selection; Editorial office 1 – rural affairs; Editorial office 2 – production affairs; Editorial office 3 – healthcare, housing, social issues; Editorial office 4 – youth and education affairs; Editorial office 5 – trade, services, communication, other affairs; Editorial office 6 – special affairs; Mailing house (General and Secret) and Machinery hall (General and Secret). The BL employed a total of 90 people<sup>14</sup>.

The same note also shows that correspondence addressed to the Polish Radio in the years 1953-1954 was more and more rich, which was the result of de-Stalinisation. In this situation,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 916/20/3, note on the Office of Letters, 19 (II) 1954, unnumbered.

the Office was not able to take care of all incoming letters. They complained about insufficient staff, premises and typewriters. In addition, there was a large inflow of applications, appeals and complaints on matters which should be duly taken care of in the field<sup>15</sup>.

The first general criticism of the BL, which fits in the larger context of political changes in Poland, took place in 1955. At a meeting of the Radiocommittee authorities on 16 February they discussed the results of audits carried out in the BL by the committee specially established for this purpose, which presented a confidential note in this matter (from 8 February).

It said that employees are “flooded” by letters, whose numbers were steadily growing. The BL employed 95 people at that time, including 29 editors, however, only 25 of them dealt with the processing of letters. “When the Office faced the dilemma: either to leave thousands of letters without reading and processing, or to process them using a ‘simplified method’, there was a growing emphasis on simplification”.

The most serious defect in the BL's work was forwarding incoming complaints to the institutions complained about, which exposed their authors to harassment and repression. A system of 40 types of prints to respond to letters was criticized. The Office resigned from re-intervening when the response was not clear, not all allegations were investigated and as a rule the listeners were not informed about the results of the intervention. Despite the increase in productivity, the backlog was estimated at about 25,000 letters, which required about three weeks of work.

Cooperation between the BL and the editorial offices and radio programs was also not great. The editors-in-chief were not interested in the subject matters of letters. The exceptions were “Fala 49”, “Muzyka i Aktualności” and “Warszawska Fala”. It was proposed to, in addition to weekly prepared “folders to read” containing “interesting and important things”, issue once a week a newsletter designed for the needs of the programme and widely distribute it in editorial offices.

In the course of the discussion on this note, Danuta Barzach, member of the audit commission, stated that “when she got to know the Office of Letters better, she was just shocked by the heartless and bureaucratic treatment of listeners”. In her opinion, the BL “basically turned into a mailbox”. She criticised the system of circulation of letters indicated in the note, which put the complainants at risk from the institutions they complained about.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

She stated that in the area of the processing of letters from listeners the Office was “doing a really bad job”. “We deceive listeners and ourselves, we violate the principles of the Act on Complaints on a daily basis”. During the discussion, there were voices that the BL should be excluded from the structure of the Polish Radio and transferred to one of the central institutions, where the necessary materials could be obtained. This position, however, did not win the support of the gathered.

Summing up this discussion, the President of the KdSR, Tadeusz Galiński, expressed the opinion that the Office should remain in the structures of the Polish Radio. He obliged its management to rethink the system of working with letters and to develop a project for a new work organisation<sup>16</sup>.

In accordance with these arrangements, already in 1955 some changes in its operation have been introduced. In October of that year, the Director of the BL, Irena Kenska, informed the executives of KdSR that its work has been improved and the number of prints sent to senders was reduced. Increase staffing meant that already at the stage of selection one editor read 200 letters a day, instead of the 400 which was the case earlier. Therefore, editorial offices dealt with more cases on their own. “Rapid” processing of correspondence was no longer the case - such work style “demoralised the people”<sup>17</sup>.

On the basis of the preserved source documentation it is difficult to track all the changes taking place in the organisation and functioning of the Office. The query of the files of the KdSR and from 8 December 1960 his successor - the Committee of Radio and Television “Polish Radio and Television” (KdSRiT) - gives grounds for establishing the basic directions of changes in this institution.

The Office of Letters in 1959 had a total of 51 employees. A total of 9,000 errands were handled per one substantive employee per year. The main recipient of letters coming to the BL was “Fala 56” - the most important radio program of that period. The scope of work was similar to that in 1958, but the number of full-time employees was reduced by 40 percent. In this situation, it was necessary to supplement the missing staff with work outsourced to own employees. This high performance forced the BL to give up “consistent intervention until the case was closed”. It was necessary to “simplify the settlement of a number of cases”. This meant that many letters were sent to the appropriate institution, while informing the listeners. Selection was also performed, which involved informing the listener that the BL does not deal

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 530/6/1, minutes from the meeting of Radiocommittee of 16.02.1955, unnumbered.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 530/6/2, minutes from the meeting of the Committee of 25.10.1955. Information of I. Kenska about the work of the Office of Letters, unnumbered.

with matters raised in the letter. In 1959, the BL issued 65 bulletins and 17 notes, 32 times employees left for field interventions<sup>18</sup>.

In the 60s, the scheme of operation and problems of the BL were similar as before. This is evidenced by the note prepared for the meeting of the KdSRiT on 18 September 1968. It shows that the “experimentally overstated efficiency for an editor” was then 25 letters a day during the autumn and winter summit, 20 in the remaining months, and “20 on working Saturdays”. On average, 1,200 visitors came to the Office annually and about 50 field trips were organised, and 5-8 bulletins were issued monthly. The most frequent recipient of the letters was still “Fala 56”. As at 31 December 1967, the BL had 44 employees, 11 of whom had higher education.

The authors of the quoted note were aware of the specifics of the BL's work, which was not a typical complaints office: “one should see in it an important weapon of party and educational propaganda”, and its range was described as “enormous”. “We eliminate irregularities, suggesting solutions to the authorities”, “We teach certain rules of conduct with an employee, client, patient, customer, citizen”. They also postulated a limitation of interventions often giving effects disproportionate to the measures taken to extend individual responses to lists of radio listeners, which required appropriate competence on the part of journalists. The editor working on complaints should be a bit of “psychologist, sociologist, lawyer, and above all a publicist and social activist, perfectly knowing the current needs and requirements of the Party and Government policy”. In order to improve the work, organisational changes were proposed, including strengthening of cooperation with Regional Broadcasting and Television Centres and creating a new thematic editorial offices structure<sup>19</sup>. However, KdSRiT management treated these projects with reserve<sup>20</sup>.

Structural changes that met some of those demands were introduced in 1972. The BL's scope of operation was extended with the obligation to coordinate intervention and advisory activity carried out by Regional Stations and Television Centres. Coordination consisted in instruction works, unification of system for settlement of the complaints and applications of viewers and radio listeners, agreeing on uniform analysis of problematic content of correspondence. In addition, the Analysis and information office was appointed, whose task was to analyse the content of letters received from viewers and radio listeners; develop

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1445/1/1, minutes from the meeting of the Presidium on 24.02.2960, report on the work of the Office of Letters for 1959, unnumbered.

<sup>19</sup> AODiZP, the Committee of Radio and Television “Polish Radio and Television” (hereinafter: KdSRiT), 1445/9/5, briefing memo on the works of the Office of Letters PR and TV in the period from the end of 1967 and the mid-1968, unnumbered.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., minutes of meeting of the Presidium of Committee on 18.09.1968, unnumbered.

systematic information on socially important last names; transfer the results of analyses to the management and program units of the Committee as well as interested central offices, institutions and socio-political organisations<sup>21</sup>.

Changes were made to the structure of BL, which was now divided into the following organisational units: Management (from 1 June 1970 the director was Jerzy Ostrzyżek); Program Secretariat; Intervention and Advisory Offices for: Socio-Political Affairs, Social Affairs, Agricultural Affairs, Economic Affairs, Analysis and Information Office; Correspondence Service Department and Independent Selection Office<sup>22</sup>.

In 1972, the Office in relation to matters contained in the so-called first letters<sup>23</sup> made 31182 interventions, gave 22054 advices and information, passed on 11394, according to the competences. Out of 66692 interventions, advices and cases passed on according to competence, 9241 legal advices were given, along with 7689 advices on the mode of procedure and 5124 other explanatory information and answers to letters on socio-political issues.

Letters were used in the radio and television program activities or were inspiration for problematic or thematic studies. At that time the office was broadcasting “Ślady naszych interwencji” [Traces of our interventions] and “Biuro Listów Odpowiada” [The Office of Letters answers].

The correspondence analysis was presented in monthly information on the current topics of letters, which were passed to the management of the KdSRiT, chief editors of Radio and TV, and interested units in KC PZPR and the Office of the Council of Ministers (URM). In addition, notes for the management of the KdSRiT and the Office of Letters and Inspections (BLiI) of KC PZPR were systematically developed. The office also prepared periodical analyses of correspondence in provinces, which were submitted to the first secretaries of the Provincial Party Committees and the chairmen of the Provincial National Councils (WRN) and passed to the editors-in-chief of radio stations and TV centres. In addition, the BL developed 32 “Internal Bulletins”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1544/20, Regulation no. 7 of the Chairman of the KdSRiT “Polish Radio and Television” of 14.04.1972 on the change of the scope of activity and organisation of the Office of Letters, unnumbered.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1468/6/6, Information for the Presidium of Committee on Radio and Television about the intervention and advisory operation of the Office of Letters, director Jerzy Ostrzyżek, Warsaw 4.06.1973, unnumbered.

<sup>23</sup> It is about letters in which cases were reported for the first time, which were previously not received by BL. This term was used because the authors of many complaints had the habit of writing on the same topic repeatedly (often to various institutions), trying to force a reaction (intervention, advice or information).

<sup>24</sup> AODiZP, KdSRiT, 1468/6/6, Information..., unnumbered.

Thanks to the protocol of internal control carried out in the BL at the turn of October and November 1977 preserved in the files of the KdSRiT, we have access to basic information about its functioning in this period.

The BL's organisational structure at that time was governed by Regulation No. 46 of the President of the KdSRiT of 10 December 1973 on the consideration of citizens' complaints and suggestions. After changes, the BL had the following organisational units: Program Secretariat; Intervention and Informational Editorial Offices for: Socio-political affairs, Economic and agricultural affairs, Editorial office of analyses and interventions and Department of correspondence circulation.

The Office of Letters employed 38 employees, including 27 journalists. The visitors were seen every day at ul. Woronicza in Warszawa. Employees of individual editorial offices provided information, directed cases to intervention, and, in urgent cases, they themselves made the telephone intervention. Only in the period between January and September 1977, 1,423 visitors were heard.

The office was obliged to submit to the Presidium of the KdSRiT an annual analysis of complaints and suggestions of citizens addressed to the radio and television. In addition, it prepared internal bulletins constituting problem-based elaborations of cases and monthly "Information on some problems in the letters" that were sent to selected persons in the state.

On the basis of the incoming correspondence, the BL prepared the already mentioned own radio program entitled "Biuro Listów Odpowiada". The BL's correspondence was also the basis of the program "Fala 77" of the Socio-political editorial office - aired alternately with the broadcast of the Office of Letters. In addition, the letters were used in regional programs of radio stations and TV centres<sup>25</sup>.

The last major reconstruction of the Office took place in March 1981. The Office of Letters was replaced by the Office of Letters and Interventions (BLiI)<sup>26</sup> and was included in the structure of the Management Board of the KdSRiT established on 31 December 1985. Its organisational units were Intervention and Information Editorial Offices for: Socio-political affairs, Socio-economic affairs, Agricultural and Food economy affairs, Editorial office of Analyses and Information, and the Department of correspondence circulation and the Program secretariat<sup>27</sup>. Liquidation of the Office in this shape was made in 1991.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 1729/43/1, minutes of a planned audit in the KdSRiT "PRiTV" in the Office of Letters concerning the Committee's intervention activities and the use of comments by listeners and viewers, unnumbered.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, Electronic document provided in ODiZP.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

### **Letters to the Radio and Television**

Writing letters to the BL and then BLiI, was a fairly common practice. Before detailed surveys on the scale, objectives and issues of this epistolography or spatial distribution and social characteristics of senders will be carried out, let us try to make a general quantitative and qualitative description of this correspondence on a comparative background with other institutional recipients (Tab. 1).

Table 1. The inflow of letters to selected central institutions in the years 1951-1987

<b>Year</b>	<b>Office of Letters and Inspections KC PZPR</b>	<b>Office of Letters and KdSR and KdSRiT</b>	<b>Office of Pardons and Complaints of the State Council Chancellery</b>	<b>Office of Complaints and Letters URM</b>
1950	459	–	–	–
1951	12,294	44,000	–	63,734
1952	14991	91,638	–	115,463
1953	21,641	123,000	37,312	118,958
1954	74942	195,200	46,222	87,424
1955	108,854	268,000	53,535	59,500
1956	171,689	267768	–	47,759
1957	160,335	–	–	32,745
1958	97,251	–	–	26,002
1959	74,222	154384	–	20,898
1960	64922	177242	–	21,203
1961	48958	152,309	–	21,158
1962	49,978	161,274	–	19,220
1963	43,978	156,944	–	17,981
1964	42,095	–	–	17810
1965	37,184	116,732	–	17,393
1966	33,503	–	–	17,304
1967	30,930	124,004	–	16,406

1968	31692	129,971	–	16,019
1969	37,035	–	–	16,571
1970	34,954	106,498	30,711	17,469
1971	106370	111,857	32,689	25,466
1972	101974	84,505	30,022	25,282
1973	74,989	54,231	26,951	18,458
1974	68,845	50,343	24,581	19,570
1975	69,108	60,720	22,771	18,660
1976	75440	55,882	24,104	18,974
1977	67431	60,140	22,874	17,995
1978	62876	62,012	22,664	18,092
1979	66000	61,251	23,183	17,313
1980	70343	73,227	25,911	24,213
1981	29291	81,636	25,611	38,196
1982	31726	51,019	15,537	36,721
1983	50201	53,649	18,139	29,597
1984	55865	42,524	17,413	28,124
1985	57,771	40,259	18,909	26,800
1986	52435	39,007	28,848	18,142
1987	49661	37,594	26,790	16,106

Source: D. Jarosz, *Peerełowskie lamenty mieszkaniowe* [Housing complaints in PRL] [in:] *Od Piłsudskiego do Wałęsy. Studia z dziejów Polski w XX wieku* [From Piłsudski to Wałęsa. Study of Polish history in the 20th century], Warszawa 2008, pp. 307–320; A. Adamus, *Problemy wsi w Polsce w latach 1956–1980 w świetle listów do władz centralnych* [Problems of the village in Poland in the year 1956–1980 in the light of letters to the central authorities], Warszawa 2017, pp. 80–81.

In fact, the inflow of correspondence to the BL was much larger, as correspondence from the institutions with explanations came along with the letters from the listeners. Only in 1954, in addition to more than 195 thousand of listeners letters, there were over 137 thousand letters with explanations<sup>28</sup>. In 1972, the BL received 84550 letters (including 66629 letters

<sup>28</sup> ODiZP, KdSR, 530/6/1, Confidential note...

sent for the first time in a given case) and 52545 responses to interventions<sup>29</sup>. In 1985, the proportions of correspondence from citizens and institutions amounted to 40259 : 26421<sup>30</sup>.

As in the case of other institutions, it is clear that there was fluctuation in the flow of letters, which most probably depended on many factors, including the nature of the institution to which it was written and the wider historical context. It was not only about taking power by new political parties, but also about important reforms that influenced the lives of large social groups. Such an increasing mass inflow of correspondence occurred in the case of KC PZPR and KdSR in 1954-1956 (and most probably in 1957, although it was not possible to determine the relevant data for KdSR). This should be treated as the effect of progressive de-Stalinization and decreasing level of fear in expressing critical opinions about the state and the system of power. The increase in correspondence addressed to central state institutions in 1967, and especially in 1968, was caused not only by the anti-Semitic campaign. Many letters were triggered by the reform of the pension scheme, carried out at that time<sup>31</sup>.

The coming to power of Edward Gierek's crew resulted in the increase of letters coming first of all to the KC PZPR, but also to the Polish Radio and Television in 1971. Apart from this year, the 70s appear as a period in which writing to the party's centre of power was more frequent than to the Polish Radio and Television. How did this happen? It is possible that trust and faith in the "causative power" of the letter written to KC (and especially to the 1st Secretary) was greater than in the case when the recipient was state audiovisual media.

On what matters did the Poles write to the Polish Radio and Television? Answer should be sought in the reporting materials of the KdSR and KdSRiT. It cannot be too precise, because the preserved statements and analyses were made according to changing criteria. In spite of these reservations, it can be generally stated that the set of problems discussed varied slightly in terms of proportion, but remained similar in terms of themes. In 1956, rural issues were raised in 22.4% of letters, industrial - in 15%, social and communal - in 24.8%, youth - in 7.8%, trade and services - in 13.3%, issues of the army, the police and the judiciary system - in 11%, theoretical-problem matters - in 5.7%.

Letters from listeners were dominated by complaints and appeals (80-85%), requests for interventions (5-10%) and petitions (5%). About 10% of correspondence was anonymous

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., KdSRiT, 1400/46/2, Information bulletin of the Presidium of the Committee of Radio and Television "Polish Radio and Television", 1973, no. 2, pp. 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 1889A/1, minutes of meeting of the Presidium of Committee on 20.05.1986, unnumbered.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1445/9/5, briefing memo on the works of the Office of Letters.

(in 1955 it was 15%). Even if the senders provided their personal data, they often asked not to disclose them, as they were afraid of consequences and harassment<sup>32</sup>.

From over 67 thousand letters sent to the BL in KdSR in the first half of 1959, almost 35% were written by peasants and over 22% by labourers. The remaining part was written by white-collar workers - 6.5%, representatives of crafts and private initiative - 2.1% and unidentified senders - 13.4%. Nearly 10% of this correspondence was anonymous, which, according to the authors of the quoted analysis, resulted from the fear - "justified, as we know - of possible repression for criticism". The rule was: "The more sensitive matter - the more anonymous letters".

In 1959, 21% of letters were devoted to living matters, 16% to human resources and wages, 14% to socio-economic problems of individual peasants, production cooperatives and agricultural circles, 11% to communication, communications, trade, craft and services, 5% to health, education and culture, 9% to power apparatus activity, 7% to relations in industrial and agricultural production facilities, 8% to socio-moral problems. The remaining part were problem letters and other topics. The most frequently discussed economic problems included poor housing conditions, low salaries and very numerous issues of pensioners. At that time, the number of letters concerning dismissals from work increased - often describing tragic situations<sup>33</sup>.

A comparison of this data with information about the subject and social composition of those who wrote to the Polish Radio and Television in the early 70s points to the characteristic similarities and differences.

Among the senders in 1972, labourers dominated (47% of letters), 35% of letters was sent by farmers, 10% by white-collar workers, and 1.4% by craftsmen and homeworkers (we lack the data on 6.6% of senders). About 66% of letters contained requests for interventions, of which 57% - in personal matters, and 9% - in matters of employee groups and local communities. About 17% of letters contained requests for advice, and 3% asked for information. About 88% were personal letters, 4% were collective letters, and 8% were anonymous. 7.4% of correspondence were treated as social and political statements. Interestingly, more and more often the BL was treated as a kind of legal advice office. Most advices were granted in matters of work and employment (29.6% of the total advices), in matters of insurance and social care (21.05%), legal and judicial matters (15.7%) and in matters of individual farming (14.7%). In correspondence from citizens, as in previous

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 863/1, notes on the work of the Office of Letters, unnumbered.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1445/1/1, report on the work of the Office of Letters for 1959, unnumbered.

periods, work and employment matters prevailed (22%), along with difficulties of individual farming (16%) and housing and private construction needs (12.5%)<sup>34</sup>.

A slightly different distribution of problems and senders is found in the correspondence that reached the BL of Polish Radio and Television in 1985. Out of more than 40200 letters over 90% were individual letters, 1.6% were collective letters, and 0.6% were letters from work establishments and institutions, almost 8% were anonymous. Among those the largest group (over 26%) were pensioners and annuitants, over 22% were farmers, and over 21% were labourers. The remaining respondents were dominated by white-collar workers (4%). The vast majority of senders (nearly 70%) requested intervention in individual cases, over 20% asked for advice and information, the rest represented the interests of wider communities or made denunciations of committed crimes. The three largest groups of problems addressed in this correspondence were: housing, agriculture, social security and healthcare<sup>35</sup>. All of them can be considered the “permanent” topics of complaints, which were the subject of letters addressed to the central state authorities. It is no coincidence that the proportions of issues raised in the letters addressed to KC PZPR were similar in this period<sup>36</sup>. However, it seems that the extremely severe effects of the socio-economic crisis in the second half of the 80s for pensioners' households, combined with the failure of the social security system, decided that they were in the group most often writing to central state and party institutions<sup>37</sup>.

There are many indications that the BL interventions were treated as one of many possibilities to settle the matter that was the subject of the letter (complaint). Part of the hopes placed in this institution was justified. Only in 1972, as a result of the interventions taken by the BL in the personal affairs of the listeners, 59% were settled positively, and 20.8% were supposed to be settled positively at a later date, due to the current lack of funds or other “objective difficulties”<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., KdSRiT, 1400/46/2, Information bulletin of the Presidium of the Committee of Radio and Television “Polish Radio and Television”, 1973, no. 2, p. 9 et seq.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1889A/1, information on the topics of letters and activities of the Office of Letters and Interventions in 1985, unnumbered.

<sup>36</sup> D. Jarosz, *Sytuacja materialna emerytów i rencistów w świetle listów do Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej z lat 1981–1989* [Financial situation of pensioners in the light of letters to the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party from 1981-1989] [in:] *Od kwestii robotniczej do nowoczesnej kwestii socjalnej. Studia z polskiej polityki społecznej XX i XXI wieku* [From the workers issue to the modern social issue. Study of Polish social policy in the 20th and 21st century], ed. P. Grata, vol. IV, Rzeszów 2016, pp. 110–111.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1889A/1, Information on the topics of letters.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., KdSRiT, 1400/46/2, Information bulletin of the Presidium.

Correspondents showed great credibility. Only in 1985, more than 21000 interventions (about 55%) were made in cases presented in letters or in person during a visit to the BL. Of this number as much as 81% proved to be authentic. The smallest effectiveness of interventions (a dozen or so percent) concerned trade and services as well as municipal and residential economy, and the largest - on reports on fraud and offences (100%) and on labour and employment issues (over 93%)<sup>39</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

- The Office of Letters, which in various mutations existed in the structures of the KdSR and the KdSRiT, was an institution important for contact between the Polish Radio and Television and listeners and viewers. It belonged to the most important central institutions in Poland at that time (next to the Offices of Letters in KC PZPR, URM and State Council), which received the most complaints from citizens of the PRL.
- The Office met with many difficulties of an organisational nature. The most frequently formulated allegations concerned formalism in dealing with incoming correspondence, which was mainly due to insufficient number and qualifications of personnel.
- Letters were the basis for the construction of many radio programs of an intervention nature. On their basis, collective bulletins were prepared for people holding managerial positions in the state. They were an important source of information about the daily problems of Poles and their opinions about the state policy. Preserved archive of the BL is a collection of documents interesting for all researchers dealing with Polish society in the years 1951-1989.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1889A/1, Information on the topics of letters.

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