

Chairman Robert Wexler  
Subcommittee on Europe

Opening Statement

“Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America: Soft Power and the Free  
Flow of Information”

July 23, 2009

I want to welcome our two witnesses, Dr. Jeff Gedmin, President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Dan Austin, Director of Voice America. We are extremely fortunate to have two of the most articulate and ardent supporters of international broadcasting and freedom of the press testifying on the continued importance of U.S. international broadcasting and its role in ensuring the free flow of information.

While there is certainly a place for constructive and critical debate in Congress, the Administration, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and among broadcasters regarding the role, content, scope, and independence of international broadcasting, I am convinced U.S. international broadcasting is an indispensable smart power tool, given the foreign policy challenges facing the U.S., the high level of anti-Americanism abroad, and a disconcerting decline in freedom of the press globally.

This hearing comes at a critical time as the world’s most repressive regimes, in places such as Iran, crack down, suppress and stifle freedom of the media and expression. Radio-Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America are critical smart power tools that are on the front-line of international broadcasting, providing unfettered information globally in multiple languages and formats, and acting as media surrogates where freedom of the press does not exist.

I strongly condemn censorship and intimidation of the press in Iran, Russia and globally. It is critically important that the United States support those individuals around the globe seeking access to news and other forms of information. The twitter revolution in Iran and the Iranian regime’s immediate and violent clampdown on media freedoms is a reminder that media transparency is one of the greatest threats to the rule of autocratic regimes.

President Obama has made international broadcasting a top priority for American foreign policy makers, and it is imperative that Congress provide additional funding and resources to give U.S. international broadcasters the tools they need to ensure the free-flow of information. Congress must also examine closely the export of American technology to other nations that use technology to monitor and suppress freedom of expression and press, especially on the internet.

In 2009, many Americans take media freedom more or less for granted. RFE/RL provides a voice, as well as an outlet to millions of people that would otherwise not have one. Additionally, despite decades of technological advances, there are still places globally where the infrastructure to keep citizens informed is simply not available. VOA and RFE/RL fill this void by bringing timely, factual information to populations that would otherwise be kept in the dark.

When I recently visited the RFE/RL headquarters in Prague, I was impressed that its broadcasts have an overwhelming share of the radio market in Afghanistan. Meeting with RFE’s Afghan service, I learned

more about RFE's direct interaction with its audience, including letters – by the bag full, phone calls, emails, cell phone text messages, and even scrolls that were meticulously crafted and delivered to RFE/RL from Afghanistan.

As both Mr. Austin and Dr. Gedmin know, international broadcasting is not without risk. It often involves broadcasting in conflict zones, like Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, where journalists are too often threatened, attacked and killed. Additionally, VOA and RFE/RL must also address the concerted, round the clock effort by some governments to block the delivery of programming, regardless of the medium or technology.

Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty should be commended for promoting freedom of the press and democracy in an increasingly difficult and dynamic global information environment. I applaud both of you gentlemen for your efforts and leadership and look forward to hearing your assessments of whether VOA and RFE/RL are successfully fulfilling your mission to “promote freedom and democracy and to enhance understanding through multi-media communication of accurate, objective, balanced news, information, and other programming about America and the world to audiences overseas.”

I would now like to turn to the Ranking Member of the Europe Subcommittee, Congressman Elton Gallegly, for his opening statement.