

Trump administration cuts US efforts to support democracy at home and abroad. CNN, 15 Feb. 2025

In less than a month in office the [Trump administration](#) has simultaneously dismantled foreign aid programs that support fragile democracies abroad and put on leave federal workers who protect US elections at home in a move that current and former officials say abandons decades of American commitments to democracy.

USAID, the main [foreign aid agency](#), and the State Department have halted funding for democracy and human rights-focused programs. The State Department has also laid off about five-dozen contractors focused on those issues, multiple sources familiar with the matter told CNN.

The Department of Homeland Security this month put on leave several employees who have worked to protect election systems from security threats at home, including advisers who work in red states on basic, nonpartisan cybersecurity measures. On Friday night, the department told employees it was pausing all of its election security work, pending a review. (Wired [first reported](#) on that move.)

The damage to democracies around the world from the foreign aid cuts will be felt for years, current and former US officials told CNN.

“The US government’s credibility as a defender of democracy, as a supporter for human rights, is so tarnished because of all of this” and “may never be able to recover,” said Shannon Green, who until January was a senior USAID official focused on those issues. “It’s a massive betrayal of the trust that [foreign allies] put in us and the commitments that we’ve made to them.”

Vice President JD Vance told European leaders on Friday that the biggest threat to their security was “from within,” rather than China and Russia, in a [speech](#) that seemed squarely aimed at America’s traditional allies in Western Europe.

A federal judge on Thursday partially paused Trump administration’s foreign aid freeze, ordering that the flow of money be restored specifically for contracts, grants or loans. But it is unclear if and how quickly all of those programs will be revived.

Chaotic situation

The US government employees still working on foreign aid describe a chaotic situation with a dearth of reliable guidance from their superiors on how to reorient a multi-billion-dollar set of programs on the fly. USAID officials [trying to evacuate](#) their families from the Democratic of Republic of Congo amid dangerous riots said in court filings on Tuesday they don’t know if they would get reimbursed for emergency expenses.

“You can’t move \$44 billion worth of taxpayers’ dollars around without issuing guidance,” one US official said, referring to the amount USAID disbursed in fiscal 2023. “This isn’t a startup.”

Pauses to programs can be disruptive even if the programs are resumed. The State Department, for example, has long provided digital security tools like VPN software to try to protect dissidents in repressive countries. “Any kind of disruption in that space can be catastrophic,” a US official said.

A State Department spokesperson did not answer questions about how much democracy-focused foreign aid has been paused.

“Each [foreign aid] program is undergoing a review with the goal of restructuring assistance to serve U.S. interests,” the spokesperson said in an email. “Programs that serve our nation’s interests will continue. However, programs that aren’t aligned with our national interest will not.”

USAID staff, the statement continued, “are continuing to work with international partners to track evolving humanitarian crises and emergency needs, to ensure that resources are directed to where they’re needed most.”

But Green, who previously spent over a decade at USAID across Republican and Democratic administrations, said that people in war zones or other countries that rely on the US government for physical protection could be left in limbo because of the freeze.

“There are human beings, human rights defenders, activists, who have up until this point been receiving emergency support and assistance from USAID and State Department,” Green said. US government-backed efforts to evacuate human rights defenders or move them to safe houses are in jeopardy, she added.

Some autocratic governments, like Russia, have welcomed the USAID cuts. And US-funded media outlets like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, which have been a thorn in the side to autocratic regimes, could be next on the chopping block after Elon Musk called for their closure.

Cuts to election protections

The upending of democracy-focused foreign aid programs comes as the second Trump administration has put on administrative leave several employees of the DHS’ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency who have protected US elections from foreign and domestic threats. Some web pages that CISA previously maintained on combating election conspiracy theories have also been taken offline since President Donald Trump’s return to office.

In a memo to employees on Friday reviewed by CNN, CISA senior career official Bridget Bean said the agency was halting all of its election security programs with state and local elections offices until a review could be completed to ensure the activity complied with an executive order from Trump to “correct” past instances of federal “censorship.”

The sweeping review will cover all of DHS’ work to protect elections since 2017, when the department formally declared elections were “critical infrastructure” following Russia’s

interference in the 2016 election. The moratorium on election security work even extends to funding for a threat-sharing center that for years has shared intelligence with elections officials about domestic and foreign cyberattacks.

In 2020, Trump fired then-CISA director Chris Krebs for saying that the election was secure.

“As (DHS) Secretary Noem stated during her confirmation hearing, CISA needs to refocus on its mission, and we are starting with election security,” DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement.

“The agency is undertaking an evaluation of how it has executed its election security mission with a particular focus on any work related to mis-, dis-, and malinformation,” McLaughlin said. “While the agency conducts the assessment, personnel who worked on mis-, dis-, and malinformation, as well as foreign influence operations and disinformation, have been placed on administrative leave.”

However, CISA’s work to counter disinformation around elections began under the first Trump administration and was reduced under the Biden administration, partly in a response to court challenges and criticism from Republicans. Today, some election officials think that CISA has over-corrected to the point of not being prepared to respond to viral falsehoods spread by Americans that could potentially lead to attacks on election infrastructure, CNN previously [reported](#).

The second Trump team’s move to put CISA’s election specialists on leave could create openings for foreign operatives interested in targeting US elections, argued David Levine, a senior fellow at the University of Maryland’s Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement.

“Foreign adversaries and other bad actors are licking their chops as they watch the current administration remove individuals who have been key to protecting American elections and encouraging the spread of democracy around the world,” said Levine, a former election official in Idaho. “Cutting CISA and USAID’s election teams risks hastening the decline of the once-high regard for American democracy, and with it America’s leadership and moral authority.”

This story has been updated with new reporting.