

**Opening Remarks – Thomas Kent  
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**For the CSCE-House Freedom of the Press Caucus Briefing  
“SYSTEMATIC ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS IN RUSSIA AND  
OTHER POST-SOVIET STATES”**

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Co-chairmen Chabot and Schiff, members of the Freedom of the Press  
Caucus and Helsinki Commission:

First, let me welcome the re-establishment of the House Freedom of  
the Press Caucus, and the willingness of Representatives Schiff and Chabot  
to serve as co-chairs of the caucus. Press freedom is often taken for  
granted, in this country and around the world.

However, as both of you have pointed out, in countries from  
Cambodia to Azerbaijan to Russia, fair and representative societies simply  
cannot exist without independent, fact-based journalism. Thank you for  
your commitment to this vital cause.

I am also grateful to the commissioners and staff of the Helsinki  
Commission for the opportunity to speak here today.

We share a common goal: freedom of the press and the protection of  
the rights and safety of reporters.

I am president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a private news corporation funded by Congress.

We do local news and investigative reporting in 23 countries. These include the former Soviet Union; the Balkans; and Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. We work in 25 languages on television, radio, the web and social networks.

The law requires RFE/RL to provide professional, independent news reporting. At the same time, we promote freedom of expression, clean government and tolerance.

These are universal values. Even dictatorships acknowledge them – if only on paper. When societies are open and just, when journalism is honest, the world benefits from more understanding and less conflict.

It follows that the rights and work of the journalists reporting the news must be respected. Yet this is far from the case.

Perhaps because our reporters focus so much on human rights, and the scourges of corruption and extremism, RFE/RL's staff is under pressure every day.

Our people face physical attack, jamming and blocking of our content, threats to themselves and their relatives, detention and imprisonment, and unrelenting assault from government and extremist media. Yet we provide something our audience obviously wants. In the first half of this year, visits to our websites were up 13 percent from the year before. People watched our videos nearly 285 million times on YouTube alone, nearly twice as many as in 2016.

Much of our work is in the Russian-speaking world.

We find audiences there who want news beyond what comes from Kremlin-controlled media, who want clean government, who want better relations with the West. To this audience we offer a dozen Russian-language news brands. These include the new, 24-hour Current Time television and digital channel, all in Russian -- an RFE/RL project produced in cooperation with VOA. We offer specialized RFE/RL Russian news for central Russia, the Caucasus, Crimea, Central Asia and other regions.

Inside Russia we face severe limitations in TV and radio distribution. This despite the fact that Russian media distribute freely in the United States. Still, millions of Russians follow our content.

Apparently, the authorities recognize our impact, because they're creating growing obstacles to our work.

Our correspondents inside Russia have been beaten and harassed. In Russian-controlled Crimea, our contributor Mykola Semena was convicted last week of treason-like charges and banned from public activity for three years.

In the Donbass region of Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists are holding our contributor Stanislav Aseyev, accusing him of espionage.

Moscow television on some days accuses us of being master spies and propagandists ... on others of being boring and incompetent. Here's one blast at us from Russian political commentator Dmitri Kiselyov:

*(Kiselyov clip)*

And yet, despite the pressures, we continue to operate ... with a bureau in Moscow and correspondents across the country.

We have been through hard times before. We trust we will endure even through the latest trough in US-Russian relations.

It's important to note that attacks on our work in the post-Soviet space are hardly limited to Russia.

In Ukraine, our investigative TV program called "Schemes" regularly reports on corruption. Last month, security agents attacked Schemes reporters covering a lavish wedding celebration – a private event that appeared to make of use of government resources.

In this clip, you can hear our reporter Mykhailo Tkach – the man with the cellphone -- shouting "sho vy robyte?" – "what are you doing?" – as one of the agents forces our cameraman Borys Trotsenko to the ground.

*(Clip from Ukraine)*

Trotsenko got a concussion.

Elsewhere in post-Soviet countries, our contributor Saparmamed Nepeskuliev has been imprisoned for two years in Turkmenistan for his reporting.

RFE/RL is suing Azerbaijan in the European Court of Human Rights in a case stemming from the forcible closure of our bureau there in 2014. There are many other abuses of our bureaus and our people.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Caucus and Commission, despite the many problems we face, we accomplish a lot. In every country across our geographies, our local staff and contributors take substantial risks covering the news for us. They believe in press and personal freedom, and they know their work has impact.

I thank you for your support.

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RT & Sputnik, content speaks for itself, don't think I need to comment on it specifically. But certainly can say that, worldwide, there's no shortage of news organizations that are barely worthy of the name, that trade routinely in fake news and disinformation. I would say that crackdowns on speech, even outrageous speech, can have a backfire effect of giving the outlet you're targeting even more publicity and visibility. My main goal is to get our content distributed freely in as many countries as possible, including Russia. And to maintain the reporting resources we have in Russia, without their being drawn into a larger tit-for-tat.