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U.S. AGENCY FOR
GLOBAL MEDIA

330 Independence Avenue SW | Washington, DC 20237 | usagm.gov

Office of General Counsel
Freedom of Information Act Office

July 23, 2021

Via email

RE: Request Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act – FOIA #20-031

This letter is in response to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request dated May 23, 2020 to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which the Agency received on the same date. In your request, you asked for

“A copy of the Questions For the Record (QFR) and agency QFR responses to Congress responding to QFRs during calendar years 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 to date.

The Agency has completed its search for and review of records responsive to your request. This concludes the Agency’s response to your request and it is now closed.

For further assistance or to discuss any aspect of your request, you may contact me at foia@usagm.gov or 202-920-2448. You also may contact USAGM’S FOIA Liaison, Daniel Rosenholtz, with questions about pending FOIA matters at drosenholtz@usagm.gov or 202-920-2342. Additionally, you may contact the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) at the National Archives and Records Administration to inquire about the FOIA mediation services they offer:

Office of Government Information Services National Archives
and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road-OGIS
College Park, Maryland 20740-6001
E-mail: ogis@nara.gov;
Telephone: 202-741-5770
Toll free: 1 877-684-6448



Facsimile: 202-741-5769

Finally, if you are not satisfied with this response to your request, you may file an administrative appeal with the Agency by writing to: Chairperson, Access Appeal Committee, USAGM, Suite 3349, 330 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20237. Your appeal must be postmarked or transmitted by facsimile to 202-203-4548 within 90 days of the date of this letter.

If you have any questions regarding your request, please contact me at (202) 203-4550 or the Office of the General Counsel at the above address or at foia@usagm.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "James McLaren".

James McLaren
Acting Deputy General Counsel

Enclosure

Question for the Record from Representative Dina Titus
Genocide Against the Burmese Rohingya
September 26, 2018

Question:

Can you explain what China and Russia have to gain by opposing a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court?

Answer:

The Voice of America (VOA) is mandated by Congress to provide news and information about the United States to a global audience and to do so at the highest professional standard. While VOA certainly covers news about China and Russia as well as the International Criminal Court in multiple languages to interested audiences, VOA respectfully declines to offer an agency opinion about the intentions of China and Russia's actions. VOA operates inside an editorial firewall established in its legislation, and does not engage in U.S. policy development or analysis.

1. Barrasso – What is the USAGM's broadcasting strategy for countering foreign propaganda from countries like China and Russia?

In deciding where to broadcast, USAGM considers the local media situation, along with U.S. strategic interests, and prioritizes countries that lack a free or developed press. Special consideration is given to audiences targeted by state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, like in Russia and China. In Russia, USAGM broadcasts in Russian through the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, along with hyper-local websites in languages like Tatar-Bashkir. In China, USAGM broadcasts in Mandarin, Cantonese, Uighur, and Tibetan.

USAGM prioritizes resources to ensure that its activities advance the broad foreign policy priorities of the United States, including the universal values of freedom and democracy. To this end, USAGM targets its resources strategically to provide accurate and credible news and information for audiences most impacted by state-sponsored disinformation.

USAGM's mission of supporting freedom and democracy is supported by two overarching, long-term strategic goals: (1) expanding freedom of information and expression and (2) communicating America's democratic experience and values.

The five USAGM networks pursue the USAGM mission and strategic goals through complementary, reinforcing roles. For example, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting emphasize domestic news for their geographically-defined audiences. Covering developments specific to defined target markets is their specialty, most notably in countries without a free press or in transition.

To counter foreign propaganda, the agency produces and curates fact-based, verifiable news and information journalism that informs and engages audiences and expands the media marketplace. This is done through developing original stories, investigative reporting, in-depth analysis, and a unique cross-cultural perspective that helps audiences become sophisticated consumers of news and media. USAGM also supports two fact-checking websites in Russian and English, called Factograf and Polygraph respectively, that call out and investigate disinformation campaigns.

In underserved and information-denied areas, USAGM seeks to introduce services in selected new languages; serve as a conduit for the transmission of reporting from inside closed societies lacking press freedom to outside audiences; ensure

strong local news coverage, as warranted by events, to meet urgent audience needs in areas of crisis; and draw on the experiences of the world's many models of free societies, in particular the United States, to present a broad array of political views and debates.

A notable example is Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's joint effort, *Current Time*, which is a 24/7 TV and digital network for Russian speakers, available through 92 distributors in 20 countries. Launched in 2017, the Current Time network provides Russian speakers world-wide with an alternative to Kremlin-controlled media – offering live news, robust debate and accurate and balanced reporting on local, regional, and international issues. Current Time plays a key role in covering live events for its Russian-speaking audiences, such as protests in Moscow as well as U.S. events such as Congressional hearings on Russia.

2. Barrasso – How does USAGM coordinate with other government agencies who are also working on countering foreign propaganda and disinformation like the Global Engagement Center in the State Department?

USAGM communicates regularly with the interagency on its strategy and programs, but it does not coordinate on messages for its international audiences. USAGM is an independent, non-partisan agency, and the work of its journalists is protected by a legislative firewall. This structure is critical to our credibility with international audiences and for distinguishing U.S.-funded journalism from state-sponsored propaganda.

3. Barrasso – How is USAGM ensuring all U.S. international broadcasting is being consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States and counterbalancing anti-American sentiment?

USAGM targets its resources strategically to provide accurate and credible news and information for audiences impacted by state-sponsored disinformation. USAGM conducts a mandated annual language service review that evaluates all broadcast languages, and potential languages. The State Department provides its input to USAGM on this process and how these languages fit into the foreign policy priorities of the department. In addition, the Voice of America (VOA) carries editorials reflecting the opinion of the U.S. Government.

- 4. Cardin – In 2018 reports surfaced that the Office of Cuba Broadcasting had disseminated a story attacking George Soros that was deemed anti-Semitic and “unjournalistic.” Other stories targeting the Cuban population included an opinion piece decrying the “Islamization” of Europe and its threat to the United States. It was reported on February 27, 2019 that USAGM is seeking to terminate the employment of eight journalists, editors, and anchors in response to these broadcasts.**

What steps are taken by USAGM to better protect against such lapses in journalistic standards?

In April 2019, USAGM released standardized expectations for network program reviews. Prior to this, each network oversaw their own program reviews and set individualized standards. Some networks had stronger standards and expectations than others, but under the new guidelines, all networks will be expected to adhere to the same high standards for reviewing programming. Under the new guidelines, program reviews are evaluations of the quality of a selection of programming of the language service including journalistic standards based upon both internal and external feedback. It is a deliberative process that randomly selects content from a language service and evaluates the quality and effectiveness. These reviews aim to provide network leadership and USAGM with an independent evaluation of each language service, and the results of these annual reviews will be presented to USAGM management.

It is important to note that when a lapse has occurred, USAGM and network management have taken steps to ensure employee accountability, even resulting in termination. By improving employee performance management, USAGM has been able to improve employee accountability and reduce journalistic lapses among its nearly 4,000-strong employee base that works in 61 languages.

- 5. Cardin - Congress has authorized substantial funding to counter foreign propaganda, especially messaging from Russia, including creating the Countering Russian Influence Fund, and expanding the mandate of the Global Engagement Center in the State Department, significantly increasing its available resources. Meanwhile, USAGM has increased resources and created targeted programming to counter Russian messaging.**

How does USAGM coordinate with other government agencies to best counter foreign propaganda?

USAGM conducts a mandated annual language service review that evaluates all broadcast languages, and potential languages. The State Department provides its input to USAGM on this process and how these languages fit into the foreign policy priorities of the department. USAGM is an independent, non-partisan agency, and the work of its journalists is protected by a legislative firewall. This structure is critical to our credibility with international audiences.

6. Cardin - USAGM has been criticized for a perceived failure in some cases to counter propaganda from certain countries of vital interest to U.S. foreign policy, including Russia and China.

Assuming there can be improvements, what must USAGM do to improve broadcaster effectiveness in these and other places?

In deciding where to broadcast, USAGM considers the local media situation, along with U.S. strategic interests, and prioritizes countries that lack a free or developed press. Special consideration is given to audiences subjected to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, like in Russia and China. In Russia, USAGM broadcasts in Russian through the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, along with some specialized websites in local languages like Tatar-Bashkir. In China, USAGM broadcasts in Mandarin, Cantonese, Uighur, and Tibetan.

USAGM prioritizes resources to ensure that its activities advance the broad foreign policy priorities of the United States, including the universal values of freedom and democracy. To this end, USAGM targets its resources strategically to provide accurate and credible news and information for audiences most impacted by state-sponsored disinformation.

USAGM's mission of supporting freedom and democracy is supported by two overarching, long-term strategic goals: (1) expanding freedom of information and expression and (2) communicating America's democratic experience and values.

The five USAGM networks pursue the USAGM mission and strategic goals through complementary, reinforcing roles. For example, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting emphasize domestic news for their geographically-defined audiences. Covering developments specific to defined target markets is their specialty, most notably in countries without a free press or in transition.

To counter foreign propaganda, the agency produces and curates fact-based, verifiable news and information that informs and engages audiences and expands the media marketplace. This is done through developing original stories, investigative reporting, in-depth analysis, and a unique cross-cultural perspective that helps audiences become sophisticated consumers of news and media. USAGM also supports two fact-checking websites in Russian and English, called Factograf and Polygraph respectively, that call out and investigation disinformation campaigns.

In underserved and information-denied areas, USAGM seeks to introduce services in selected new languages; serve as a conduit for the transmission of reporting from inside closed societies lacking press freedom to outside audiences; ensure strong local news coverage, as warranted by events, to meet urgent audience needs in areas of crisis; and draw on the experiences of the world's many models of free societies, in particular the United States, to present a broad array of political views and debates.

A notable example is Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's joint effort, *Current Time*, which is a 24/7 TV and digital network for Russian speakers, available through 92 distributors in 20 countries. Launched in 2017, the Current Time network provides Russian speakers world-wide with an alternative to Kremlin-controlled media – offering live news, robust debate and accurate and balanced reporting on local, regional, and international issues.

USAGM launched a similar network in Farsi this year, and has announced plans to develop a similar effort in Mandarin to reach global Mandarin-speaking audiences.

7. Cardin - As you know, U.S. international media operates under a bifurcated mission, with VOA informing the world about the United States and its policies, and the surrogate broadcasters taking the role of an otherwise absent free media.

Why maintain these separate missions?

While the overall mission for all USAGM networks remains the same—“to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy”—the approach differs greatly between the federal organizations and the surrogate grantees. The Voice of America (VOA) has the primary role of telling America's story throughout the world, and it does so as a federal

broadcaster. Its coverage is focused heavily on U.S. news and politics, Americana, and the role of the United States in the world. When global audiences want to know what the United States is thinking, it turns to VOA. Surrogate broadcasters—Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia—act as local independent media. They focus primarily on domestic news for areas where accurate, timely local news and information is otherwise unavailable.

When VOA and a surrogate network work in the same language, their programming strategies and approaches remain distinctively separate. These approaches attract different audiences, provide different perspectives on social, political and economic issues, and ultimately give international audiences more comprehensive access to information. This coverage is coordinated at a strategic level through the International Media Coordinating Committee, comprised of all of the network heads.

The Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) is the only Arabic-language broadcaster for USAGM, and it fulfills a dual role—providing local coverage as well as sharing America’s perspective with the Arabic-speaking world. VOA takes on a similar role in Central and South America and sub-Saharan Africa, where it is the only U.S. international broadcaster.

8. Menendez – How is journalistic integrity protected at USAGM?

Journalistic integrity is protected in two ways. First, USAGM has a broad list of journalistic standards that are consistent with its authorizing legislation. These standards form the bedrock of journalistic practices for USAGM networks. Moreover, USAGM networks have instituted their own standards and best practices, consistent with the USAGM standards. These standards are enforced to ensure that all journalistic work and editorial decisions within the agency are conducted at the highest professional standard.

Journalistic integrity is also supported by the firewall. This firewall, mandated by Congress, insulates the journalists of USAGM from political interference. The independence of the agency and its journalists is of paramount importance to the credibility USAGM achieves among its international audiences. Historically the firewall has fundamentally relied on a bipartisan board at the top to insulate the agency and leadership from outside influence. Thus recent reform legislation removed a key aspect of the firewall. It is unclear how a CEO without this insulation will be able to withstand such pressure. (The new Advisory board under current legislation has no real powers or role.)

9. Menendez – What is the plan for technological upgrades for the Agency?

USAGM has well-documented the growing threats to information and freedom of the press around the world, and the digital space is facing some of the most significant emerging threats. According to its Strategic Plan 2018-2022, USAGM strives to be a leader in assisting audience members in information-deprived nations to gain access to information on all platforms, and internet freedom activities play an important role in this effort. USAGM is intending to increase distribution on platforms that research demonstrates audiences are using – FM, satellite and broadcast television, and mobile devices – continuing the migration away from legacy platforms where they do not reach audiences. Additionally, USAGM is seeking to utilize alternative forms of technology to reach closed societies, including flash drives, DVDs, and other alternative delivery means. The strategic plan also notes that USAGM will improve TV and video facilities to support growing audience on TV, mobile, and on-demand platforms by reinvesting savings from the falling cost of video production.

10. Menendez – What role does USAGM play in countering disinformation, Russian or otherwise?

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11.Menendez – What is the success of new initiatives like CurrentTime and Radio Farda?

Current Time: Current Time is available through 92 distributors in 20 countries, and world-wide via over-the-top (OTT) media services and online. Individual Current Time programs are available in 14 countries via more than 50 affiliates, including nine inside Russia. Current Time's digital products and strong social media presence have helped tap into key markets. In 2018, the network logged more than 520 million online views – more than half from inside Russia, an increase from 2017 of 30 percent.

Radio Farda: According to a 2018 national survey of Iran managed by Gallup on behalf of USAGM, 15.7% of Iranian adults use Radio Farda weekly. 76.8% of past-week listeners told Gallup that they trust Radio Farda as a news source; the figure rises to 83.8% when asking multi-platform Farda users. Despite a government ban, Farda logged a monthly average of 12.2 million visits to its website and almost 22 million page views. Almost two-thirds of all website traffic originated inside Iran. Farda has more than 3.5 million combined followers on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Telegram. Radio Farda has partnered with the

Voice of America in the launch of its global Farsi-language digital network, VOA365. This is an effort to reach Farsi-speaking audiences globally and utilize their social networks to share information back into Iran, as well as reaching USAGM's traditional audiences in Iran.