

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY**  
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**For the Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability,  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
“Management Successes and Failures: Assessing the U.S. Agency for Global Media”**

**July 9, 2024**

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee thank you for hosting this hearing and inviting me to speak today.

I would also like to extend my gratitude for the hearing you held last month to raise awareness about the plight of Americans detained abroad, including one of our journalists, Alsu Kurmasheva. Thank you, especially, for urging the Department of State to designate Alsu as wrongfully detained so the full power of the U.S. government can work to free her from Putin’s grasp. Your continued efforts to highlight these critical issues are deeply appreciated.

Next week, Alsu’s husband and two teenage daughters will be in Washington to advocate for her designation as wrongfully detained under the Levinson Act. The girls haven’t seen their mom in a year - but they cling to a Taylor Swift concert ticket they bought for her last year before the Russians locked her up - the show is next month - and they want nothing more than to be able to go with their mom. They’ve missed birthdays, holidays, and an entire school year together. No American family should have to deal with this. It is critically important that we all do everything we can to bring her home as soon as possible. Other RFE/RL families are suffering too. Three more journalist colleagues have been sentenced to a total of 26 years in prison. Vladyslav Yesypenko has been held in Russia-controlled Crimea since March 2021. In Belarus, Ihar Losik was detained in June 2020 and Andrey Kuznechyk in November 2021. The increasingly brutal regime of Lukashenka in Belarus has held Ihar incommunicado since February 2023, a cruel practice which Freedom House says is “intended to make prisoners believe that the outside world has forgotten them.” The families of many of our journalists are harassed, intimidated and forced into exile by authoritarian regimes across our region. It is my job to note their courage here.

Since taking this role in January, it has been my honor to represent an organization dedicated to providing independent journalism in countries where freedom of the press is limited or nonexistent. The cornerstone of our mission is to help build free societies and by so doing improve the chances of global prosperity and freedom. My greatest responsibility is advocating for all of our employees who work in challenging and often dangerous environments, and my top priority is ensuring our journalists have the resources and support they need to do their jobs without fear of retribution.

For seventy-four years our organization has stood as a beacon of independent journalism and remains so today in an era where press freedom is increasingly under threat. With bipartisan support from Congress, RFE/RL reaches more than 42 million people in 27 languages across 11 time zones every week.

As you know well, democratic societies are more likely to be allies than adversaries. Reinforcing the democratic foundations of other nations contributes to the safety and security of the American people. While we share the values of freedom and democracy with the American people, as a non-profit organization we remain editorially independent. This independence is not just a principle we uphold; it is the crucial framework upon which our credibility and trust are built. For example, according to the 2023 Gallup World Poll Survey, 91 percent of our audience in Georgia trusts RFE/RL's content; in Ukraine that result rises to 95 percent.

That credibility and trust are consistently reflected in audience data as well. When news interest piques, our audience numbers spike. For example, during the first week after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, audiences viewed RFE/RL videos 436.4 million times on Facebook, 305.4 million times on YouTube, and 83.2 million times on Instagram – reflecting increases of 265 percent, 406 percent, and 185 percent, respectively, over the previous week.

This past March, the number of video views garnered by Current Time's coverage of the Crocus City Hall terror attack in Moscow spiked by 122 percent on YouTube over the previous week, to more than 86 million. Russians were looking for news they could trust, and they came to us.

Amid the brutal crackdowns on individual liberties in Iran, RFE/RL's Radio Farda provides the rarest of opportunities to the Iranian people: the chance to hear news that is not propaganda, defying government censorship to deliver Persian-language news to audiences inside the country. In 2023, Farda received an astonishing 1.4 billion Instagram video views, 289 million website page views, 55 million Facebook video views, and 5 million YouTube video views, demonstrating our popularity among Iranian youth.

For seven decades we have seen that people from across our region turn to RFE/RL reporting when seeking information free from government propaganda and disinformation. After World War II the need for US soft power --including surrogate journalism-- was clear; as a result, we contributed to winning the Cold War and to supporting our former adversaries as they turned from militant authoritarianism to the difficult task of building democratic societies. Our government was wise to fund organizations like RFE/RL. The need now is no less critical. RFE/RL continues to play a crucial role on the world stage, especially in today's complex and dangerous global landscape.

Our reach and impact don't go unnoticed, particularly by unfriendly regimes. The effectiveness of our work is proven by the lengths to which some governments go to

silence us. Many of the challenges we face as an organization are more than simple operational obstacles; they serve as testaments to the success and impact of our work.

One of our key priorities is bolstering the safety of our journalists, who often face severe personal risks, including harassment, imprisonment, and cyber-attacks. In nearly every country we cover, reporters and staff face intimidation, physical harm, and imprisonment. Keeping our journalists safe and advocating on their behalf incurs a wide range of costs, such as physical infrastructure upgrades, legal fees, insurance, and travel expenses. We are changing the company even today to meet those needs. We are adding resources to our advocacy teams so that they are better able to support and advocate for journalists in need.

The detention of our colleagues is a stark reminder of the dangers they encounter daily. The proliferation of so-called “foreign agent” laws and other restrictive measures across our broadcast markets testifies to the impact of RFE/RL’s brand of journalism on authoritarian governments.

We’ve seen this process play out recently in Georgia, resulting in widespread protests. In April (the start of the 2024 protests), our Georgian service, known locally as Radio Tavisupleba, saw a massive increase in social media traffic because it was content about Georgia, produced in Georgian by Georgians for Georgians. On Instagram, views increased by 176%. Then, in May, Instagram views increased again by 222%.

These policies are straight out of Moscow’s playbook and are designed to criminalize journalism. By labeling our journalists as foreign agents - or terrorists, traitors, extremists, etc. - these measures aim to delegitimize their reporting and make it exceedingly difficult for them to operate. In Russia, the people who give us “man on the street” interviews are being arrested years after the interviews occurred. That’s how nervous the Kremlin is about our reporting.

Yet, these adversities also highlight the courage and dedication of our team.

Authoritarians make it difficult for our journalists to stay and work in one place. Despite the many challenges and extreme pressures on our reporters, some of whom were forced, for safety’s sake, to move from Russia to Ukraine to Georgia, Latvia and Lithuania, our organization’s accomplishments over the past year have been remarkable.

For more than two years, the Ukrainian people have bravely resisted the Kremlin’s violent attempt to take over its democratic neighbor. Throughout the full-scale invasion, RFE/RL journalists on the ground in Ukraine have been providing professional on the ground reporting in Russian and Ukrainian to millions of people who rely on us for accurate information about the war. This work, which is only possible with Congressional support, has been instrumental in countering Russian aggression.

Our reporting is an essential elixir against Russia's efforts to undermine democratic values on a global scale. RFE/RL's award-winning journalism from the front lines of the war in Ukraine provides insight into the devastating toll of the conflict by reaching places that few other media outlets can access. One of our most significant achievements has been our reporting on Russia's war crimes and atrocities against the Ukrainian people.

Our journalists risk their lives to provide firsthand accounts and valuable evidence of these heinous acts. Their reporting has brought global attention to these crimes, contributing to international efforts to seek justice and accountability.

RFE/RL also plays a critical role in monitoring Ukraine's democratic institutions -- before the war started, as it continues now, and eventually when the war ends. This work informs the international community and boosts the resilience of democratic values in Ukraine.

Operationally, funding questions pose a critical ongoing challenge for numerous RFE/RL initiatives. The pending expiration of FY 2022 supplemental appropriations supporting Ukraine, threats of government shutdowns, and cuts to our grant funding, create significant uncertainty. We must be extraordinarily wise about our appropriated funds, maintain cost reduction rigor, while re-prioritizing resources and assets in order to remain vital and competitive.

Funds provided through the FY 2022 supplemental appropriations kept our audiences informed and pushed back against Russian disinformation and propaganda. This critical funding has allowed RFE/RL to:

- expand wartime investigative journalism to expose Russia's atrocities and monitor Ukraine's democratic institutions;
- keep Ukrainians informed about the war through expanded digital journalism, consistent frontline reporting, and tailored programming for millions of war refugees, and;
- enhance journalist safety and wellbeing by:
  - establishing a new bureau in Lviv away from the front lines;
  - reinforcing facilities in Lviv and Kyiv to better shield our colleagues from missile attacks;
  - investing in hostile environment first-aid training and safety equipment, and;
  - expanding life insurance and mental health support programs for colleagues in the war zone.

Without sufficient funding, RFE/RL cannot continue these critical initiatives in Ukraine beyond FY 2024.

As the committee knows, China has become more aggressive in producing propaganda and disinformation campaigns and exerting political influence throughout the countries where we work. We've seen such tactics across Central Asia and Eastern Europe. China now spends approximately seven to ten billion dollars annually on information manipulation and propaganda programming. Without our vigilant tactics, China will eagerly fill the void in the information landscape in our region.

In addition to the specific challenges posed by military conflict and authoritarian repression, RFE/RL must also address one of the most challenging periods for journalists and journalism in recent history. The news industry is experiencing a dynamic digital revolution that requires agility, creativity, and technological prowess to keep pace. Today's challenges demand that RFE/RL constantly elevate the quality and impact of our journalism as well as our fundamental operational structure so that we can deliver the best value for money for our audiences and stakeholders.

The need for independent and trustworthy news is more urgent than ever in today's increasingly polarized world. Our role in promoting democracy and democratic values is not just vital, but a cornerstone of our mission, as we provide our audiences with the information they need to navigate their political and social landscapes.

RFE/RL has made significant strides in modernizing our work, with early successes in our 'digital-first' strategy and innovation focus.

RFE/RL has embarked on an ambitious modernization plan, which is strategically designed to improve operations, reduce duplication, utilize existing talent more efficiently and:

1. Better serve a complex, multi-service, digital-first organization, with an emphasis on world class video storytelling on all platforms.
2. Increase the impact and quality of our journalism, production values and showcase it more effectively.
3. Identify savings to strategically reinvest.

The reform aims to elevate the quality and impact of RFE/RL's journalism by establishing specialized units focused on verification, planning, multimedia production, and multi-language content.

Another key component of our reform effort is continuing to implement and assess reforms started under my predecessors to manage expatriate personnel costs and benefits. Personnel costs and benefits comprise the biggest component of RFE/RL's annual budget. Since 2018, despite high inflation in our host country and throughout our regions, RFE/RL has successfully contained these costs by limiting salary increases, reducing the number of expatriates on staff, and overhauling benefit programs being offered to expatriates, where feasible.

These steps were implemented during a period when – because of increasingly repressive authoritarianism in Russia and Belarus, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine -- RFE/RL was forced to relocate dozens of journalists to safer locations and take other costly measures to protect our staff.

In addition, RFE/RL expanded and reconfigured its content production to reach audiences impacted by instability, intense disinformation campaigns, government pressure, and closing media markets, relaunching services for Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary.

In a world where authoritarians are closing the information space, we must find innovative ways to reach audiences with trusted news inside Russia, Iran, and most of the countries where we work. RFE/RL, in partnership with the Open Technology Fund, has implemented an innovative, multi-faceted censorship circumvention strategy that has opened the way for over 90 percent of Radio Farda’s audience to consume its content through an OTF-supported VPN. In Russia, OTF-supported VPNs are allowing millions of monthly active users to access RFE/RL content. At the start of the full-scale war, OTF developed mirrors with RFE/RL as a publisher-side circumvention solution to reach a politically wary non-traditional audience base with little knowledge of VPNs or other censorship circumvention technologies.

The global media landscape described here may sound bleak, and it begs the question, why do we do it? Why risk everything? The simple answer is we do this because all that we hold near and dear as inherent fundamental human rights are at risk all across our regions. We can’t abandon the people who view Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty as lifelines.

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee thank you once again for the opportunity to speak before you today.

Your continued support and dedication to press freedom and democracy are invaluable to our mission. The challenges we face are significant, but so is our resolve to overcome them. As we navigate the complexities of legislative, operational, financial, and legal challenges, we remain steadfast in our commitment to our mission.

Our journalists’ bravery and dedication in the face of adversity testify to the power of truth and the enduring importance of a free press. It also testifies to the American commitment to building stronger societies and a freer more prosperous world. We ask for your continued support in addressing the obstacles that threaten our ability to work effectively.

Together, we can ensure that independent journalism survives and thrives, providing a beacon of hope and truth in the world's darkest corners.

We look forward to a productive discussion and to collaborating closely with you to support the vital work of our journalists and staff.