

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20515

October 8, 2020

Mr. Michael Pack  
Chief Executive Officer  
United States Agency for Global Media  
330 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20237

Dear Mr. Pack:

As members of Congress who care deeply about the continued suffering and democratic aspirations of the Venezuelan people, we write to condemn your refusal to renew the visas of foreign national employees who were doing important work to advance the United States' interest in supporting a return to democracy in Venezuela. Voice of America's Venezuela 360 program, which is part of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), was designed to reach audiences in Venezuela whose access to information is curtailed daily by the Maduro regime. USGAM's stated mission is to "inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy." Yet, the punitive actions you have taken against foreign national employees run counter to USAGM's and Venezuela 360's mission and undermine bipartisan U.S. foreign policy goals.

Many of us planned to raise our deep concerns with you during the House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing held September 24th, but you lacked the courage to answer for your actions before the American people. As you know, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and other USAGM outlets have for decades provided independent reporting throughout the world, including in contexts like Venezuela where access to information is heavily restricted. Countless foreign national employees have contributed to these efforts, providing unique skills and perspectives that have helped USAGM reach audiences around the globe.

In 2019, two such journalists were recruited by Voice of America for a special new program, Venezuela 360, to provide in-depth investigations and original analysis of the humanitarian and political crisis in Venezuela. The show profiled bipartisan U.S. efforts to push for a democratic transition in the country. One of the program's independent investigations exposed links between the Maduro regime and the Cartel of the Suns, a hybrid organization of criminal groups and high-ranking military officials. These critical investigations could bring serious risks if carried out in Venezuela, and there is no doubt that VOA journalists felt empowered to follow the story wherever it led because they believed they had the support and protection of the U.S. government. But after you took over at USAGM and soon after these journalists' contracts had been renewed, you terminated their visas and placed them on leave without pay. Your Human Resources department provided no explanation for their dismissal and instead reserved each of them a plane ticket to their countries of origin. Media reporting suggests that they are just two of many who have been subjected to such degrading treatment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen numerous attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of the press around the world. The Maduro regime is one of many autocratic governments that have used the pandemic as an excuse to crack down even further on all forms of dissent, and targeted journalists, opposition politicians, and human rights defenders. As members of the United States Congress, we are committed to calling out such authoritarian tactics, as we believe it is in the U.S. interest to consistently promote freedom of expression globally. Unfortunately, your xenophobic intimidation tactics against USAGM journalists look like what we might expect from autocrats around the world like Nicolás Maduro, not from the head of a U.S. Government agency tasked with promoting press freedom. We are gravely concerned that your actions could endanger these journalists, forcing them to return to countries where they may face retaliation for the work they have done. Their safety is now your responsibility, and should they face any harm, we will hold you personally accountable.

We urge you to immediately reinstate these journalists and cease your persecution of foreign national employees who are working to promote U.S. values through their contributions to free and independent journalism.

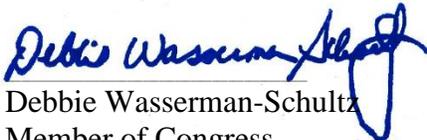
Sincerely,



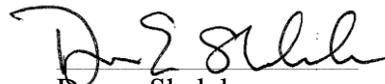
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Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere,  
Civilian Security, and Trade



Eliot L. Engel  
Chairman  
Committee on Foreign Affairs



Debbie Wasserman-Schultz  
Member of Congress



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Joaquin Castro  
Member of Congress



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Member of Congress



Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress



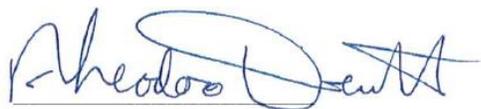
Norma Torres  
Member of Congress



Debbie Mucarsel-Powell  
Member of Congress



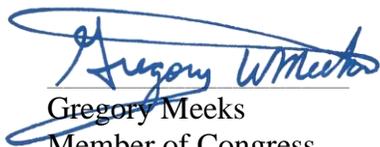
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