# US closes State Department's foreign disinformation unit amid free speech debate



The Trump administration has announced the closure of the State Department's Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (R/Fimi) hub, the last remaining office dedicated to monitoring foreign disinformation campaigns. This decision marks a significant shift in the US government's approach to countering state-sponsored disinformation, a move welcomed by rightwing critics who had accused the office of censoring American conservative voices.

R/Fimi, formerly known as the Global Engagement Center (GEC), was established during the Obama administration to address foreign disinformation threats at the state level. It focused solely on propaganda and influence operations conducted by foreign governments against other countries, including the United States. Despite its critical role in identifying and mitigating foreign interference, the office has faced criticism from conservative politicians and commentators, who argued that it infringed upon constitutionally protected free speech.

Senator Marco Rubio, the Secretary of State, announced the closure on social media, posting on X: “Over the last decade, Americans have been slandered, fired, charged, and even jailed for simply voicing their opinions. That ends today.” He framed the move as part of a broader government initiative to roll back what he described as overreach in speech monitoring, referencing an executive order on “countering censorship and restoring freedom of speech.” Rubio also criticised the office’s budgetary cost, alleging it “cost taxpayers more than $50 million per year and actively silenced and censored the voices of Americans they were supposed to be serving.”

Despite Rubio’s position, during his own confirmation hearing, he had acknowledged the importance of countering Chinese disinformation. However, the current administration’s direction reflects a greater priority placed on safeguarding perceived free speech rights over continued funding for foreign influence research.

The closure of R/Fimi will leave the State Department without any dedicated entity to track and respond to complex disinformation efforts orchestrated by foreign state actors. According to prior estimates from the GEC, Russia allocates approximately $1.5 billion annually to its foreign influence operations. Iran’s main propaganda organisation reportedly had a $1.26 billion budget in 2022, and China is said to invest several billion dollars every year into its influence efforts worldwide.

State Department sources, speaking to the MIT Technology Review, reported that Acting Undersecretary Darren Beattie informed R/Fimi staff of the decision to eliminate the office and terminate all positions. Around 40 employees are currently on administrative leave and will be dismissed within 30 days. Beattie, who is overseeing the closure, was previously dismissed as a speechwriter in Trump’s first administration due to his attendance at a white nationalist conference and has since promoted controversial theories about federal law enforcement’s role in the January 6 Capitol riot.

The R/Fimi office, during its operational period, had achieved several notable successes. It developed artificial intelligence tools to detect deepfake videos, uncovered Russian propaganda campaigns aimed at Latin American countries regarding the Ukraine conflict, and published detailed reports on Russian and Chinese disinformation activities. One prominent case involved dismantling the Kremlin-backed “African initiative,” a strategy designed to spread conspiracy theories about US-funded health programmes in Africa to undermine American influence on the continent.

In related developments from September 2024, the US Justice Department indicted two employees of RT, a Russian state-funded media outlet, following revelations that the organisation had operated a large-scale military procurement network. This network allegedly supplied Russian military forces in Ukraine using online crowdfunding platforms.

The shutdown of R/Fimi signifies a dramatic change in how the US government intends to address foreign disinformation threats, withdrawing from active monitoring at a time when competing global powers are reportedly intensifying their investments in influence and propaganda campaigns. The long-term implications for US national security and information integrity remain to be seen as this shift unfolds.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/us-state-department-eliminate-center-countering-foreign-disinformation> - This URL supports the announcement by the U.S. State Department to close the Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Hub (R/FIMI) under Secretary of State Marco Rubio.
* <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/3382470/state-department-announces-closure-censorship-hub/> - This article corroborates the closure of R/FIMI and details its background, including past criticisms and its transformation from the Global Engagement Center (GEC). It also highlights the controversy surrounding alleged censorship of conservative voices.
* <https://kyivindependent.com/us-shuts-down-office-combating-russian-disinformation-rubio-says/> - This source covers Secretary of State Marco Rubio's announcement to close the office combating foreign disinformation and its history as part of the Global Engagement Center (GEC). It also mentions projects aimed at countering Russian disinformation, such as the African Initiative.
* <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/29/russia-disinformation-africa-00074944> - While not available in the search results, a generic explanation for the type of content this URL might contain: This type of article could discuss specific disinformation campaigns, like the African Initiative, which was countered by the Global Engagement Center (GEC). However, no exact match was found in the search results.
* <https://www.cisa.gov/understanding-disinformation> - Although not directly mentioned in the search results, a generic explanation: This type of resource from CISA might discuss general strategies and information on understanding and addressing disinformation efforts, providing context on why entities like R/FIMI were initially established.