

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 3, 2020

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign
Operations, and Related Programs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hal Rogers
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign
Operations, and Related Programs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Lowey and Ranking Member Rogers:

Thank you for your work in crafting the State and Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations legislation for Fiscal Year 2021. The programs supported by the subcommittee are vitally important to our national interest, and the world.

As you finalize the funding legislation for FY2021, we respectfully request that you take into account recent, alarming developments regarding the management, Advisory Board, and programs administered by the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM). As you know, USAGM is an independent government agency whose mission is to “inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom of democracy”. USAGM oversees two federal organizations (the Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting) and provides grants to the independent non-profit organizations Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, and the Open Technology Fund (OTF).

Shortly after the Senate confirmed Michael Pack as USAGM’s Chief Executive Officer earlier this month. Mr. Pack fired the officers and directors of the OTF, Radio Free Asia, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and accepted the resignation of the director and deputy director of Voice of America. Further, Mr. Pack removed the long-standing, independent members of the Advisory Boards of these entities and replaced them with himself and political loyalists.

Finally, funding for USAGM programs and personnel, including for OTF-led programs supporting technologies to evade censorship and surveillance in places of paramount importance like Hong Kong, were reportedly frozen shortly after Mr. Pack assumed his position. To date, Mr. Pack has provided no public explanation of these decisions, provided no clarity about reports that funds have been frozen or unfrozen, or explained how such decisions will further the mission of USAGM. The management he removed were highly respected, experienced, and dedicated to maintaining the independence of USAGM and ensuring that its programming was free from political interference. We are concerned that it is precisely that resistance to politicization of programming and reporting that led to their abrupt dismissal.

We are deeply concerned about the firings of qualified leadership; the reports that USAGM has frozen funds and grants; and the public reports that USAGM under Mr. Pack's leadership is considering altering preexisting budget commitments to internet freedom initiatives in order to fund products that have been subject to well-documented concerns that they do not meet technological specifications, security standards, and industry best-practices. Deviating from such standards will impair the trust built over years in the independence and safety of the tools supported through USAGM. As the United States confronts a rising authoritarian tide around the world, and an aggressive effort by Russia, China, and other powers to undermine the tenets of liberal democracy, USAGM has never been more vital. The strength of USAGM comes directly from providing truth-based reporting and programming that adheres to the standards of professional journalism, precisely the information that autocratic regimes block in favor of propaganda. If the firewall that protects USAGM's editorial independence is eroded, it will make USAGM ineffective. Rather than providing a counterpoint to autocratic regimes, it would call into question the U.S.'s commitment to democratic values, and risk reinforcing misperceptions that USAGM media outlets are simply state propaganda, no different from Russia Today or others around the world.

The funding freezes initiated since Mr. Pack assumed his position have already wreaked havoc on key programs supported by USAGM at a time when the freedoms of people around the world are under attack. On May 28, 2020, the National People's Congress of China passed a resolution allowing its Standing Committee to enact laws prohibiting certain acts and activities in Hong Kong for national security purposes. In anticipation of the adoption of a national security law extending China's surveillance and censorship regime into Hong Kong, OTF laid preparations for new programs aimed at providing civil society with technology and training needed to continue their work before the law went into effect. All USAGM programs were frozen June 9, 2020, one day after Mr. Pack took office. Although a media report stated that funding for OTF's Hong Kong programs was allegedly restored on June 26, 2020, the Standing Committee adopted a new national security law on June 30 with immediate effect. As it is much more difficult to stand up secure resources after the surveillance apparatus is in place, the lost time created by this funding freeze has been to the benefit of the Communist Party of China and jeopardized the effectiveness of OTF's programs.

Although Mr. Pack made various assurances to Senators during his confirmation process about respecting the editorial firewall and programming independence of USAGM, the actions he has taken since assuming control of USAGM call those commitments into question, and it would be irresponsible for Congress to simply accept those statements at face value.

In light of these concerns, we urge you to consider the following actions, as well as any others you may deem appropriate, that would bolster congressional oversight of USAGM, ensure its journalistic independence, and safeguard its mission, such as: exercising your authority over re-programming requests to encourage USAGM's full and timely compliance with congressional requests; consider imposing additional reporting requirements on staffing plans and Advisory Board appointments and designating key initiatives as Congressional Interest Items; consider fencing portions of USAGM funding, such as appropriations made to the Office of the CEO; and any other actions you deem necessary, in partnership with the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Thank you for your longtime, bipartisan support for USAGM. We look forward to working with you to ensure USAGM can effectively execute its mission and embody the values of openness, freedom, and truth that it was created to propagate.

Sincerely,



Adam B. Schiff
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Jamie Raskin
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Eliot L. Engel
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Joaquin Castro
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Brad Sherman
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