

**House Foreign Affairs Committee**

**September 24, 2020 Hearing**

***“Oversight of the United States Agency for Global Media and U.S.  
International Broadcasting Efforts”***

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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and other members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

Until June of this year, I was honored to serve as President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a congressionally funded broadcaster reaching 38 million people across 23 countries in 27 languages. RFE/RL and the other entities that receive grants from the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) -- Radio Free Asia (RFA), Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), and the Open Technology Fund (OTF) -- provide objective news and information to audiences around the world and help citizens hold governments accountable for their actions.

I have worked on national security and foreign policy for my entire career. I served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, on the National Security Council staff, and in the U.S. Senate. While working for Senator Marco Rubio during the 2016 presidential campaign, I grew increasingly concerned about foreign actors exploiting our democratic election process through our domestic media and after leaving the Senate, co-directed a project, at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Alliance for Securing Democracy, to tackle this challenge. I viewed U.S. international broadcasting as an underutilized tool in the U.S. response to these challenges. In July 2019, the bi-partisan USAGM board selected me to be RFE/RL's President and CEO for a period of three years.

I approached my new role with great enthusiasm. For the remainder of 2019 and first half of 2020, I worked diligently to enhance the mission of RFE/RL, which is to promote democratic values and institutions by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established. This is always an important mission, but the events of the last six months, including a global pandemic, have increased the importance of RFE/RL's independent journalism even further.

My work unexpectedly ended in mid-June 2020, days after the Senate confirmed Michael Pack to be the USAGM Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In the early hours of June 18, I received an email informing me I had been removed without cause. I was

not alone. I soon learned that CEO Pack had simultaneously fired the Presidents of RFA, Bay Fang, MBN, Alberto Fernandez, and OTF, Libby Liu.

I and much of the RFE/RL staff are still in shock about this unprecedented turn of events. To provide further context to the Committee, I describe here RFE/RL's many accomplishments over the decades and the challenges the network now confronts. I also describe: my activities and accomplishments at RFE/RL during my tenure; the circumstances surrounding my removal; and make suggestions about areas for reform of U.S. international broadcasting.

### **The Importance of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty**

Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were established in the wake of the Second World War. They, along with Voice of America, a federal news organization, were created as America prepared for what turned into a long struggle with Soviet communism. The architects of these federally funded news outlets included individuals such as George Kennan. Future President Dwight Eisenhower served as an early Board member of the National Committee for a Free Europe, which oversaw RFE.<sup>1</sup>

They understood the power that the advancement of truth would play in ensuring America's Cold War success. Giving exiles the microphone and letting them talk to their fellow compatriots about the challenges facing their societies and about the fact that Western democracies had not forgotten them, were powerful tools. They also helped the voices of dissidents such as Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to be heard by their fellow citizens.

Decades later, during my tenure as President, I met many aging individuals, from heads of state to average citizens, who would emotionally recount to me the hope that RFE/RL gave them and their families during those dark decades before the Wall fell and Soviet communism was defeated. Since those events, key figures have attested to the importance of the broadcasters. For instance, Lech Walesa said, when asked about the impact of Radio Free Europe's Polish Service on the Solidarity movement, "Would there be an earth without the sun?"

Today RFE/RL is a multimedia news organization operating across multiple platforms and like, all media organizations, struggling to ensure that it can meet its audience on their platforms of choice in the years to come. The information space, especially on digital platforms, will be the key area for RFE/RL in the years ahead and it and the other USAGM-funded networks will need additional support from the Congress to ensure that America regains a competitive advantage in this domain.

The organization has played a key role during the coronavirus pandemic as governments from Russia to Belarus to Hungary to Central Asia use the pandemic to

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<sup>1</sup> In the initial decades, it was later revealed that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were funded by the CIA. In 1971, Congress made their funding overt through the annual appropriations process and enacted protections to ensure the Radios editorial independence from the U.S. government.

attack the work of an independent press. RFE/RL has provided factual information about the crisis, ensuring that citizens can protect themselves and their families. It has revealed the arrival of coronavirus in countries where leaders denied its existence.

RFE/RL also continues to play a role similar to its Cold War-era mission – giving voice to the oppressed, allowing them to gain information about what is happening within their communities and their societies during tumultuous times. During my tenure at RFE/RL, we provided extensive coverage of protests in Russia, Central Asia, and Iran that went uncovered by local media.

Today, in 2020, RFE/RL's competition is more varied than during the Cold War period. However, it still operates in some countries where the primary alternative is state-run TV or radio but more likely, RFE/RL is competing in varied media environments against competitors controlled by politically connected oligarchs.

RFE/RL is different from its competitors. The key to this differentiation is the independence and objectivity of RFE/RL's journalism. The International Broadcasting Act specifically mandates that the journalism of U.S.-funded networks "be conducted in accordance with the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism." This doesn't just ensure that these outlets are credible, in the case of RFE/RL, it helps protect the security of journalists who are working in their own countries, reporting on their own societies, from being labeled as intelligence agents by regimes quick to harass and attack them. Many RFE/RL journalists have nowhere to flee to with their families. Compromising their independence does not just cross a bureaucratic line or violate a regulation, it puts their lives at risk.

RFE/RL also differs from Voice of America (VOA). They have always had separate missions. VOA was given the clear statutory mandate of presenting the policies of the United States, commonly referred to as "telling America's story." In contrast, RFE/RL journalists primarily focus their reporting on events taking place in the countries in which they broadcast.

Until recently, RFE/RL's overseers have scrupulously avoided trying to turn it or the other non-governmental grantees into mouthpieces of a particular administration or for U.S. policies. They have hewed to the simple power of truth as a disruptive force that empowers individuals. I urge the Committee to ensure that this focus on objective news and information continues at the grantees even as new leadership at the U.S. Agency for Global Media places renewed emphasis on explaining American policy to foreign audiences.

### **My Time at RFE/RL**

While I was President of RFE/RL, I worked to modernize the network – to make it more effective for addressing current and future challenges. Here are some examples.

When I arrived at the RFE/RL offices in Prague to begin work, I found that constant leadership turnover had caused significant chaos and drift. Funding gaps were

widespread. A roughly flat budget was increasingly allowing competitors to hire away staff and putting the network at a disadvantage in key markets. Russia and others were outspending RFE/RL by several orders of magnitude across Eurasia. To put it mildly, morale across the organization was low.

My team and I worked hard to make improvements which were fully supported by the organization's bipartisan corporate board, which included a representative of Secretary of State Pompeo, USAGM leadership, and Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, including some of you on this Committee.

After just ten months as President and despite a once in a century pandemic that significantly impacted our operations, we were making real progress. We increased RFE/RL's focus on digital platforms, which experienced significant audience growth in key markets during the pandemic. We expanded investigative reporting and prioritized journalistic professionalism and training. We increased coverage of China's influence across Eurasia, and we developed new tools to combat disinformation. We were developing strategies to expand our audience inside Russia. I also oversaw the preparations for RFE/RL's return to Hungary and pushed the organization to learn lessons from RFE/RL's 2019 launch of digital only services in Romania and Bulgaria. We worked to improve RFE/RL's security and countered attempts by foreign governments to threaten or pressure our employees.

### **Michael Pack**

One of the most significant challenges facing the private grantees is their oversight relationship with the U.S. Agency for Global Media. This federal agency by statute is unable to interfere in the editorial decision making of the entities yet retains significant control over their budget and operations. Changes in strategic direction at the USAGM and its predecessor entity, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, significantly impacted RFE/RL's operations. I thus viewed the arrival of an empowered CEO like Michael Pack in June of this year as a positive opportunity for the Agency to chart a new course.

I was wrong. CEO Pack's first action was an order freezing all spending, hiring, and contracting at the private grantees including RFE/RL. That was troubling to me and our attorneys because it suggested that CEO Pack did not understand the difference between the private grantees (RFE/RL, RFA, MBN, OTF) and the federal entities that he oversees (USAGM, VOA, Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB)).

Nevertheless, we spent the days after his arrival preparing to brief him about our work and challenges facing our journalists. But we heard nothing from Mr. Pack or his team – they did not respond to our repeated briefing offers. Then, on the evening of June 18, 2020, I received by email a letter informing me that the RFE/RL board of directors was being replaced by a group of individuals, primarily political appointees from the Trump administration. One hour later I received a second letter by email relieving me of my duties effective immediately without cause. The letter appeared to violate the International Broadcasting Act, which provides that the Board of Directors of RFE/RL

– not USAGM management – shall make all major policy determinations, including hiring and firing decisions.<sup>2</sup> I have no evidence that the other Board members, none of whom had ever met me, played any role in my firing.

Congress’ instructions regarding the independence of RFE/RL remain clear, even after the recent enactment of the legislation expanding the CEO’s powers. The statute provides: “Nothing in this title may be construed to make RFE/RL, Incorporated a Federal agency or instrumentality.”<sup>3</sup> Mr. Pack’s defacto federalization of the corporate board of RFE/RL and the other grantees appears to violate this provision of the statute and it potentially compromises their independence and credibility.

I was not the only victim. The same night I was fired CEO Pack fired the Presidents of the other networks (RFA, MBN) and the leadership of OTF. He later also apparently pressured the Acting leadership of RFA to dismiss Bay Fang, who had returned to a lower level position in the company.

I know the RFE/RL staff have reacted to my firing with shock, frustration, anger, and most concerning, uncertainty about RFE/RL’s future. To date, no successors have been named to replace me or my counterparts at the other networks.

It has not stopped there. CEO Pack has or has attempted to fire long-time career civil servants and to block the extension of visas for Voice of America journalists working in the United States. He has also implied that journalists at VOA and the other networks are intelligence agents working for foreign governments.<sup>4</sup>

Sadly, CEO Pack’s arrival has brought only more chaos and uncertainty to U.S. international broadcasting. This turmoil could not come at a worse time. We are falling behind our competitors. In a few short months, CEO Pack has put the agency he oversees and the grantee networks he funds at significant and potentially irreparable risk.

### **Needed Reforms**

I devote the remainder of my testimony to suggesting areas where Congress can and should step in to make USAGM, RFE/RL and the other entities better, more impactful news organizations. First, for the United States to remain competitive in efforts to counter disinformation, support independent media and strengthen democracies, it will need to increase funding for the tools of American soft power. I firmly believe that can only be accomplished through responsible, nonpartisan support and oversight. Based on experience to date, I strongly support bipartisan efforts to limit the power of the USAGM CEO. One way of doing this is by empowering the International Advisory Board which is being established to advise him.

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<sup>2</sup> See 22 USCS Section 6207(a)(2).

<sup>3</sup> See 22 USCS Section 6207(e)

<sup>4</sup> See most recently, “Michael Pack reviews stunning foreign influence in federal media agencies,” <https://ricochet.com/podcast/sara-carter-podcast/michael-pack-reveals-stunning-foreign-influence-in-federal-media-agencies/>

But many more significant actions will be required for the U.S. international broadcasting to remain competitive.

### *Pass a New International Broadcasting Act*

When the International Broadcasting Act (IBA) was signed into law by President Clinton, much of U.S. international broadcasting was still carried out via radio. Since then, these networks have gone through a television transformation and now are in the midst of a digital transformation. We live in a world vastly different from 1994. It is time for Congress to fundamentally overhaul the International Broadcasting Act. Repeated attempts to modify its provisions, carried out through amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act and other bills, have left the broadcasters with an outdated and contradictory set of instructions for their work.

### *Ensure and Strengthen Grantee Independence*

As part of these reforms, I would urge Congress to make the private grantees RFE/RL, RFA and MBN even more independent of the U.S. government. Their independence is essential to their credibility with their audiences. It is what attracts listeners, readers, and viewers to their content. The politicization of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and the undermining of the grantees' corporate boards through the actions of the new CEO of the Agency will only serve to raise questions about their independence and their ability to continue to speak truth to power. The defacto federalization of their corporate boards has also put their journalists at greater risk of being targeted for their work.

To address these issues and ensure their independence, the private grantees should be funded in a manner similar to the congressional appropriation for the National Endowment for Democracy and governed by individual bipartisan boards that are accountable for all strategic and personnel decisions. The Firewall that protects these networks from the influence of U.S. government officials should be strengthened in the revised IBA.

### *Restructure U.S. Public Diplomacy Tools*

An updated IBA should clarify the role of the federal government entity broadcasters, such as VOA and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, to ensure that the mission of "telling America's story" does not fluctuate from one administration to the next based on political concerns. It should also review whether USAGM is even needed. Perhaps the mission of translating U.S. policies to foreign audiences might be more effectively carried out through improvements to the State Department's public diplomacy apparatus rather than through federally employed journalists at entities like the Voice of America.

Mr. Pack's politicization of the Agency and his actions as CEO raise significant concerns about the Agency's operations and argue for a frank assessment of its future.

## **Conclusion**

During my tenure at RFE/RL, I talked frequently with the staff about the concept of "living in truth." Vaclav Havel remains an important figure to the organization, especially given its current location in Prague at his invitation and his testimonials attesting to the critical services it provided to the Czech people during the times of their greatest need. President Havel is buried across the street from RFE/RL's headquarters. His spirit is alive every day across the organization.

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I urge you to ensure that U.S. international broadcasting does not abandon the simple premise that Havel understood that the truth can liberate the human spirit, that the truth is what authoritarians fear the most, and that the truth deserves to be defended at all costs.

Thank you.