

Testimony of Mr. John Lansing
CEO and Director of the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Before the Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Thursday, September 14, 2017

Senator Gardner, Co-Chair Smith, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to speak today about the Broadcasting Board of Governors' (BBG) and U.S. International Media efforts to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Background

I currently serve as the Chief Executive Officer and Director of BBG, where I oversee all operational aspects of U.S. international media comprising five networks:

The Voice of America, Office of Cuba Broadcasting (Radio and TV Marti), Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks including Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa.

As U.S. international media, the BBG's mission is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. We produce news on all media platforms including radio, television, online, and mobile digital and social media. Collectively, our programs reach 278 million people on a weekly basis in more than 100 countries and 61 languages. According to Gallup data, our audience increased by 52 million from 2015. The fastest growing segment of that audience is our newly expanded commitment to digital distribution which helps us target younger future leaders.

The BBG provides consistently accurate and compelling journalism that opens minds and stimulates debate. We demonstrate values that reflect our society: **freedom, openness, democracy, and hope.**

This advances U.S national interests by fostering societies that enjoy greater stability and prosperity, live in peace with their neighbors, value universal human rights and reject terrorism and extremism. Such societies make better political allies and trade partners for the United States.

This mission, granted by Congress at the end of World War II, remains vitally important. During World War II, the Voice of America fought against Nazi propaganda and the absence of information by beaming accurate and unbiased news and information into shuttered societies. RFE/RL was founded during the Cold War to break through the Kremlin's wall of tightly controlled media in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe with truthful professional journalism and by documenting the anti-Soviet sentiment of the citizens under the authoritarian regime.

Current Media Environment

Today we are encountering a global explosion of disinformation, propaganda and lies fed by multiple authoritarian regimes and non-state actors like ISIS, as they deploy digital media and social media platforms to target vulnerable citizens with false narratives. House Foreign Affairs Chairman Ed Royce, referring to Russian propaganda specifically, terms it “***the weaponization of information***,” and I believe that captures the severity of the negative impact quite well.

From Russia and its periphery, to China and East Asia, Iran and the Middle East, to Cuba, Venezuela and large parts of Latin America – audiences are under a disinformation assault from authoritarian regimes and are desperate for credible information. The five U.S. International Media Networks of the BBG fill that void.

To meet the challenge head-on, all five BBG networks are rapidly expanding our traditional radio and television distribution to digital, mobile and social networks so we are on the same playing field as our adversaries.

Importantly, over 80 percent of our weekly audience on all platforms considers our content to be trustworthy, based on data compiled by Gallup, and we highly value the trust our audience has placed in us.

At the same time, global press freedom is at its lowest point in over a decade. According to the 2017 Freedom House report on Freedom of the Press, only 13 percent of the world's population live in countries with a fully free press. Of the ten worst offenders—which include Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Syria—all are covered by one or more of the BBG's networks. In each of these countries, BBG networks challenge limitations on the press and provide alternative sources of news against state- or extremist-sponsored accounts.

Russian Actions

In Russia, the Kremlin propaganda machine is breathing new life into a strategy of *dezinformatsiya*, or disinformation, operations to influence opinions about the United States and its allies and partners. Essentially, it's the weaponization of information that Chairman Royce describes. For example, Russian disinformation campaigns claim that the United States is covertly testing chemical warfare in Ukraine and that the U.S. has more than 400 laboratories around the world for biological weapons.

State-sponsored broadcasters such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik are expanding their global operations, opening new bureaus and developing new programming. Earlier this year in Washington, DC, a Bluegrass radio station sponsored by NPR on 105.5FM was replaced by Sputnik radio offering listeners the Kremlin spin on U.S. news and politics. Outside these organizations, Twitter trolls and social media bots magnify the Kremlin-supported message.

Unlike Cold War propaganda, Russian disinformation campaigns do not seek to sway listeners to the Russian point of view; rather they strive to undermine the notion of objective truth and foster social divisions—delegitimizing Western democracies while drawing negative attention away from Russia.

In essence the Russian strategy is to destroy the very idea of an objective, verifiable set of facts. In their world the death of facts is the first step towards creating the alternative reality that helps them gain and keep authority with no accountability. If everything is a lie, then the biggest liar wins. That is what we are up against.

BBG Response

While the threat is not new, the battlespace is changing, and the BBG is adapting to meet this challenge head on. We are one part of the overall government effort taking a global approach to countering Russian disinformation across a variety of platforms. I'd like to detail some of these key initiatives:

1) Current Time

Since Russian aggression against Crimea and eastern Ukraine started in early 2014, BBG language services at VOA and RFE/RL have added or expanded more than 35 new programs in Russian and other languages of the former Soviet space. The flagship of this effort is a 24/7 television and digital news network that BBG

launched in February 2017 called *Current Time*, or “*Nastoyashchee Vremya*”. In Russian, the name has a double meaning: “right now” or the current time; and “the real deal,” which plays off the name of Russia’s traditional nightly newscast “*Vremya*,” meaning “time.”

The *Current Time* mission is to provide a constant stream of accurate, professional, independent, unbiased news to Russian speakers in Russia, the Russian periphery, and around the world including major capitals such as Berlin, Jerusalem, and London. For example, in Stockholm or Istanbul, Russian travelers may turn on the television in their hotel room to find *Current Time* next to CNN on the channel list.

Produced by RFE/RL in a first-ever, unique partnership with VOA—another BBG network—*Current Time* represents the next generation of digital news for BBG. Viewers access programming throughout the region on the *Current Time* website. Individual *Current Time* programs play on 39 affiliates in 14 countries, but the full 24/7 channel is distributed to over 23 countries on 59 satellite, cable, and digital distributors. The network also develops social media videos and other content, expanding the reach of *Current Time* and offering alternative sources of information in a Kremlin-controlled environment.

The level of access to *Current Time* programming varies. In Russia, *Current Time* TV and radio broadcasts are not permitted on domestic television and radio airwaves, but audience members can access content through the website and YouTube. In Lithuania—a key Kremlin propaganda target and currently *Current Time*’s largest market —programming airs on two public broadcasting stations and is viewed by 8.2 percent of the adult population each week. Additionally, the BBG is finalizing negotiations with Lithuania Radio & Television to place *Current Time* on their nationwide Terrestrial Digital TV system—with signals covering 98 percent of the Lithuanian population and reaching into Belarus, Poland, and Kaliningrad.

The *Current Time* network produces daily news shows on the United States and global events. It also features reports on business, entrepreneurship, civil society, culture, and corruption. Because *Current Time* is its own branded network on its own platform, BBG also has the flexibility to interrupt programming to bring late-breaking news and analysis or unfiltered, simultaneously translated broadcasting of major events. For example, during the 2016 U.S. election, VOA and RFE/RL

provided a 5-hour marathon of live television programming with reports from around the country and live results and analysis.

Digital statistics—such as the number of video views, comments, and shares—indicate that the *Current Time* network is yielding results online. From January to July 2017, *Current Time* social videos were viewed more than 300 million times on various digital platforms—nearly three times the number of views during the same period in 2016. Half of these views came from Russia. Further, in May alone, *Current Time* achieved a record 40 million video views across social media platforms. This impressive start is just the beginning, and as time goes on, we will have the opportunity to add to this digital data through our traditional media surveys that measure both reach and influence.

2) Targeting the Russian periphery

Current Time is only the latest BBG effort in the Russian periphery and Eastern Europe. VOA and RFE/RL programming in Russia and the Russian periphery targets audiences in 23 media markets and is consumed by over 24 million adults on a weekly basis in 20 languages. In Kosovo and Albania, over 60 percent of the adult population tunes in on a weekly basis.

3) Meeting Russia on a global stage

If we discuss the Russian disinformation campaign only in terms of Russian language efforts, we are missing the global context of what is truly a world-wide campaign. Russian-sponsored programming is available in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and across Europe in Arabic, Spanish, French, English, and other languages.

In Latin America, for example, VOA has strong relationships with hundreds of TV and radio affiliates. Everyday our reporters offer live VOA feeds from DC into local news programs in Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and other countries. They cover and explain developments in the United States and U.S. foreign policy and also develop special programs in partnership with local stations. For example, in Nicaragua, VOA and local partners are developing a series on the Russian presence in that country.

If VOA content were no longer available, Russian media and other state-sponsored broadcasters (including China's CCTV and Iran's HispanTV) would be more than willing to provide their own slanted content replacing the VOA. Some affiliates

have reported that they have been offered payment to air programming, which VOA does not provide in that region. Instead, VOA offers cogent programming and a brand trusted by Latin American audiences.

We have also deployed a new brand called *Polygraph*, a joint RFE/RL and VOA website in English to call out Russian lies and educate global audiences on media literacy and how to spot fake news. Within the next few weeks, BBG will launch a Russian language version of this website.

Russia has jumped to criticize these and other BBG efforts. On *Current Time* and other content aimed at the Russian periphery, a Russian state news organization charged that these programs are all produced by “Russian people who put the interests of America above the interests of Russia.” Our journalists have also come under attack. For example, RFE/RL contributor Mykola Semena was indicted on criminal charges in Crimea for so-called separatist activities, or rather professional journalism and telling the truth. His most recent hearing occurred on August 31. We take the safety and security our journalists very seriously, and believe that this and other incidents demonstrate the Kremlin is clearly irritated by our efforts.

BBG Challenges

With the support of Congress and the generosity of the American taxpayers, BBG’s budget has expanded over the last few years.

In addition to nearly half-billion-dollar combined budgets of RT, Sputnik, and other Russian international media, the Russian government also targets Russian-speakers around the world with the vast resources of its domestic state-controlled news and entertainment networks.

The BBG’s mission is to broadcast internationally; thus, BBG is constrained by law from programming in the United States, although we are now allowed to share content with U.S. media outlets upon their request. RT, Sputnik and others are free to broadcast in the U.S. – because the U.S. values free speech and freedom of the press, and we extend those rights to all. Russian speakers in the United States are free to choose not only from RT and Sputnik, but from dozens of Russian language stations whose scope is the equivalent of CNN, Fox, CBS, ABC, NBC, Bloomberg and other entertainment channels. We would welcome access to the Russian market to allow our networks to broadcast freely there in the spirit of reciprocity.

Make no mistake the United States is facing information warfare, and I don't use that term lightly. The BBG is an essential element of the national security response. The export of U.S. journalism and the values of free media and free speech speak to the world as much as U.S. boots on the ground. Like defense, development, and diplomacy, U.S. international media—accurate, balanced and true—is an essential part of our standing on the world stage.

I'll close with a quote from Edward R. Murrow, former director of the U.S. Information Agency and a much respected journalist of the 20th Century, when he testified before Congress in 1963:

To be persuasive we must be believable;
to be believable we must be credible;
to be credible we must be truthful.

His words ring true today, more than ever.

Thank you.