

**Written Statement of Amanda Bennett
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Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability
“Management Successes and Failures: Assessing the U.S. Agency for Global Media”
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INTRODUCTION

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, an American and a Russian citizen, has been in a Russian jail since October 2023, wrongly accused of being a foreign agent simply for her association with the truthful journalism RFE/RL produces. Across the region, foreign agent laws are spreading – most recently to the country of Georgia – effectively impeding independent media organizations’ ability to deliver objective news and information to the region. Around the globe, in places like Cambodia and Vietnam, many of our journalists languish in prison for years simply for reporting the truth. Meanwhile, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) deepens its ties with news organizations around the world, it spreads its own distorted authoritarian message, not just to Asia but also to the Global South, and even penetrating our own country and other Western democracies.

Many see these terrifying facts and conclude that democracy has lost the information war and that the very idea of truth has been crushed. But not us at the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). We were founded precisely for the very act of bringing truthful journalism and democratic values into the world’s most closed and dangerous societies. Our proud roots in this mission go all the way back to our country’s responses to World War II and the Cold War, to the overthrow of the Cuban government and the Tiananmen Square massacre in China, to the horror of 9/11 here at home on U.S. soil, and now, most recently, to the struggle to combat the global information threat from the PRC and Russia.

USAGM was built for this moment.

OUR MISSION

USAGM and its broadcast entities – Voice of America (VOA), RFE/RL, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), Radio Free Asia (RFA), the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), and with the support of the Open Technology Fund (OTF) and our newest grantee, the Frontline Media Fund (FMF) – provide fact-based news and information to people in the world’s most restrictive media environments.

We are at a tipping point in our global history. One in which our mission is arguably more important than ever.

Disinformation by our adversaries, paired with censorship of truthful reporting threatens the viability of fragile democracies and presents an urgent national security risk to the United States. Today, we are evolving rapidly to meet any challenges that might arise. Even amid tough cuts to USAGM’s congressional budget requests, we are investing in our infrastructure, our technology,

our training, and most importantly, in the safety and security of our remarkable people. Among constraints and mounting threats to press freedom, our journalists and staff remain resilient and undeterred. We are doubling down on our efforts to keep them secure.

A Legacy of Credibility

Our entities have built trust among audiences by reporting reliable, fact-based news and information for generations. Audiences seek us out and trust us to report the truth, especially in times of crisis or when it is a truth their own governments prefer to hide.



Audiences turn to us in times of crisis, and further, our trust among them is echoed by our networks' sustained growth.

Over the past decade, the combined measured audience of USAGM's networks has more than doubled, with the agency now reaching 420 million people weekly in 63 languages and over 100 countries.

Our combined measured audience is the largest of any publicly funded international media organization, and our credibility with audiences consistently outperforms that of our state-sponsored media competitors.

For years, the PRC and Russia have made heavy investments to control the flow of information inside their own countries and rapidly expand malign influence abroad. In Latin America, for example, the PRC is conducting extensive marketing campaigns and offering media executives lavish trips to China to promote PRC-controlled media content. In Africa, the PRC is installing low-cost satellite dishes to provide poor and rural citizens with limited, government-controlled

programming.

However, despite being vastly outspent, our networks surpass Russia and the PRC's local-language brands in key markets, including in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In Nigeria, for example, 1/3 of all adults report accessing VOA content in the past week, while Russia's state-controlled network, RT, reaches just 1%, and China Radio International, less than 3%. Despite a government crackdown on press freedom in Cambodia, RFA and VOA together reach 16% of all adults, compared to the PRC's state-controlled network, CGTN, at less than 2%.

OTF plays a critical role in supporting internet freedom technologies that allow USAGM networks to reach their audiences and journalists to report safely in closed media environments. Today, over two billion people worldwide use OTF-supported technologies to securely access the uncensored internet.

Management Successes

As USAGM's CEO, I am constantly humbled by the extraordinary courage and resilience of our journalists and staff, many of whom have made tremendous sacrifices and continue to face enormous risks to investigate, report and deliver the truth to those who need it most. Our employees are some of the bravest people I have ever met, and it is a privilege to work alongside them.

“Doing journalism in a closed society like Cuba is quite a challenge for several reasons...the repression that independent journalists in Cuba face, the surveillance, the harassment, this restricts our movement in the field when producing reports and also limits direct communication with sources due to the fear people in Cuba have of testifying. Precisely because of this repressive environment in which journalists have to work in Cuba, many of us have gone into exile. In my case, I have been in Madrid for a year and have gradually learned how to report on Cuba from Spain. It's complex, and initially, there is a great sense of discouragement. At first, you may think that it's impossible, but as the months pass, you find ways.” – OCB contributor Luz Escobar

I have prioritized building a culture of trust and clarity among our workforce by prioritizing transparency, improving operational efficiency, breaking down siloes and investing in our public servants.

That approach has resulted in tangible successes, including USAGM's highest ranking to date among the Partnership for Public Service's 2023 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government, which are based on results from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) each year. On the 2023 FEVS, USAGM scored its highest-ever Global Satisfaction Index at 68% – a 7-point increase from the previous year. The index measures employees' satisfaction with their job, pay and organization. The latest rankings indicate a solid trajectory of improvement. In FY 2022, the Partnership for Public Service recognized USAGM as the “Most Improved Mid-Sized Federal Agency” among their 2021 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government.

The International Broadcasting Advisory Board

In addition to prioritizing transparency and efficiency, USAGM has taken steps to preserve the journalistic independence of its entities, which is a core component of their credibility worldwide. The bipartisan International Broadcasting Advisory Board (IBAB) – an independent federal agency, composed of experts representing mass communications, broadcast media, and international affairs – which was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in December 2023, plays a key role in that process.

The IBAB provides strategic counsel and oversight in partnership with the USAGM CEO, as well as advice and recommendations for improving the agency’s effectiveness and efficiency. Its members are off to a strong start and have been actively engaged to determine how they can best support the agency.

Upon inception, the IBAB immediately began to address a robust list of priorities, including protecting the entities’ editorial independence, ensuring their competitiveness, and strengthening journalist safety in an increasingly dangerous global media landscape. In the past six months, the IBAB has already authorized RFE/RL’s board to name Stephen Capus as RFE/RL President & CEO and helped secure Michael Abramowitz as VOA’s new Director.

Journalist Safety & Threats to Press Freedom

Journalist safety is one of our most urgent priorities.

Many of our journalists have been targeted by authoritarian regimes and their proxies, and even jailed in Russia, Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia, Belarus, and more. Further, the emergence of so-called “foreign agent” laws in Russia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Hong Kong, and other countries have made it increasingly dangerous for our journalists to do their jobs.

Growing threats to journalists are a problem facing media organizations worldwide, and we often meet with our international public service broadcasting peers to identify solutions to the emerging challenges. We have received tremendous support from our peers calling for the release of Alsu Kurmasheva.

American RFE/RL journalist Alsu Kurmasheva was detained by Russian authorities in October 2023 while visiting her ailing mother and has been unjustly detained in a Russian prison – with inadequate medical care and deteriorating health, unable to see or speak to her children and family – for over eight months under bogus “foreign agent” laws. On May 31, a Russian court extended detention for the sixth time, until August 5. She currently faces up to 15 years in prison on false charges.

In an April letter to the editor published in the Tatar-language newspaper “Beznen gəžit,” or “Our Newspaper,” Alsu said,

“My greatest wish is to get out of here alive and well. Some illnesses have gotten worse, but medications and regular exercise give me the strength to hold on and endure the pain... Sooner or later, I’ll come out of here, but how will those who subjected me and my loved ones to such a test feel? Will the judges who read my verdict through their teeth

be able to boldly raise their eyes? How will those who separated us for a long time by imprisoning me, a mother of two children, live?"

The Committee to Protect Journalists described Alsu's case as "the most egregious instance to date of the abusive use of Russia's foreign agents' legislation against independent press." Global leaders have condemned Alsu's wrongful detention and called for her release, including the governments of Canada, Czech Republic, France, Poland, and Sweden, more than a dozen U.S. lawmakers – including President Biden and Chairman McCaul – as well as human rights and press freedom organizations including Amnesty International, Freedom House, PEN America, Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, the International Press Institute and more. We are tremendously grateful for the overwhelming support and hope to see the full force of the U.S. government behind securing her release.

While Alsu's case has rightfully garnered much attention, rising threats to journalists are a growing occurrence within Russia and beyond. *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich is currently on trial facing wrongful espionage charges in Russia, and in February, Russia declared RFE/RL an "undesirable organization," exposing its journalists and anyone who works with the organization – or who even shares its content – to criminal charges. This is an escalation from RFE/RL's previous designation as a so-called "foreign agent."

Across the world, we're seeing journalists increasingly targeted just for doing their jobs. RFE/RL Belarus Service journalists Ihar Losik and Andrey Kuznechyk have been detained in Belarus since June 2020 and November 2021, respectively, and Vladyslav Yesypenko has been detained in Russian-occupied Crimea since March 2021. VOA Burmese Service contributor Sithu Aung Myint has been behind bars in Myanmar since August 2021, while VOA Vietnamese Service reporter Pham Chi Dung has been imprisoned since January 2021. In Vietnam, several RFA journalists remain imprisoned, including RFA Vietnamese Service contributors Nguyen Tuong Thuy, Truong Duy Nhat, Nguyen Vu Binh, and Nguyen Lan Thang. Meanwhile, in China, dozens of family members related to RFA's Uyghur journalists are missing or detained.

"Since the Chinese government began its "strike-hard" campaign last year, we have reported on the injustices taking place in the Uyghur region and we have covered the stories of many Uyghurs facing such injustices. Now, we too have become part of the story. Our families face tremendous pressure, coercion, and punishment from Chinese authorities. My younger brother, my only brother Kaiser Abduqeyum, was arrested by Chinese police last September 28th because of me." – Gulchehra Hoja, RFA Uyghur Service journalist

Journalism is not a crime, and as authoritarian bad actors grow bolder in their attempts to silence independent voices, USAGM remains steadfast in our commitment to supporting the safety and security of our staff.

We recently increased our number of full-time staff dedicated to strengthening our journalist safety operations, and established a standing Threat Working Group, which monitors, mitigates, and responds to reported threats, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We also provide risk assessments and specialized training to journalists and staff working in and traveling to high-

threat environments and have expanded our security training offerings to keep our workforce safe, in any circumstance, including on the frontlines of warzones and beyond.

“I’m proud every time I stand in front of the camera, stay strong, and cover the war. Three weeks ago, I went live right after receiving news that our home where my parents and children live was bombed. This was the time to stand up and do my work. As soon as I finished my live shot, I went back to being a mom. I started making calls. It was a difficult night, but God saved my family miraculously. I’m proud of what I do, and I see pride in my children’s eyes, even though they suffer when I’m far away from them. They are proud to say, ‘our mother is a journalist and works at Alhurra’.” – MBN Alhurra Correspondent in Gaza, Wissam Yassine

LOOKING AHEAD

As authoritarian governments work to halt the flow of information, we remain focused on ensuring people in closed media environments can access our content.

Frontline Media Fund & Global News Service

We recently launched the Frontline Media Fund, which will incubate and advance new approaches to distributing content, identify opportunities for business savings, provide surge capacity during crises abroad, and champion issues related to journalist safety and security.

The first pillar of the FMF is the Global News Service (GNS), which is slated to launch this year. The GNS will serve as a transmission and translation hub to curate and promote stories by our entities in Mandarin, English, and eventually many other languages, and will amplify USAGM’s reach and impact, while countering malign influence emanating from the PRC.

Our content is only valuable if people can access it, and expanding our reach requires careful consideration of how we use our existing resources. The USAGM Office of Technology, Services and Innovation is working with our broadcasters to eliminate transmissions with little to no audience, shore up transmissions to audiences whose access to information is restricted – like those in North Korea, western China, Afghanistan, and rural Africa – and invest savings in new programming and more effective content delivery. The transition has allowed us to more effectively meet audiences where they are. For example, audiences in the PRC are intensely interested in coverage of U.S.-China relations. One loyal audience member described how she started listening to VOA Mandarin Service on a shortwave radio in 2001 and continues to listen to the network to this day, now through VOA’s array of digital platforms.

Relocating to a New Headquarters

Since 2018, USAGM has worked to identify options for a new headquarters for the federal agency and its largest network, VOA. We need a modern facility to be able to compete in a highly competitive media landscape. VOA has been a tenant of our current building – the Wilbur J. Cohen Building, near the National Mall – since 1954. USAGM estimates that moving into a modern building will reduce our spatial footprint by over 50 percent and save the agency over \$100 million over the course of a 15-year lease, securing cost savings that can be reinvested in

the infrastructure needed to support a modern media organization.

Technology Transformation

As part of our relocation effort, we're concurrently embarking on a technology transformation to adopt a system that better reflects the needs of our journalists and audiences. Major news broadcasters and cable services are experiencing a technological revolution that is breaking down silos, enabling sharing, automating processes, and speeding up the creation of new broadcast operations. Our plan to move to a new headquarters has created an opportunity for us to review and improve the technological infrastructure that underpins U.S. international broadcasting and identify the changes needed to preserve our reach to global audiences. USAGM's technology transformation, which would incorporate translation technology, would allow USAGM to share its networks' content even further.

CONCLUSION

Despite considerable challenges – including budgetary constraints and emerging threats to press freedom – USAGM continues to deliver reliable, fact-based news and information to those who need it most.

As mis- and disinformation at the hands of our adversaries threatens the stability of democracies around the world, our mission to connect, inform and engage people in support of freedom and democracy remains an invaluable pillar of diplomacy that cannot be overlooked.

This hearing was entitled "Management Successes and Failures," but with a mission this critical, failure is not an option.

We are still in the midst of a global information war – one that we're currently winning but will lose if we miss any opportunity to invest in our future. We cannot succeed without the support of Congress.

I am thankful for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to your questions.