



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Departure of Cold War media veterans – loss for the USA or moral panic?



The **shutdown** of the US foreign media outlets has triggered a huge wave of outrage, not only in the US but even more so in the world, with regrets over the US abandoning its important instruments of soft diplomacy.

The opposition to the closure of Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is assuming the proportions of a moral panic by its sheer scale, but even more by more or less the same arguments.

US President Donald Trump last week cancelled funding for the US Agency for Global Media, a government agency that runs media outlets that produce content intended for foreign countries, such as VOA, RFE/RL, Radio Free Asia, and Radio Marti, which broadcasts Spanish-language news intended for Cuban citizens.

These media outlets were also affected by a large wave of federal spending cuts, and their employees lost their jobs, including 1,300 of them at VOA.

From a budget savings perspective, the Trump administration will not save much by eliminating decades-old media brands, only about \$900 million, which is the annual budget of the US Agency for Global Media.

When compared to the elimination of foreign aid through USAID, which is also closed, amounting to about \$40 billion in 2023, the savings on government-supported media are almost negligible.

Withdrawal from the media front

The shutdown of the American media outlets, whose brands are known throughout the world, is not yet final, however, as the administration's decision still has to be confirmed by the US Congress. But the path has already been paved, and the fate of the USA's decades-long promoters in the world is almost certainly already sealed.

VOA and RFE/RL gained their fame during the Cold War as channels of American influence in Eastern Europe. Many who today complain and protest about Donald Trump's intention to shut them down point to this very period as the reason these media outlets should continue working.

Another, even more common argument against cancellation is that America is unnecessarily retreating from a tough front where it confronts its ideas with the propaganda of totalitarian systems such as China and Russia.

A number of international organisations that protect freedom of expression and media freedom protested against the Trump administration's decision

"The Iranian Ayatollahs, Chinese communist leaders, and autocrats in Moscow and Minsk would celebrate the demise of RFE/RL after 75 years. Handing our adversaries a win would make them stronger and America weaker," RFE/RL President and Chief Executive Officer Stephen Capus **said** regarding the administration's decision to shut down his media outlet.

A number of international organisations that protect freedom of expression and media freedom protested against the Trump administration's decision. "By shutting down USAGM and its media outlets, the Trump administration is sending a chilling signal: authoritarian regimes such as Beijing and Moscow now have free rein to spread their propaganda unchecked," **said** Thibaut Bruttin, Director General, Reporters Without Borders.

Europe rushes to the rescue

A few days after the Trump administration's decision, European politicians and bureaucrats in Brussels have begun discussions on how to keep Radio Free Europe alive, which they see as an "important voice for freedom and

democracy, especially in those places where it is most needed," as Swedish Minister for European Affairs Jessica Rosencrantz **said**.

Therefore, the Europeans will assess which media operations are running out of financial support from the US government. On this basis, they will decide "how [they] can help, what [they] can do", as EU Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič explained.

Besides geopolitics, other factors have limited the US government-sponsored media's reach

Europe is a really good example of how media outlets like VOA and RFE/RL have done an excellent job of justifying the role for which they were created in 1942 and 1950, respectively. The space that they provided with information and stories about the Western way of life has been a part of the democratic world for more than three decades.

However, this is not yet the case for other regions of the world where authoritarian regimes are still very strong, such as Russia, China, and Iran, as well as countries close to them.

Besides geopolitics, other factors have limited the US government-sponsored media's reach. The technological revolution, which has almost completely shifted the audience's focus from traditional media to digital media, especially social networks, has been a major contributing factor.

Losers of the technological revolution

When critics of the cancellation of VOA, RFE/RL, or Radio Free Asia warn that this will create a media vacuum in a large part of the world that can easily be filled with the propaganda of authoritarian governments, they overlook the fact that this space has long been filled.

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On that network, Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency and also one of Beijing's main propaganda channels, has 1.6 million followers, and Radio Free Asia has 56,000.

An even more drastic dominance of Chinese over American state-supported media can be seen on X, where Xinhua has almost 12 million followers and Radio Free Asia around 80,000.

American media services aimed at audiences in closed crisis regions have simply not survived the technological revolution in the media sector; nor have they been able to fulfil their founder's desire to exert influence in these zones using their concept.

As instruments of soft power, they stayed in a past, a time when they were bearing fruit for their government, which is decades behind us. Washington's decision to stop funding these media outlets will be detrimental if they are not replaced with platforms that meet today's technological and conceptual needs.