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Introduction

Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Lee, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the critical mission and work of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of USAGM, an independent agency that provides accurate, objective, and professional news and information to parts of the world that do not have a free and open press. As a journalist by training, I often explain our mission by saying we export the First Amendment.

The history of U.S. international media spans more than 80 years, starting with the creation of Voice of America’s first radio show during World War II. Since then, U.S. international media has evolved from its origins in radio to include a full spectrum of modern delivery methods. Whether on radio, television, or online – from satellite streams to Telegram accounts – we meet our audiences where they are. In fact, 410 million people in over 100 countries turn to us every week for news and information in 63 languages about what is going on in the world around them.

We advance our mission through the work of six entities: Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), and the Open Technology Fund (OTF). Each USAGM network contributes to our mission by fulfilling a unique role in their respective markets. VOA provides comprehensive regional and world news to their local audiences, while also covering the United States in all its complexity. RFE/RL, RFA, and OCB act as surrogate broadcasters, providing access to professional and fact-based regional and local news in their markets. MBN serves as a hybrid of the two models, providing accurate and comprehensive news about the region and the United States. OTF works to advance internet freedom worldwide, enabling audiences to access and share independent news, and empowering our journalists to do their jobs, without fear of repressive censorship or surveillance.

A Critical Moment in the Global Information War

We are at a critical moment in history. Free, objective information is targeted as never before by authoritarian regimes using malign influence, propaganda, and information manipulation to undermine those seeking credible, fact-based, and unbiased coverage of the world around them. When I was director of VOA, I traveled to 22 countries witnessing the depth of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Russia, and Iran’s propaganda around the world. I also saw people’s hunger for believable, trustworthy information. I realized then that international public service

media like USAGM and the BBC networks were, for all practical purposes, the only free press in a huge part of the world.

The media landscape has since shifted. Independent global media is constantly under threat — this includes even some of our strongest and longest-running democratic allies. Earlier this year, the BBC announced cuts in radio and television services around the globe. These cuts represent some of the larger challenges many independent public service broadcasters are currently facing in the global information war. While international public service broadcasters from democratic nations face steady or declining budgets, authoritarian regimes like Russia and China are making massive investments in many media markets including Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan, to expand their spheres of influence.

The reality is: if we miss this opportunity to target investments to counter inroads Russia and the PRC are making, we run the risk of losing the global information war. Right now, we have a head start in many markets, but these next two years will be absolutely critical. We should be alarmed, but optimistic – alarmed because we are being vastly outspent, but optimistic because we still have a chance if we act now.

This is a moment that USAGM was built for, as it was during World War II and the Cold War, to combat malign foreign influence. While the governments of China and Russia expand state-sponsored propaganda not only in their own countries but also into regions including Latin America and Africa – USAGM, with over four thousand media partners around the world, is well-positioned to counter this authoritarian influence offensive. We have measurable data showing we are outperforming China and Russia in many key markets. And our credibility and trust with audiences are high because we tell the truth. It is not too late for us to secure our competitive advantage.

To stay competitive in the 21st century, we must continue to find new ways to reach our audiences, improve our infrastructure from digital security to physical safety, lead new forms of engaging content and build on what is already working, and leverage the global reach of each individual network for greater impact. By leveraging our media partnerships, we can continue to expand the delivery of fact-based journalism to larger audiences around the world for just pennies per person. USAGM represents a powerful investment that continues to show an outsized and scalable impact across the globe. By maximizing the best use of available resources and the talent of our journalists and staff, USAGM remains committed to providing a trustworthy, fact-based alternative to state-sponsored propaganda.

Our Global Impact

USAGM uses a variety of research and analytics tools to measure our impact. We conduct nationally representative surveys to measure how often our global audiences consume content and on what platforms. We also measure whether audiences find our information credible and share it with others, and whether it helps them form opinions.

As the brutal war in Ukraine grinds on, Russian-language news that combats Kremlin disinformation reaches larger and larger audiences every day. At the start of Russia's full-scale war in February 2022, RFE/RL was uniquely positioned on-the-ground to deliver exceptional multi-platform breaking news coverage to millions of people in Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and around the world. This crucial reporting did not come without grave personal risks. Vira Hyrych, a talented journalist and producer for RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, paid the ultimate price for her commitment to sharing the truth about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On April 29, 2022, Vira was killed in Kyiv after a Russian missile strike hit the residential building where she lived. With great bravery and despite the risks, correspondents reported from the frontlines, drawing on their deep local knowledge to bring nuance and context to a fast-evolving historic moment. Ukrainian and Russian audiences are seeking out RFE/RL coverage of recent events in the war in unprecedented numbers despite extensive Kremlin attempts to block RFE/RL's websites and most social media platforms. Between February 24, 2022, and February 23, 2023, RFE/RL web and social media videos in Russian and Ukrainian were viewed billions of times. For example, RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service video views on Facebook alone were viewed 1.1 billion times, an increase of 119% compared to the same period the year before.

Our research from 2022 also shows that audiences are choosing USAGM networks' content over that of Russia and China in a number of key target markets across Eurasia, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In Nigeria, for example, VOA reaches a third of all adults while Russia's state-controlled network, RT, reaches just 1% and China Radio International, less than 3%. In Cambodia, despite a government crackdown on the free press, RFA and VOA together reach 16% of adults, compared with China's state-controlled network, CGTN, at less than 2%.

Our levels of credibility across all the broadcasters are objectively high—over 70% of our weekly audience considers our reporting to be trustworthy. Both our mission and the editorial firewall, which prohibits U.S. government interference in the editorial autonomy of the broadcasting networks, underpin the worldwide credibility that USAGM's broadcasters enjoy. The firewall is essential to that credibility, ensuring editorial independence and protecting USAGM and its journalists from outside influence, including from U.S. government officials. This firewall is what sets us apart from state-controlled propaganda networks like Russia's RT and China's CGTN. Audiences see our example of openness and candor in exercising press freedom in a democratic society as proof of our credibility. In so many countries, people yearn for the truth—even if it is a painful truth. In times of crisis, traffic to our networks' websites and social media often spikes as audiences seek us out to learn the truth. We have seen this again and again in recent years, from the coup in Burma to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the recent protests in Cuba and Iran, and the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Even the very best journalism is of no use if people cannot see or hear it. As authoritarian regimes become increasingly sophisticated in blocking information, OTF is ensuring we become even more sophisticated in breaching those barriers. For example, following the Iranian regime's severe blocking of the internet during the protests over the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, the

number of monthly active users of OTF-supported censorship circumvention tools grew dramatically, and now over 90% of USAGM’s Iranian audience uses OTF-supported Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to access USAGM network content. Backed by OTF to reach users in Iran, RFE/RL’s Farda partnered with Toosheh, a U.S.-funded Satellite file-casting app that does not need Internet access. This one-way file distribution system can download content packages via satellite datacasting that can then be shared on messaging apps. This helped the network maintain accessibility for audiences at key moments during protests. Over the last three years, use of OTF-supported circumvention tools has quadrupled globally, increasing from about 9 million monthly users to over 40 million monthly users. While these tools have a very economical monthly cost of only 7 cents per user, OTF has been strained by the enormous demand for their tools by our audiences in Iran, Russia, China, and other countries where it is increasingly dangerous to access the internet and seek out truthful information.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, MBN brings news and programming about the region, the world, and the United States to audiences. USAGM’s research shows that MBN is consistently competitive with and, in some cases, outperforming Russia’s widely available RT Arabic channel. MBN’s Alhurra reaches more than twice as many adults weekly as RT Arabic in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. In Iraq and Morocco, the two networks reach similar audiences, with Alhurra slightly ahead of RT in Iraq and just behind in Morocco. MBN sheds light on and explains the U.S. perspective on topics or events that are often ignored or not covered comprehensively by competitors such as Qatar’s Al-Jazeera, Saudi Arabia’s Al-Arabiya and UAE’s Sky News Arabia. For example, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited South Africa in August 2022 to launch the U.S. Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, MBN covered his visit comprehensively and was the only network among its competitors to play his speech in its entirety for MENA audiences. MBN’s weekly digital series ‘Did It Really Happen?’ fact-checks prominent dis- and misinformation being spread on social media in Arabic, including that being disseminated by Russia and China, while the television program ‘Alhurra Investigates’ focuses much of its investigative reporting on Russia, Iran, and China by fact-checking false narratives and shedding light on stories omitted by the local press.

Despite facing challenging circumstances, OCB remains committed to fulfilling its mission for the people of Cuba and staying competitive in the 21st century. As access to the internet increases in Cuba, OCB is developing a new focus on digital distribution. After a spike in video views during the July protests of 2021, OCB has increased its digital reach on the island. Video views on Facebook in 2022 totaled 27 million – up from 22 million in 2021. With an estimated 75% of Cubans using the internet according to Statista, OCB’s new focus on digital storytelling will reach even more people in Cuba over the coming months and years. At the same time, OCB remains committed to maintaining and strengthening Radio Martí, our flagship broadcast to Cuba for almost 40 years.

VOA is successfully reaching audiences in regions that are major targets of malign influence from the PRC and Russia, including Africa and Latin America. Last year VOA Spanish reached a measured weekly audience of more than 66 million adults in Latin America – that’s a price of just 8 cents per audience member reached for an entire year. Russia and China both operate major Spanish-language brands in the Latin America media market, but neither comes close to the reach of VOA. VOA reaches 47% of adults weekly in Bolivia, 24% in Colombia, 51% in the Dominican Republic, and 39% in Ecuador, all while Russia’s RT Spanish reaches 5% or less in each market and China’s CGTN reaches 6% or less in each market. VOA’s reach is made possible by its extensive network of media partners in the region – including the top radio and television stations in nearly every country, and the most important independent outlets in countries like Venezuela or Nicaragua where the free press is under threat. VOA serves as the U.S. bureau for its media partners, covering major U.S. and international stories for them, providing custom reports for major partner stations, and working closely on a daily basis to ensure content is tailored to the needs of their audiences. When our media partners cover events like President Biden’s State of the Union address or recent visit to Ukraine for their local audiences, it is VOA reporters who provide the reporting, analysis, and coverage of these events. VOA’s simultaneous translations of major speeches mean that audiences around the world can tune into important U.S. news events in real-time, and in their own languages.

Our true power lies in our ability to harness the reach of the entire USAGM network for greater impact. Through translation of war coverage into dozens of languages, USAGM takes the work of RFE/RL’s brave journalists on the ground in Ukraine and shows the impact of Russia’s invasion not only to nearby countries like Belarus, Moldova, Bosnia, and Kazakhstan but also brings this global story to audiences in places like Cuba, Iraq, Cambodia, Vietnam and Nicaragua. USAGM takes VOA’s footage of the protests in Iran, or RFA’s exclusive reporting on Uyghur detention camps in China, and brings this news and information to audiences all over the world who rely on us.

Countering Malign Foreign Influence from Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine not only sparked the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II, its consequences also reverberated around the world, bringing the global information war into sharp focus. For many in our audience, the full-scale invasion forced them to question their entire worldview. As the Kremlin moved aggressively to centralize power, eliminate opposition, and silence dissenting voices inside of Russia, it also launched wide-ranging malign influence operations abroad with a special focus on Russian speakers in its immediate region.

It is in this context that USAGM’s role in providing fact-based, independent, and reliable reporting to the Russian public, to Ukraine, and to the world became even more important. Since the invasion began in 2014, USAGM network journalists, led by RFE/RL, have been on the literal front lines of this war, reporting from the fields and trenches of heavily bombed towns of Ukraine, highlighting the horrible reality of Russia’s invasion for audiences across the globe.

Despite the Russian government’s unprecedented censorship of independent media inside its borders, which forced RFE/RL to make the difficult decision to shutter its Moscow bureau and relocate to Riga, Latvia, there has been a surge in demand for VOA and RFE/RL Russian-language content along with a spike in the use of OTF-supported circumvention tools. Our networks reach a combined 11.7 million Russian adults each week.

USAGM is actively pushing back against Russia’s malign influence in nearby countries and across the globe. In nearby countries, USAGM networks provide news and information in languages including Ukrainian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Azerbaijani, and Georgian, among others. Through projects like Polygraph, VOA’s English-language fact-checking website, we are confronting Russia’s disinformation efforts in English for a global audience as well. “Systema,” an RFE/RL Russian-language Investigative Unit conducts deep investigative journalism modeled after the Ukrainian Service’s successful project “Schemes,” which has uncovered Russian atrocities in Ukraine, filling a void left by Russian-state media. The RFE/RL Current Time program ‘Footage vs. Footage’ exposes Russian disinformation campaigns, contrasting the fake footage with actual footage to debunk the lies behind the propaganda. This year, OCB’s Radio and Televisión Martí and the Ukrainian fact-checking outlet, StopFake.org, launched a joint project to counter Russia’s propaganda circulating in the Spanish language in Cuba.

Leading up to the full-scale invasion and to this day, Russia continues to deploy a variety of false narratives in Russia and around the world to justify an unjustifiable war. Much of this disinformation involves the U.S. - including the false claim that NATO and the West were the aggressors threatening Russia’s security and escalating the war. The governments of China and Russia often work together to amplify disinformation campaigns, obscure the facts, and cause confusion on a global scale. This is where VOA comes in. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a global story: VOA is not just covering the war for Russians and Ukrainians, they’re covering it for the world. Interest in this story was extremely high across many target regions: places like China, Vietnam, Iran, Latin America, Indonesia, Georgia, Albania, and Myanmar. In the year since Russia invaded Ukraine, VOA’s coverage of the war attracted more than 2.4 billion video views on social media and 144.4 million engagement actions across social media platforms, as well as over 83 million visits to VOA websites.

OTF-supported circumvention tools have played a critical role in enabling Russian citizens to access the uncensored internet. Use of OTF-supported circumvention tools has surged in Russia from only 250,000 monthly active users prior to the full-scale invasion in Ukraine to over 8 million today. In addition, OTF-supported mirror sites have received over 200 million visits per month. With the help of OTF, RFE/RL’s digital audience in Russia has grown significantly despite ongoing censorship of their digital platforms.

USAGM’s networks are maximizing resources to reach an even larger audience in and near Russia. RFE/RL and VOA video content in Russian and Ukrainian was viewed 8 billion times in the year since the full-scale invasion — 2.5 times the numbers from the year before. To put that number into context, just under 300 million people speak either Russian or Ukrainian. In the

months following Russia's invasion, Current Time, the 24/7 Russian-language television and digital network led by RFE/RL in cooperation with VOA, signed over 50 new media partners in countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova — just as media outlets in those countries were dropping Russia's RT. Despite significant censorship, Current Time Facebook videos were viewed 2 billion times, an increase of 163% compared to the same period the year before. Current Time videos routinely trend number one on Russian YouTube, a sign that Russian-language audiences want access to trusted news. In a powerful on-the-ground example, we received evidence that activists inside Russia took it upon themselves to begin posting flyers with QR codes disguised as furniture ads; but when scanned, the QR codes direct Russians to the Current Time YouTube channel.

Countering Malign Foreign Influence from China

China's media environment is one of the most restricted in the world and it has been working hard to export this model to other countries. Within China, the government exercises near-total control over both mass media and the internet, through a sophisticated system of content blocking, filtering, and surveillance.

Outside its borders, the PRC government is deliberately and effectively extending its reach far beyond its previous sphere of influence of the Pacific Rim and Southeast Asia, and rapidly moving into Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. In Latin America for example, the PRC government is doing extensive marketing campaigns in the region and offering media executives lavish trips to China to promote placement of China's state-controlled media content. In Africa, China is installing low-cost satellite dishes to provide poor and rural citizens with limited, government-controlled programming. The energy with which the PRC government drove its Belt and Road expansion a decade ago is now being replicated in the information space.

Despite independent global media operating with only a fraction of the budget of China's state-controlled media, USAGM's networks have made significant gains in getting information to audiences in China and diaspora communities outside of the country, and bolstering media partners in regions targeted by China. VOA and RFA broadcast in Mandarin, Cantonese, Uyghur, and Tibetan, providing a variety of news, political and cultural programming as well as English-language instruction. VOA's English-language fact-checking project, Polygraph, includes a website dedicated to producing videos and articles in Mandarin to confront China's disinformation efforts and present evidence to debunk falsehoods. Similarly, in 2022, RFA launched the Asia Fact Check Lab, a project in both English and Mandarin that monitors and fact-checks China's false narratives and misinformation campaigns. Across Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia, RFE/RL's journalists increasingly witness and report on growing connectivity between disinformation from the PRC and Russia, and they cover Beijing's growing footprint across the region.

VOA and RFA represent some of the only sources of credible information for people living in China, while OTF increases their access to information – and their combined impact is powerful. Audiences in China yearn for a comprehensive, uncensored view of China, the U.S., and the world. They feel seen and heard, and often express gratitude when VOA and RFA cover events the PRC government would prefer to hide or distort, including the 2022 protests against the PRC government’s zero-COVID policy. Last year, RFA’s timely coverage of these protests broke records for web traffic and social media engagement. RFA experienced historic surges on social media, as RFA Mandarin gained 75,000 new followers on Twitter in one week and saw a 233% increase in traffic from mobile Google searches, and RFA Cantonese’s Facebook video views increased by 10 times over the previous week. One RFA video showing these protests was viewed over 4 million times on Twitter.

Audiences in China are also intensely interested in coverage of U.S.-China relations. When former Speaker Nancy Pelosi traveled to Taiwan last year, VOA Mandarin received over four million pageviews on their website in one week as the network live-streamed the speech, interviewed former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and several Senators from both sides of the aisle, and published articles with in-depth analysis. This type of coverage is a window into the U.S. and the world for many: one loyal audience member described how she started listening to VOA’s Mandarin Service on a shortwave radio in 2001 and continues to listen to this day through the network’s digital platforms.

Our audiences in China show that they not only prefer USAGM network content, but also that they are willing to go to great lengths to overcome the “Great Firewall” to reach that content. For example, last year VOA’s Mandarin Service content on YouTube earned nearly double the video views as China’s CCTV. When thinking about our impact, we must take into account that China has the most sophisticated internet censorship in the world. OTF supports leading VPNs in China, which help over 2.5 million monthly active users protect their privacy while they access the internet.

Conclusion

This is the most important time for this agency since the Cold War, and perhaps since World War II. USAGM must be positioned to be consistently competitive in today’s dangerous world of information manipulation and heavy investment by authoritarian regimes and other bad actors. To do so, we will stay true to our agency-wide priorities: modeling transparency and accountability in everything we do; maintaining mission focus; expanding and improving access to USAGM content; ensuring journalistic independence for every broadcaster and entity; and bolstering journalistic safety, security, training and ethics.

USAGM remains committed to delivering on our mission to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. We cannot do this without the support of Congress and the critical decisions made by appropriators on this Committee. We are confident that any increased investment you might consider making in our work will be crucial as we fight this global information war. Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Lee, and distinguished

members of the Subcommittee, we are deeply grateful for your support of and interest in our work and we value your oversight role. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.