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U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

Enhanced Measure of Local Media Conditions Would Facilitate Decisions to Terminate Language Services



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Highlights of [GAO-04-374](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

U.S. INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

Enhanced Measure of Local Media Conditions Would Facilitate Decisions to Terminate Language Services

Why GAO Did This Study

In its fiscal year 2004 budget request to Congress, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (the Board) proposed the elimination of 17 Central and Eastern European language services managed by the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in order to free resources for higher-priority initiatives such as the war on terrorism. GAO was asked to examine (1) how the Board determines which language services should be proposed for reduction or termination and (2) the extent to which local media conditions are considered before a termination proposal is made. In addition, GAO's report provides summary analysis and conclusions relating to the media conditions in three countries impacted by the Board's language service termination decisions.

What GAO Recommends

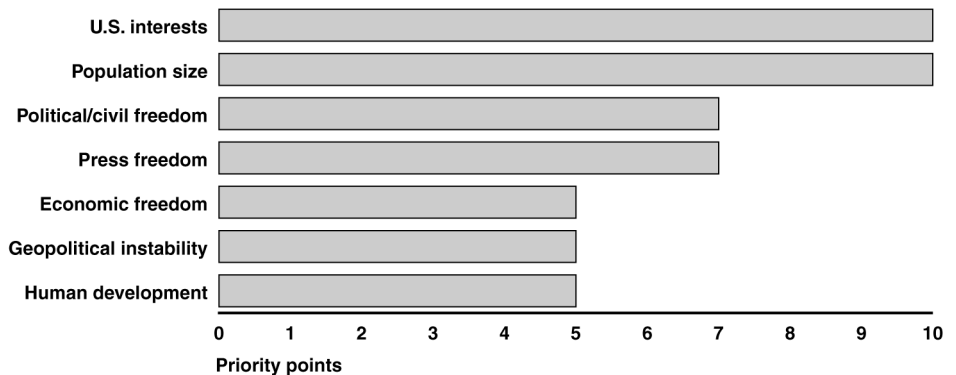
GAO recommends that the Board modify its language service review process to include an assessment of whether the domestic media in target countries provides accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to the national audience.

What GAO Found

The Board identifies language service reductions and eliminations through its annual language service review process and follow-up consultations with the State Department and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The language service review process provides an analytical framework for making such decisions based on a number of decision criteria. The principal criteria used by the Board are language priority and language service impact. Other decision criteria considered by the Board include whether overlapping language services broadcast to the same target areas. Final resource allocation decisions and proposals are made after the Board consults with the State Department on foreign policy considerations and with OMB on budget-related issues.

The Board's current measure of press freedom does not adequately address the congressional concern that RFE/RL language service should not be terminated until a domestic media exists that provides accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to a national audience. The Board evaluates local media conditions primarily through an annual survey of press freedom conducted by the media watch group Freedom House. This press freedom rating, along with some adjustments made by the Board, constitutes one of seven factors used to develop a priority list of broadcast languages. While the Board's press freedom measure addresses the issue of press freedom, it does not specifically measure whether domestic media provide news that is accurate, balanced, and comprehensive. GAO's analysis of relevant data sources and discussions with agency officials indicate that among the services targeted for elimination, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania stand out as having the most unstable media environments.

Ranking Factors for Prioritizing Broadcast Language Services



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-374.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

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Abbreviations

EMU	European Multimedia Unit
IBB	International Broadcasting Bureau
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board
MSI	Media Sustainability Index
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
VOA	Voice of America

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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

February 26, 2004

The Honorable Richard G. Lugar
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In its fiscal year 2004 budget request to Congress, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (the Board) proposed the elimination of 17 Central and Eastern European language services affecting Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The language services targeted for termination, which include 10 Voice of America (VOA) and 7 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty services (RFE/RL), as well as other reductions, are estimated to generate savings of up to \$8.8 million for fiscal year 2004 and recurring annual savings of about \$12.1 million that could be redirected to higher-priority initiatives.¹ With passage of the Fiscal Year 2004 Consolidated Appropriations Act, House and Senate conferees adopted the Board's proposal to terminate service to those Central and Eastern European nations that have been invited to become new members states of the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and have received a Freedom House press freedom rating equal to that of the United States. Conferees expressed the expectation that broadcast services in Romanian and Croatian should continue.² They also established an expectation that the Board will continue to monitor press freedom conditions in the region and around the world and will advise the Committees on Appropriations regarding any changes to language service priorities.

You expressed interest in the process the Board used to make language service elimination decisions and whether the process was applied to the

¹Estimated savings include reductions to VOA Armenian and Ukrainian and modifications to RFE/RL Armenian, Georgian, Serbian, and Ukrainian language services.

²According to a senior Board official, the agency intends to eliminate VOA's service to Romania, while retaining RFE/RL's Romanian service to Moldova and very limited news feeds and service to a reduced number of affiliates in Romania. The Board intends to eliminate RFE/RL's Croatian service to the Balkans region while retaining VOA's Croatian service to Croatia.

17 language services targeted for termination. You also asked if the Board's review process included an adequate review of local media conditions, which can enable and support the development of democratic societies. As agreed with your staff, this report examines (1) how the Board determines which language services are candidates for reduction or elimination and (2) the extent to which the Board evaluates local media conditions in making such decisions. In addition, we provide summary information on media conditions in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, which appear to be particularly underdeveloped.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed documentation on language service reductions and eliminations over the past 4 years and discussed the Board's decision-making process with individual Board members, senior Board planners, senior managers and language service chiefs from VOA and RFE/RL, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and State Department officials, media experts at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and a number of private sector researchers and media development experts including Freedom House, InterNews, InterMedia, and the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). Our analysis included a review of the approach the Board uses to assess language service priority and impact, with a particular focus on its measure of press freedom to see if local media conditions were adequately assessed.

Results in Brief

The Board makes decisions about which language services to reduce or eliminate based on the results of its language service review process and follow-up consultations with the State Department and OMB. Beginning with its annual language service review, the Board evaluates each of its language services using an analytical framework that incorporates as many objective decision criteria as possible to help guide such decisions. Ranked priority and impact lists are developed using such measures as U.S. strategic interest in the countries where the service is broadcast, press freedom, political freedom, geopolitical instability, and population size. Other decision criteria considered by the Board include whether overlapping language services exist in the targeted countries and the potential impact a reduction or elimination could have on the Board's ability to meet surge capacity requirements in times of crisis. Lower-priority or lower-impact services become candidates for cuts or elimination, usually to fund higher-priority or new initiatives. Final resource reallocation decisions are made after the Board's proposed adjustments are coordinated with the State Department and OMB. In the case of the 17 language services targeted for elimination, the Board used

this analytical framework to determine that these services should be terminated to free funds for higher-priority initiatives, such as the war on terrorism.

The Board evaluates local media conditions primarily through a yearly survey of press freedom conditions that considers a number of factors but does not adequately measure whether the press is responsible and professional. Currently, the Board relies mostly on the annual press freedom survey conducted by a nonprofit group called Freedom House. This survey examines the extent to which the legal, political, and economic environment in each country supports press freedom. However, it does not address whether national media provide accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information, factors that Congress has stipulated it expects the Board to consider before terminating RFE/RL language services.

Our analysis indicates that among the services targeted for elimination by the Board, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania stand out as having the most unstable media environments. This conclusion is based on published press freedom data and analyses from various sources; USAID and State Department media development efforts in these countries; and comments from Board, VOA, and RFE/RL officials regarding the relative importance of the broadcast operations targeted for elimination.

This report makes a recommendation to the Chairman of the Broadcasting Board that the Board enhance its measure of local media conditions, which would improve its language service review process and facilitate decisions to terminate language services. The Board generally agreed with our findings, conclusions, and recommendation. We have reprinted the Board's comments in appendix III.

Background

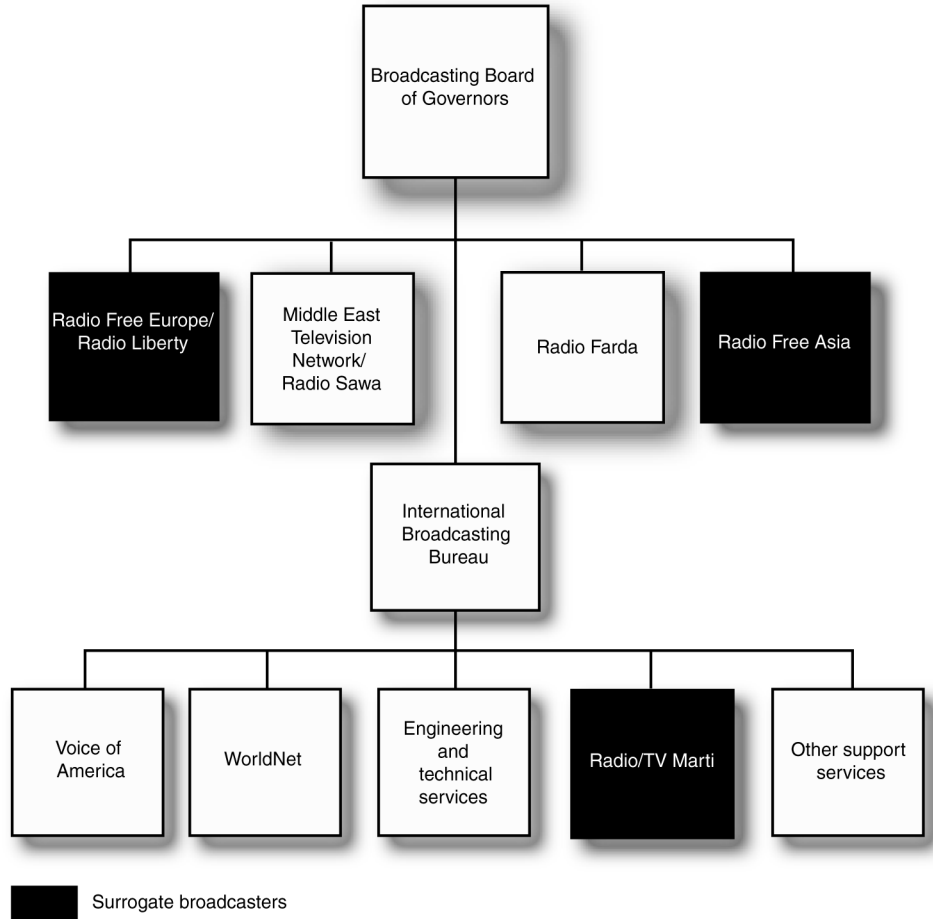
The Broadcasting Board of Governors oversees the efforts of all nonmilitary international broadcasting, which reaches an estimated audience of more than 100 million people each week in more than 125 markets worldwide. The Board manages the operations of the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB),³ VOA, WorldNet Television, the Middle East Television Network (which consists of Alhurra—the Board's

³IBB provides transmission services for all Board broadcasts and support services to VOA, WorldNet, and Radio/TV Marti.

new Arabic language television station—and Radio Sawa), Radio Farda, Radio/TV Marti, RFE/RL, and Radio Free Asia (RFA) with an annual budget of over half a billion dollars. The latter three organizations function as “surrogate” broadcasters, designed to temporarily replace the local media of countries where a free and open press does not exist and to promote democratic values and institutions by disseminating factual information and ideas.

Each broadcast entity is organized around a collection of language services that produces program content. In some countries, more than one entity broadcasts in the same language. These “overlapping” services are designed to meet the distinct missions of each broadcast entity. Figure 1 illustrates the Board’s current organizational structure.

Figure 1: U.S. International Broadcasting Chart



Source: GAO analysis.

Given the temporary nature of the surrogate services, Congress has outlined broad sunset provisions for each service. The U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, as amended,⁴ contains a sense of Congress⁵

⁴Title III of P.L. 103-236, as amended by P.L. 106-113, Appendix G, Section 503.

⁵A “sense of Congress” is not legally binding on an agency as is the case with legislation signed by the President. Although a sense of Congress has no force in law, agencies typically monitor such provisions closely since Congress can change an informal expectation into a statutory provision if agencies ignore congressional guidance.

statement that RFE/RL should continue to broadcast to the peoples of Central Europe, Eurasia, and the Persian Gulf until such time as a particular nation has (1) clearly demonstrated the successful establishment and consolidation of democratic rule and (2) firmly established a widely accessible domestic media that provides accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to the national audience. When a particular nation meets both of these conditions, RFE/RL should phase out broadcasting to that nation.

Congress has not stipulated that similar press freedom conditions should exist prior to the termination of RFA or Radio/TV Marti. However, sunset provisions or provisions for termination have been established for each of these entities. In RFA's case, the Broadcasting Act states that the Board may not make any grants for operating RFA after September 30, 2009.⁶ In Radio/TV Marti's case, Congress has stated that broadcast operations should be terminated when a democratically elected government takes power in Cuba.⁷ VOA, charged with clearly presenting and discussing U.S. policies, has no sunset provision.

Candidates for Reduction and Possible Termination Are Identified through Language Service Review Process and External Consultations

The Board uses the results of its language service review and external consultations with the State Department and OMB to identify candidates for reduction and possible termination. The language service review process considers a number of factors to help guide such decisions. One key consideration is the position of a language service within the language service priority/impact framework developed by the Board. The Board's language service review process also involves external consultations with the State Department and OMB to ensure that its tentative resource reallocation decisions are consistent with U.S. foreign policy objectives and the administration's budget priorities. Language service review has generally led to a reduction in the size of language services to fund higher-priority broadcast initiatives. For example, between 1999 and 2002, the Board reallocated about \$19.7 million in program funds from more than 25 language services as a result of this process. Although the Board's 2002 language service review process culminated in a decision to reallocate \$8 million internally to fund priority needs in Iran, through discussions with OMB, the Board later decided to propose the elimination of 17 of its lowest-

⁶See 22 U.S.C. 6208(f).

⁷See 22 U.S.C. 6037(c), 6063(c)(3).

priority language services⁸ to free resources for priority areas such as the war on terrorism.⁹

Language Service Review Triggers Resource Reallocation Decisions

The Broadcasting Act of 1994, passed in the aftermath of the Cold War, embodies the expectation that the newly created Broadcasting Board of Governors will take stock of changing political environments and their impacts on U.S. international broadcasting priorities. The act calls for the Board “to review, evaluate, and determine, at least annually, after consultation with the Secretary of State, the addition or deletion of language services.”¹⁰ The Board’s annual language service review process directly responds to this congressional mandate, which it has interpreted to allow the expansion and reduction of language services as well as outright additions and deletions.

The Board’s language review process begins with an assessment of its language priorities and the impact of its language services. Over the past several years, the Board has developed a complex system for assigning priority and impact ratings to broadcast languages and services, respectively.¹¹ The Board has attempted to create an analytical framework that incorporates as many objective decision criteria as possible to help guide reallocation decisions. Seven component indexes are constructed to determine the Board’s language priorities: U.S. interests, population size, political/civil freedom, press freedom, economic freedom, geopolitical instability, and human development. These components are weighted on a scale of up to 10 points. U.S. strategic interests and population size may be given a score of up to 10 points each; political/civil freedom and press freedom up to 7 points each; and economic freedom, geopolitical instability, and human development up to 5 points each. The Board

⁸The Greek and Thai language services were removed from the list of lowest-ranked services due to practical concerns that terminating services might result in the withdrawal of transmission rights in each of these countries.

⁹Board officials noted that these terminations proposals were generally preceded by several years of program cuts as media conditions in the region stabilized. As shown in appendix II, most VOA and RFE/RL services targeted for elimination have had their budgets reduced since 2000.

¹⁰See 22 U.S.C. 6204(a)(4).

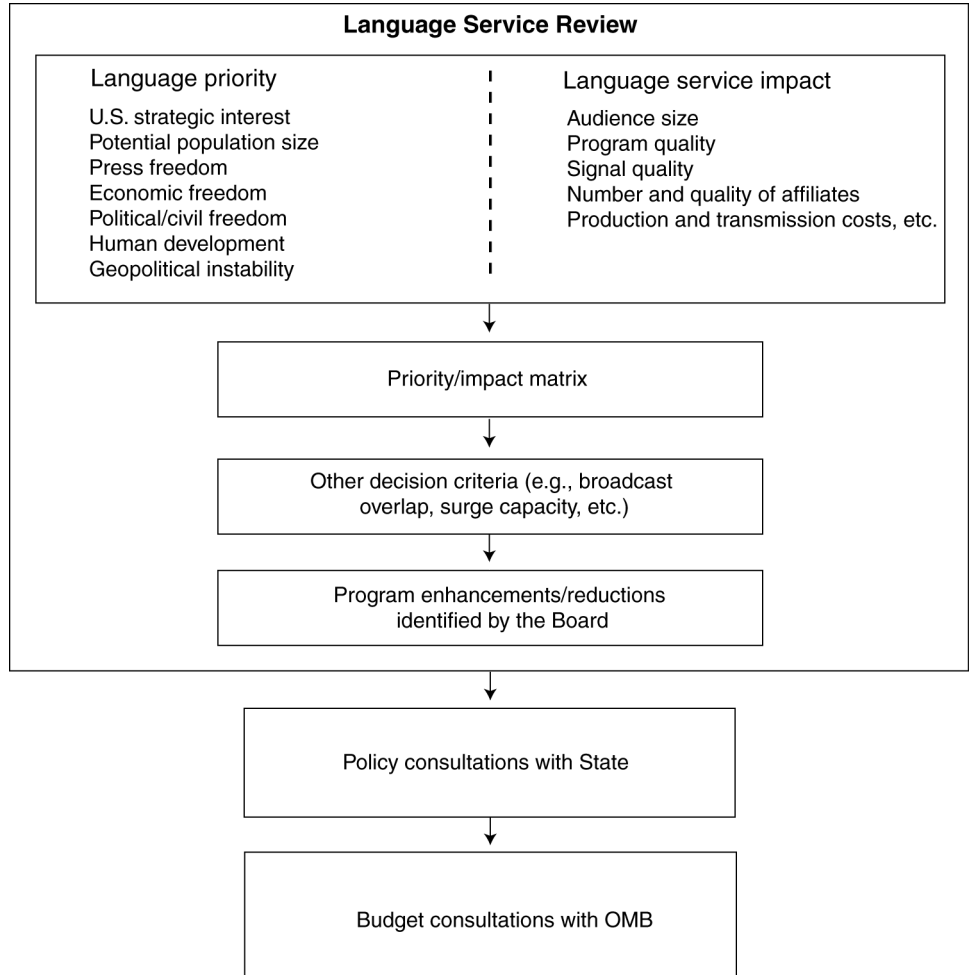
¹¹Each of the Board’s 65 broadcast languages receives a priority score. An impact score is assigned to most of the Board’s 97 language services where data is available.

considers additional factors to arrive at an impact score for each language service, including audience size, program quality, transmission effectiveness, number and quality of broadcast affiliates, and production and transmission costs. Appendix I provides a detailed description of each evaluation factor, information on data sources, and a discussion of the methodology used to weight and assign priority and impact scores.

The position of a language service within the Board's language service priority/impact matrix serves as a focal point for subsequent discussions on language service enhancements and offsetting reductions or eliminations that are used to pay for these enhancements. The Board views lower-priority languages or lower-impact services as potential candidates for elimination or reductions. In addition to language service priority and impact scores, the Board considers a number of additional criteria in making tentative resource reallocation decisions. These factors include broadcast service overlap, significant mismatches between current funding levels and language priorities, the potential impact that a program reduction or elimination could have on the Board's ability to meet surge broadcast requirements in a crisis situation, and whether the same level of impact can be achieved at a lower cost.

Figure 2 illustrates key components of the process including external consultations with the State Department and OMB.

Figure 2: Language Service Review and Resource Reallocation Process



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

External groups have evaluated the Board's language service review process, and improvements have been made to the system. For example, the Board periodically submits its process to external review and validation by international broadcasting experts from academia and the field. In addition, the Board adopted a prior GAO recommendation that it institute a standardized approach to conducting program quality assessments as part of its language service impact rating process.¹² Board officials told us that other improvements are planned, including linking the language service review process more closely to the budget process, incorporating stakeholder input earlier in the decision-making process, and further refining the language priority index to include a more detailed assessment of local economic conditions and corruption.

Millions of Dollars Reallocated, but Few Terminations Proposed Prior to 2002

The resource reallocation process followed by the Board has generally led to a reduction in the size of language services to fund higher-priority broadcast initiatives and services. Since initiating the language service review process in 1999, the Board has completed three rounds of language service reviews, the most recent ending in 2002.¹³ From 1999 to 2002, the Board has reduced the scope of operations of more than 25 language services and reallocated about \$19.7 million in funds, with the majority redirected toward central Asia and the Middle East. For example, the Board created and fully funded its \$8 million Radio Farda service to Iran during its 2002 language service review and partially funded the Radio Sawa service to the Middle East in its 2001 review. In total, the Board has eliminated three language services since the language service review process was initiated.¹⁴

¹²The issue of program quality measurement and language service review is discussed in greater detail in U.S. General Accounting Office, *U.S. International Broadcasting: Strategic Planning and Performance Management System Could Be Improved*, [GAO/NSIAD-00-222](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2000). The Board's strategic planning and performance management system is discussed in detail in *U.S. International Broadcasting: New Strategic Approach Focuses on Reaching Large Audiences but Lacks Measurable Program Objectives*, [GAO-03-772](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2003).

¹³The Board is in the process of finalizing its 2003 language service review recommendations and findings.

¹⁴VOA Portuguese to Brazil was eliminated as a direct result of language service review. VOA's Arabic service (with the exception of a minimally staffed Web site) and RFE/RL's Persian service were reconstituted as Radio Sawa and Radio Farda, respectively.

Decision to Terminate Services Follows 2002 Review

While the Board’s 2002 language service review process culminated in a decision to reallocate \$8 million, Board officials told us that through discussions with OMB the Board decided that its lower-priority services should be considered for elimination in order to free additional resources for other higher-priority initiatives. While the primary basis for selecting services for termination was language priority, Board officials noted that they did consider the other decision criteria incorporated in the language service review process. For example, the Board recommended that VOA’s Croatian service continue broadcasting while eliminating an “overlapping” service offered by RFE/RL. In the case of Romania, the Board proposed the elimination of both VOA and RFE/RL’s service to Romania but decided to retain a Romanian language broadcast service to Moldova.

As shown in table 1, a total of 10 VOA and 7 RFE/RL language services—affecting 11 countries—have been targeted for elimination. Appendix II provides detailed information on the budget, staffing, priority, impact, and transmission hour trends for the 17 services targeted for termination.

Table 1: Targeted Language Service Eliminations

Language	Voice of America	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
Bulgarian	Eliminate	Eliminate
Croatian	Retain	Eliminate
Czech	Eliminate	No service
Estonian	Eliminate	Eliminate
Hungarian	Eliminate	No service
Latvian	Eliminate	Eliminate
Lithuanian	Eliminate	Eliminate
Polish	Eliminate	No service
Romanian	Eliminate	Eliminate ^a
Slovak	Eliminate	Eliminate
Slovene	Eliminate	No service

Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

^aRadio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Romanian language service to Moldova will be retained, along with very limited news feeds and service to a reduced number of affiliates in Romania.

Board's Press Freedom Measure Does Not Address Media Responsibility or Professionalism

The Board's measure of press freedom evaluates a number of factors but does not measure whether the press acts responsibly and professionally. The Board's press freedom measure index relies heavily on Freedom House's press freedom index, which focuses on free speech issues, the plurality of news sources, whether media are economically independent from the government, and whether supporting institutions and laws function in the professional interest of the press. The Freedom House index is used and respected by media groups around the world. However, it does not assess whether domestic media provide accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information.

Board's Press Freedom Measure Relies Heavily on Freedom House Data

The Board largely depends on Freedom House's annual press freedom index of local media conditions to help to prioritize services during language service review. To arrive at a numerical evaluation of the overall level of press freedom for a particular country, Freedom House examines three broad categories—the legal environment, political influences, and economic pressures. Over the years, the Board has made selected enhancements to its press freedom measure to account for several factors that Freedom House's index does not consider. It reviews reports issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists and by Reporters Without Borders to account for cases involving the killing, injury, or imprisonment of journalists. It also reviews narrative country reports from Freedom House's annual press freedom survey to account for the relative unavailability of broadcast news in a particular country. If necessary, the Board makes adjustments to a country's press freedom score if these additional reports show negative trends in any of these areas. Finally, the Board also uses its geopolitical instability index, another measure for assigning language priorities, to account for trends in press freedom over time.

Measure Does Not Assess Provision of Accurate, Balanced, Comprehensive News

While the Freedom House press freedom index is used and respected by media groups around the world, neither it nor the Board's press freedom index incorporates an assessment of whether domestic media provide accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information. This is a significant omission in the Board's index, given the sense of Congress that RFE/RL's broadcast operations should not be terminated until a country's domestic media provides this level of coverage to the national audience. Board officials acknowledged that their existing press freedom measure could be updated to include information on media responsibility and professional quality. However, they noted that practical obstacles would

need to be addressed, such as how to define such terms as “accurate” and “balanced” and whether such information can reasonably be developed to cover the Board’s worldwide operations.

We found that the Media Sustainability Index (MSI), developed by IREX, is intended to provide a more in-depth measure of local media conditions than the Board’s. The MSI was developed at USAID’s request to supplement the press freedom measures issued by groups such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders and help guide its media development program decisions.¹⁵ The MSI examines 38 separate media indicators grouped under five broad assessment categories: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions. Several indicators tracked in the MSI correlate closely with the Board’s broadcasting mission and the sense of Congress statement regarding the termination of RFE/RL services. For example, under the professional journalism category, the MSI considers whether reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced. It also considers whether journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards and whether entertainment programming has eclipsed news and information programming. None of these measures of press responsibility and professional quality is covered by the Freedom House index.¹⁶

¹⁵IREX designed a more comprehensive measure of whether a sustainable media—characterized by all of the factors that shape a modern independent media—existed in target areas to gauge a country’s progress in media development.

¹⁶Freedom House’s press freedom index primarily overlaps with the free speech component of the MSI, with only limited coverage in the other four categories.

The MSI covers 20 markets in Europe and Eurasia and, according to USAID, its preparation costs approximately \$70,000 each year.¹⁷ The Board currently has broadcast operations in all of the countries covered by the MSI. While this set represents only a fraction of the Board's broadcast operations, use of the MSI could provide a starting point for collecting information on a few of the countries impacted by the Board's language service termination decisions.¹⁸ In addition, the MSI could provide potential insights for the Board in developing its own methodology for evaluating the responsibility of domestic media outlets and whether journalists meet accepted professional standards of quality.¹⁹ Despite the potential use of the MSI to help evaluate and guide the Board's media measurement efforts, we did not independently validate the accuracy of this measure or assess the cost/benefit implications of applying this measurement approach to the Board's operations.

Media Conditions in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania Raise Concerns

The Board's 2002 priority ranking of languages indicates that Bulgarian, Croatian, and Romanian stand apart from the other languages targeted for termination by a significant point gap. This gap was largely attributed to comparatively worse press freedom, political freedom, and economic freedom scores in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, and elevated U.S. strategic interest scores that suggest particular caution should be exercised with regard to terminating broadcast services in these three languages. Our review of available data outside of the Board's ranking confirms that media conditions are less stable in these countries compared to the other countries affected by the Board's language service termination decisions. We base this conclusion on (1) published press freedom data and analyses from various sources; (2) USAID and State Department media development funding efforts; and (3) comments from the Board, VOA, and RFE/RL

¹⁷IREX is currently discussing the potential of private funding to expand the scope of the MSI.

¹⁸Three of the 20 markets covered by the MSI are also on the list of countries affected by the Board's proposed language service terminations—Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania.

¹⁹Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* studies, which assess the level of progress toward democratization and rule of law in 27 Central European, Eastern European, and former Soviet Union countries, provide an additional framework for assessing local media. Since 2000, the study has annually evaluated 10 contributing factors for independent media, including the legal framework and present state of press freedom, harassment of journalists, editorial independence, the emergence of a financially viable private press, and Internet access for private citizens.

regarding the relative importance of the broadcast operations targeted for elimination.

Borderline Press Conditions in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania Suggested by Various Data Sources

Recent press freedom ratings, various studies and reports, and comments from agency officials suggest that media conditions are not fully stable in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania.

Press Freedom Ratings

Freedom House rated press conditions as only “partly free” in Croatia and Romania. Bulgaria was rated as “free;” however, it was assigned a score of 30—just one point short of the cut point for labeling a country’s press situation as “partly free.” The other services targeted for elimination fell comfortably above this cut point, with “free” scores ranging from 17 to 23. The latest press freedom ranking from the group Reporters Without Borders showed that Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania ranked below the other countries affected by the Board’s language service termination decisions. Bulgaria tied for 34th place, Romania tied for 59th place, and Croatia tied for 69th place out of a total of 166 countries.

IREX’s Media Sustainability Index shows that local media in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania have not yet achieved sustainability in any of the five categories the index tracks—free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions. While this index was developed to meet USAID’s specific program needs, these media sustainability ratings provide additional context for evaluating the Board’s termination proposals.

Studies and Reports

A review of the annual country reports prepared by Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists reveals a pattern of ongoing problems with the press in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania. Table 2 provides sample excerpts from these reports.

Table 2: Press Watch Group Excerpts from Calendar Year 2003 Annual Country Reports

Country	Freedom House	Reporters Without Borders	Committee to Protect Journalists
Bulgaria	“Although the press remains lively and diverse, press freedom declined for a second year as a result of continued government efforts to influence state and private media.”	“New press laws are having trouble being accepted and controversy continues about the appointments of heads of public media.”	“Regulation of the state media remains politicized.... Politically motivated libel lawsuits and violent attacks continued to discourage reporters from covering sensitive issues, such as corruption.”
Croatia	“While the government has substantially expanded the boundaries of press freedom in recent years, the events of 2002 demonstrated mixed progress.”	“Since the Tudjman era (1991-99) ended, great strides have been made in press freedom, especially legally, but several provisions in the law about insults, defamation, access to information, and protection of state and military secrets continue to restrict journalists.”	“Although Croatia has been invited to join the European Union in 2004, powerful far-right opposition, bitter rivalries in the ruling reformist coalition, and a judiciary in need of reform continue to frustrate the country’s lively and influential press.”
Romania	“Press freedom declined slightly in 2002 as a result of new legislation on access to information and continued political influence over state media.”	“New laws curbing freedom to inform the public and to be informed were passed in 2002. Pressure from the authorities increased, reducing the chances of expressing political opposition or criticism that might give a ‘bad image’ of the country at a time when Romania is negotiating to join NATO and the European Union.”	“Government officials, wary of any media coverage that could potentially threaten the country’s efforts to join NATO and the European Union, used threats and intimidation to promote docile reporting—resulting in increased self-censorship in 2002.”

Sources: Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

A review of Freedom House’s *Nations in Transit 2003* study illustrated a worsening (comparing 2002 to 2003 data) in the scores for independent media development in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania. Freedom House noted that questionable court decisions against journalists, newspapers, magazines, and publishers continue to have a chilling effect on reporting in Croatia and that unprofessional, false, and inflammatory reporting is occurring. It also reported that in Bulgaria, electronic media are not still fully free of state influence and interference and that the government has tried to use its power to grant broadcast licenses as a lure to influence the electronic media. Freedom House also noted that Romania’s legislative framework for independent media, partly inherited from the Communist period, fails to meet European standards.

In a recent GAO report on NATO enlargement, we found many of the same trends for the media in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania.²⁰ For example, we found that constitutional guarantees for civil liberties may be limited in practice in Bulgaria, including the guarantees of freedom of the media, and that the effectiveness of efforts to address these issues was questioned. We also noted that the 2001 International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights²¹ reported assaults against journalists in Bulgaria and continuing undue governmental influence over the media, especially the electronic media. In Romania, we found that legal provisions raised concerns about possible limits to freedom of expression and the media. For example, while the constitution provides for freedom of expression and the media, it prohibits “defamation of the country” and “offense to authority.” In addition, we noted that Human Rights Watch²² reported in 2002 that authorities in Romania used these kinds of constitutional curbs on free expression to interfere with journalists’ work.

**USAID and State
Department Media
Development Programs Still
Active in Bulgaria, Croatia,
and Romania**

Ongoing media development efforts by USAID and the State Department suggest that local media conditions are still considered unstable in Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania.²³ USAID officials said they continue to fund media development projects in Bulgaria and Croatia. Similarly, State Department officials noted that its media development efforts continue in each of these countries. According to State Department country experts, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania represent marginal candidates for elimination compared with the other countries affected by the Board’s language service termination decisions. State Department officials noted that Croatia has not yet been invited to join NATO or the European Union. Bulgaria and Romania are being considered for membership in the

²⁰See U.S. General Accounting Office, *NATO Enlargement: Report Is Responsive to Senate Requirements, but Additional Information Could Be Useful*, [GAO-03-255](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2002).

²¹The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights is a self-governing group of nongovernmental, not-for-profit organizations that works to protect human rights throughout Europe, North America, and the central Asian republics formed from the territories of the former Soviet Union.

²²Human Rights Watch is an international nongovernmental organization that monitors the protection of civil liberties and human rights around the world.

²³Media development efforts are part of U.S. assistance to Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, and the Caucasus region, which signify U.S. commitment to support the transition of former Communist nations to democracies.

European Union in 2007, while the other affected countries have been invited to join the European Union in 2004. State officials noted that both NATO and European Union admission processes consider the status of press freedom and civil society as part of their evaluation criteria.

Agency Officials Question Selected Eliminations

While senior Board officials generally concurred on the need to cut language services to fund higher-priority broadcast needs, several officials questioned the advisability of eliminating the Bulgarian, Croatian, or Romanian services at this time. For example, the Board Chairman told us he had “second thoughts” about the proposal to eliminate the Bulgarian service on the basis of a recent report by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press on Bulgarian public opinion regarding freedom and democracy issues.²⁴ The Chairman was concerned about public apathy regarding basic democratic rights and principles and questioned whether now is the best time to discontinue U.S. broadcast efforts. In another case, a senior Board planner noted that the Board did have concerns about the proposal to eliminate services to Bulgaria and Romania, given the status of press freedom and civil society development in these countries.

Senior VOA managers were not opposed to the elimination of the targeted VOA language services (that is, the Estonian service and the nine services consolidated in VOA’s European Multimedia Unit, or EMU).²⁵ This attitude appeared to reflect recognition that these services largely represented a Cold War legacy and that they are streaming only about 15 minutes a day of content to EMU’s Web site. RFE/RL managers were more insistent about the need to continue their broadcast operations, which are better staffed and more robust than VOA’s. However, RFE/RL managers conceded that a priority order existed with regard to the need to retain language services, with the Baltic services rated as lowest priority; the Slovak service in the middle; and the Bulgarian, Croatian, and Romanian services representing the highest-priority need. Program officials also pointed out that the Croatian service is an integral part of a multilanguage South Slavic service that reaches audiences dispersed across the region including in such countries as Serbia.

²⁴The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, *Views of a Changing World* (Washington, D.C.: June 2003).

²⁵EMU consolidates the Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, and Slovene services.

Conclusions

Language service reduction and elimination decisions are made on the basis of the Board's language service review process and follow-up consultations with the State Department and OMB. The Board has strived to create an analytical framework that incorporates as many objective decision criteria as possible to help guide such decisions. Lower-priority/lower-impact services are candidates for cuts or elimination generally to fund higher-priority services and other enhancements. The Board used its language priority data and other evaluation factors to propose the elimination of 17 VOA and RFE/RL language services in order to reallocate funds to other needs. A closer look at the Board's press freedom measure revealed that it did not fully take into account whether a country's domestic media provides accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to the national audience before RFE/RL services are terminated. An improved press freedom measure could both influence the relative priority ranking of all language services and help provide a specific basis for determining whether local press freedom conditions conform to a sense of Congress provision regarding when RFE/RL language services should be terminated. Such information is currently developed by IREX for some of the Board's broadcast countries.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To improve the language service review process and facilitate future termination decisions, we recommend that the Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors modify the current process to include an assessment of whether domestic media provide accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information to national audiences.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

The Broadcasting Board of Governors provided written comments on a draft of this report. The Board concurred with our report recommendation²⁶ but noted concerns with our report title, our use of the term "expectation of Congress" to describe the criteria supporting the need to develop an improved measure of domestic media conditions, and the lack of current information regarding congressional action taken on the 17 language services targeted for elimination. In response to these comments,

²⁶We removed a second report recommendation that the Board review its proposed language terminations in light of the information discussed in our report. As noted in the Board's comments, final funding action taken by Congress regarding the proposed terminations overtook this recommendation.

we revised the title to better focus on our primary concern, that is that the Board develop an enhanced measure of local media conditions. We replaced the term “expectation of Congress” with “congressional concern” and “sense of Congress” throughout the report and added a footnote to explain the latter term. Finally, we updated our report to incorporate the latest action taken by Congress with regard to the 17 language services targeted for elimination. Other technical changes obtained in discussion with the Board were incorporated in our report where appropriate. The comments provided by the Board are reprinted in appendix III.

Scope and Methodology

To examine how the Board uses its language service review process to determine which language services are candidates for elimination, we interviewed senior Board planners and reviewed available documentation and analyses prepared for each of the Board’s four language service reviews held since 1999. We conducted a general review of the methodology used by the Board to develop language service priority and impact rankings. While we did not validate this process, we analyzed its data outputs, interviewed Board officials and outside experts, and considered reviews and critiques of the methodology—including a 2000 review by three independent sources.

To determine the extent to which local media conditions are evaluated during the language service review process, we examined the methodology and data sources used by the Board to assess and rate press freedom conditions on a country-by-country basis. We discussed the Board’s methodology and data sources with senior Board planners and with officials from VOA, RFE/RL, USAID, the State Department, and private sector entities (InterMedia, Freedom House, and IREX). In addition, we compared the Board’s press freedom measure to IREX’s Media Sustainability Index. However, we did not validate the accuracy of this index or assess the cost/benefit implications of applying IREX’s approach to assessing local media conditions to the Board’s operations.

To obtain country-specific information on media and civil society conditions on each of the countries affected by the Board’s targeted language cuts, we collected pertinent rating data and reports from Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and the Committee to Protect Journalists. We also interviewed each of the VOA and RFE/RL language service chiefs in charge of the 17 services targeted for elimination and reviewed written program information provided by these individuals. Finally, we discussed local media and civil society conditions with agency

managers, USAID media development experts, State Department country experts, and private sector entities.

We conducted our work from July 2003 through December 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

We are sending copies of this report to other interested Members of Congress. We are also sending copies of this report to the Chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and to the Secretary of State. We will make copies available to other parties upon request. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me on (202) 512-4128. Other GAO contacts and staff acknowledgments are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess T. Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Jess T. Ford
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Evaluation Criteria Supporting the Language Service Review Process

The Broadcasting Board of Governor's (the Board) language service review process incorporates a range of evaluation criteria to evaluate the priority and impact of its language services. These evaluation criteria provide the analytical basis for Board decisions regarding language service enhancements, reductions, and eliminations.

Language Priority

Table 3 provides details on the seven component measures used to determine language priority: U.S. interests, population size, political/civil freedom, press freedom, economic freedom, geopolitical instability, and human development. Board officials have indicated that they believe that the combination of these indexes reflects both the short- and long-term foreign policy objectives of the United States, as well as the mission of U.S. international broadcasting. Information for the indexes is gathered for the countries impacted by the Board's language broadcasts from many public sources, including Freedom House, the *Wall Street Journal*, the Heritage Foundation, and the United Nations Development Program. U.S. strategic interests and geopolitical instability are scored in-house using information gathered from the State Department.

To develop priority scores for individual broadcast languages, the Board first determines the various countries targeted by that language. For each index, the Board then compiles information for the country (or set of countries) targeted by that broadcast language.¹ The component indexes are added together to form a summary score for each language, and all 65 of the Board's languages are then ranked against each other. The maximum summary score that can be assigned to any language is 49, and the minimum score is 7.

Board officials told us that after they assign priority scores to individual languages, a Language Service Review Committee, broadcasting entity management, and the full Board review the resulting Language Priorities Index List² for accuracy and reach agreement on the relative rankings of

¹If more than one target country applies to a language, indexes may be weighted by estimates of the number of language-speaking adults in each country. Because of the complexities involved with assigning weights, in most cases multiple-country languages reflect the values for the worst-case country.

²The Language Priorities Index List is classified: it is shared only with the Board, Board staff, and broadcasting entity heads and their immediate staffs.

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broadcast languages. Board officials then divide the list into two segments, indicating which languages have higher or lower priority.³

Table 3: Language Service Review Evaluation Factors

Factor	Scale	Description
U.S. interests	1-10	<p>The Board's language priority index takes into account U.S. Department of State commentary on U.S. interests. The U.S. interests index is scaled according to the methodology introduced in the publication <i>America's National Interests</i>.</p> <p>Data sources: Scored by the Board based on The Commission on America's National Interests (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; the RAND Corporation; and the Nixon Center) <i>America's National Interests: A Report from the Commission on America's National Interests, 2000</i> (http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/monographs/nationalinterests.htm); Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) annual <i>World Factbook</i> (http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook); State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development briefings and strategic plans; and National Defense University's annual <i>Strategic Assessment</i> (http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Strategic%20Assessments/pubs_SAs.htm).</p>
Population size	1-10	<p>The Board's population index is the estimated adult population that (1) is the intended audience (speaks the broadcast language) and (2) has the ability to listen to the broadcasts. The lowest intended audience is approximately 800,000 (Tibetan), and the largest is 725 million (Mandarin).</p> <p>Data sources: Population Reference Bureau's annual <i>World Population Data Sheet</i> (http://www.prb.org); International Broadcasting Bureau Office of Research; CIA's annual <i>World Factbook</i>; <i>Ethnologue: Languages of the World</i> (http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp).</p>
Political/civil freedom	1-7	<p>Freedom House's freedom index is used as the sole basis for the score. This index assesses two broad categories: political rights and civil liberties. Political rights enable people to participate freely in the political process. Civil rights include the freedom to develop opinions, institutions, and personal autonomy without interference from the state.</p> <p>Data source: Freedom House's annual <i>Freedom in the World</i> survey (http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/index.htm).</p>
Press freedom	1-7	<p>Freedom House's press freedom index is used as the base score. This index takes into account free speech issues, plurality of news sources, whether local media are economically independent from the government, and whether supporting institutions and laws function in the professional interest of the press. The index is modified for (1) killing/injury/imprisonment of journalists during the survey year (0.5 points may be added) and/or (2) relative unavailability of broadcast news (0.5 points may be added).</p> <p>Data sources: Scored by the Board based on Freedom House's annual <i>Press Freedom in the World</i> survey (http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/presssurvey.htm); Committee to Protect Journalists' annual <i>Attacks on the Press</i> report (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press).</p>

³A Board staff member indicated that there are no explicit criteria used for determining where the cut point between higher versus lower priority is made. Rather, this determination is based on staff judgment and individual country circumstances.

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Evaluation Criteria Supporting the Language
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(Continued From Previous Page)

Factor	Scale	Description
Economic freedom	1-5	<p>The Heritage Foundation's economic freedom index is used as the base score. This index is an annual survey of the world's economies that evaluates countries on various economic indicators and ranks countries against each other. Indicators include such things as trade policy, foreign investment, regulation, and black markets.</p> <p>Data source: Heritage Foundation and the <i>Wall Street Journal's</i> annual <i>Index of Economic Freedom</i> (http://www.heritage.org/research/features/index).</p>
Geopolitical instability	1-5	<p>The Board's instability index has three purposes: (1) to capture short- and long-term trends in freedom to augment the freedom indexes; (2) to encompass events since the freedom surveys were conducted; and (3) to highlight regional, internal, and diplomatic conflicts that may be growing large or violent and may require surge broadcasting.</p> <p>Data sources: Scored by the Board based on Transparency International's annual <i>Corruption Perception Index</i> (http://www.transparency.org); CIA's annual <i>World Factbook</i>; National Defense University's annual <i>Strategic Assessment</i>; Freedom House's annual <i>Freedom in the World</i> and <i>Press Freedom in the World</i> surveys; Heritage Foundation and the <i>Wall Street Journal's</i> annual <i>Index of Economic Freedom</i>; Committee to Protect Journalists' annual <i>Attacks on the Press</i> report.</p>
Human development	1-5	<p>The human development index provides information about the actual living standards of intended audiences in target countries. The index is a combination of (1) life expectancy rate; (2) gross domestic product per capita; (3) literacy rate; and (4) combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross school enrollment rate. The index contributes a humanitarian element to the language priorities index as well as more evidence about the probability that residents can regularly receive and understand or develop an interest in news and current events information.</p> <p>Data source: United Nations' annual <i>Human Development Report</i> (http://www.undp.org/hdr2003).</p>

Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Language Service Impact

Table 4 provides a brief overview of the Board's measures of language service impact considered during language service review. To determine the relative impact of language services, Board officials obtain information on average weekly audience size and elite audience reach from InterMedia, the Board's research contractor, and the International Broadcasting Bureau's Office of Audience Research. The Language Service Review Committee also holds regional meetings with the broadcasting entities to discuss additional language service impact considerations such as program quality, in-country awareness, local media access and use, and cost per listener. Board officials assign the language services into higher- versus lower-impact categories. Services obtaining greater than or equal to 5 percent average weekly audience and/or 15 percent "elite" (i.e., government and other influential decision makers) audience reach are considered higher impact.

Table 4: Language Service Impact Factors

Factor	Description
Average weekly audience	The percentage of the adult population listening at least once a week.
Elite audience	The percentage of the adult “elite” population listening at least once a week.
Cost per listener	Budget divided by average weekly audience.
Budget	Budget includes direct production and transmission costs but not overhead or TV satellite costs.
Program quality	Numerical score derived from ratings given in program review. Program quality addresses such issues as whether program content is fair and balanced, and a number of presentation issues including program pacing, use of musical bridges, and the appeal of the announcer’s voice. Scores can range from poor to excellent.
Signal quality	IBB monitoring stations score services for short-wave and cross-border medium-wave signal quality. Scores can range from no signal to excellent.
In-country awareness	Percentage of the adult population that can recognize the station name.
Original weekly hours	Number of original weekly programming hours produced each week.
Affiliates	A count of both TV and radio affiliates classified by impact as well as contractual quality. High impact occurs with national or major regional coverage in prime time on the best media. High contractual quality occurs when there is full control of the leased transmitter or frequency.
Media access and use	Percentages of the adult population that own various media, can access it, or use it on a daily basis.

Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Priority/Impact Matrix

To assist the Board in conducting its review of requested enhancements and reductions, a matrix is developed using the Board’s higher/lower priority and higher/lower impact determinations. All language services are assigned to one of the four categories shown in table 5.⁴ Language services rated as lower impact or lower priority may become potential targets for elimination or budget reductions.

⁴Some language services are excluded from the matrix if data are insufficient to judge impact.

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Table 5: 2002 Priority/Impact Matrix

Higher priority/higher impact (14 language services in 2002)	Higher priority/lower impact (27 language services in 2002)
Lower priority/higher impact (24 language services in 2002)	Lower priority/lower impact (17 language services in 2002)

Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Language Service Budget and Program Data

Table 6 provides a brief overview of the budget, staffing, priority, impact, and transmission hour trends for each language affected by the Board’s fiscal year 2004 budget reduction proposal. In general, the budget, staff size, and transmission hours for Voice of America (VOA) language services in question have been declining, with the exception of two services that have increased budgets since fiscal year 2000—VOA Estonian and VOA Croatian. Most VOA services faced significant cuts in fiscal year 2001 or 2002, as they were incorporated into a VOA European Multimedia Unit (EMU) designed to achieve cost efficiencies. Most of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) services in question have not faced the same level of cuts in staff size as VOA. Three of RFE/RL’s language services have increased in staff size since fiscal year 2000—RFE/RL Estonian, RFE/RL Croatian, and RFE/RL Lithuanian.

Table 6: Budget, Staffing, Priority, Impact, and Transmission Hours Data for Language Services Targeted for Elimination (fiscal years 2000-2003)

Dollars in thousands

Broadcast language	2000		2001		2002		2003 ^a	
	VOA	RFE/RL	VOA ^b	RFE/RL	VOA ^c	RFE/RL	VOA	RFE/RL
Bulgarian								
Budget level	\$542	\$1,791	\$537	\$1,289	\$365	\$1,125	\$278	\$1,164
Staffing level	6	9	3	9	3	8	3	8
Total weekly hours	3.5	45	1.25	32.32	1.25	32.32	1.25	35.15
Impact rating	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available

**Appendix II
Language Service Budget and Program Data**

(Continued From Previous Page)

Dollars in thousands

Broadcast language	2000		2001		2002		2003 ^a	
	VOA	RFE/RL	VOA ^b	RFE/RL	VOA ^c	RFE/RL	VOA	RFE/RL
Croatian^d								
Budget level	721	2,327	724	3,574	814	3,878	902	4,172
Staffing level	7	29	8	33	8	30	8	30
Total weekly hours	14	75	10.5	107.92	10.5	92.67	10.5	98
Impact rating	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Czech^e								
Budget level	747	530	408	600	273	630	288	0
Staffing level	9	0	3	0	3	0	3	0
Total weekly hours	12	70	1.25	91	1.75	91	1.75	0
Impact rating	Lower	Not available	Lower	Higher	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Estonian								
Budget level	291	833	315	739	340	823	362	856
Staffing level	4	6	4	6	4	7	4	7
Total weekly hours	3.75	9	3.75	15.75	3.75	9.92	3.75	9.92
Impact rating	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Hungarian^f								
Budget level	1103	0	554	0	287	0	294	0
Staffing level	11	0	3	0	3	0	3	0
Total weekly hours	9	0	1.25	0	1.83	0	1.83	0
Impact rating	Lower	N/A	Lower	N/A	Lower	N/A	Not available	Not available
Language priority rating	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available

**Appendix II
Language Service Budget and Program Data**

(Continued From Previous Page)

Dollars in thousands

Broadcast language	2000		2001		2002		2003 ^a	
	VOA	RFE/RL	VOA ^b	RFE/RL	VOA ^c	RFE/RL	VOA	RFE/RL
Latvian								
Budget level	395	992	182	819	186	807	190	853
Staffing level	5	7	2	7	2	7	2	7
Total weekly hours	5	14	0.80	7.58	0.83	8.42	2.08	8.42
Impact rating	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Lithuanian								
Budget level	466	841	267	811	165	884	169	870
Staffing level	6	7	2	7	2	7	2	7
Total weekly hours	5	16	0.80	19.25	0.83	17.55	0.83	18.07
Impact rating	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Higher	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Polish^g								
Budget level	1560	0	565	0	303	0	308	0
Staffing level	18	0	3	0	3	0	3	0
Total weekly hours	15	0	1.25	0	1.75	0	1.75	0
Impact rating	Lower	N/A	Lower	N/A	Higher	N/A	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Romanian^h								
Budget level	624	2,209	572	1,574	260	1,680	163	1,646
Staffing level	7	10	3	10	3	11	3	11
Total weekly hours	3.5	42	1.25	27.30	1.25	27.30	1.25	21.55
Impact rating	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available

**Appendix II
Language Service Budget and Program Data**

(Continued From Previous Page)

Dollars in thousands

Broadcast language	2000		2001		2002		2003 ^a	
	VOA	RFE/RL	VOA ^b	RFE/RL	VOA ^c	RFE/RL	VOA	RFE/RL
Slovak								
Budget level	514	1,307	513	1,002	342	813	281	892
Staffing level	6	8	3	8	3	7	3	6
Total weekly hours	7	28	1.25	24.03	1.83	11.75	1.83	14.55
Impact rating	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available
Sloveneⁱ								
Budget level	228	0	174	0	168	0	180	0
Staffing level	3	0	2	0	2	0	2	0
Total weekly hours	3.75	0	0.80	0	0.85	0	0.83	0
Impact rating	Not available	N/A	Higher	N/A	High	N/A	Not available	Not available
Language priority	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Lower	Not available	Not available

Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors.

^aBudget, staffing, and transmission data for fiscal year 2003 are agency estimates.

^bIn fiscal year 2001, VOA's Czech, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Slovene services were merged into the EMU.

^cIn fiscal year 2002, VOA's Slovak, Bulgarian, and Romanian services were added into the EMU.

^dRFE/RL's Croatian service serves the entire Balkan region as part of a regional initiative called the South Slavic Service. RFE/RL budget, staffing, and transmission data figures are for the entire South Slavic Service. Priority and impact ratings are for the entire South Slavic Service, with the exception of 2002, where they are for the Croatian segment only.

^eRFE/RL's Czech language service was privatized in 1994 at the discretion of RFE/RL management. However, RFE/RL continued to provide financial support to the private Czech station through 2002.

^fRFE/RL decided to end its Hungarian service in 1993.

^gRFE/RL ended its Polish service broadcasting at the end of 1997.

^hRFE/RL's Romanian language service serves the countries of Romania and Moldova. RFE/RL budget, staffing, impact, and transmission figures are for the entire service.

ⁱRFE/RL has never had a Slovenian language service.

Comments from the Broadcasting Board of Governors



BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

February 3, 2004

Mr. Jess T. Ford
Associate Director
International relations and Trade Issues
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C., 20548

Dear Mr. Ford:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report: *Language Service Review Does Not Adequately Address Local Media Conditions*, dated February 2004.

Since the passage of the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, the Broadcasting Board of Governors has grappled with and improved its methodology for complying with the Congressional mandate to “review, evaluate, and determine, at least annually, after consultation with the Secretary of State, the addition or deletion of language services.” Over the last four cycles of language review, we have refined the criteria for evaluating priority languages in order to ensure that U.S. strategic broadcasting requirements are provided adequate resources. We have briefed the Congress on the methodology used, and we are receptive to further refinements and measurements that would assist the process.

With respect to the draft report, we are concerned that the report’s title sends a message that the current methodology of the language service review process is seriously flawed. However, on reading the draft report, GAO seems to acknowledge the viability of the process while recommending additional indices to further refine the process. We hope that you will consider changing the title to reflect the GAO’s broad endorsement of the language service review process rather than implying that the process itself is not sound pending adoption of certain improvements.

The GAO’s first recommendation appears to hinge largely on “Sense of Congress” language contained in the Omnibus Appropriation Act for fiscal year 2000 that states: “It is the sense of Congress that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty should continue to broadcast to the peoples of Central Europe, Eurasia, and the Persian Gulf until such time as . . . its domestic media which provide balanced, accurate, and comprehensive news and information, is firmly established and widely accessible to the national audience. . . .” The GAO report describes this language as expressing a “congressional expectation,” but does not clarify for the reader that the “sense of Congress” provision does not have the force of law. We are concerned that the reader might be misled to believe that the BBG is violating a legislative mandate in proposing to reduce

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RFE/RL broadcasting in Central Europe, and feel it would be helpful to clarify the scope of a “sense of Congress” resolution in the body of the report.

In addition, the “Sense of Congress” language only applies to RFE/RL, yet the GAO’s recommendations appear to apply to the entire language service review process. Although we agree with the thrust of the GAO recommendation, we don’t believe it is legislatively mandated. Nevertheless, we will examine ways to strengthen the language review process to reflect local media conditions.

It may be worth noting that the Congress has expressed other expectations with respect to language service review and the proposed broadcast reductions that are not noted in the GAO’s report. For example, in the Conference Report on H.J.Res.2, Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003, the conferees note their continued support for “the Board’s efforts to objectively and systematically review and evaluate the performance, results, and importance of every U.S. Government-sponsored international broadcasting language service and to propose corresponding reallocations of funds. The conferees endorse this process as a means to improve broadcast quality and meet emerging program priorities within limited resources. . . . The conferees expect that the continuing language service review effort may result in the dedication of additional resources to emerging priority programs”

Again, in its conference report to accompany H.R. 2673, the Omnibus Appropriation Act for Fiscal Year 2004, the conferees indicate support for the Administration’s proposal to reduce broadcasts to Eastern and Central Europe. Specifically, they “adopt the Broadcasting Board of Governor’s (BBG) proposal regarding funding for language services in central and eastern European nations that have been invited to become new member states of the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and have received a Freedom House press freedom ranking equal to that of the United States.” Given the recent passage of the Omnibus bill, we believe that GAO’s second recommendation that the Board reexamine its proposal to reduce or eliminate designated services as submitted in its 2004 budget request has been overtaken by Congressional action.

The BBG takes into account many factors as it reviews service priorities, none of which are determinative in their own right. A number of these factors are indicated by law or report language prescribed by the Congress over the years. While the language service review process ascribes numerical values to various services, the BBG does not slavishly follow the numbers in working toward critical decisions. In addition, language service review decisions must take into account the overall budget environment, and that is the context in which the decisions relating to broadcasting in Eastern and Central Europe were made. Given the budget environment and the critical need to enhance broadcasting to the Islamic world, a clear preference had to be given to the war on terrorism.

The GAO draft report quotes me as saying I had “second thoughts” about the proposal to eliminate the Bulgarian, Croatian, and portions of the Romanian Services at this time. These words imply that I would not implement these changes, given the opportunity to revisit this question within the same broadcast environment. That is not the case. As a broadcast veteran of

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Comments from the Broadcasting Board of
Governors**

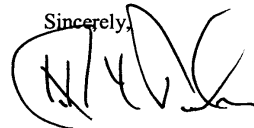
3

the Cold War, I regret the end of these services. But I also celebrate the accomplishment of their mission that enables us to reduce our commitment to this region and fund new priorities.

While in a perfect world, the BBG may not choose to reduce or eliminate services that retain more marginal benefits than services to denied areas or regions in crisis, there is an expectation that the Board make difficult choices that support the nation's most urgent demands. Even as we enhance our process of determining language service priorities, we recognize that difficult policy choices must be made in an atmosphere of scarce budget resources in order to fund pressing broadcast priorities, such as those in the Islamic world.

Resource reallocations are, and will remain, difficult and controversial decisions. In spite of the use of various and well informed indices to measure and compare such intangibles as media "freedom", and "fair, balanced, and comprehensive" news, these measures and the decisions that grow out of them are inherently subjective in nature. However, the Board will continue to endeavor to weigh all relevant factors in steering the course of international broadcasting, and welcomes GAO's suggestions for additional data that can enhance our analysis.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Y. Tomlinson
Chairman

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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Diana Glod, (202) 512-8945

**Staff
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