

# Termination of the State Department's Global Engagement Center

December 26, 2024

The legislative authority for the Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC), which carries out activities to counter foreign disinformation and propaganda and coordinates related interagency efforts, terminated on December 23, 2024. In 2024, Congress declined to enact several proposals to extend the GEC's mandate prior to termination. The GEC has been the subject of criticism by some Members of Congress for its connections to partner organizations accused of restricting free speech on digital platforms in the United States.

## GEC Authority and Mandate

In March 2016, President Barack Obama directed the Secretary of State to establish the GEC by [executive order](#). Similar to the structure and purpose of [previous State Department efforts](#) to counter support for terrorism, the GEC was tasked with leading interagency efforts to carry out U.S.-government-sponsored counterterrorism communications to foreign publics, with a GEC Coordinator reporting to the Secretary through the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

In December 2016, Congress enacted an establishing [provision](#) for the GEC in the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328; [22 U.S.C. § 2656](#) note), which expanded the GEC's mandate from countering terrorist messaging to "counter[ing] foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts" that threaten U.S. national security interests as well as the national security interests of U.S. allied and partner countries. In 2018, Congress [amended](#) the provision to clarify and strengthen GEC authorities, requiring the GEC to "lead" and "direct" interagency counter-extremist and counter-propaganda communications as well as coordinate them.

## GEC Operations and Activities

The GEC was led by a Special Envoy and Coordinator, who reported to the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The GEC [coordinated](#) its work with "the U.S. interagency, international partners, private sector, civil society, technology industry, and media networks." Operating threat-based and functional teams covering a wide range of activities related to the Center's mission, the

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GEC coordinated U.S.-government counter-propaganda and disinformation programs around the world and shared information on foreign disinformation efforts with domestic and international partners. The Center also [produced](#) several public-facing reports explaining foreign countries' concerted disinformation efforts, including a number of reports described as "exposing Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem."

## Assessment of GEC Performance

The Department of State Office of Inspector General (OIG) has conducted investigations into and audits of the GEC, finding that the GEC remained in a support role for other federal government efforts to counter foreign disinformation rather than leading and directing such efforts as mandated in law. A 2022 [inspection](#) of the GEC by OIG revealed that the GEC had suffered from

- an internal structure that limited the clear lines of authority necessary to effectively lead whole-of-government efforts and relied too heavily on contractors;
- disparate, competing, and better-resourced counter-disinformation efforts housed in other government agencies despite the GEC's legislative mandate to direct and coordinate such efforts; and
- difficult and conflicting roles and relationships with other State Department units.

The OIG nevertheless found that the GEC was "generally effective" in supporting programs to counter disinformation with interagency partners. Congress [required](#) the Department of State to submit a report addressing the OIG report's recommendations to the appropriations committees, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and House Foreign Affairs Committee by June 21, 2024.

## Issues Concerning the GEC's Activities

The GEC devoted a significant portion of its funding to [grants](#) supporting domestic and foreign organizations that perform work in communications and communications technology, including implementing projects to identify and combat disinformation and foreign malign influence. A number of groups have sued the GEC, alongside other government agencies, alleging that certain organizations partnered and funded in part by GEC grants took actions (sometimes allegedly unrelated to their GEC grants) to remove or restrict the availability of information posted online by U.S. citizens, curtailing constitutionally protected speech. The House Foreign Affairs Committee has conducted [hearings](#) and Members have detailed their [findings](#) concerning the GEC's relationship to alleged First Amendment violations and the Center's performance in countering foreign disinformation and propaganda. Criticism of these [activities](#) and arguments over GEC [effectiveness](#) have continued in the debate over GEC reauthorization.

## Proposals to Protect Against Possible Partisan and Unconstitutional Activities and to Extend GEC Authorization

Some Members of Congress have continued to support the GEC and have suggested additional oversight to protect against unlawful restraint of domestic speech. As both chambers of Congress considered FY2025 Department of Defense authorization legislation, [provisions](#) were [proposed](#) to authorize the GEC through FY2031. These proposals included amendments to the GEC's authorizing provision to require the Secretary of State to prevent GEC funding from being used for grants to entities that would engage in

partisan activity or unconstitutional censorship of domestic speech and to certify such to Congress prior to providing such funding. Congress did not adopt these proposals when it enacted the finalized Defense authorization [bill](#). On December 17, 2024, Representative Tom Cole introduced a continuing appropriations [measure](#) that included a provision extending the GEC’s authorization until December 23, 2025, but the House took [no further action](#) on the bill. Congress enacted a different continuing appropriations [bill](#) on December 21, 2024, which did not contain a GEC reauthorization provision.

The December 23 deadline has passed and the GEC’s authorization has expired. The Department of State has confirmed that the GEC is [closed](#), and [reportedly](#) was prepared to cease GEC operations and to transfer personnel, resources, and activities to other offices and sections carrying out public diplomacy activities within the State Department. Because counter-disinformation and -propaganda activities are to continue at State, Members of Congress might continue oversight activities to address the propriety, purpose, and effectiveness of these efforts.

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