

Jamie Fly
Senior Fellow and Senior Advisor to the President
German Marshall Fund of the United States
(former President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment

September 10, 2020 Hearing on “*Protecting Democracy During COVID-19 in Europe and Eurasia and the Democratic Awakening in Belarus*”

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

The world has not witnessed a global, life altering event like the coronavirus pandemic for more than a century. There are facets of modern life that will likely be fundamentally changed, even as the virus is brought under control. Yet certain trends that were underway well before the pandemic remain. One is the growing importance of information in our societies. Information is more accessible than ever, yet access to unbiased, objective information is increasingly difficult to obtain. Across Eurasia, information is jealously guarded and wielded by authoritarians attempting to maintain control. Yet it is also being weaponized by average citizens in the region seeking freedom from oppression and better lives for themselves and their children.

Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, “our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”¹ The free flow of information that derives from a vibrant press is essential to the functioning of democracy. Citizens in a democracy base their decisions about who to vote for and whether to continue to place their trust in their government on such information. This is why authoritarians attempt to control information, subjugate independent media, and shape the media narrative to their advantage through outlets of state propaganda.

Freedom House describes Eurasia as “long one of the worst-performing regions” in its latest edition of *Freedom in the World*, its annual assessment of the state of freedom globally. Even in democracies in the region, democratic norms and institutions have been under challenge by the forces of populism.² Prior to the pandemic, authoritarians were under pressure in many countries across the region due to sclerotic economies, corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of authority. From protests challenging Putin’s attempts to make himself President of Russia for life, to growing dissent in parts of Central Asia, the pandemic and the fumbled response of many governments has added fuel to an already burning fire. When citizens attempt to take more responsibility for their governance, it is a positive thing, yet the pandemic has the

¹ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Currie, January 28, 1786, accessible at https://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.005_0216_0218/?sp=1.

² Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy,” p. 23 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf.

potential to give authoritarians more influence as they use a public health emergency to impose broader restrictions on society.

These developments are occurring as America's strategic competitors are jostling for influence across Eurasia, hoping to stall the advance of democracy and to further their economic goals. First and foremost, Russia, with its cultural connections and shared past with much of the region, still exerts significant influence. China looms on the horizon, and Iran and others are attempting to expand their ties. The region contains populations vulnerable to extremism and radicalization, an ongoing concern. For all these reasons, it is in the interest of the United States to assist fledgling democracies in Eurasia in their transition into full-fledged members of the European community and avoid their exploitation by other powers.

In the twenty-first century, the information domain is where powers are attempting to shape their narratives. It is where authoritarians fight to retain their power and where the masses are going to organize and overthrow illegitimate rule. Given the centrality of information in our modern societies, it is more important than ever that we modernize the tools that helped win the Cold War and reduced Soviet communism to President Reagan's "ash heap of history."

For this reason, I focus this testimony on the impact of the pandemic on free speech and freedom of the press. For much of the last year, I witnessed the centrality of these freedoms to the maintenance of democracy and its expansion throughout this region every day from my perch at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in Prague. As Americans and Europeans, we are not devoting enough time and attention to these challenges and we are running the risk of ceding space to those who seek to control and limit access to information rather than expand that access and shore up the ability of all of the people of this vital region to, in the words of Vaclav Havel, "live in truth" and expose the lies that mask the inherent fragility of authoritarian regimes.

The Pandemic's Impact on Freedom of Information

Countries across Eurasia have struggled to deal with the pandemic. It has ravaged weak health systems and tested governments' coordination abilities. Early on, authoritarians throughout the region viewed the pandemic as a political threat, not just a public health problem. They acted accordingly, often denying the existence of the virus or disputing its arrival in their countries.³ Independent, accurate reporting about the pandemic thus ran counter to the goals of many governments across the region.

From Russia to Belarus to Hungary to Central Asia, governments attempted to criminalize free speech and journalism about the pandemic through emergency legislation and ad hoc measures. Under the guise of public health controls, regimes

³ The strange journey of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus from COVID-denier to COVID victim is just one example but there are many others. See Mike Eckel, "Tractors, Herbs, Vodka, Saunas? Some Leaders Offer Strange, Unhelpful Advice on Warding Off COVID-19," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/coronavirus-unhelpful-advice-tractors-herbs-vodka-saunas-gurbanguly-lukashenko-vucic/30495810.html>.

have attempted to justify investments in mass surveillance technology. They developed new accreditation requirements for journalists. In some countries, bans on physical movement of citizens did not exempt journalists (as is common practice in the United States and Europe), making it difficult for journalists to meet sources, cover protests, and provide relevant information for their audiences. In places such as Russia, government regulation of media content was expanded. Demonization of journalists covering the pandemic became routine.

The pandemic also accelerated changes already underway in the business models of many media outlets. Just as local media have come under economic pressure in the United States due to the disappearance of traditional advertising revenue, the media landscape in parts of Eurasia has been fundamentally changing. In countries where a vibrant independent media developed in the decades after the fall of communism, market forces are now limiting options for consumers. As economies take a hit from lockdowns and other effects of the pandemic, media outlets in many countries across the region will be even more susceptible to political influence through government friendly corporate interests or control by external actors such as Russia and China.⁴

The pandemic also allowed these external actors to spread disinformation. Just as governments were attempting to deceive their citizens about the facts related to the pandemic, Russia, China, and Iran were attempting to use the pandemic to their geopolitical advantage. They spread conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, blaming the United States.⁵ Once the recovery started, they spread disinformation about their own handling of the pandemic and their supposed assistance to countries in the region.⁶ They attempted to drive wedges between the United States and its European allies and to pit member states of the European Union against each other.⁷ The United States and its European allies often found themselves woefully behind in the information space, unable to get the facts out about their response to the pandemic and responding to the narratives of these actors rather than advancing their own messages.⁸

These malign efforts were successful across parts of Eurasia because countries that lack true freedom of the press and a vibrant independent media are environments in which disinformation flourishes. The best response to these challenges is for United

⁴ This is a disturbing trend affecting many advanced democracies in the region, including in some U.S. allies.

⁵ In some cases, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian narratives overlapped and were amplified by each other. See Betsy Woodruff Swan, "State report: Russian, Chinese, and Iranian disinformation narratives echo one another," Politico, April 21, 2020 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-china-iran-disinformation-coronavirus-state-department-193107> and European External Action Service Special Report Update, "Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic" April 22, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>.

⁶ See Dusan Stojanovic, "China's 'mask diplomacy' wins support in Eastern Europe," *Associated Press*, April 14, 2020, <https://apnews.com/76dff4b113e82d85716262895909f151>.

⁷ For one example of a campaign in Poland that was repeated in other countries across the continent, see Stanislaw Zaryn, "The Coronavirus Disinformation Campaign Against Poland," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2020 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign-against-poland-11585509765>.

⁸ See Hans von der Burchard, Jillian Deutsch and Maïa de La Baume, "Berlin pushes back in coronavirus propaganda war," *Politico Europe*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-propaganda-war-germany-solidarity/>.

States and Europe to continue to expose these efforts but also to redouble their support for independent media in countries across the region so that citizens can get the facts for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

Policy Recommendations

Pushing Back Against Authoritarian Restrictions on Media

Given these threats to the information space across Eurasia, it is essential that the United States and its European allies commit to forcefully condemn efforts by authoritarians or external actors to control or manipulate the information environment and to prioritizing this issue in their bilateral engagements with governments across the region. The transatlantic community has leverage if it chooses to use it. Attacks on journalists should be condemned and use of accreditation restrictions and other common tools of information repression should lead to punitive measures by the United States and Europe. Countries such as Russia that are designating journalists as “foreign agents” should face punishment for such actions, including through human rights sanctions imposed on government officials involved in such decisions. Countries that receive U.S. and European assistance, such as the Central Asian states, should have some assistance made conditional on progress in this area.⁹

U.S. International Broadcasting

Among the greatest tools that the United States possesses to ensure the free flow of information is the \$800 million it spends annually on international broadcasting. In the wake of the peaceful revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the work of entities like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America were cited by dissident leaders as key to their victory over oppression.

The reach of these networks is vast. Combined, they reach a worldwide audience of more than 350 million people.¹⁰ RFE/RL produces content in 27 languages, reaching more than 38 million people across Eurasia.¹¹ This audience comes to RFE/RL for news and information that is independent, objective and truthful. RFE/RL viewers and listeners trust its journalists to provide unbiased information about their governments and their societies that they cannot get elsewhere. I witnessed the loyalty of this audience during my time as the President of RFE/RL as I traveled throughout the region and talked to local viewers and readers of our content. It is this trust and respect for the work of these journalists that even led a group of protesters in Minsk, Belarus in August to spontaneously chant their support for Radio Svaboda, (RFE/RL’s Belarus service which has been providing news and information to the people of Belarus since 1954).¹²

⁹ Central Asia is an important market for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty but one where journalists are increasingly under pressure. See Jamie Fly, “Press freedom challenges continue in Central Asia,” <https://www.usagm.gov/2019/10/02/press-freedom-challenges-continue-in-central-asia/>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.usagm.gov/news-and-information/press-room/>.

¹¹ See <https://pressroom.rferl.org/about-us>.

¹² Information about Radio Svaboda’s work is available at <https://pressroom.rferl.org/rferl-belarusian-service-radio-svaboda>. See <https://twitter.com/franakviacorka/status/1294908760880816129?s=21> for scene from Minsk protests.

USAGM networks – all funded by Congress – have played a particularly critical role during the pandemic. They have held governments accountable for their handling of the crisis, in countries where no other independent media were able or willing to. They provided basic health information and guidance from respected international authorities to their audiences. In some instances, they revealed the first cases of infection in their broadcast countries and covered the lack of vital medical equipment and government attempts to mask deaths. Some journalists working for these broadcasters even used their own struggles with COVID to highlight the difficulties in obtaining tests or quality medical assistance and treatment. They also played a key role in exposing efforts by external geopolitical actors like Russia and China to manipulate the local information environment to their advantage by spreading conspiracy theories about the virus’ origins and propaganda about their assistance to other countries.¹³

USAGM’s Current Challenges

Due to the recent ascendance of new leadership, USAGM and its networks are in turmoil on many fronts. On June 15, 2020, I along with my counterparts at other networks were simultaneously fired without cause and with no prior consultation. Moreover, USAGM grant recipients – such as the Open Technology Fund whose mission to preserve and enhance internet freedom is more critical than ever – have been targeted. The broadcasters are suffering from poor morale and programs are being compromised. This all comes at a time when the United States is falling behind in this vital area. Even prior to recent developments, the networks have been continuously buffeted by debates about the appropriate role of the broadcast networks, torn between those who advocate for a greater focus on explaining American policy to the world versus the core work of journalism in societies where independent media does not otherwise exist.

USAGM and its networks have significant systemic problems which must be addressed. They have often been adversely affected by frequent changes in leadership in Washington and intermittent congressional oversight. Congress has frequently modified the International Broadcasting Act of 1994, which governs their operations. Their funding – while remaining steady because of broad bipartisan support from the Congress – is falling significantly behind the resources of other state actors. Notably, the Kremlin is outspending RFE/RL by several orders of magnitude across Eurasia. China, with even greater resources, is beginning to engage in this region, cultivating connections to local media outlets and possibly pursuing corporate ownership of some networks. If the United States wishes to remain competitive in efforts to counter disinformation, support independent media and strengthen nascent democracies across this region, it will need to increase funding for these tools of American soft power and ensure responsible, nonpartisan oversight of their work.

¹³ For an overview of RFE/RL’s coverage of the pandemic, see the RFE/RL video “From the Balkans to Bishkek,” June 9, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUjDsY6A30Q>.

Areas for Reform

When the International Broadcasting Act 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. An updated Act should clarify the role of the Federal broadcasters, such as Voice of America, 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 a Federal agency like the U.S. Agency for Global Media is even needed in the twenty-first century and whether the mission of translating U.S. policies to foreign audiences might be more effectively carried out through the State Department’s own public diplomacy apparatus rather than through federally employed journalists at entities like the Voice of America.

As part of these reforms, I would urge Congress to make the private grantees RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Middle East Broadcasting Networks (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 on a daily basis. The politicization of their oversight agency, the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and the undermining of their 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 International Broadcasting Act.

Reciprocity with Adversary-funded and directed media

As Congress reforms U.S. international broadcasting, it should also work with the Executive Branch to demand greater reciprocity for state-controlled media operating within the United States. Russia, China, and other actors have learned from the U.S. successes of the Cold War era and developed their own international networks catering to American and foreign audiences. Russian state sponsored outlets are spending significant resources across Eurasia. They gain a following through slick production values that under-resourced U.S.-funded media outlets often struggle to compete with. They also use covert tactics and dispense with the norms of objective journalism. Unlike U.S.-funded media, they are not just state-funded, but also state-directed, not

maintaining the strict controls in place in the U.S. broadcasters that ensure editorial independence from the U.S. government. They also enjoy significant access to Western societies. Outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are widely available across the United States and Europe. They are available on satellite packages and in hotel rooms and have partnerships with local radio stations that beam their content throughout the democratic world.

Yet western-funded outlets face significant challenges to operating inside Russia. Journalists are harassed and they face onerous legal and administrative requirements, including most recently the possibility of being designated as “foreign agents” for their work inside Russia. Russia’s media regulator, Roskomnadzor, has increased the demands on media operating inside Russia, with a clear goal of making it impractical for truly independent media to reach their audiences.¹⁴ Looming over all of these actions are the ongoing threats by Russian authorities to create a Russian “sovereign internet” to wall off Russia from the international information space.

Democratic societies like the United States and its European allies are based on openness and transparency. Yet the tactics of Kremlin-directed media like RT and Sputnik demand greater reciprocity. U.S. officials should be more forceful in demanding greater openness from Russian officials. Why should satellite providers in the United States be allowed to offer RT when U.S.-funded media are prevented from reaching Russian citizens on satellite packages in the Russian Federation? Why should Sputnik be allowed to air its content unhindered to audiences in the Midwest when U.S.-funded outlets were long ago stripped of their broadcast licenses in Russia?¹⁵ Russian officials like to proclaim “reciprocal” treatment for Western media outlets operating inside Russia, but when it comes to audience access, there is no reciprocity. A serious conversation with Russian officials, backed up by a willingness to hold Russian broadcasters to the same operating conditions that Western outlets face inside Russia will go a long way to towards a more balanced information environment in Russia.

Obligations of Social Media Platforms

Congress and the Executive Branch need to continue to closely monitor actions by the major social media platforms that are now the gatekeepers for much of the information being consumed around the world. Their algorithms are the modern equivalent of editorial staff, in many cases immune to considerations of the public good. They have consistently been found to be amplifying the most extreme or salacious content. These platforms have also been used by authoritarians to their advantage. Content is at times restricted due to the demands of host governments and actors like Russia and China have determined how to manipulate the platforms to their advantage. These platforms have played a role in the decline of traditional media and thus should face some responsibility for the current fractious truth-free media landscape. The platforms

¹⁴ See “Russia’s Media Regulator Seeks to Tighten Restrictions on ‘Foreign Agent’ Outlets,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 23, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-s-media-watchdog-seeks-to-tighten-restrictions-on-foreign-agent-outlets/30743951.html>.

¹⁵ See Neil MacFarquhar, “Playing on Kansas City Radio: Russian Propaganda,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/us/russian-propaganda-radio.html>.

should be encouraged to work with public broadcasters just as they are engaging traditional media in the United States and Europe to ensure that the content of these broadcasters is not drowned out by hostile actions by authoritarian regimes.¹⁶

Need for Transatlantic Cooperation

Despite the broader challenges in transatlantic relations, the shared U.S. and European interest in seeing a Europe, including the countries of Eurasia, whole, free and at peace should provide an opportunity for greater cooperation. Despite the criticisms one often hears in Europe about supposed U.S. disengagement from the region, the United States has continued to devote significant resources to civil society organizations and independent media as well as U.S.-funded media. In some areas, particularly within the European Union (EU), the United States is much more engaged than its European partners, who have shied away from issues of press freedom affecting member states due to political sensitivities. Ensuring the viability of the media sector in EU member states such as Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania should not be a task for Washington alone. These initiatives, like the newly launched RFE/RL Hungarian Service could have a significant long-term impact on the future of the EU, not just on U.S. interests.¹⁷ Joint partnerships between government-funded media in the United States and Europe should be explored and Brussels should be more willing to make the viability of the media space in EU member states an agenda item for EU deliberations before it is exploited further by Russia and China as well as anti-democratic leaders.

The Stakes

The importance of the information space and the stakes for the advance of freedom are perhaps nowhere as apparent currently as on the streets of Belarus. After denying for months the existence of a pandemic and taking little action to protect the Belarusian people, Alexander Lukashenko lost an election that he attempted to steal. After 26 years, the Belarusian people are taking their future into their hands. Yet the Lukashenko regime is responding with arrests, torture, and an information crackdown. Internet access has been sporadically shut down and journalists have been stripped of accreditation. Russia has responded by "surging" support in the information domain, flying Russian state TV technicians and journalists to Belarus to man Belarusian state outlets weakened by walkouts and staff protests.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the United State and Europe seem to be bystanders to this key aspect of the Belarusian revolution of 2020.

¹⁶ One recent positive action by the platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, has been to draw a distinction between state-funded and state-controlled media, labeling the latter as such to provide greater transparency to audiences interacting with state-controlled content online. See Facebook post on "Labeling State-Controlled Media on Facebook," June 4, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/labeling-state-controlled-media/> and "Twitter to label state-controlled news accounts," *BBC News*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53681021>.

¹⁷ RFE/RL returned to Romania and Bulgaria in 2019 and returned to Hungary on September 8, 2020. All three of these relaunched services are digital platforms. See "RFE/RL Relaunches Operations in Hungary Amid Drop in Media Freedom," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/rfe-rl-relaunches-operations-in-hungary-amid-drop-in-media-freedom/30826537.html>.

¹⁸ See Matthew Luxmoore, "After Belarusian Journalists Quit State TV, Russians Fill the Void," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 24, 2020 <https://www.rferl.org/a/after-belarusian-journalists-quit-state-tv-russians-fill-the-void/30800576.html>.

Brave journalists from congressionally funded outlets such as RFE/RL's Radio Svaboda continue to produce amazing and critical reporting, but there has been no commensurate "surge" in Western support to help assist the people of Belarus get access to information they need to engage with each other and to understand what is happening in their country.

The pandemic has revealed certain universal truths about governance, about the fragility of brittle authoritarian systems, about the impact of the secrecy in countries like China that can lead to devastating consequences for the entire world. As events in Belarus and the growing unease in Russia about Vladimir Putin's rule have shown, the authoritarian moment may finally be threatened due to frustrations with the inability of governments to deliver for their people. We should do more to ensure that these publics have access to basic information about their governments and the policies affecting their lives. Redoubling our support for freedom of speech and freedom of the press is key.

Our greatest allies are the people across this region. Even when they have been deprived of the right to freely choose their leaders, they have voted time and again through their actions, through their use of all means necessary to get access to objective journalism about what is happening in their societies, and their demands for greater freedom and transparency. We should be increasing our support for journalists who are risking their lives to provide facts to their fellow citizens. Armed with the truth, it is the people of this region, not the sclerotic regimes that currently maintain their grip on control, that will determine the future of their countries. From my observations of the audience that RFE/RL reaches every day on multiple platforms across 23 countries, they are hungry for independent news and information and ultimately share the same desire for freedom that has united Americans and Europeans over the last seventy years.

We must do more to support their cause because it is ultimately the same as ours.