

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

July 27, 2014
11:00PM EDT

Ukraine and its regional neighbors are threatened by an all out offensive from Russia's robust propaganda machine. Unfortunately, Putin's campaign of misinformation is having the desired effect: stocking sectarian violence, undermining stable democratic governments, and creating the pretext for Russian invasion. The Broadcasting Board of Governors ("BBG") which oversees U.S. international broadcasting was established to be our country's first defense in wars of information but the BBG is broken – or as Secretary Clinton stated, "defunct". Thankfully, legislation to reform the BBG is moving in the House of Representatives. The bipartisan United States International Communications Reform Act of 2014, sponsored by Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, proposes important reforms to address the BBG's highly dysfunctional management structure, clarify the mission of our international broadcasters, and empower our journalists. We urge you to sign H.R. 4490 into law when it reaches your desk.

For years, the failure to improve the BBG has allowed anti-democratic states and non-state actors to effectively use propaganda to undermine our national security objectives overseas. As Hillary Clinton testified to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the BBG "is practically a defunct agency in terms of its capacity to be able to tell a message around the world. So we're abdicating the ideological arena and need to get back into it."

Clarifying the BBG mission is critical. According to its charter, the Voice of America ("VOA") is charged with providing a "clear and effective presentation of the policies of the United States." This mission is as relevant today as it was during the Cold War but it has been subjugated to leadership that has allowed for mission drift. We still need the Voice of America to report on the broad foreign policies of the United States and present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies; we need the VOA to expand and strengthen the relationship between the people and Government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world.

We support H.R. 4490's proposal to dissolve the current BBG structure and consolidate its component entities based on mission and workforce structure. H.R. 4490 retains the federal elements of the BBG, including the VOA and OCB, but makes important management reforms by identifying a Chief Executive Officer to oversee the day-to-day operations. This federal organization is rebranded, jettisoning the "BBG" name that has become synonymous with government dysfunction and inefficiency.

Non-federal international broadcasters, such as Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, will be consolidated into a single organization with a common leadership and advisory board. This consolidated organization will be modeled after the National Endowment for Democracy and have the mission to provide uncensored local and regional news and information to people in closed societies. This division will reduce overlap and ensure the complementary yet distinct missions of our international broadcasters are being fulfilled.

Unlike the post-war media climate of the 1940's, today's media landscape is highly competitive, necessitating a more aggressive U.S. international broadcasting posture. Adaptation will require a more effective and efficient use of finite resources which can only be achieved with significant reforms to the BBG's management and mission clarification. The United States International Communications Reform Act of 2014 draws upon the recommendations put forward by 2011-2012 BBG Board and we urge you to support this much needed reform effort.

You have stated that "we need all elements of national power to win a battle of wills, a battle of ideas." Today we are engaged in a battle of ideas with state and non-state media that U.S. international broadcasting is an important element of our national power that can no longer be neglected and allowed to decline. We, the undersigned, urge you to support the forthcoming legislation with resolve and urgency. We lend our names in our personal, not institutional, capacity.

Sincerely,

Blanquita Cullum, broadcaster, former Broadcasting Board of Governors member

Ambassador (retired) Victor Ashe, former Broadcasting Board of Governors member

Timothy Shamble, President of AFGE Local 1812

Robert Reilly, former Voice of America Director

Harry Wu, China's labor camps survivor, Executive Director of the Laogai Research Foundation

Rev. Ruben Diaz, New York State Senator

Mark Gjonaj, New York State Assemblyman

Karl Altau, Managing Director, Joint Baltic American National Committee, Inc. Representing:
Estonian American National Council, Inc.
American Latvian Association, Inc.
Lithuanian American Council, Inc.

Irena Lasota, President of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (IDEE), journalist

Janusz Bugajski, Senior Fellow, Center for European Policy Analysis, Washington DC

Ann Noonan, Executive Director of Committee for U.S. International Broadcasting

Ted Lipien, journalist and author, former Voice of America Acting Associate Director, former VOA Eurasia Division Director, former IBB Eurasia Marketing Director, former VOA Polish Service Chief

Ethan Gutmann, journalist and author, Committee for U.S. International Broadcasting Advisory Board

Manny Papir, human rights activist, former Deputy Chief of Staff to Mayor Guliani

Jing Zhang, journalist, President of Women's Rights in China

Liqun Chen, Women's Rights in China

Justin C. Yu, journalist, community leader

Reggie Littlejohn, President of Women's Rights Without Frontiers

Enver Safir, former VOA Russian Service Moscow Correspondent, former Director of IBB's Prague Office of Marketing and Program Placement

Marek Walicki, journalist, formerly with Radio Free Europe and Voice of America

John T. Murphy, former Director Voice of America Eurasia Division, former IBB Global Marketing Director, former Senior Adviser IBB Office of Engineering

Vello Ederma, retired VOA European News Chief and European Division Deputy Chief

Marina Oeltjen, former Voice of America Russian Service Chief

Marie Ciliberti, former Voice of America broadcaster

Jaroslav Martyniuk, formerly Researcher with InterMedia and an active member of the Ukrainian Diaspora in Chicago and Washington D.C.

Additional signatures are being collected.

Attachment:

We strongly support all three provisions of the Voice of America Charter and restoration of VOA newsroom's and VOA language services' ability to report U.S. and international news.

VOA CHARTER

To protect the integrity of VOA programming and define the organization's mission, the VOA Charter was drafted in 1960 and later signed into law on July 12, 1976, by President Gerald Ford.

It reads:

The long-range interests of the United States are served by communicating directly with the peoples of the world by radio. To be effective, the Voice of America must win the attention and respect of listeners. These principles will therefore govern Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts:

1. VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.
2. VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.
3. VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies. (Public Law 94-350)