ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Representatives Schiff and Chabot, (SHABBOT) and the Freedom of the Press Caucus for convening this briefing with the Helsinki Commission.

It’s an honor to share the Voice of America’s perspective in confronting an increasingly hostile environment for journalists in Russia and its surrounding states.

BACKGROUND

I would like to begin by sharing the experience of VOA journalist Fatima Tlisova, who in 2007 was compelled to leave Russia.

She had faced harassment, intimidation and imprisonment while covering terrorist attacks, hostage situations, corruption, and abuse of power by the military and police in Chechnya and the Caucasus region.

[CUE FATIMA VIDEO]

Why I am I showing you a ten-year-old story?

Because it’s happening again. Fatima’s story sounds eerily familiar to the story of Russian journalist journalist Yulia Latynina [YOO-LEE-UH LAT-TEE-NIH-NUH], who recently wrote in the Moscow Times that she was forced to flee Russia because the Kremlin is losing control over the violence.
In July, a strange gas was released in her home; the police watched her; her car was set on fire.

This came a year after an unknown assailant threw feces on her – another common tactic against independent journalists.

We are also seeing the Russian government tighten access to reliable information and crack down on Internet freedoms. In August, Putin banned online messaging as well as VPNs commonly used to circumvent censorship.

**VOICE OF AMERICA**

It is in this environment that we—the Voice of America—operate. Our mandate from Congress is to bring America’s story to the world, explain US policy, and foster responsible discussion with accurate, objective, and comprehensive journalism.

Along with RFE/RL and three other networks, we comprise U.S. international media under the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Ours is a mission to promote freedom and democracy.

VOA—the largest network for BBG—broadcasts in 47 languages around the world, reaching an estimated 234 million people on a weekly basis. In Russia and the post-Soviet space, we broadcast in 11 languages, including Russian and English.

**VOA IN RUSSIA 2017**

VOA’s Russia service has been in operation since 1947. Threats and intimidation are not new for us, but in recent years, we have seen increased harassment by
Russian authorities, unexplained bureaucratic delays, and increasingly negative public rhetoric about VOA’s journalism.

For example, in January, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly berated a VOA stringer in Moscow, accusing him of lying about Russia’s reaction to a US intelligence report. Watch Mr. Lavrov here accuse our VOA stringer of promoting “lies” and “junk.”

[CUE LAVROV VIDEO]

The only problem was Mr. Lavrov was wrong. He was reading the wrong story. The error was so egregious that later the Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman posted on the stringer’s Facebook page an acknowledgment that they had misrepresented the facts. It’s the first sort-of apology any of us can remember.

There is also financial intimidation. In August this year, two VOA stringers in Azerbaijan were summoned to the Tax Ministry. Both were interrogated for about two hours.

One of the journalists told VOA she felt threatened by the tone of the two investigators when her interrogation veered off into questions about her ties to VOA, her salary, and bank account. Her legal representative was not allowed into the meeting. She said she was afraid for herself and her family, and asked VOA not to leave her alone against the Azeri authorities.

If history is a guide, once officials start making public accusations against journalists — then threats and intimidation, and sometimes physical violence, follow.

Public pressure is also placed on the stations that carried our content. Look at this “investigative” story that ran on Russia’s Channel ONE that pieces together
public information – including from the BBG annual report and an Inspector General report – to come to the conclusion that we made secret payments to one of our affiliate stations.

[CUE VIDEO INVESTIGATIVE ]

The truth is the station couldn’t find a record of payments because there were none. We make our content freely available around the world. Yet pressure like this caused our affiliate to drop VOA.

BALKANS

This type of intimidation and pressure isn’t limited to Russia and the Russian periphery. I have just returned from a visit to our VOA bureaus in the Balkans, where I heard local journalists speak of their widespread fear about pressure from media or business interests aligned with the Kremlin.

Russian capital has undoubtedly penetrated Serbia’s media market. In addition to Russian international media such as Sputnik, Russian money is funding so-called patriotic, Orthodox-Christian religious web portals and other information websites. Russian money is apparently in the TV market as well, with TV Nova—a national cable network—rumored to have connections with Konstantin Malofeev, (CON−STAN−TEEN MAL OH FEE EV) a supporter of Putin.

Although the Russian government may deny directing harassment and intimidation of journalists, it is complicit. Independent Russian journalists say the government is, in effect, winking at the instigators and empowering local actors.

IMPLICATIONS OF ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS

Increasing pressure by governments, whether overt or subtle, is closing the space for independent journalism, honest dialogue, and the free flow of information. VOA journalists are incredibly committed to what they do—which is to tell
America’s story and explain US policy—but we always mindful of our obligation for their safety.

Anytime a journalist is attacked, threatened, abused – it has a dampening effect on the freedom of the press.

Voice of America provides a much-needed alternate, fact-based, narrative in areas where these networks are trying to gain influence – Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America.

Yet it is a mistake to think that if we are shut down the result is only silence. There are others waiting behind us to fill the gap. News directors from VOA partners at with some of the biggest independent television stations across Latin America, including in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Peru pleaded with VOA to not abandon them. They told us that if we left – RT, the Iranian State Broadcaster and China Global Television – all funded at anywhere from twice to many times VOA’s $234 million annual budget -- would move in immediately and pay good money to take our place.

Our very presence can protect other journalists fostering independent voices, and this is a crucial byproduct of our activities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and I look forward to your questions.