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Reporting & Editing

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Layoffs, lawsuits and lost trust have left US-funded global news outlets diminished, creating openings for authoritarian leaders abroad

By: [Angela Fu](#)

March 20, 2026



POST



Begum Donmez Ersoz was in the hospital for high blood pressure, 29 weeks pregnant with twins, when she got her first termination letter from Voice of America.

For nearly seven years, Donmez Ersoz had worked for the broadcaster, covering the White House for audiences in Turkey — a country in which “all possible means” are used to stifle critics, according to Reporters Without Borders. But that job seemed to evaporate in an instant last

March when Voice of America announced layoffs. Donmez Ersoz works for Voice of America Global Media.

That night she gave birth to twins. For her, the news was about the loss of her job. She is concerned about the neonatal intensive care unit over the loss of her job at Voice of America.



“It was the end of the world,” she said.

A year later, she has not yet returned to work.

Donmez Ersoz said she has not yet returned to work. Many of her colleagues are expected to return as soon as next week, following a recent ruling by a federal judge, but confusion abounds over the logistics of restarting operations after more than a year away.

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Regardless, as a group, the USAGM-affiliated outlets — which include Voice of America and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, as well as grantee organizations Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Middle East Broadcasting Network — are largely shadows of their former selves. All have had to cut staff and programming, with some halting production entirely at points over the past year.

The loss of coverage has been a boon for authoritarian leaders abroad, say USAGM jo...ews and informatic...ress. Though th...editorially independent...

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found had illegally run USAGM for the past year — has said she will stay on as deputy CEO.

“When we got our appropriation, all of a sudden, it was like, ‘OK, I think

this thing survives,” said Voi...ector of strategy a... performance assessment Kate Keoper, who said USAGM over VOAs

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shutdown, along with several of her colleagues, including White House bureau chief Patsy Widakuswara, the lead plaintiff. "I don't know what form it survives in. I don't know if we're associated with it at all. I don't know if Patsy and I are going back. But something survives. Some kind of Voice of America is going to come out the other end of this."

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Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Middle East Broadcasting Network were able to continue broadcasting because, unlike

Voice of America and Office of Cuba Broadcasting, they are independent organizations. But they still... after losing their fu...

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Kari Lake speaks at Agency for Global Information

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slowly resumed [redacted] in China, like Mandarin and Tibetan, were a priority, said executive editor Rosa Hwang, in part because the Chinese government was quick to fill in the gaps Radio Free Asia left behind in the wake of the cuts. She cited Uyghur as another example, since Radio Free Asia is the only independent Uyghur news outlet in the world.

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Middle East Broadcasting Network was already in the midst of restructuring to become a smaller, nimbler, “digital first” outlet when it got hit by Lake’s “brutal” cuts, president and CEO Jeffrey Gedmin said. At the time, it had 503 employees and 114 contractors. Within a month, the outlet cut hundreds of staff. It later stopped broadcasting to linear television, instead sharing its reporting via other platforms like social media and newsletters. Now, the outlet has 49 employees and 94 contractors.

“(The cuts) became more because we

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USAGM did not [redacted] [redacted] broadcasting staffing levels, and the outlet’s deputy director, Álvaro Alba, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. But in a [July op-ed for The Miami Herald](#) that has since been taken down, Alba wrote that the outlet reopened its doors on March 26, 2025, less than two weeks after Lake

placed USAGM employees or [redacted] outlet faced “staffing limitations” and had to restructure, Alba wrote.

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Threats abroad

As Trump and Lake announced cuts to USAGM, panic rippled through its affiliated outlets. Many of the outlets employed journalists from countries with authoritarian governments. If they lost their jobs — and consequently their work visas — they could be deported back to their home countries, where they could face punishment for their journalism.

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The Trump administration and USAGM’s detractors have criticized the hiring of foreign nationals, alternately portraying them as a security risk and as a threat to American journalists seeking jobs.

But foreign journalists bring valuable connections and knowledge beyond just their language skills, said [redacted] who initially joined

outlet’s Indonesian service on a visa. “By hiring me, they also hired my

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connections and my networks.”

That principle applies to journalists and stringers hired abroad. At Radio Free Asia, reporters on the ground help the outlet cover areas that are extremely difficult for independent journalists to gain access to, like Tibet, North Korea and Myanmar.

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Photo/Lee Jin-man)

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“Because of the disruption last year, we lost important sources inside some of these areas, which makes the work even harder,” Hwang said. “We have a pretty substantial record of breaking many stories that mainstream news organizations simply couldn’t cover because we have the language

expertise, source networks and editorial focus on places others just can't reach. So when those resources shrink, it becomes very difficult to sustain that level of exclusive reporting."

Several USAGM-affiliated journalists have been arrested for their work. Prior to the cuts, staff at the agency were responsible for advocating for their release. Now, it is unclear who in the U.S. government is monitoring those cases. Weimers said he has brought the issue up in meetings at the State Depa

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When Reporters [redacted] [redacted] quit headed by
Widakuswara, its path to victory was unclear, weimers said. But
incremental court victories ultimately saved the jobs of the 800 full-time
Voice of America employees who were put on leave. On March 7,
Lamberth ruled that Lake had led USAGM illegally and voided all of her

actions from July 13 to Nov. 11, 2020.

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“What (the lawsuit) did was it froze things in place while things dragged out in court, and Congress rediscovered its love of these programs, and it realized that they’re important and that they represent American values,” Weimers said.

Donmez Ersoz credited the lawsuit with prolonging the period during which she and her family could access health insurance. Her termination letter said she would be issued a formal notice effective March 31, 2025. A few days b

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analytics tools at a cheaper rate. Now, Radio Free World must negotiate those contracts on its own. Especially costly has been self-financing transmissions after the agency cut off access to transmitters.

On Tuesday, Lamberth ordered that USACM must bring back to work the hundreds of Voice of America... have been on leave...

March last year. It is unclear what that process will look like.

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On Tuesday, Lamberth ordered that USACM must bring back to work the hundreds of Voice of America... have been on leave...



Widakuswara and Neeper said Thursday morning they had not heard from the agency about return-to-work plans.

Both said they anticipate widespread logistical issues. For one, most employees don't have security badges to enter the VOA offices, work laptops or work phones. The outlet must also renew satellite contracts, which will be expensive.

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CEO.

Their plans for USAGM are unclear. The State Department did not respond to a request for comment. On X, Rogers said that if she is confirmed, she plans to serve her new role concurrently with her State

Department role.

Under Secretary of State Sarah B. Rogers

@UnderSecPD · Follow



I am deeply honored by, and grateful for, President Donald J. Trump’s nomination to lead the U.S. Agency for Global Media – a role I will hold concurrently with this one if confirmed. I am excited to get started, and look forward to engaging with the Hill.



Truth-telling and [Show more](#)

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While Lamberth’s ruling saved the jobs of hundreds of journalists, it did not save Donmez Ersoz’s because she was a contractor. She is hopeful that a future ruling might mean she could return to work. Covering the White House for Voice of America had been her dream job.

“There have been so many missed reporting opportunities at this important time in terms of what’s happening in the region, what’s happening in the Middle East, U.S. foreign policy, Turkey-U.S. relations,” Donmez Ersoz said. “It’s not fair for us to be able to report on these things and not see that we’re not able to do so.”

“At the end of the day, it’s not right? To be able to report on every side of the story, that’s what we do in America, and that’s what we do for our audience.”



Correction
Poynter incorrectly reported that Donmez Ersoz worked for Radio Free Europe. She worked for Voice of America.

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Angela Fu

Angela Fu is a reporter at Signal at [angelafu.74](#), on Bluesky [@angeianru.bsky.social](#) and on Twitter [@angeianru](#).

[Angela Fu](#)

More News



Nonprofit newsrooms have grown, but they still generate a fraction of what newspapers once did



A new report from subscrip

April 7, 2026 Eric

limited revenue

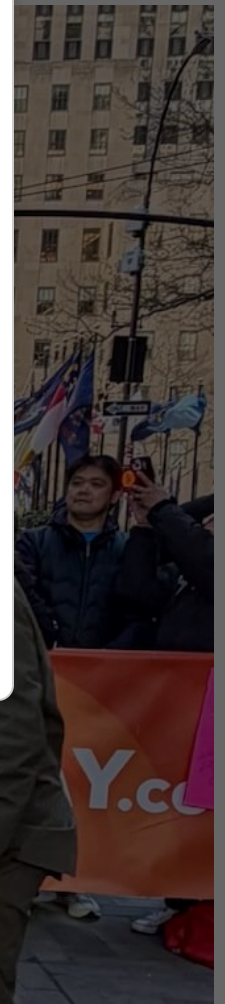
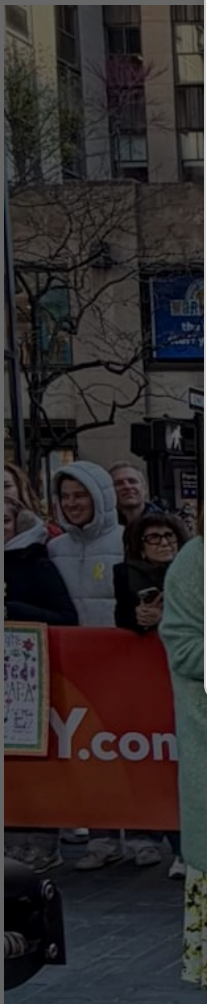
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Opinion | Savannah Guthrie made a graceful return to NBC's 'Today' show

Back on Monday, months after her mother's disappearance, Guthrie and her colleagues acknowledged the moment without letting it overtake the broadcast

April 7, 2026 | Tom Jones

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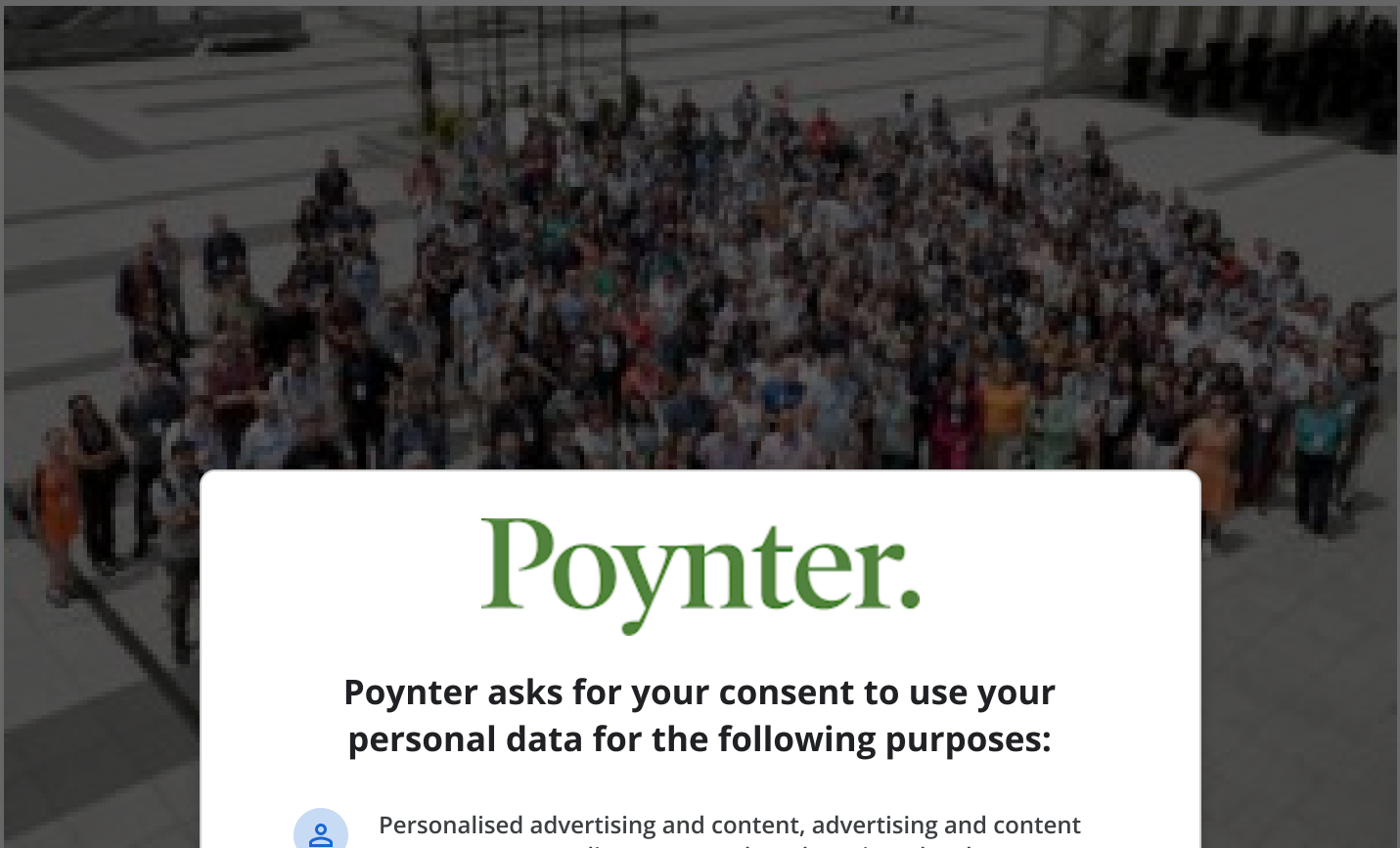
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