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Opening Statement – Chairman Ed Royce
“Confronting Russia’s Weaponization of Information”
April 15, 2015

This hearing will come to order. Today we look at the danger of Russia’s misinformation campaign in Europe – indeed, around the world – and the failed U.S. response.

As we will hear today, Russia’s propaganda machine is in overdrive, working to subvert democratic stability and foment violence in Eastern Europe. These tactics have undermined the government in Ukraine, laying the groundwork for invasion. This same plan is being worked in Eastern and Central Europe. Russian propaganda has the potential to destabilize NATO members, impacting our security commitments. This Russian campaign –what one witness describes as the “weaponization of information”-- seriously threatens U.S. security.

Russia has deployed an information army inside television, radio and newspapers throughout Europe. Some doing the Kremlin’s bidding are given explicit guidelines to obscure the truth by spreading conspiracies that the CIA is responsible for everything from 9/11 to the downing of Malaysia flight MH17 over Ukraine. Others are simply paid more for demonizing the West, while those who pursue credible reporting are pushed aside. Today we will hear from journalist Liz Wahl, who dramatically interrupted a live broadcast to resign from RT, a Russian outlet, explaining she could not stand by its distorted coverage of Russia’s occupation of Ukraine. Meanwhile, independent journalists in Russia have come under attack, with three killed so far this year.

Unfortunately, Ms. Wahl is a rarity, so Russian speakers in the frontline states like the Baltics, Ukraine, and Moldova continue to be told that their governments want to oppress and render them second-class citizens. Unfortunately, many are buying this divisive message. In parts of Europe where there aren’t Russian speaker populations, the message is that western democracy is morally corrupt and that integration with Europe since the Cold War has failed. It’s estimated that Putin is spending more than \$600 million a year to deride democratic pluralism.

And the U.S. response? The agency expected to manage our response – the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) – is far behind. After years of Russia ramping up its effort, last fall, the BBG finally launched its flagship response to Russian propaganda – a mere 30-minute television news program in the Russian language called “*Current Time*.” The program was put on-air in Lithuania, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Latvia. But after just four months, it was pulled in Latvia because it couldn’t draw an audience. What U.S.-backed news and information that does get through is a thimble of journalistic credibility in an ocean of Russian-driven news distortion.

This isn’t a matter of resources. U.S.-broadcasters are laboring under a flawed bureaucracy. Members may recall that then-Secretary Clinton called the agency “defunct” in her testimony before this Committee in 2013. The Inspector General and Government Accountability Office have been highly critical. Defenders have argued that all the BBG really needed to improve was a new CEO. Well, they hired a CEO and he quit after 42 days on the job. Last week, the director of the VOA announced his resignation. Our international broadcasting is in disarray.

The journalists of the BBG risk their lives reporting from the frontlines across the world. They deserve better support. And the American people need much more from this agency if we're going to respond to the rapidly evolving media environment and better secure the long-term security interests of the United States.

Last Congress, the House unanimously passed bipartisan legislation introduced by myself and Ranking Member Engel. That legislation will help us fight Putin's propaganda by allowing more resources to be spent in the field and on content instead of a broken bureaucracy. By clarifying the BBG's mission, creating accountable leadership through a CEO, and reducing the bureaucracy more of the budget can be spent on disseminating truthful news. Righting international broadcasting must be an urgent priority in our foreign policy.

I now turn to the Ranking Member for any opening comments.