

CHAPTER 4

PARTING WAYS?

Europe and the US on the disinformation frontline

by

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Since its first days in office, the US administration has undertaken a U-turn in the fight against disinformation. The White House's radical change of stance, rooted in ideology as well as in Trump's contentious relationship with mainstream media, comes at a moment of heightened risks for the EU, its Member States and like-minded partners. Disinformation is a central part of Russia's ongoing hybrid aggression against Europe and Moscow's interference attempts are growing both in scale and frequency⁽¹⁾.

This radical shift is impacting US policies at home, and it is now spilling over into foreign policy, with serious implications for Europe. While Washington politicises the notion of 'free speech', the EU and Member States should scale up their efforts on the disinformation frontline – both within Europe and in contested information spaces.

RETRENCHMENT AT HOME, DISRUPTION ABROAD

Notwithstanding the documented attempts by foreign actors to interfere in the 2024 elections⁽²⁾, the US government is dismantling its counter-disinformation apparatus at home. The administration shut down the 'Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Hub' – the office in the State Department that took over from the 'Global Engagement Centre'⁽³⁾. Both offices, closed on the grounds of alleged infringement of the free speech of American citizens, focused solely on *foreign* disinformation and played key roles in exposing Russian, Chinese and Iranian activities, as well as propaganda by non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State

(1) Soldatov, A. and Borogan, I., 'Arsonist, killer, saboteur, spy: While Trump courts him, Putin is escalating Russia's hybrid war against the West', *Foreign Affairs*, 20 March 2025 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/arsonist-killer-saboteur-spy-vladimir-putin-donald-trump>).

(2) Kovalčíková, N. and Spatafora, G., 'The future of democracy: Lessons from the US fight against foreign electoral interference in 2024', Brief No. 22, EUISS, December 2024 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-02/Brief_2024-22_US%20elections%20FIMI.pdf).

(3) Wong, E., 'Trump aides close State Dept. Office on Foreign Disinformation', *The New York Times*, 16 April 2025 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/16/us/politics/trump-rubio-state-department-foreign-disinformation.html>).

(ISIS). The shutdown followed the defunding and downsizing of offices with similar mandates within the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), part of the Department of Homeland Security⁽⁴⁾. Most recently, the Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, announced plans to close the intelligence community's 'Foreign Malign Influence Center' (FMIC), 'effectively end[ing] any meaningful government role in addressing the foreign interference threat'⁽⁵⁾.

Abroad, Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference marked a pivotal moment in the politicisation of free speech, particularly in relation to Europe's approach to countering disinformation. The intervention was followed by explicit interventions in European elections, where the US openly supported far right and Eurosceptic parties and candidates – notably in Germany, Poland and Romania⁽⁶⁾.

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Europe which, via a series of posts on X in spring 2025, clearly exemplifies Washington's new posture. At its core, the campaign frames the EU's fight against disinformation as 'censorship of dissenting views' from a 'global elite' run through a 'fact-checking industrial complex'⁽⁷⁾. Additionally, economic and regulatory concerns play a key role in shaping the US stance towards the EU. Washington has openly portrayed Brussels' efforts to regulate social media through the Digital Services Act (DSA) – which includes provisions on illegal, harmful and disinformation content – as part of the alleged 'disinformation industry' and as a 'scam' to monitor, censor, and 'demonetize' American companies⁽⁸⁾. The DSA incorporates the 'Code of Conduct on Disinformation', which strengthens the European Commission's authority to enforce specific rules when platforms pose risks to citizens, societies or democratic processes. This dispute shows no signs of abating, with President Trump threatening in August additional tariffs and exports restrictions on chips for countries that apply 'discriminatory' rules against American companies⁽⁹⁾.

(4) Gioe, D. and Hayden, M. V., 'Trump is breaking American intelligence', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 July 2025 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trump-breaking-american-intelligence>); Myers, S.L., Barnes, J. E. and Frenkel, S., 'Trump dismantles government fight against foreign influence operations', *The New York Times*, 20 February 2025 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/20/business/trump-foreign-influence-election-interference.html>).

(5) Salvo, D., 'What just happened? Dismantling the intelligence community's Foreign Malign Influence Center', *Just Security*, 28 August 2025 (<https://www.justsecurity.org/119653/wjh-dismantling-foreign-malign-influence-center/>).

(6) Dionne, E.J., 'Trump invites electoral backlash abroad, but Europe's far right is far from dead', *Brookings*, 5 June 2025 (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/trump-invites-electoral-backlash-abroad-but-europes-far-right-is-far-from-dead/>).

(7) The communication campaign was run by the accounts of the US Mission to the EU and the OSCE (<https://x.com/US2EU>, <https://x.com/usosce>), and the embassies in Berlin, London and Tallin (<https://x.com/usbotschaft>, <https://x.com/USAinUK>, <https://x.com/USEmbTallinn>), with a series of identical posts published between May and June 2025.

(8) The DSA targets platforms operating in the EU with over 45 million monthly users. As of July 2025, 10 of the 20 listed VLOPs/VLOSEs are US-based companies. As per the updated list by the European Commission (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/list-designated-vlops-and-vloses>).

(9) Gkritsi, E. and Wendler, J., 'Trump threatens "substantial" new tariffs against countries with "discriminatory" digital rules', *Politico*, 26 August 2025 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/us-question-report-sanction-eu-officials-dsa-donald-trump/>).

EFFECTS OF 'AMERICA FIRST' CUTS – IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

This ideological stance has had tangible consequences abroad, resulting in a ‘unilateral disarmament in the information warfare Russia and China are conducting all over the world’⁽¹⁰⁾. A key example of this ‘America First’ retrenchment is the federal funding cuts to Voice of America (VoA) and USAID. The White House framed these cuts as bureaucratic reductions⁽¹¹⁾ and, in VoA’s case, cited alleged ‘radical propaganda’ despite the network’s charter to provide balanced coverage exclusively outside the United States.

The United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM) oversees both directly controlled networks – including VoA and Radio Television Marti, and grantee networks such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Middle East Broadcasting (MEB), and the Open Technology Fund (OTF). Since its founding in 1942 to counter Nazi propaganda, VoA has represented the ‘hard edge’ of US soft power⁽¹²⁾, supporting

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American (and European) security interests worldwide. Its networks have provided independent information in regions dominated by state-run media, countering authoritarian narratives and disinformation.

Even if these activities no longer align with the current administration’s foreign policy, they remain crucial for maintaining a US presence in contested information spaces, including in Europe’s neighbourhood. This retreat from counter-disinformation engagement also jeopardises European interests, particularly as Russia has invested over \$1 billion in state-sponsored media in 2025⁽¹³⁾, and Chinese content rapidly fills the vacuum from Nigeria to Indonesia⁽¹⁴⁾. Initiatives funded by USAID – ranging from media literacy to freedom of information – are now endangered, leaving the EU and its Member States to strengthen their foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) defences without a resourceful ally⁽¹⁵⁾.

In September, the US State Department notified European partners of its decision to terminate a memorandum of understanding designed to enhance coordination in countering foreign

(10) James P. Rubin, former State Department official in the GEC, quoted in *The New York Times*. See footnote 4.

(11) The White House, ‘Continuing the reduction of the federal bureaucracy’, 14 March 2025 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/continuing-the-reduction-of-the-federal-bureaucracy/>) and ‘At USAID, waste and abuse runs deep’, 13 February 2025 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/02/at-usaid-waste-and-abuse-runs-deep/>).

(12) Remarks by Lisa Curtis, Chair of the Board of RFE/RL, PBS News Hours, 17 March 2025 (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-is-voice-of-america-and-why-trump-is-dismantling-the-broadcaster>).

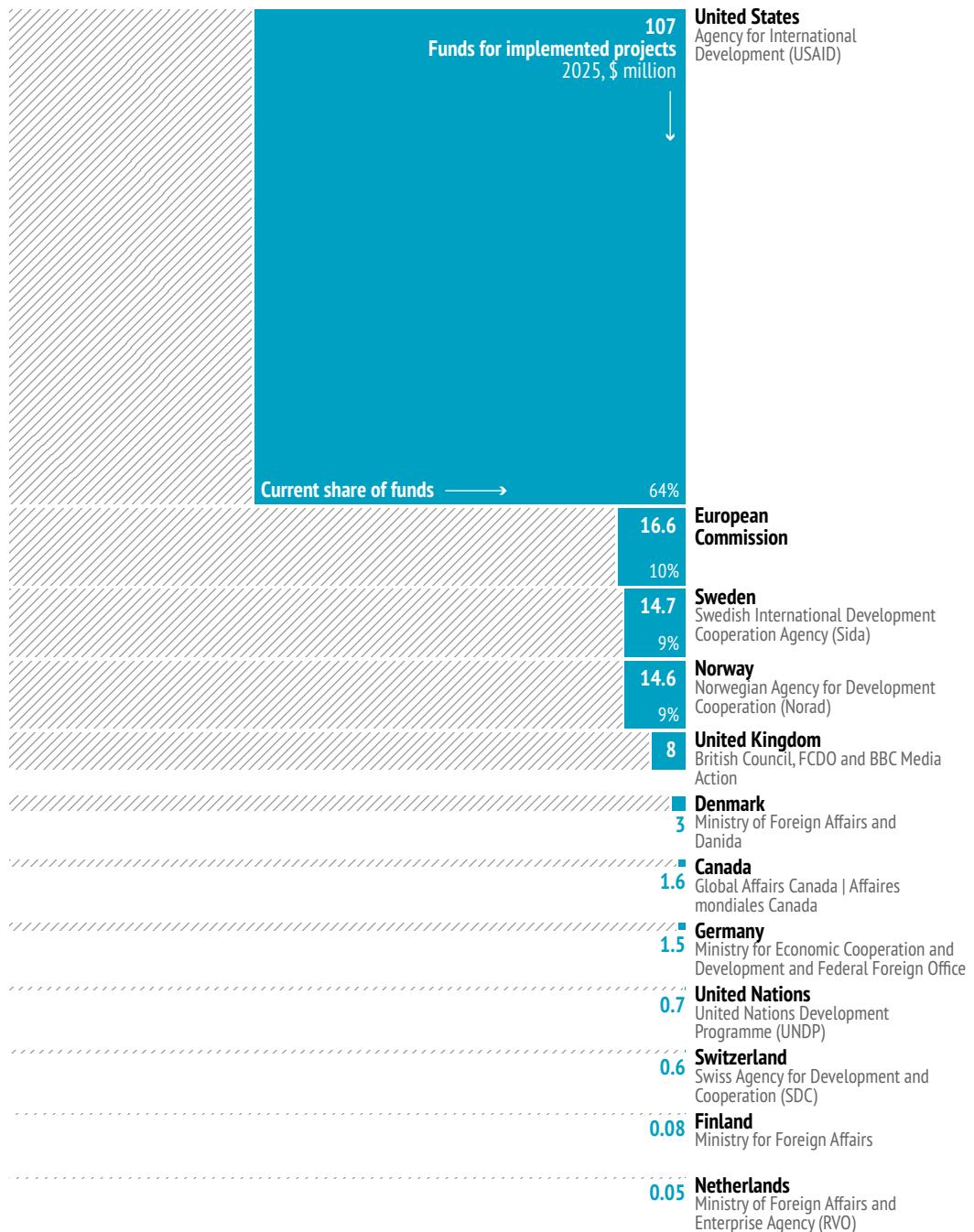
(13) EEAS, ‘3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats’, March 2025 (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/3rd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-0_en).

(14) Viswanatha, A., Wexler, A. and Leong, C., ‘China gets more airtime around the world as Voice of America signs off’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 July 2025 (<https://www.wsj.com/world/china/voice-of-america-china-russia-65f54e6a>).

(15) Dityrch, O., ‘Doing resilience better, with less: The cornerstone of the EU’s Eastern policy needs rethinking’, Brief No. 10, EUISS, April 2025 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-04/Brief_2025-10_Democratic%20resilience.pdf).

Abandoning the disinformation frontlines

USAID cuts significantly impact counter-disinformation efforts in the EU's eastern neighbourhood



Data: International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) for projects, currently being implemented through 2025 in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the Western Balkans; under the 'Media and free flow of information' category.

disinformation⁽¹⁶⁾. Trust in transatlantic cooperation against disinformation and foreign interference is eroding, and joint efforts – spanning intelligence sharing, common analysis, attribution, and sanctions – face mounting pressure under the current administration. The US retrenchment from the Five Eyes intelligence alliance raises doubts about continued cooperation within the G7's Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) and NATO structures dealing with public diplomacy and information threats.

This uncertainty 'opens up' already contested information spaces in third countries: from Africa to the Caucasus, where the EU cannot afford to lose ground and should present itself as a coalition builder. The renewed Security and Defence Partnerships (SDPs) with G7 members such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan all stress the importance of enhanced cooperation on hybrid threats including FIMI. In the Indo-Pacific, the EU can also draw on an expanding web of initiatives: bilateral initiatives with Japan, South Korea and India, minilateral formats including Australia, and broader multilateral engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)⁽¹⁷⁾.

In Latin America and Africa, where Russian and Chinese FIMI activity is growing, the EU can build on previous initiatives in countries like Argentina and Colombia or *vis-à-vis* the African Union, where disinformation was discussed at the 2025 ministerial meeting. Across the globe several countries, including Australia,

South Korea and Brazil, are pursuing DSA-inspired legislation to protect their citizens from illegal online content⁽¹⁸⁾. The EU should support these efforts in a policy space in which it has proven to be a global norm setter.

EUROPE: TAKE THE LEAD, SHAPE THE NARRATIVE

To safeguard its interest and protect its citizens and democracies the EU should try to take the lead in the battle against disinformation, taking over from Washington. Some concrete steps to fill the void are outlined below:

Engage DC where possible: It is very unlikely that trust – or meaningful cooperation – on this matter can be restored under the current US administration. A policy of non-engagement with Washington may be the most realistic option, as a normative and value-based approach to countering disinformation is bound to backfire. Still, trying to engage selectively could be a starting point. For example, maintaining a minimum level of engagement with the US by including *foreign* – and especially Chinese – disinformation as part of a broader 'countering hybrid threats' dialogue, or focusing on less contentious areas such

(16) Mackinnon, A., 'US ends international push to combat fake news from hostile states', *Financial Times*, 8 September 2025 (<https://www.ft.com/content/d31b56e3-aca9-4ee7-af5a-abec74830455>).

(17) Jasper, L., *Building Bridges: Euro-Indo-Pacific Cooperation for resilient FIMI Strategies*, HCSS, July 2025 (<https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Policy-Brief-Building-Bridges-HCSS-2025.pdf>).

(18) Propp, K., 'Talking past each other: Why the US-EU dispute over "free speech" is set to escalate', Atlantic Council, 15 August 2025 (https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-eu-dispute-over-free-speech-is-set-to-escalate/?utm_campaign=read&utm_content=20250816&utm_medium=organic_social&utm_source=linkedin&utm_term=Atlantic+Council).

as counterterrorism and cybersecurity, may remain viable options⁽¹⁹⁾.

Build and lead coalitions: The EU and its Member States have demonstrated their ability to act as both ‘norm setters’ and ‘coalition builders’ in countering FIMI. With the G7 weakened in the absence of US leadership, it is strategically important for the EU to continue playing this role. The EU should advance the strategic discussion on countering disinformation and foreign interference more proactively and comprehensively – encompassing political interference, sabotage and cyberattacks – by deepening existing partnerships and exploring new ones. This process should begin with the UK, where the renewed SDP is already fostering greater alignment on sanctioning Russia for its hybrid activities⁽²⁰⁾.

Secure Europe and the neighbourhood: While the US retrenchment may not significantly affect the EU’s ability to guard against FIMI at home, the bloc’s support to countries in its neighbourhood should be rethought. Supporting countries with a contested information environment in regions of strategic interest will need increased attention and an efficient reallocation of resources. The EU should try to fill the funding gap left by USAID in its Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans. In this context, the idea,

floated by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), that Member States should step in and provide long-term funding to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, deserves serious consideration⁽²¹⁾.

Communicate proactively: The EU should move to fill the airwaves, frequencies and (social) media channels left unguarded by Washington’s retrenchment with positive messaging. These channels are already being occupied by Russia and China, which makes it all the more important for the EU to invest in a renewed digital diplomacy strategy⁽²²⁾. The ‘global battle of narratives’⁽²³⁾ is raging from sub-Saharan Africa to the Indo-Pacific and, without the US, the EU needs to adapt its posture in this increasingly strategic domain.

(19) See for example: Joint Cybersecurity Advisory, ‘Countering Chinese state-sponsored actors compromise of networks worldwide to feed global espionage system’, addressing the threat of Chinese state-sponsored malicious cyber activity, published in August 2025 (https://media.defense.gov/2025/Aug/22/2003786665/-1/-1/0/CSA_COUNTERING_CHINA_STATE_ACTORS_COMPROMISE_OF_NETWORKS.PDF).

(20) UK Government, ‘UK sanctions Russian spies at the heart of Putin’s malicious regime’, Press Release, 18 July 2025 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-russian-spies-at-the-heart-of-putins-malicious-regime>); Council of the EU, ‘Russia: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU condemning Russia’s persistent hybrid campaigns against the EU, its Member States and partners’, Press Release, 18 July 2025 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/07/18/hybrid-threats-russia-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-condemning-russia-s-persistent-hybrid-campaigns-against-the-eu-its-member-states-and-partners/>).

(21) Blackburn, G., ‘EU to provide €5.5 million in emergency funds to help keep Radio Free Europe afloat’, Euronews, 20 May 2025 (<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/20/eu-to-provide-55mln-in-emergency-funds-to-help-keep-radio-free-europe-afloat>).

(22) De Agostini, L. and Ditrych, O., ‘Digital echoes: Countering adversarial narratives in Georgia and Armenia’, Brief No. 19, EUISS, July 2025 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-07/Brief_2025-19_Digital%20Diplomacy.pdf).

(23) Council of the European Union, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, March 2022 (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf).