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**House Committee on Appropriations Hearing:  
United States Efforts to Counter Russian Disinformation and Malign Influence**

Statement by USAGM CEO & Director John F. Lansing

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Introduction

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the efforts of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) to counter Russian state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation. I serve as the Chief Executive Officer and director of USAGM, where I oversee all operational aspects of U.S. international media comprising five networks: the Voice of America (VOA); Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); Radio Free Asia (RFA); the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), which include Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa; and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting's (OCB) Radio and TV Marti.

USAGM Overview

The mission of USAGM is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. We produce news on all media platforms, and our programs reach 345 million people on a weekly basis in more than 100 countries and in 61 languages.

USAGM provides consistently accurate and compelling journalism that reflects the values of our society: freedom, openness, democracy, and hope. Our guiding principles—enshrined in law—are to provide a reliable, authoritative, and independent source of news that adheres to the strictest standards of journalism.

Our agency utilizes a full suite of research and analytics tools to understand the reach and impact of this vital work. We conduct nationally representative surveys to measure how often overseas audiences consume content and on what platforms. We also measure whether audiences find our information credible and share it with others, and whether it helps them form opinions. In a nationally representative survey of adults in Russia conducted between late April and early June 2018, Gallup found that USAGM content (from Current Time, RFE/RL, and/or VOA) was consumed across all platforms by 7.9 million people each week, or 7.7 percent of the adult population. This is an increase from 5.6 million adults in 2016.



We are very proud that USAGM content is considered trustworthy by over two-thirds of our weekly audience in Russia, a remarkable figure considering the overwhelming deluge of state-sponsored propaganda and state-controlled popular media available in the Russian media space. Seven in ten audience members in Russia reported that Current Time and RFE/RL had increased their understanding of current events; six in ten said the same about VOA. Close to half of our weekly audience said that VOA had increased their understanding of U.S. foreign policy and American society.

What these figures show is that our voice is heard and our objective, balanced information is getting through, increasingly to an online and digitally connected younger audience.

The credibility of our reporting—a reputation earned over decades—is why our broadcasts are so highly valued around the world. It is also why our audience continues to grow worldwide, increasing last year by 24 percent. That credibility forms the foundation of our influence and is one of our greatest strengths in pushing back on false narratives and state-sponsored propaganda. We need that credibility today more than ever as we face pressing and pernicious threats to freedom of expression and a free press from Russia and other authoritarian governments.

### Russian Disinformation

And make no mistake, we are living through a global explosion of disinformation, state propaganda, and lies generated by multiple authoritarian regimes around the world. The weaponization of information we are seeing today is real. The Russian government and other authoritarian regimes engage in far-reaching malign influence campaigns across national boundaries and language barriers. The Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation machine is being unleashed via new platforms and continues to grow in Russia and internationally. Russia seeks to destroy the very idea of an objective, verifiable set of facts as it attempts to influence opinions about the United States and its allies. It is not an understatement to say that this new form of combat on the information battlefield may be the fight of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Government control over Russian media outlets has devastated independent media sources in the country, especially on television, where virtually no alternative information sources are available. Russia's state and state-controlled media inundate audiences with disinformation about global events and depict the United States as being on an irreversible downward spiral, its institutions failing and global strength on the wane. Disinformation campaigns are coordinated among state-funded TV channels, social media platforms, internet services, and so-called trolls to fulfill the Kremlin's goal of countering what Moscow regards as



“Western influence.” Media laws as well as self-censorship for fear of government retribution contribute to a repressive media environment.

Increasingly, Kremlin disinformation campaigns are aimed not only at its own citizens, but also at global audiences. State-sponsored Russian broadcasters such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik are expanding their global operations even into the United States. Right here in Washington D.C., Sputnik purchased airtime on a local radio station in 2017 to broadcast Russian state propaganda. Russian state-sponsored disinformation networks operate in English, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, and in at least 25 other languages. Russian influence is contributing to the deteriorating media environments and democratic backsliding in places such as the Balkans, where Russia partners with local media outlets, bloggers, and other influencers to push anti-Western narratives and pro-Kremlin stories.

At USAGM, we have tracked cyber-attacks in recent years on operations in and around Russia, including on the VOA Uzbek Service and on our broadcasts to Russian-occupied Crimea. We are facing challenges on other fronts as well, as the Russian government directly targets USAGM with legal actions. In late 2017, the Russian Justice Ministry declared RFE/RL, VOA, and several affiliated news services “foreign agents” within the Russian Federation. That status has led to bans on reporting by these news services at the Russian State Duma, unwarranted fines resulting from ambiguous regulations, and increased harassment of RFE/RL stringers and freelancers engaged in professional journalism in many regions across Russia. This, and continued legislative efforts by Russia to criminalize dissent, have created security concerns for journalists who work with RFE/RL and VOA within the country. Russia recently passed laws banning so-called “fake news” that enables the authorities to block websites and hand out punishments for material deemed insulting to the state or the public.

The Russian government has targeted USAGM journalists, subjecting them to physical assault, imprisonment, court convictions, arbitrary detention, interrogation, stalking, verbal assault, online threats, and seizure of equipment. It has also targeted the journalists’ family members. Among the most serious cases, RFE/RL contributor Mykola Semena is serving a 2.5-year suspended sentence following a conviction on “separatism” charges in Russian-occupied Crimea, and is barred from working as a journalist for two years. He was convicted based on his written criticism of Russia’s occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea. RFE/RL contributor Stanislav Aseyev was kidnapped by Russian-led forces in a Russia-controlled area of Donetsk, Ukraine in June 2017 and forced to confess falsely to spying for Ukraine.

Make no mistake: the United States is being targeted on the information warfare battlefield, and I do not use that term lightly. It is an uphill battle for us and our democratic allies to counter such a determined and well-resourced foe. In addition to the work of RT, Sputnik, and other Russian media outlets in the region,



the Kremlin also targets Russian-speakers with the vast resources of its domestic state-controlled news and entertainment networks. The \$28 million a year USAGM can devote to Russian-language programming and the additional \$64 million allocated to broadcasting in the rest of Eurasia is a significant investment that shows demonstrable impact—but it is relatively small in comparison.

Nevertheless, USAGM is maximizing our resources and the incredible talent of our journalists to meet this challenge head on by offering audiences an alternative to Russian disinformation in the form of objective, independent and compelling news and information. We are using a multi-pronged approach. First, we are targeting young, entrepreneurial Russian-speaking audiences through direct programming and expanded distribution of our 24/7 Russian-language network *Current Time*, which is produced by RFE/RL in cooperation with VOA. Second, we have maintained our traditional Russian broadcasts through VOA's Russian Service and RFE/RL's Radio Svoboda. These are supplemented with hyper-local digital media through RFE/RL's North Caucasus and Tatar-Bashkir services in Russia and in regions such as Siberia. Third, USAGM's Eurasian and Central Asian language services operate in languages such as Ukrainian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, Uzbek, Kazakh, Azerbaijani, and Georgian, among others, to push back against the Kremlin's disinformation machine. We are increasingly confronting Russian disinformation efforts in English for a global audiences as well.

#### Global Russian Programming: Current Time

I am excited to share with you the incredible success we are seeing with ***Current Time***. Launched in 2017 with your support, the *Current Time* television and digital network provides Russian speakers across Russia, Ukraine, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltics, Eastern Europe, and as far away as Israel with access to accurate, topical, and trustworthy information. It serves as a reality check on the disinformation that drives conflict in the region.

The *Current Time* weekly audience was recently measured at 4.1 percent of Russian adults aged 15 and older (4.2 million people). In 2018, *Current Time*'s videos received more than 500 million views online and across social media platforms, with more than half coming from inside of Russia. *Current Time* now has more than two million followers across its social media platforms, including more than 900,000 followers on the network's primary Facebook page. *Current Time*'s YouTube channel has more than 600,000 subscribers. These all represent year-on-year double-digit percentage increases, and we anticipate that those figures will continue to climb.

The *Current Time* television channel is now available in 20 countries via 92 distributors and has more than 50 affiliates—local partner stations that carry individual programs. It has also been able to achieve limited



television distribution within Russia, with nine affiliates inside the country. Current Time's digital arm engages audiences with fresh, compelling content via social media. The service is active on all of the region's popular social media platforms, including Facebook, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, and Twitter.

Current Time leverages state-of-the-art production value with a robust online presence to capture a younger, social-media savvy, Russian-speaking demographic. It aims to depoliticize Russian-language media by serving as a credible and compelling news source for all Russian speakers, who are often limited to Kremlin-controlled media even when living far beyond Russia's borders. Current Time places a premium on live news coverage that allows skeptical audiences, numbed by fake news and Kremlin narratives, to judge events on the ground for themselves. For example, Current Time has delivered on-location reporting on topics and events like the Russian presidential elections and opposition protests, the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, U.S. elections, major Congressional hearings, the 2018 World Cup, the Skripal poisoning case in England, Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukrainian naval vessels near the Kerch Strait, Russia's ongoing aggression in eastern Ukraine conflict, and other major news stories.

Current Time covers social and political protests that state media ignores, and it reports extensively on corruption. Its feature programs have illuminated unknown aspects of life in Russia and beyond, telling the untold stories of ordinary residents in unheralded places whose efforts are improving life for their neighbors and communities. For example, each episode of the Current Time program "Unknown Russia" gives the viewer a look at the lives of ordinary Russians living in unexplored and often neglected corners of the enormous country. Another feature program, "Person on the Map," focuses on ordinary individuals, such as teachers, farmers, and inventors, who have opted for the provincial life and are eager to build a better world without leaving home.

Current Time's April 2019 Ukrainian election coverage set a record for the 24/7 Russian-language network with some 9.3 million views across all platforms, and garnered outstanding feedback from partners and audiences alike. The network offered a live broadcast with simultaneous Russian translation of the April 19 debates between the two final Ukrainian presidential candidates to Russian-speaking audiences in countries whose leaders steer clear of public debates with their opponents. Two days later, Current Time broadcast 13 hours of live, non-stop election day coverage of voting by the candidates, Ukrainian citizens, and Ukrainians around the world; exit polls; results; and reactions from the candidates' campaign headquarters.

Current Time is also giving a voice to opposition figures in Russia. For example, after years of speculation, the anonymous author of the popular Russian social-media account, [StalinGulag](#)—an acerbic critic of



current affairs in Russia—revealed his identity and sat for an interview with Current Time. The twenty-seven-year-old [Aleksandr Gorbunov](#), whose Twitter account has over 1.1 million followers, decided to go public after his elderly mother’s apartment was searched for spurious reasons. Social media audiences responded robustly, viewing the interview about 300,000 times.

Current Time also offers an array of information on U.S. policy and perspectives produced by the VOA Russian Service in Washington and across the U.S. In the lead-up to the 2020 U.S. elections, Current Time will feature special programming explaining America’s democratic experience while focusing on issues targeted by Russian disinformation. Starting with the first Democratic primary debates in Miami in June, VOA expanded its programming to provide live coverage from across the U.S.

In an indication of the Kremlin’s irritation over Current Time’s coverage, Russian state media has featured it in at least six separate segments since May 2015, decrying it as part of a “U.S. information war” and labeling it a threat to national security.

The Current Time model of collaboration between RFE/RL and VOA has been such a success that USAGM followed this playbook with the launch of a 24/7 Persian network called VOA365, and has plans to expand the concept to Mandarin this year.

### VOA Russian Service

VOA’s Russian Service has provided coverage of America’s democratic experience to the Russian-speaking world since 1947. Due to Russian restrictions on broadcasting inside the country, the service currently employs a digital-first, cross-platform strategy to fulfill its mission. The goal is to offer fact-based alternatives to the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns designed to fan anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiments both in Russia and globally. VOA Russian’s interactive multimedia content includes video streaming on desktop and mobile platforms, products made for social media, expert blogs, and user-generated content and feedback. It serves to engage audiences in conversations about American life and values while offering insights into U.S. policy and institutions, including U.S.-Russia relations and American reactions to developments influencing Russian domestic politics and governance.

From June 2018 to June 2019, the VOA Russian Service website registered an average of 2 million monthly visits and 2.5 million monthly article views—typically attracting a more educated and liberal Russian-speaking audience. During the same period, videos on VOA Russian’s digital platforms garnered 147 million views on Facebook and 12.7 million views on YouTube. Facebook is the Service’s most active





social media outreach platform, receiving about 1 million post engagements daily. Original content includes live reporting by VOA correspondents and immersive formats such as 360 panoramic videos.

The VOA Russian Service programs aim to tell America's story. Specific new programming includes "America Live Coverage Desk" – VOA's live, unfiltered coverage of events in America. Launched in 2017, "America Live Coverage Desk" features real-time analysis by U.S.-based experts and simultaneously translated presidential addresses, major policy pronouncements, speeches, debates and congressional hearings. This past year the service launched the "Great American Road Trip", a 20-episode travel TV program where VOA Russian journalists take viewers beyond major tourist routes and destinations and introduce them to people who represent the American character – self-made problem-solvers, innovators, thinkers, and role models.

The VOA Russian Service also produces a variety of programming, now over 11 hours a week, which all air on the Current Time TV channel. "Current Time America," a one-hour, Monday-to-Friday television newscast, offers content not otherwise available on state-controlled Russian media and a "reality check" on various political, economic, social, and cultural issues. It features live interviews with newsmakers and the latest in business, science and technology, medical, and entertainment news. A stringer network across the United States provides news and feature programming from major American cities. Other new content includes live, unfiltered, simultaneously translated coverage of major events in America; new weekend talk shows; and documentary programming.

In addition to the unique role that VOA has in showcasing the American experience to foreign audiences, the VOA Russian Service also shines a light and gives a voice to opposition figures in Russia. A recent interview with exiled former oligarch and regime critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky garnered more than 1 million views on YouTube, and was picked up and reposted by numerous Russian outlets. In June 2019, VOA Russian digital team members covered the mass protests resulting from the detention of Russian investigative reporter Ivan Golunov, who was detained in Moscow on bogus drug charges. The team successfully obtained commentary from influential participants. In addition to the live coverage of the protests as they unfolded, including hundreds of detentions, the digital team produced a video explainer with human rights statistics, reminding the audience of Russia's press freedom challenges.

### RFE/RL's Radio Svoboda

RFE/RL's mission is distinct from VOA's, in that its purpose is to serve as an example of what a local and independent media can and should be. Thus, the focus of its programming is often reporting on local news that is not covered by Russia's domestic media. RFE/RL serves as a "surrogate" for free press in Russia and in



other countries in the Russian periphery. Its flagship Russian Service, known locally as Radio Svoboda, live streams from important public events, such as protests, and provides a wealth of Russia-focused content online, on social media, and by radio.

Radio Svoboda maintains a bureau in Moscow with approximately 50 staff, and utilizes other freelancers throughout Russia and around the world who are under significant pressure for their work.

Radio Svoboda programming provides analysis on Russian current affairs, politics, social issues, human rights, and culture in and where they live, in addition to investigative pieces not covered by domestic Russian media. The media mix ranges from news, to documentary programming, to other Russian-language shows designed to compete with the disinformation exported by the Kremlin. Radio Svoboda also features eight daily news bulletins, live streaming from important public events such as protests, and video/TV casts of talk shows and programs.

As an example of the impact that Radio Svoboda makes, the network recently drew an audience of over 2 million to its reporting on the May Day protest detentions. More than 100 people were detained during opposition rallies across Russia, led by Alexei Navalny, a vocal critic of the Kremlin and a leading opposition figure. The Russian police responded with force to shut these events down. Current Time aired TV footage from St. Petersburg that showed police hitting people with batons and dragging them to police vans; the video attracted some 900,000 online views. Total views for the May Day coverage across all platforms came to more than 1.2 million.

#### Programming in Languages other than Russian

In addition to reaching Russian-speaking audiences, USAGM broadcasts continue to push back against Kremlin propaganda in other languages used in the Russian Federation, as well as in Central Asia and the Balkans. Original content is generated at many levels – local, national, and regional – and then translated across language services to provide audiences with a diverse news menu. A central goal of each of these, in addition to providing local and national news coverage in local languages other than Russian, is to push back against the false narratives coming out of Russia.

For example, the VOA Georgian Service devotes 70 percent of its overall programming to countering Russia's disinformation and anti-Western propaganda inside Georgia. The VOA Serbian Service has significantly expanded its programming in recent years with the aim of countering growing penetration of Russia-sponsored media and disinformation into the Serbian and Montenegrin media space. VOA Serbian has expanded its coverage regarding the Russian presence and influence in many areas of politics, society,





culture, and economics, including the growing influence of Russian soft power through civil society organizations, cultural exchanges, and ties with the Eastern Orthodox Church.

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, RFE/RL conducted a live interview with new Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in which he reaffirmed that Ukraine is on a "course toward Europe." In May, the TV channel "Ukraina" [aired](#) the Ukrainian Service documentary "[Balukh](#)" on the Ukrainian activist sentenced in Russian-occupied Crimea for flying a Ukrainian flag. RFE/RL correspondent Anzhelika Rudenko, who travelled to Crimea in 2018 to document reaction to his arrest by Balukh's neighbors in the village where he lived, was subsequently banned from returning to Crimea by Russian occupation forces. According to the channel, the documentary, which aired at midnight, reached 740,000 people - second only to a political talk show on the 1+1 channel popular with viewers age 18 and older.

In Kazakhstan, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service and Current Time both had extensive live coverage of the June 9, 2019, presidential election, which was widely seen as an orchestrated handover of power from the longtime president and Russian ally Nursultan Nazarbaev to a hand-picked successor. USAGM broadcasts documented the ensuing protests in Nur-Sultan and Almaty and the detention of nearly 4,000 people including several journalists. Meanwhile, the Kazakh state-run media misrepresented or ignored these developments. RFE/RL's continuous reporting from Kazakhstan received a robust audience response, with more than 1.6 million views of the Kazakh Service's live election and protest coverage, and another 816,000 views of an interview with the only opposition candidate in the election, [Amirzhan Qosanov](#).

On an even more localized level, RFE/RL covers news in the Tatar, Bashkir, and Chechen languages, providing relevant news coverage to Russia's underserved and marginalized populations in politically sensitive areas. RFE/RL has also launched hyper-local websites to focus on the realities on the ground in Russia-occupied Crimea, Donbas, the mid-Volga region, the North Caucasus, and Siberia.

### Disinformation Fact Checking

In addition to the Russian and regional language networks, USAGM continues to operate the fact-checking websites Polygraph (in English) and Factograph (in Russian) that counter Russian disinformation. Established in 2016 and 2017 respectively, these services in VOA and RFE/RL investigate misleading statements and stories from Russian officials and state-sponsored propaganda outlets. Polygraph and Factograph serve as a resource for verifying the increasing volume of disinformation and misinformation distributed globally. They separate fact from fiction, add context, and debunk lies. Polygraph has garnered an 849 percent increase in web article views in the past year, and the site has been quoted by U.S.



embassies and consulates, as well as independent news organizations such as the Atlantic Council's Disinformation Portal and *The New York Times*.

### Looking Ahead

Looking to the future, USAGM will continue to prioritize Russian-language broadcasting to combat the Kremlin's sustained dissemination of disinformation and state-sponsored propaganda. We have bolstered our reporting capabilities throughout Russia, Ukraine, and neighboring countries during the past year and will continue to do so. In addition to our Russian-language efforts, we will continue to develop news capabilities in other languages used in the Russian Federation, Central Asia, and the Balkans, build live news capabilities, expand acquired and commissioned programming, and meet digital audiences on their preferred platforms. USAGM will continue to seek Current Time placement opportunities and expand our reach in underserved markets.

We cannot do this without the support of the Congress. Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, we are deeply grateful for your support of our work and we value your oversight role. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to any questions you may have.