

JAMIE FLY TESTIMONY
CSCE HEARING
MEDIA FREEDOM IN THE OSCE REGION
OCTOBER 20, 2021

I want to thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify.

I serve as President and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Funded by the U.S. Congress through an annual appropriation to the U.S. Agency for Global Media, RFE/RL broadcasts news and information to 23 countries across Eurasia in 27 languages.

This hearing couldn't come at a more critical moment. Authoritarian leaders are increasing their pressure on free media, upgrading and sharing their repressive tactics and acting with impunity. Even some democratically elected leaders are succumbing to the attraction of a media landscape without the independent checks and balances inherent in an impartial press.

RFE/RL's mission is to promote democratic values and institutions and advance human rights through our journalism. Our objective, unbiased news and information helps protect information ecosystems increasingly under assault from corrupt domestic political actors and foreign authoritarian governments like Russia, China, and Iran.

Our journalists help counter disinformation and propaganda by providing what many people cannot get elsewhere: uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate. We operate in places where freedom of the press does not exist, is under attack, or where independent media are struggling to find their place. This includes 18 of the participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

In all of these countries, Radio Free Europe provides “surrogate” journalism using the full range of communications platforms, distribution options and news formats. From short wave to YouTube, from television talk shows to public service radio programming, we exist to bring independent information to citizens underserved or misled by state outlets and other media options.

This has been a year of tremendous change and challenge for RFE/RL. Compounded by the complexities of reporting during a global pandemic, which many governments used to expand restrictions on the work of journalists, the collapse of funding models for independent media, and the global resurgence of authoritarianism, we are faced with the serious decline of media freedom around the world. This has been documented in reports by organizations such as [Reporters Without Borders](#) which finds “dramatic deterioration in people's access to information and an increase in obstacles to news coverage.”

From Belarus to Central Asia, I have observed these disturbing trends firsthand across RFE/RL's media markets. Well-aware of the potential power of news and information, authoritarians are cracking down. Brutally. And often with impunity. The international response to these trends has been insufficient.

In Russia, the Kremlin has stepped up its long-running campaign against our journalists and those of other independent news organizations. Our Russian corporate entity is on the brink of forced closure,

with our bank accounts in the country frozen since May 2020 due to \$4.4 million in unpaid fines stemming from the ludicrous requirement that every single piece of content from tweets to social media videos that we produce for the Russian audience be invasively labeled as the product of a “foreign agent.”

The Kremlin has branded eight of our journalists as individual “foreign agents,” facing extensive registration and financial filing requirements. Another 21 organizations have now been labeled as “foreign agents.” Several have gone out of business as a result. The Kremlin’s goals are clear – absolute control of the information space in advance of the end of Vladimir Putin’s current term in 2024.

In Belarus, on July 16 our bureau in Minsk was raided as cameras from Russia Today filmed Belarusian Security Force destroying the office and our equipment. Since the Lukashenka regime’s crackdown after the 2020 fraudulent presidential election, many of our journalists have had to leave the country to continue their work from afar. Belarus is now one of the most dangerous places in the world to try to practice journalism. Since June 2020, RFE/RL journalists have spent a total of 133 days in short-term detention. Journalists have been detained for simply venturing out into the streets to do their work. Several journalists from other news organizations are serving significant prison sentences for the mere act of livestreaming protests from a private apartment.

In Afghanistan, the country is now governed by a regime that has terrorized and threatened journalists for years. Almost half of our journalists remain in the country and we continue to call on the U.S. and partner governments to prioritize their evacuation and that of others affiliated with civil society groups who were left behind in the initial U.S. military evacuation.

Meanwhile, other governments, even when they have not physically destroyed journalists’ workspaces and forced them to relocate, have been no less subtle. Just over the past week, after hard-hitting investigative reporting about official corruption, our Uzbek journalists based in Europe, whose website remains blocked and accreditations continue to be denied by the Uzbek government, have received death threats online such as “Don’t think that you can hide in Europe.” “I will cut your head if I catch you.” “We need to burn you all.” In Tajikistan, the government deploys security services to entrap journalists and threaten them and their families in an attempt to influence coverage.

In the past year alone, one of our journalists, Mohammad Ilyas Dayee, was murdered in Afghanistan; two of our colleagues languish behind bars – Ihar Losik, who has now spent 16 months in prison in Belarus and Vladyslav Yesypenko, who has been detained since March in Russian-occupied Crimea by the FSB and reportedly tortured; and far too many journalists and their families have been subjected to the type of cruel violence and harassment I referenced above.

Despite this bleak picture, we have many partner governments in the region who have taken a stand for press freedom this year. They have been helpful in many ways and their support for media freedom, for our journalists and for our cause, should be welcomed and appreciated wherever possible. For instance, the Ukrainian, Czech, Serbian, and Kyrgyz governments have all helped us as we have worked to evacuate colleagues from Afghanistan.

For us at RFE/RL this has become the year of the “displaced” journalist, a year in which some of our largest and most successful bureaus have been forced to move to remote locations. We are re-learning to do what the organization has already done so well during the Cold War, reaching our audiences where they are – from wherever we are. And, we are doing this in very diverse markets, from Iran to

Belarus to Russia, to Uzbekistan, wherever a government is too insecure to allow a free press. In order to remain relevant in a communications revolution our organization is changing quickly, adapting to technological and communications innovations that bring great opportunities, but also risk.

Every day our journalists are looking for new ways to reach their audiences where they are, but also from where the journalists are – working from outside of their home countries is complex and expensive. In order to remain relevant in a communications revolution our organization is changing quickly, adapting to technological and communications innovations that bring great opportunities, but also risk.

Our journalists are up to this challenge, just as their Cold War predecessors were. They need more support, however from the Congress. They need advocates and pressure on governments when they are put behind bars or when they or their families receive that knock on the door in the middle of the night or the disturbing threats online. They need greater financial support across a region that, despite the decline of media freedom is experiencing a flood of oligarch and Russian and Chinese fueled media spending.

As the ‘foreign agent’ designation takes its toll, our Russian reporters are especially committed to their work, wherever it happens. One of our Current Time producers who was displaced from Moscow and now works from our bureau in Kyiv, Ukraine, Yelizaveta Surnacheva was just designated as an individual ‘foreign agent’ on October 8. During an [interview](#) with Current Time, she said that the Putin government “needs this terrifying ‘foreign agent’ sign to be everywhere,” to remind the Russian media, and population, what issues can, and can’t be reported or discussed. Surnacheva continued, “This is their global aim. And it already doesn’t make a difference whether I’ll be silent in Russia or be silent abroad. But I won’t be silent.”

Neither will the rest of Yelizaveta’s colleagues at RFE/RL. These are our journalists. I am very proud to represent them here today.

Thank you again for holding this timely hearing.