

To:  
Michael Pack, CEO, USAGM

CC:  
Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell  
Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi  
Senator Jim Risch  
Senator Bob Menendez  
Representative Eliot Engel  
Representative Michael McCaul  
Representative Marcy Kaptur  
Representative Adam Kinzinger  
Richard Stengel, Team Lead, Transition Agency Review Team  
Jefferson Brown, Office of Inspector General

December 30, 2020

Dear Mr. Pack,

We are writing to protest actions you are taking that will compromise the freedom from political influence that for seven decades has characterized Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as an independent surrogate news organization for countries with no free press of their own.

These actions include your recent distribution of a revised grant agreement with RFE/RL that has been unilaterally prepared by your office and is intended to revoke RFE/RL's financial autonomy and embed your appointees within both RFE/RL and its Board of Directors for a period of two years – an unprecedented departure from RFE/RL's tradition of working in a bipartisan manner with changing U.S. administrations. This conflicts with the appointment process enshrined in law and in our bylaws, and is precisely the kind of political power maneuver that RFE/RL regularly witnesses in places like Russia, Hungary, Belarus, and Tajikistan. We never thought we'd see it from our own oversight agency.

The new grant agreement is expected to go for signature to a freshly appointed president of RFE/RL who has been installed by yourself and your appointed Board of Directors. RFE/RL's senior managers object to many of the terms spelled out in this agreement, which if signed will strip this organization of nearly all of its financial and operational autonomy.

We regard these actions as an eleventh-hour effort to secure a hold over RFE/RL for a single U.S. political party at a moment when your own tenure as CEO of U.S. foreign broadcasting is likely to end with the transition between administrations in Washington. And we protest because this will directly put at risk the reputation RFE/RL enjoys with its local audiences as a source of objective news delivered without fear or favor and free of the influence of any interest group.

This all comes at a time when Russia is signing a law that is being used against RFE/RL's journalists in Russia to brand them as individual foreign agents, potentially subjecting them to criminal prosecution for doing their job and at a time where RFE/RL's journalists face arbitrary imprisonment, having already been stripped of their accreditation in neighboring Belarus.

Instead of using your resources to support RFE/RL, its brave frontline journalists, and its audiences in their time of need, you are eviscerating the independence of the very news organization you have been entrusted with safeguarding. You are putting at risk the reputation of a storied institution – a reputation that builds on 70 years of reporting the news objectively and without political influence.

On behalf of the News Division of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, we express our profound concern regarding your actions, and the actions of the RFE/RL board, in the six months since your appointment as CEO for the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

Your role as CEO is to ensure the smooth operations, security, and technical support for the constituent networks under your care. In the case of RFE/RL, that includes more than 1,000 on-the-ground journalists, 21 bureaus, and the daily delivery of fact-based news and information to audiences across 23 countries where democratic freedoms are under daily assault.

In your time in office, you have not only fallen short in your duty of care for RFE/RL. You have also taken deliberate steps to attack and weaken this organization, precisely at a time when the coronavirus pandemic and increasing aggressions in RFE/RL's target countries have left us at profound operational and security risk.

- In June 2020, you summarily dismissed our CEO and President Jamie Fly without cause or explanation.
- Defying longstanding practice, you have appointed a board of inexperienced partisan appointees with no industry or regional expertise – a board you yourself referred to as a “placeholder” board, and yet one which you are now apparently seeking to entrench for two years or more.
- You have used this board to summarily approve Ted Lipien, an untested, unvetted candidate with a history of often one-sided writing about RFE/RL and other U.S. international broadcasters.
- You have rescinded and publicly dismissed firewall language protecting our editorial independence, a critical cornerstone of credibility and trust with our audiences.
- You have failed to provide surge funding or meaningful legal support for our journalists in Belarus who have collectively spent more than 250 days behind bars as a consequence of their reporting on flawed presidential elections.
- In a year when RFE/RL honored its unfunded mandate and returned to Hungary, your mishandling of your relationship with Congress effectively barred us from much-needed outreach to stakeholders on the early impact of our work.
- You have done all this without a single Town Hall or listening engagement with the hundreds of journalists whose work, safety, and livelihood are deeply impacted by your decisions.

The year 2020 has been one of the most challenging years RFE/RL has faced in its 70-year history. But we can say without hesitation that our work has never been stronger or more important. From Russia to Kyrgyzstan, from Belarus to Iran, from Afghanistan to Kosovo, our reputation is the last line of defense in a very real battle between repressive autocracy and the humanistic democracy it is our mission to uphold. You should be doing everything in your power to celebrate and protect our journalists, rather than tearing down the institution that protects them and their vital mission.

At this critical moment in our history, we ask that you use the remaining days of your tenure to support a smooth, professional, and transparent transfer of power to the incoming USAGM administration – including the immediate revocation of the current grant agreement awaiting Mr. Lipien’s pen. As for Mr. Lipien, we at RFE/RL expect that as our newly

appointed president, he will avoid attempts to sign away our independence and instead act in the interests of RFE/RL's journalistic mission, which he professes to hold in high regard.

Many of our journalists have put their lives at risk for this mission. Some have died – five this year alone. Others have been jailed. We strongly believe that this mission – and our reputation – are worth fighting for.

Regards,

**The RFE/RL Editorial Board**

Daisy Sindelar, Editor in Chief

Patrick Boehler, Head of Digital Strategy

Jeremy Bransten, Regional Director for Europe

Hamid Ismailov, Regional Director for Central Asia

Kathleen Moore, Director, Central Newsroom

Charles Recknagel, Standards Editor

Kiryl Sukhotski, Regional Director for Europe and TV Production

**RFE/RL Language Service Directors**

Salimjon Aiubov, Service Director, Tajik Service

Ivan Bedrov, Service Director, Bulgarian Service

Mohammad Hossein Boghrati, Acting Service Director, Farda (Iran)

Pavel Butorin, Channel Director, Current Time TV Channel

Gyula Csak, Service Director, Hungarian Service

Torokul Doorov, Service Director, Kazakh Service

Venera Djumataeva, Service Director, Kyrgyz Service

Rim Gilfanov, Service Director, Tatar-Bashkir Service

Qadir Habib, Service Director, Afghan Service

Alexander Lukashuk, Service Director, Belarus Service

Zakir Magomedov, Senior Editor, North Caucasus Service

Ilkin Mammadov, Service Director, Azerbaijani Service

Mohammad Amin Mudaqiy, Service Director, Radio Mashaal (Pakistan)

Oana Serafim, Service Director, Moldovan Service

Andrey Shary, Service Director, Russian Service

Alisher Siddiq, Service Director, Uzbek Service

Harry Tamrazian, Service Director, Armenian Service

Elena Tanase, Service Director, Romanian Service

Arbana Vidishiqi, Service Director, Balkan Service

Farruh Yusupov, Service Director, Turkmen Service

Natela Zambakhidze, Service Director, Georgian Service