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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

June 23, 2020

Ambassador Stephen Akard
Acting Inspector General
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Acting Inspector General Akard,

On Wednesday, June 17, 2020 the new Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, Michael Pack, fired the heads of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, and dissolved the boards of each network.¹ It is also my understanding that standards editors have been reassigned from their duties at the networks.

I write to request that you review whether Mr. Pack's wholesale firing of the leadership of these networks violated a rule by the Broadcasting Board of Governors that went into effect on June 11, 2020, titled "Firewall and Highest Standards of Professional Journalism."²

The rule revised "regulations to clarify the practical meaning and impact of the statutory firewall contained within the United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended."³ Specifically, the rule states that "this 'firewall' is understood to be violated when any person within the Executive Branch or a Network, but outside the newsroom, attempts to direct, pressure, coerce, threaten, interfere with, or otherwise impermissibly influence any of the USAGM networks, including their leadership, officers, employees or staff, in the performance of their journalistic and broadcasting duties and activities."⁴ On its face, the firing of the leadership of each network and dissolution of the boards appear to constitute an attempt to "interfere with" and "impermissibly influence" all "of the USAGM networks, including their leadership, officers, [and] employees ... in the performance of their journalistic and broadcasting duties and activities." Furthermore, the absence of standards editors in each of these news organizations raises questions about accountability mechanisms for journalistic integrity.

¹ David Folkenflik, "Trump's New Foreign Broadcasting CEO Fires News Chiefs, Raising Fears Of Meddling." *NPR*, June 18, 2020.

² "Firewall and Highest Standards of Professional Journalism." A Rule by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, posted to the Federal Register on June 15, 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

While the rule states that the “firewall does not prevent a USAGM CEO or Board from undertaking the same type of direction and oversight that those in equivalent leadership positions in an organization overseeing other reputable news organizations may provide, in a manner consistent with the highest standards of professional journalism,” that exception does not appear to apply to Mr. Pack’s actions on June 17, as he presented no cause for firing the network leaders, dissolving their boards, and reassigning the standards editors.⁵ Instead, these actions appear to be entirely inconsistent with the highest standards of professional journalism.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and I look forward to the results of your review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robert Menendez
Ranking Member

⁵ Ibid.