



One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

March 6, 2023

Amanda Bennett
Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Agency for Global Media
330 Independence Avenue SW
Washington D.C., 20237

Dear Ms. Bennett,

I write to express my concern about recent censorship at the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and Voice of America (VOA). USAGM management is required under its “firewall” statute to “respect the professional independence and integrity” of the journalists at VOA.¹ This includes providing coverage that is “consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive.”² As a publicly funded media organization, it is imperative that USAGM and VOA comply with these strict requirements for both integrity and nonpartisanship, keeping USAGM leadership out of the editorial decision-making process.³ A recent incident which has come to my attention calls into question the editorial integrity of VOA, particularly when it reports facts critical of past or current leadership.

VOA published an article on February 25, 2023, detailing a controversy over its hiring and subsequent suspension of two writers for the Russian division, who were accused of being Russian propagandists.⁴ At the end of the article, the writer included background information about past controversies with VOA’s hiring processes, which read in part:

¹ 22 U.S.C. § 6204(b).

² 22 U.S.C. § 6202(b)(1).

³ U.S. Agency for Global Media, *Firewall*, USAGM.GOV (last visited March 3, 2023), <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/firewall/> (stating that USAGM networks *enjoy full autonomy, free of influence from . . . the USAGM CEO . . .*) (emphasis added).

⁴ Paul Farhi, *Voice of America journalists put on leave after ‘Russian propaganda’ accusations*, WASHINGTON POST (Feb. 24, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2023/02/24/voice-of-america-russian-propaganda/>; VOA News, *VOA Puts Two Russian Journalists on Paid Leave Following Complaints*, VOICE OF AMERICA (Feb. 25,

“VOA’s hiring process was called into question previously over the investigations into Setareh Derakhshesh Sieg, who had worked in VOA’s Persian service.

Sieg was removed from her position in 2020, after a USAGM investigation found she had falsified credentials and abused public funds.

In February 2021, after a change in USAGM leadership following the election of President Joe Biden, a new investigation exonerated Sieg.

In December 2022, Representative Michael McCaul, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, issued a letter to USAGM CEO Amanda Bennett requesting documents and information about the decision to retain Sieg.

The letter said, “To our dissatisfaction, the responses that USAGM provided [earlier] were inadequate and failed to take account of [the] various inconsistencies regarding Sieg’s alleged credentials.”⁵

A few days later, this accurate information was scrubbed from the site, and an editor’s note was attached, reading “*Some background information originally contained in this story has been removed pending further review.*”⁶ On March 1, that note was replaced with the following five paragraphs, mirroring the prior background section, but with all history or specifics of past criticisms removed:

“VOA’s employee hiring and vetting process has been called into question before.

Under the previous USAGM leadership, the then-CEO cited security lapses when putting several officials under investigation.

U.S. lawmakers and analysts said the action was retaliatory against whistleblowers and those officials were later exonerated and reinstated.

Some of the other VOA staff investigated for other issues during that period — some who also had protected whistleblower status — were later cleared by investigations under the Biden appointed leadership at USAGM.

However, the House Foreign Affairs Committee chair has pressed USAGM leadership for more information about one of those cases.”⁷

2023), archived from Feb. 25. 1:38pm at:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20230226090704/https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-puts-two-russian-journalists-on-paid-leave-following-complaints/6978960.html>.

⁵ VOA News, *VOA Puts Two Russian Journalists on Paid Leave Following Complaints*, VOICE OF AMERICA (Feb. 25, 2023), archived from Feb. 25. 1:38pm at:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20230226090704/https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-puts-two-russian-journalists-on-paid-leave-following-complaints/6978960.html>.

⁶ VOA News, *VOA Puts Two Russian Journalists on Paid Leave Following Complaints*, VOICE OF AMERICA (Feb. 25, 2023), archived on March 1 at 2:50pm at:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20230301200831/https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-puts-two-russian-journalists-on-paid-leave-following-complaints/6978960.html> (Emphasis in original).

⁷ VOA News, *VOA Puts Two Russian Journalists on Paid Leave Following Complaints*, VOICE OF AMERICA (March 1, 2023), <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-puts-two-russian-journalists-on-paid-leave-following-complaints/6978960.html>.

Editor's note: This story has been updated to add context about VOA's hiring and vetting processes.

The original background section published on February 25 was entirely accurate; no new "context" was added after the "further review" was conducted.⁸ Instead, the newly sanitized section censored any criticism of USAGM or VOA. This action points towards an agency openly violating its statutory requirements of editorial independence, integrity, and objectivity. Congress needs answers about the continuing self-interested censorship.

In reference to the changes in the article described above, please provide the following documents no later than March 20, 2023:

1. All documents and communications referring or relating to the February 25, 2023 article described above and its editing, including but not limited to:
 - a. Any communications and correspondence between USAGM executives, including Amanda Bennett and Yolanda Lopez, regarding this article, particularly about the changes that occurred between February 25 and March 2;
 - b. Documents sufficient to show the "review process" USAGM and/or VOA undertook for this article, which involved removing the above sections from the article and replacing them with the new vague "context";
 - c. All communications referring or relating to this article sent to or from journalist Jessica Jerreat;
 - d. Any communications and correspondence between USAGM executives and VOA editors regarding the "review process" for this article between February 25 and March 6, 2023;
 - e. Any communications and correspondence instructing the author(s) of this article to "add context" to the article between February 25 and March 2;
 - f. Any documents pertaining to this article, in its original form or new version, which include prior drafts of the five paragraphs stricken and replaced in the "review process";
2. Documents sufficient to show VOA's standard process for editorial review of an article after it is published, including its policy on adding "context"; and
3. Documents sufficient to show USAGM and VOA's policies on reporting about internal issues at the two agencies.

The Committee takes its constitutional duty to conduct oversight of the executive branch seriously. Apparent censorship of the sort displayed here violates both USAGM's statute and the

⁸ Press Release, House Foreign Affairs Comm., Chairman Michael McCaul, McCaul Pushes For Oversight of Repeated Stonewalling at USAGM Ahead of Next Congress (Dec. 20, 2022), <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-pushes-for-oversight-of-repeated-stonewalling-at-usagm-ahead-of-next-congress/>.

high principles of journalistic integrity it claims to uphold.⁹ It is imperative that USAGM provide responses to the Committee's requests as soon as possible, but no later than March 20.

I look forward to your prompt compliance.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Republican Leader
House Foreign Affairs Committee

CC: Rep. Guy Reschenthaler, Member of Congress, Chief Deputy Whip
Rep. John Curtis, Member of Congress
Rep. Scott Perry, Member of Congress
Rep. Gregory Meeks, Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee

⁹ 22 U.S.C. § 6204(b); 22 U.S.C. § 6202(b)(1); U.S. Agency for Global Media, *supra*, note 3.