

Wednesday, July 25, 2012

Central and East European Coalition Panel: The Impact of Russian “Soft” Power in Washington and Its Spillover Effects

Remarks by Jeffrey Trimble, Deputy Director, U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau

Good afternoon, and Nino, thank you for that kind introduction – and thank you as well for your years of dedicated service in support of U.S. international broadcasting. During my time at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty you regularly held my feet to the fire through your insightful, hard-hitting reviews of our content as an analyst with InterMedia.

It’s an honor to sit with such a distinguished group of panelists and under the auspices of the Central and East European Coalition. I’m proud to serve in U.S. international broadcasting, which continues its vital mission to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of democracy and freedom – a mission that contributed to democratic transformations and growth of civil society in many of the countries represented in the CEEC, and a mission that carries on still today in a number of the CEEC countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Belarus).

The views I express today are my own, and do not represent positions of the Broadcasting Board of Governors or the administration. I for one am happy to be a journalist, not a policy-maker.

I’ll focus my brief remarks – I’m eager to move on to discussion with panel members and to your questions – on the uneven playing field for soft power around the globe.

To pick up first on comments from previous panelists, what we’re seeing at work around the world today is that governments increasingly are determined to define themselves and their policies and beliefs rather than – as they view the situation – being defined by others, especially by outside media, and most especially by Western media. Taking full advantage of new technologies and new media – as well as traditional media – they are bringing their narratives directly to us in our living rooms and on our mobile devices. China’s leaders have been explicit about their aims along these lines, and they are putting their money where their mouths are, to the tune of \$7-8 billion in investments in international media ventures – and the evidence of this is not far away on New York Avenue, where CCTV has its impressive, well-equipped new bureau operation.

I think one the things about which we can be most proud as Americans is that we have nothing to fear from the free and open competition of ideas. This concept was woven into our national identity from the beginning and reflected most prominently in the First Amendment. Today that openness facilitates the soft power efforts of Russia, China, and other countries to propagate their perspectives here in the United States. These foreign broadcasters are limited in the United States only by commercial and market considerations that vary but are present in any free society. It’s true that foreign ownership of certain types of media outlets and licenses in the United States is not permitted; but this in no way constrains foreign media entities from seeking placement of their programs on a paid or unpaid basis on radio, television – be it broadcast, cable or satellite – print, or through the Internet. In fact a blanket ban

on domestic dissemination of content applies to only one international broadcaster: **us**. Under the 1948 U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act (“Smith-Mundt” Act), the international broadcasters of the United States may not disseminate their content within the U.S. The current BBG Board is seeking to remove those restrictions, which at a minimum are anachronistic in the Internet age. We can speak more about this during Q-and-A, if you wish, but Smith-Mundt now precludes us from competing with foreign information efforts in the U.S. even if it was deemed proper and important to do so.

I’m a bit envious of RT’s U.S. operations. It has well-staffed bureaus here in Washington DC and in New York City. According to its website, RT now has distribution in 10 U.S. states and here in Washington DC – a potential reach of 50 million in English and Spanish via cable or satellite. A June 2012 media analysis report from Nielson found that RT was the most-watched foreign news channel in five key U.S. markets in 2011 (New York, Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco) – however, the data on this has not been made publicly available. Back home RT soon will move into a new, state-of-the-art broadcast facility in Moscow.

Let’s compare RT’s situation that with distribution opportunities for U.S. international broadcasting in Russia – and the trends in Russia that brought us to where we are today. The situation is part and parcel of an atmosphere that has been manifested in actions by the Russian Duma in recent weeks: as you already know, the Duma has passed a series of laws – about NGOs, defamation and the Internet – that individually and taken together represent a severe, further downgrading of freedom of speech in Russia. The others panelists know more details about these laws and so can discuss them in detail, but I would say that what worries me the most about them is the vagueness with which they are written, a characteristic continued from Soviet times. The interpretation of these laws could cripple free expression in Russia.

As this group knows, U.S. international broadcasts via shortwave (SW) were aggressively jammed during the Soviet era. The jamming ended without warning in 1988. SW still was in wide use and VOA and RFE/RL drew significant audiences through the dramatic and historic collapse of Communism. Then, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the hectic, relatively open early years under Boris Yeltsin, opportunities arose for VOA and RFE/RL to place programming on domestic Russian media outlets, thereby increasing potential audiences significantly. By early 2005, the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were available through nearly 100 (97) local television and FM stations across Russia. Not bad. About five percent of adults in Russia reported in research tuning in regularly to our broadcasts – again, by global international media standards, not bad at all.

Today U.S. international broadcasts are available on a single FM station in northern Russia (Kola Peninsula) and two weak AM (medium-wave) stations in Moscow. There are no domestic TV broadcasts. The crackdown began following hard-hitting RFE/RL coverage of events in Chechnya, and was manifested through various administrative and regulatory actions that put pressure on our affiliate partners to drop our broadcasts.

There’s worse to come: separate and apart from the other legal actions, as of November 10, 2012, RFE/RL’s MW transmitter in Moscow will no longer be legal as legislation to enforce a law prohibiting

foreign-majority owned media entities to legally operate comes into effect. VOA has one transmitter in Moscow that is leased from Voice of Russia, but that agreement expires at the end of September and we're not sure what will happen there.

I should point out that we continue to broadcast RFE/RL Russian on shortwave, but that SW usage in Russia is extremely low and dropping. As a result, our strategy is to shift to digital and multimedia online content – the part of the medium spectrum that Russians turn to as the “most free,” even as trust in Russian television declines. So needless to say we are watching anxiously at latest moves in Russia to restrict Internet freedom.

I am pleased to report that we have been able to continue our journalistic operations in Russia. RFE/RL and VOA maintain bureaus in Moscow and have stringers throughout the country. But President Putin even has fired a shot across our bows on that score: in 2002, he rescinded a presidential decree of President Yeltsin permitting RFE/RL to maintain a bureau in Moscow – the only instance of which I'm aware in which a Russian president has rescinded an official decree of a previous Russian president. This move as yet has had no real effect, but there's no mistaking the sentiment behind the gesture.

Despite the challenges, we continue robust efforts to reach audiences in Russia: RFE/RL and VOA in Russian primarily through digital platforms; and RFE/RL in Tatar, Bashkir, Chechen, Avar and Circassian via shortwave. Irina will speak in more detail about VOA's Russian efforts.

This gives me the opportunity to talk briefly about the role of U.S. international broadcasting – in Russian, the former Soviet space, and elsewhere.

The U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 – our underlying legislation -- is very specific that we are not in the propaganda business and calls on us to do three things: news which is consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate; objective, and comprehensive; a balanced and comprehensive projection of United States thought and institutions, reflecting the diversity of United States culture and society; clear and effective presentation of the policies, including editorials, broadcast by the Voice of America, which present the views of the United States Government and responsible discussion and opinion on those policies.

With global press freedom at a two-decade low, our value-added is to support freedom of press and expression, essential to fostering and sustaining free societies. Promoting the development of healthy, stable, democratic societies through credible, accurate journalism supports U.S. national interests.

The Arab Awakening has pointed up the link between information and democratization and the urgency of the BBG's work across the Middle East. The ongoing struggle against extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan and active involvement of U.S. military forces compels a strong BBG presence. The potential of nuclear proliferation by North Korea and Iran, along with the repressive nature of both states, calls for robust, ongoing BBG media efforts. The unfolding humanitarian crisis in East Africa, where extremist elements also play a direct role, underscores the life-saving potential of agency service in that region. In other areas not engaged in conflict or crisis but nonetheless important because of the countries' role on the global stage and their continued denial of free press and free expression such as China and Russia,

the BBG needs to maintain a steady stream of news and other programs. Again, as a general proposition, wherever indigenous media remain under-developed and citizens lack access to vital news and information, BBG services will seek to play a role.

Put another way: we don't broadcast to Australia, or Denmark, or Canada, or France. So if Russia or other countries determine that it's important to pursue a soft power strategy in such countries, for the most part we – USIB – will not be there in any large capacity to present an alternative message. Our products are available on the Web, but again, they are not targeted to countries that are free and deeply anchored in Western institutions.

Contrast this with Voice of Russia, whose mission is described on its website “shaping Russia’s image worldwide and introducing Russia to the world and highlighting its opinions on global events.” That’s a more-targeted tasking to enhance and improve image, which is not in the mandate of U.S. international broadcasting. RT doesn’t feature a mission statement on its website – at least that I could find – but a study of the markets it is emphasizing shows the contrast with USIB. On its website, RT says it has an audience in Great Britain of 2 million; over seven million in six European countries including Germany, France and Italy – in South Africa, substantial audience. These all are countries to which the U.S. does not broadcast (beyond availability of commercial media outlets such as CNN International).

The situation is different in countries that are less free, and let me focus on the former Soviet space in order to keep the focus on Russia’s efforts. U.S. international broadcasting, consistent with its mission, is an alternative to Russia's soft power in areas where Russian media use remains significant. Just to take a quick tour of the region: USIB broadcasts in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Turkmen, Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uighur.

In this context I should mention that the Voice of Russia broadcasts in 39 languages worldwide (we do 59). VOR’s languages include Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Serbian, Slovenian, Czech, Albanian, Armenian, Chechen, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Georgian. In June 2012, Voice of Russia began broadcasting from London. In New York it is 24/7 on 1430 AM and here in Washington on 1390 AM.

I won't go into details about the domestic media environment in these countries because I'd be mostly quoting from Freedom House and we have a distinguished expert from Freedom House right here. But you know that things are bad elsewhere when a website editor in Belarus is arrested for publishing pictures of teddy bears.

I'll stop on that image, and will look forward to the presentations of the other panelists and to your questions and comments.