

Radio fan puts an accent on French airwaves

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By Peter Fray, Herald Correspondent in London

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Ian de Renzie Duncan ... "Yes, I am a bit crazy." Photo: Alastair Miller

An Australian lawyer who once was brave - or foolhardy - enough to put up his legal shingle in post-Soviet, corruption-ridden Kazakhstan has started the first English-language commercial radio station in Paris, in a direct challenge to France's love affair with its language and culture.

Armed with a mere €500,000 (about \$800,000), half of it from mates in Australia, Ian de Renzie Duncan, a former defamation lawyer with Blake Dawson Waldron in Sydney, has persuaded French authorities to let him open Paris Live as a cable, satellite, internet and, from June 16, digital radio station.

The station, which hopes to join the FM market next year, has attracted 20,000 listeners a day since it went on air three weeks ago, with a mix of rock, talk, news and infotainment, including more than 40 per cent French music. Its target is 50,000 listeners.

Mr Duncan, 38, who pioneered Blake's push into the former Soviet bloc from 1993 to 1997, said he became aware of the gap in the Paris market after moving to France with his French-born wife three years ago. "Yes, I am a bit crazy, but I thought it should be done," he told the *Herald*. "You can't buy an English-language newspaper that tells you what's going on in Paris. It's amazing. In Moscow you can buy five."

But the logic of the market - there are 15 million English-speaking tourists in Paris every year, plus 400,000 resident expats - does not always hold in France, often a bulwark against the rise of English-speaking (read: American) imperialism.

Among the questions on which he had to satisfy the French Government's radio licensing authority, the CSA, was whether a French person could live in Sydney and open a French-speaking radio station there.

"It was very much, 'Would you let us do it in your country?'," he said. "It was an interesting discussion but I knew the answer already and that's why I went to them and said, 'You know in Sydney you can listen to French radio and I come to this city with my French wife and my French-Australian son and I can't listen to English radio!'"

But Mr Duncan is no cultural imperialist, far from it. He is happy to play French music and promote French events, and argues that by doing so he is promoting French culture rather than denigrating it.

Now when his expatriate listeners go to French dinner parties "they can actually participate in the conversation", he said. "They don't have to keep talking about what they used to do when they were back home."