

Testimony of
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Subcommittee on Europe
House Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Voice of America and its contribution to a fundamental tenet of democracy, the free and unfettered flow of information, opinions and ideas. VOA has been a trusted purveyor of this American style of journalism since 1942 when our first broadcast to Nazi Germany boldly proclaimed: “The news may be good. The news may be bad. We will tell you the truth.”

Today, VOA is the largest U.S. international broadcaster, reaching out around the world in 45 languages, distributing news and information by radio, television, the Internet and social media platforms. And VOA audiences continue to grow, with an estimated 134 million people now tuning in to our broadcasts every week.

We can't say that every one of those 134 million likes America or its policies. But we do know they listen to us regularly, they interact with us and they depend on us to sustain their right to accurate, trustworthy news and information about the world, their region, their nation. We also know our programs enhance their understanding of the United States, our policies, our culture and our people.

Soft power, according to a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is the “ability to attract people to our side without coercion. Legitimacy is central to soft power.”

While we at VOA leave the formulation of U.S. foreign policy to the professionals at the State Department, we very much agree that legitimacy in our broadcasts is not only central to soft power, it is critical to the long-range strategic interests of the United States.

Why is this so? Consider:

We attract the high numbers of listeners and viewers that we do by striving to produce programs that, as both the VOA Charter and the U.S. International Broadcasting Act have it, are “consistently reliable and authoritative” as well as “accurate, objective and comprehensive.”

Perhaps more important, by presenting news and information in this way and to these standards, we achieve a credibility with our audiences that lets them cut through the din of shrill propaganda and the fog of misinformation and disinformation that makes up so much of the world's media these days. Thus, when we report on the dramatic but peaceful election of an African American—the son of a Kenyan—as President of the United States, we draw millions to see and hear and believe a story about a side of America that their own media, their own government, would often prefer to either ignore or distort. This hard-won credibility means that today, these millions in the cities and towns of a broad swath of the world continue to turn to VOA when they want to find news they can believe about President Obama's international trips, his historic speech in Cairo, his meetings in Moscow, his visit to Ghana, and the administration's policies and actions. Such trust, as the ads say, is priceless.

VOA's parent agency – the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) – has as its mission the goal of promoting freedom and democracy and enhancing understanding through multimedia communication. The Board does this by serving as a “firewall” to protect the independence of VOA's journalists. As the CSIS report states: “It is easier to attract people to democracy than to coerce them to be democratic.” Exactly. By serving as an example of fact-based journalism, by letting people express different views openly, by explaining democracy, warts and all, VOA serves as a touchstone for those living in countries where democracy remains fragile and the free flow of information is imperfect: the Balkans, Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to name a few places.

Just last week, Kosovo's Justice Minister Nekibe Kelmendi reacted to VOA's coverage of the confirmation hearing of U.S. Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor in the U.S. Senate. “Confirmation hearings are the best way to verify and evaluate a candidate ... I wish this model was followed by all countries that call themselves democracies. It is important to check on the past performance ... ethics ... professionalism of a candidate for judge.”

Before I talk about VOA, I'd like to salute VOA's 1,300 employees and the hundreds of VOA stringers and contractors worldwide. It takes people – often very brave people working in dangerous places – to produce the reports that form the basis of 1500 hours of broadcasting every week. Many of our people sacrifice every day to make VOA one of the best-known broadcasting organizations in the world.

The Taliban are targeting VOA stringers in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province as they gather the news. They looted and blew up the house of Rahman Bunaree earlier this month in retaliation for his reporting for VOA. And in Somalia, where five journalists have been killed this year, VOA's stringers are constantly threatened by Al-Shabab extremists. We are honored to have people working for us who believe that collecting and disseminating information, the oxygen of freedom, is worth risking their lives.

We're proud of our history, but like the world, VOA today is a vastly different organization than the one that began broadcasting by shortwave radio to Germany more than 67 years ago. About half of VOA's audience accesses our programming through television which, in many countries – including most places in the Balkans, Iran and Central Asia – has become the preferred way for getting news and information. In Iran, for example, some 96 percent of people say they watch

TV daily, compared with 26 percent of people who listen to radio. In Armenia, TV is used by some 95 percent of people to follow news weekly. Radio and newspapers are used by about one-quarter of the population as an information source. VOA has 25 language services on television, distributed primarily by satellite and reaching a total of 69 million people worldwide. VOA still relies on radio (shortwave, AM and FM) as well as the Internet to connect with the other half of its audience.

Iran

Internet is VOA's newest frontier, along with mobile technology and social media. We're very aware that this is the future, the place we are going to capture the next generation of VOA users. Illustrating the growing importance of the Internet in Iran, the latest survey data indicate that access to VOA through the web was as high as access to VOA through radio. The recent protests in Iran – the story that grabbed worldwide attention and caused Iran's leadership to rail against the Western media – is the latest example of VOA's leap into the new information delivery world. Traffic originating inside Iran to VOA's Persian website increased in June over 500 percent from the previous month. And despite the Iranian government's efforts to jam TV satellites and block the Internet, audience feedback tells us they were unable to completely block VOA's eight hours of original Persian programming daily – news shows, call-ins, special reports, interviews.

Desperate to communicate with the outside world, Iranians were sending VOA 300 videos a day, along with thousands of still pictures, emails and telephone calls. VOA aired the fatal shooting of Neda, the young woman who was shot and killed during a protest, and allowed Iranian viewers to see it for themselves.

“Citizen journalists” in a country where state controls the media sought out VOA for good reason – the same reason the Iranian government alleged that VOA was responsible for the protests. We have a substantial and regular audience. VOA's Persian News Network (PNN), created in 2006, commands a weekly TV audience of about 29.5 percent, according to a January 2009 survey. That's about 15 million people, or one-in-four adults weekly. VOA-branded Twitter, Facebook and YouTube channels in Persian all helped VOA broaden its audience. Results from a more recent survey in Iran suggest that many millions of Iranians continued to follow the election results and the ensuing protests through one or more VOA programs.

In a message typical of many VOA received, one person said, *“Me and my family need your broadcasts to find out what is going on in our country. It is very important and we do not know what is going on without you.”*

Iran underscores VOA's flexibility in addressing the challenges posed in getting through to hard-to-reach audiences in countries with authoritarian governments, particularly in times of unrest. But all countries are different; there's no one-size-fits-all solution in broadcasting.

Turning to Europe and Central Asia, VOA targets countries that reflect U.S. strategic interests and seeks to maximize impact in places most lacking free press and democracy. Today, we're

broadcasting in Albanian, Armenian, Azeri, Bosnian, Croatian, Georgian, Greek, Macedonian, Russian, Serbian, Kurdish, Turkish, Ukrainian and Uzbek.

Balkans

Nearly two decades after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the political situation in parts of the **Balkans** remains tenuous: ethnic divisions persist, governing institutions and public trust in them are weak, economic hardship, corruption, and discrimination continue. In countries where changing domestic political agendas unduly influence the media environment, VOA's main strength is its objectivity. It is perceived as a broadcaster that is immune from political and economic influences that often skew local programming.

VOA's Albanian programming is so strong that former President Alfred Moisiu said, "All the politicians in Albania, and all the people who are interested to follow the events, watch and listen to VOA." According to InterMedia Research, in Kosovo alone, the weekly reach of TV and radio broadcasts by the Albanian service is estimated at 64% of the adult population. In Bosnia, 9.2% of adults are watching VOA-TV. Superior news programming, call-in shows and in-depth interviews with key political figures, including the leaders of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Macedonia help sustain VOA's strong audience numbers in the region. For instance, Serbian President Boris Tadic said talking with VOA was "a good opportunity to explain to the citizens of Serbia that our country depends on international processes, that we are not alone in the world, and that everything that happens on Wall Street or in Beijing, affects Serbia as well."

Russia

Russia presents a challenge for VOA – and all international broadcasting. Tight government control over television and many print media and radio outlets, which led to the loss of most VOA in-country radio and television affiliates, combined with a decline in shortwave radio audiences, prompted VOA to redefine traditional content delivery. VOA is now a multi-media web-based program produced for a country where Internet usage is growing rapidly. Nationwide, 15 percent of the adult population use the medium weekly with the percentage in large cities like Moscow much higher. The VOA Russian Service's ambitious strategy recognizes that the Russian audience, which is more highly engaged in social networks than any community in the world, expects access to information to be provided beyond the confines of a traditional website. At a critical juncture in US-Russian relations, this strategy allows audiences to increase understanding of American policies, politics and culture and of American views of Russia.

The service's brand-new website features a plethora of interactive activities for the audience. Using a network of full-time correspondents based in Washington, New York and Moscow, freelance reporters in target regions, and policy experts at think tanks and academic institutions, the service's output galvanizes conversation among its audience through utilization of Web 2.0 tools. Embeddable videos are provided through both a user generated community page, where dedicated audience members interact, and on YouTube, where Russians find videos through relevant topic searches and then share them with their own expanded network of friends. To

encourage interaction even further, VOA's policy experts provide continuous analysis on the VOA blog, which is featured on Russia's most popular blogging platform, *LiveJournal*.

The footprint of the service's efforts can already be seen in the Russian market, with, for example, over 60,000 views per month on VOA Russian's YouTube. And 65 percent of users have given the Russian-service produced videos a rating of five stars – the highest available figure.

Ukraine

With Ukrainian public sentiment divided over Ukraine's further Western integration, it is perhaps more important than ever that VOA's Ukrainian service continue to reach the estimated 4.75 million viewers who tune into its TV programming every week. The service, through broadcasts of *Window on America* and *Chas-Time*, offers its audience a unique perspective of events in Ukraine – focusing its spotlight on key players in Kiev and in Washington.

Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg recently appeared on VOA's *Chas Time*. In response to a question on U.S. support for Eastern European countries like Ukraine, the Deputy Secretary emphasized the importance of VOA, stating, "I think what I would focus on is the strong partnership that we have with Ukraine ... the kind of good work that the Voice of America does in making sure that the people of Ukraine have a chance to hear these important messages."

This interview, like many produced by the Ukrainian service, lived beyond the live telecast, being syndicated by two major news outlets in the country (Pravda and Unian). VOA also connects all of its content – through polls and other interactive elements – to its presence online, allowing its audience to engage in important dialogue about U.S.-Ukrainian relations.

Georgia

VOA increased its daily radio broadcasts to Georgia from 30 minutes to 1 hour immediately after Russia's military incursion into Georgian territory on August 8, 2008. Radio programs are reaching Georgian listeners via the FM network of Georgia's Public Broadcasting Corporation. We have numerous other opportunities to explore – five private FMs recently expressed interest in placing VOA programs.

Turkey

Public opinion in Turkey is split between those who urge entry into the European Union and those who hold anti-western views. VOA's affiliation with TGRT-Haber TV, one of Turkey's leading news broadcasters, gives it an excellent entrée to the Turkish people.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan

VOA's Armenian Service reaches 46% of Armenia's adult population with its daily television broadcasts. VOA has a successful affiliation with Armenia-TV, one of the top two networks in Armenia. The service reflects the experiences of Armenian-Americans and reports on

developments in U.S.-Armenia relations as well as Armenia's relations with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia. Members of Congress are often interviewed on topics such as relations with Turkey and the Nagorno Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. "You are a very credible news organization and a window on the West for Armenian viewers," said Armenia's Ambassador to the U.S., Tatul Margarian.

VOA's Azerbaijani Service produces a daily 30-minute radio show, a daily 15-minute television show and maintains an Internet site with multi-media offerings. Until the end of 2008 when the government of Azerbaijan banned radio and TV broadcasts of VOA, VOA's Azerbaijani Service was regarded as the top international broadcaster in Azerbaijan. According to the InterMedia survey of May 2008, VOA's weekly reach was 8.1 percent of Azerbaijani adults. Since the beginning of 2009, VOA has continued to produce the daily radio and TV programs, broadcasting them on shortwave frequencies and via satellite. The audio and video of VOA Azerbaijani broadcasts are also available on the VOA Azerbaijani web site which features interactivity with listeners' comments and polls. The Service covers closely the issues of human rights and freedom of press in Azerbaijan. U.S. policies and Congressional statements regarding the Caucasus region, Armenian-Azerbaijani disputes, efforts to improve relations between Turkey and Armenia and regional energy issues are discussed in radio and television interviews with officials of the Administration and Members of Congress.

The media environment in **Uzbekistan** is dominated by government-owned TV and radio stations. The government of Uzbekistan does not allow rebroadcasts of VOA radio and television programs by local stations. As a result, VOA aims to reach Uzbek-speaking radio audiences in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan via shortwave frequencies and a medium wave transmitter. The Service maintains a multimedia web site, and the weekly 30-minute VOA Uzbek TV program is broadcast on a local station in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Multiple broadcasts of the same TV show are available for satellite TV viewers throughout Central Asia. VOA is the only international broadcaster that produces a regular TV program in the Uzbek language.

According to an InterMedia Media Market Report of November 2008, 75 percent of those who view the VOA Uzbek TV show find the programming trustworthy. In spite of challenges in delivery, VOA's Uzbek Service continues to attract significant direct audience feedback for its daily 30-minute radio broadcast as well as TV and Internet offerings. Recently, the Service's coverage on the Congressional hearing chaired by Congressman Delahunt on the status of Chinese-Uighur detainees in Guantanamo elicited a high volume of comments from listeners, viewers and Internet users. The primary witness, Mrs. Rebiye Kadeer, the exiled Uighur leader, thanked our Uzbek Service for VOA's extensive coverage of Uighurs and said: "VOA Uzbek is a source of information that we all depend on."

Cyber Attacks

The Denial of Service (DoS) cyber-attack against the VOA web site on July 5 was part of a wide scale attack that targeted Korean and US government sites, financial sites, and some news sites. VOA's core computer systems were never affected and there was no loss of any agency information technology asset. The voanews.com web site is hosted off-site, and all public traffic to it was affected, most severely from the Asia-North America axis, with local access problems

elsewhere, such as within Russia. The attack prevented many users from reaching the site (and all the other targeted sites) for several hours until Korea, the suspected source of the attacks, was cut-off by many of the Internet Service Providers (ISP). As the suspect machines were quarantined by Korean ISPs and others, the attacks slowed and Korea access was re-established. VOA traffic from Asia since has reached near normal levels and non-Asian traffic is completely back to normal levels. Our production systems are behind firewalls and intrusion detection systems, which functioned well, and both servers and desktop machines are updated with security patches at least once per day. Working with our web distribution contractors, we now have predictive systems in place that can isolate the source of DoS attacks much more promptly.

The International Broadcasting Bureau, provider of transmission and technical services for VOA, RFE/RL, RFA, and MBN, runs a highly-regarded Internet anti-censorship program focused on web audiences in Iran and China. Emails using circumvention techniques are mailed into Iran and China, and web proxy links, allowing unfiltered access to news and other sites, are attached to those emails. In addition, tools developed by various internet circumvention specialists are deployed directly into Iran and China, and also advertised over-the-air on radio and television programs. These tools have proven highly effective during the recent events in Iran, as the Iranian Government attempted to heavily filter their citizens' access to non-government sanctioned sites. VOA's PNN receives significant portions of its overall web traffic via these tools.

Conclusion

U.S. international broadcasting reaches around the world with trusted news; information about medicine, technology, and development; and discussion of U.S. policies. We reach into households, schools, and taxi cabs to provide listeners and viewers with a glimpse of America and of objective journalism. The impact of what we do is felt over the long term, through the relationship we build with our audiences and the trust they place in our content.