

# WebMemo



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## The Sound of Silence: The Decline of the Voice of America in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia

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Last week, an exhausted, retreating Georgian soldier was overheard asking, “Where are our friends?”<sup>1</sup> Given that only days before the conflict—and for the first time in over 60 years of broadcasting—the Voice of America’s (VOA) Russian-language radio programming fell silent, this was a legitimate question. Russian is the principle language in both Russia and large swaths of Georgia, a region plagued by media censorship and human rights violations. Kremlin-controlled media outlets, meanwhile, filled the news and information void. As a result, Georgia plunged into a media blackout as the government shutdown broadcasting of Russian TV and blocked websites in the “ru” domain.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, this is a significant, but not unexpected, failure. In recent years, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) has slashed funding for programming in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in favor of broadcasts in the Middle East and Asia. It has also outsourced broadcasting to semi-private entities with dubious track records. Additionally, the Russian government has pursued a campaign to eliminate U.S. broadcasts by intimidating and harassing VOA’s local, private-sector partners. Consequently, America has—literally and figuratively—lost its voice in the region at a critical moment.

**Slip-Sliding Away.** In 1942, the Voice of America opened its first broadcast, announcing: “Daily at this time, we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell

you the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Since then, VOA has played a unique role among U.S. broadcasting entities. It is the only agency mandated by law that explains U.S. foreign policy, presents “responsible discussions and opinion on [U.S. policy],” and offers a “balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, VOA has fallen into decline since the end of the Cold War and, in particular, since the demise of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999.

Authority for U.S. broadcasting now rests with the BBG. Under the BBG’s tutelage, the global audience for U.S. broadcasting has increased by 75 percent (from 100 million in 2001 to 175 million today).<sup>5</sup> This growth, however, has occurred almost exclusively in the Middle East and Asia, at the detriment of broadcasting in other regions.

This disproportionate growth is the direct result of new funding priorities, as well as outsourcing. The BBG has outsourced many VOA programs to semi-private entities in the Middle East, claiming they are less bureaucratic and attract larger audiences. Unfortunately, these organizations, namely, Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television, have suffered

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from several scandals due to biased reporting and mismanagement.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while attracting larger audiences, these semi-private entities are inadequately representing America abroad.

In contrast, funding for VOA broadcasts in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia has either flat-lined or declined. Take into account the massive devaluation of the dollar abroad (over 30 percent against some currencies) and there is little wonder why VOA is bleeding programs and personnel at a staggering pace. Over the past several years, VOA has ceased virtually all English broadcasts and cut programs in 21 other languages (mostly in the three aforementioned regions).<sup>7</sup> This was after more than a third of VOA's employees signed a petition in 2004 protesting the "dismantling" of the agency.<sup>8</sup>

Last month, Congress attempted to stop even more cuts. Citing concerns for the region's freedom of speech, the Senate Appropriations Committee condemned the BBG's latest budget request that would not only eliminate VOA Russian language programs, but also terminate broadcasts in Ukraine and significantly cut back those in Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The committee subsequently approved legislation explicitly funding programs in each of these countries. Yet without any public announcements, and on the eve of conflict between Russia and Georgia, the BBG ceased VOA's Russian-language programs anyway.

In its stead, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a semi-private entity operating in the former Soviet Union, has been tasked with continuing radio broadcasts in Russian. While RFE/RL has a much better track record than Radio Sawa or Al-Hurra, the organization has proven uniquely vulnerable to the Kremlin's crackdown on independent media.

**Moscow Two-Step.** Since coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin has systematically brought the country's media under control of the state or state-friendly businesses. In addition, Russia remains one of the world's most hostile environments for independent journalism. For instance, Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent investigative journalist who had written about Russian human rights violations in Chechnya, was infamously killed execution style in Moscow in 2006. Politkovskaya's murder was not an aberration; over the past 15 years, Russia has become the third deadliest country in the world for journalists to operate in, behind only Iraq and Algeria.<sup>9</sup>

This environment has proven disastrous for RFE/RL, which depends on local partners to broadcast its programming. Citing license violations and unauthorized changes in programming format, Kremlin regulators have forced most of its local partners to stop broadcasts. One Russian station manager commented, "It's sad because the pro-

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2. Nick Holdsworth, "Russia Claims Media Bias," *Variety*, August 12, 2008, at <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117990468.html?categoryid=14&cs=1> (August 18, 2008).
3. "Voice of America Reacts to Shifting Global Politics," *PBS.org*, March 5, 2007, at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june07/voa\\_3-05.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june07/voa_3-05.html) (August 18, 2008).
4. "VOA Charter," *Voice of America*, July 12, 1976, at <http://www.voanews.com/english/about/VOACharter.cfm> (August 15, 2008).
5. James Glassman, "U.S. International Broadcasting on the Frontlines of Freedom," Heritage Foundation *Lecture No. 1086*, May 15, 2008 at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/hl1086.cfm>.
6. "Silencing the Voice of America Russian Radio and TV Programs," *FreeMediaOnline*, undated, at [http://www.freediaonline.org/silencing\\_of\\_voice\\_of\\_america\\_russian\\_23072008.htm](http://www.freediaonline.org/silencing_of_voice_of_america_russian_23072008.htm) (August 15, 2008).
7. Alan J. Heil, Jr., "America's Vanishing Voice?" *TBSjournal.com*, July 2006, at <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Heil.html> (August 18, 2008).
8. Paul Kiel, "Voice of America to Cut Language Services," *ProPublica.org*, July 8, 2008, at <http://www.propublica.org/article/voice-of-america-to-cut-language-services-709> (August 18, 2008).
9. Ted Lipien, "Radio Liberty Russian managers put a positive spin on Putin's comments about the murder of pro-democracy journalists," *FreeMediaOnline*, October 19, 2006, at [http://www.freediaonline.org/radio\\_liberty\\_russian\\_managers\\_put\\_a\\_positive\\_spin\\_on\\_putin's\\_comments\\_on\\_the\\_murder\\_of\\_journalist\\_221141.htm](http://www.freediaonline.org/radio_liberty_russian_managers_put_a_positive_spin_on_putin's_comments_on_the_murder_of_journalist_221141.htm) (August 18, 2008).

grams were very popular.... The owners decided that they would rather have their license, because if they kept the programming they would have been in trouble.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, three-quarters of the radio outlets provided by private companies have terminated their partnership with U.S. broadcasting over the past two years alone.<sup>11</sup>

**Take the Power Back.** Despite such daunting obstacles, it is not too late for the United States to reassert its broadcasting presence. Congress and the Administration must do the following:

- **Establish a doctrine for U.S. broadcasting.** Currently, the BBG lacks clearly defined strategic objectives. Congress and the Administration should delineate the mission of U.S. broadcasting, specify the rolls of each organization (i.e., VOA and semi-private entities), define the target audiences, and create a process for targeting, clearing, and assessing messages.
- **Reform the BBG.** Since its inception, the BBG has struggled to organize U.S. broadcasting entities. This has resulted in short-sighted program cuts and waste of public funds. Congress and the administration must seriously reexamine the structure and function of the BBG.

- **Modify broadcast funding.** Funding for broadcasting has increased significantly in recent years to over \$700 million this year.<sup>12</sup> Congress must ensure that this funding is spread to other regions outside the Middle East and Asia. In addition, it should reconsider the policy of outsourcing funding to semi-private entities rather than VOA.

**Lifeline of Freedom.** U.S. international broadcasting, and in particular Voice of America, is needed now more than ever. In its annual report on press freedom, Freedom House described the past year as one of “global decline.” Of a total of 64 countries surveyed, one-third had a press that was “not free.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, U.S. broadcasting must continue to serve as the lifeline of freedom in these regions, provide uncensored news, explain U.S. foreign policy, and tell America’s story.

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10. Peter Finn, “Russia’s Signal to Stations Is Clear: Cut US Radio,” *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2006 at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/06/AR2006070601760.html> (August 18, 2008).

11. Glassman, “U.S. International Broadcasting.”

12. *Ibid.*

13. Arch Puddington, “Findings of Freedom in the World 2008—Freedom in Retreat: Is the Tide Turning,” *Freedom House*, 2008, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=130&year=2008> (August 18, 2008).