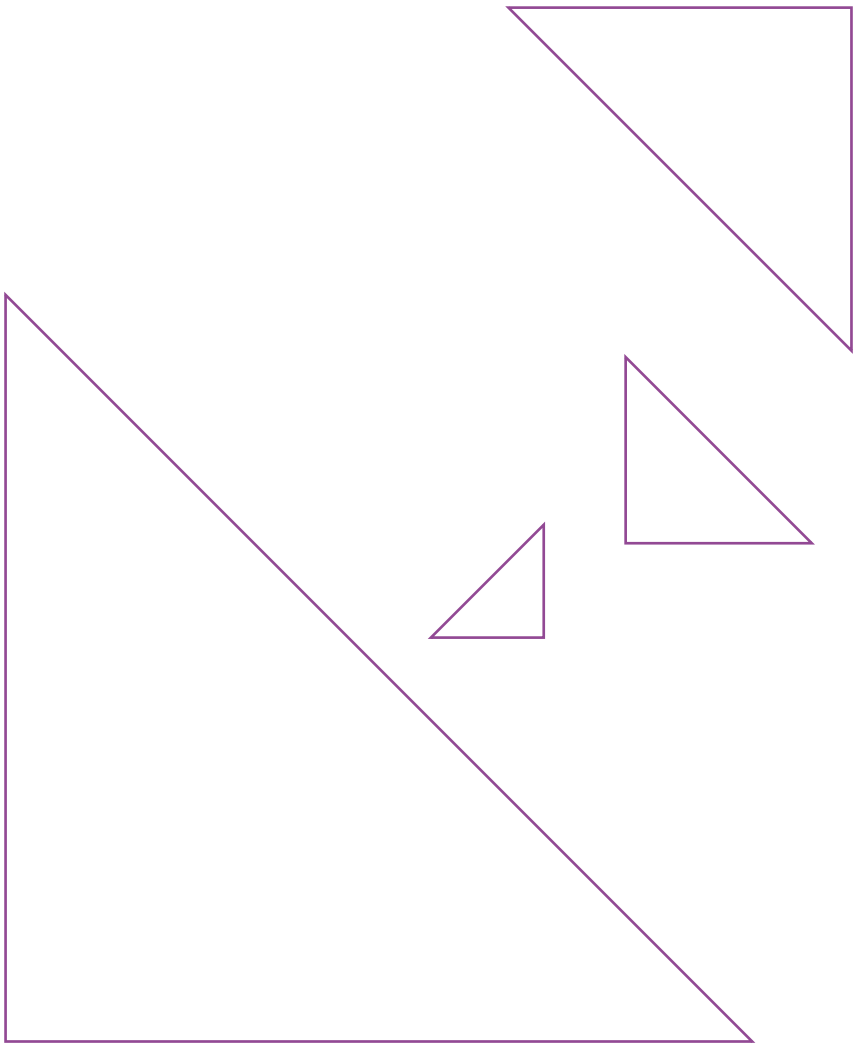
Corporate Europe Observatory

The ‘Triangle of Madness’:

the MAGA coalition defending online hate speech in Europe



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The 'Triangle of Madness': the MAGA coalition defending online hate speech in Europe

The Trump administration and two of its closest allies – Elon Musk, and an ultraconservative religious group – are waging a vitriolic battle to stop the EU's digital rules on content moderation. Claims they make are often absurd, but that doesn't make the coalition any less dangerous.

Speeches at important international summits, court cases in Europe, conferences with scores of far right participants, powerful messaging using the massive outreach of X, one of the most used social media platforms on the planet. These are part of a campaign waged by three different parts of the MAGA coalition – the Trump administration, Elon Musk, and the Alliance Defending Freedom, an ultraconservative religious group – to stop the EU's digital rules on content moderation. They claim to be doing this in the name of 'defending free speech'.

But looking at their messages on the state of free speech in Europe, it comes across as a campaign without substance, including in how they portray the main object of their hatred, the Digital Services Act, and how it works. And in the light of MAGA's rising attacks on free expression and free press, it is highly hypocritical too. But just because the claims are absurd and the senders difficult to take seriously, that doesn't make the coalition – or the ultraconservative US religious group driving the campaign – any less dangerous.

And this summer, the heat was turned up a notch, when the Trump administration, via an office under the State Department, began to offer grants to organisations that will accept "substantial involvement" of the department, or a US embassy, under the guise of the campaign to defend "freedom of speech" and fight "censorship" in Europe.

With that, we are looking at an unusually broad based US political intervention in European politics by the US. One that unfolds not only through lobbying by companies or diplomatic efforts, but also civil society initiatives and activism in courts.

'Civilizational allies'

Since the early days of the second Trump presidency, it has been clear that his administration would not just push its interests in Europe through talks with governments, politicians, and civil servants both at national level, and in the EU institutions. As expressed in the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy 2026, their intention is to cultivate resistance "to Europe's current trajectory within European nations" and encourage "its political allies in Europe" to promote a "revival of spirit". And the Trump administration finds that there is fertile ground for this, due to "the growing influence of patriotic European parties", which give "cause for great optimism," the National Security Strategy reads.

In other words, Trump and the broader MAGA coalition are building a far-right network in Europe, working with think tanks, NGOs, companies, and individuals to exert pressure on decision-makers through media campaigns, working through the courts, and coalition-building between organisations in the MAGA camp and European organisations. The MAGA objective is to gather "civilizational allies" on the far right in Europe and work with them to change European policies and politics.

While migration is a key topic of interest, with initiatives underway to influence the European debate, the most visible MAGA campaign so far has been over supposed attacks on free speech and – not least – against the EU's digital regulation of online content, in particular the Digital Services Act (DSA). The ultraconservative religious organisation the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) has been at the forefront of this crusade, along with support from Elon Musk's X.

Trump's attack on free speech

Yet while the Trump administration has opened fire on the DSA supposedly for installing 'censorship', in the US it has launched a chilling and blistering attack on free speech. Reporters Without Borders notes, "After a century of gradual expansion of press rights in the United States, the country is experiencing a significant and prolonged decline in press freedom, with Donald Trump's return to the presidency greatly exacerbating the situation." Trump's moves including banning core media organisations from the White House, putting pressure on media to silence critical voices, opening criminal investigations against critics and political opponents, defunding public broadcasting, and giving the nod to MAGA allies to buy up media companies and create huge new monopolies.

And in the same vein; the very same organisation that claims to fight for free speech in Europe, is busy imposing censorship in states laws in the US on LGBTQ+ issues.

Money on the table

The MAGA campaign in Europe has been ongoing for more than a year now, dominated by absurd statements and far-fetched, fake claims. Still, it is hard to deny that the triangle between the ADF, Musk, and the US State Department, is making some headway in Europe. And now there is more money involved.

Trump's State Department made US$5 million available in the first pot of official money to support US intervention at civil society level in European politics. This was followed by several other grants for activities in Europe, such as approximately US$2 million for migration issues, and another US$2 million for "proposals to strengthen the ability of European countries and institutions to protect freedom of expression, political pluralism, and national self-government". In early September 2026, it was also announced that a further US$4 million would be allocated for right-wing media.

In total the Trump Administration intends to spend US$25 million in this round, almost half of which (US$12 million) is reserved for the UK according to *The Guardian*. The European campaign is divided into two main arenas, the UK and the EU. The Alliance Defending Freedom has been campaigning in both places for a while, has networked with European organisations, and has created narratives around specific cases linked to both hate speech and anti-abortion campaigns. The ADF interact frequently in their campaign with European actors and the US State Department, and they strive to have Elon Musk and X as involved as possible.

Clear targets – but recipients unknown

The US State Department's goals and objectives of the grants include addressing "modern challenges", not least violations of free speech. Their stated target is supposed attempts to use "state power to undermine fundamental principles of democratic self-government through over-broad and vague hate-speech laws and online content regulations that police and punish speech while suppressing political participation." They highlight "politically motivated prosecutions, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), criminal defamation laws, and regulatory sanctions against dissenting voices."

At the time of writing, no word is out about who the recipients are in the EU, though the deadlines for applying have passed. But in the EU and the UK, according to the description of the objectives of the grants listed by the State Department, such as civil society work against suppression of free speech, the grants could very well be used to prop up the campaign that has unfolded the past year with three protagonists forming a triangle: ultraconservative religious group the Alliance Defending Freedom, Elon Musk and X, and the US State Department.

Beginnings: the ADF's free speech campaign

Thanks to the networking and the campaigning done in Europe by the Alliance Defending Freedom, a lot has been made easier for the State Department in terms of making contact with European groups, and for that reason the official money that is planned to pour into campaign efforts, is more likely to find a recipient. Potential partners have been identified, such as anti-abortion campaigners in the UK, Germany, Austria, conferences with conservative, religious Europeans have been held, such as one with the so-called Political Network for Values, ideas have been exchanged.

It may represent a problem to some European actors, that the grant is to be spent with a "substantial involvement" of the State Department. After all, Trump is unpopular in most parts of Europe. But in terms of being able to identify actors and establish a working relationship, it all appears to be ripe and straightforward for the State Department, thanks to groundwork done by others.

ADF's agenda

The Alliance Defending Freedom is a group that has fought against the right to abortion, against gender and LGBTQ+ rights, marriage equality, and transgender rights, for many years in the US. They work mainly through the courts, and they are able to play a long game to undermine and even fully reverse such rights. Famously they played a pivotal role in having the US Supreme Court annul the right to abortion at the federal level.

The group has been active in Europe since at least 2010, where they have brought the same legal advocacy tactics to Brussels and member states, with some success. They have offices in Brussels, Vienna, and London, and in recent years, they have increased their spending in Europe significantly.

Reporting by *The New York Times* also shows ADF has played a key role in inserting an anti-abortion agenda into long-time Trump-ally Nigel Farage's Reform party in the UK. The reporting shows Farage only recently started talking about abortion as an issue.

In the UK, as in most of Europe, a radical anti-abortion stance is a fringe position at best and difficult to fight 'head on', so adjustments have been made. Similarly, outbursts against LGTBQ+ people by ADF or its allies, could make it difficult in some European contexts to establish a presence. So in order for the ADF to make headway in Europe on issues where their views are far away from mainstream, and generally regarded as archaic and sectarian, the group is cloaking its radical and deeply unpopular positions in a discourse on freedom of speech, where it is easier to make headway.

Building a coalition of three

By 2023 the ADF was running several campaigns in Europe for 'free speech', with a strong focus on the right to harass people approaching abortion clinics (contesting buffer zones), and about the right to use hate speech against sexual minorities, as in the case of a Finnish politician Päivi Räsänen, who has enjoyed massive support from the ADF, including representing her in court in Finland (more below). Räsänen has also met with the top brass of the Trump administration, not least Undersecretary of State Sarah Rogers.

Over time, the ADF's campaigns to support anti-abortionists and people like Räsänen, developed into a campaign against the EU's Digital Services Act, and the UK's Online Safety Act. And the ADF was in a good spot to put itself in the middle of a broader effort by the MAGA coalition. First, they developed links with Elon Musk, and second, they were well placed in the broader MAGA camp to create bonds with the Trump administration. The ADF is part of the group behind the infamous Project 2025, the plan for the first 100 days of the Trump Presidency that included ideas for mass deportation of immigrants, the shutting down of the Department of Education, and many other far right favourites. The plan had tremendous influence on Trump's priorities, and the organisations behind it continue to be staunch allies of his.

ADF's links to high places

The ADF's close relations to key figures in the MAGA movement date back years. In 2020, Michael Farris, who was then-President of the ADF, worked on appeals to challenge the results of the 2020 election lost by Donald Trump. Its current President, Kristen Waggoner, has been appointed by Donald Trump to the US administration's Advisory Board to the Religious Liberty Commission. And Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, used to be an ADF lawyer.

This position in Project 2025 has enabled ADF to put themselves at the centre of this coalition that has come together to the fight against the EU's digital regulation. The three members of this coalition all take different angles – the Trump Administration has a global trade angle and an urge to stave off any kind of regulation that would inhibit the strategies of US companies; Elon Musk has an obvious interest in preserving Big Tech as a broadly speaking unregulated or self-regulated area. The ADF, for its part, has an agenda that is fully compatible with its broader aims: its support for anti-abortion campaigners, and its defence of persons accused of hate speech. Note that the ADF was itself categorised as a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty Law Centre in 2020. This coalition of three is what we call the 'triangle of madness'.

The DSA as a threat and opportunity

If you listen to the ADF, the DSA is about strict censorship imposed on Europe by the European Commission. Yet the legal text says activities on digital platforms have to be in keeping with national law and EU law – what is prohibited offline is prohibited online, in other words. In that sense, the DSA does not impose new standards on freedom of speech, it merely sets out to include the platforms in the reach of the law.

To understand why an evangelical ultraconservative religious organisation is apparently conducting a campaign against censorship and for free speech, a look at two of their favourite and most-cited cases, can shed some light.

Päivi Räsänen is a Finnish conservative politician convicted for hate speech at the Finnish Supreme Court. She produced a pamphlet that claims homosexuality to be a "disorder" of psychosexual development, "an aberration of psychosexual development" who suffers from "sexual deviation", to quote a press release from Finland's Supreme Court from April 2026. And she has been on trial for a tweet against a Pride Parade in which she states "the sin and shame" of a Pride parade is incompatible with "the doctrine of the church".

Cases of "hate speech" are important to the ADF (who always puts the phrase in quotation marks), because it fears laws that can restrict attacks on LGBTQ+ rights.

Adam Smith-Connor is the second case mentioned ad nauseam in the ADF's campaign. He stood trial and was convicted for "silent prayer" in the words of the ADF and was fined £9,000 (€10,500) for not respecting a buffer zone around an abortion clinic in the UK. The logic behind the buffer zones – both in the UK and elsewhere – is that women on their way to an abortion clinic often are in a vulnerable state. "Silent prayer" just outside, then, comes across as an aggressive, hurtful statement.

Both cases are meant to show an "intensifying free speech and religious liberty crisis across Europe", and one that the Digital Services Act will catapult to give it a global reach. The DSA, the ADF claims, is "an extreme threat to fundamental freedoms" (plural).

Why we need content moderation

So what is so threatening in the DSA?

"Content moderation" is something that needs to be handled with utmost care. Freedom of speech is a core human right, and yet some exceptions have to apply to protect the right to security and peace. To begin with, there is hardly any country on the planet that does not outlaw death threats.

It's not hard to argue that there's a need for content moderation, albeit applied extremely carefully. The cost of not doing so is already apparent. Around the world, there have been incidents of ethnic hatred and violence fuelled by social media platforms and their problematic algorithms, from the Rohingya genocide to ethnic violence in Ethiopia's civil war.

Elon Musk's own company, X, has shown recently just how easy to stir up racist hatred using disinformation on platforms. To take just two recent examples, Musk posted on X amplifying calls to protest against migration as racist pogroms set fire to city streets and homes in Belfast in June 2026. Researchers from the Center for Countering Digital Hate say Musk played an "instrumental" role in the Belfast riots.

In 2024 riots targeting migrants in the wake of a brutal stabbing in Southport, UK, were both stoked by online viral claims and disinformation. Sacha Deshmukh from Amnesty International UK said: "By amplifying hate and misinformation on such a massive scale, X acted like petrol on the fire of racist violence in the aftermath of the Southport tragedy. The platform's algorithm not only failed to 'break the circuit' and stop the spread of dangerous falsehoods — they are highly likely to have amplified them."

On the same note, false claims or virulent attacks on sexual minorities can make peoples' lives miserable and lead to further hollowing out of their rights. This can be a matter of life or death. In a case in the US, a man was allowed by X to use his account for vitriolic anti-LGBTQ+ attacks. X only took the account down, when he shot and killed a California business owner over a Pride flag. The investigation showed X had refused to intervene.

Misinformation and elections

There is another key reason why content moderation matters: social media platforms left to their own devices can open the door to election interference. Whether it is China, Russia, or the US, there is no space for complacence in Europe given the risk of social media campaigns based on false, fabricated messages to manipulate politics. This includes Elon Musk's personal attempts to influence the US Presidential elections in 2024, posting at least 87 messages that "fact-checkers have rated as false or misleading, amassing 2 billion views," the Center for Countering Digital Hate writes in a report.

And it goes deeper than featuring falsehoods and spreading misinformation. Research has shown that recommender systems used by social media platforms amplify disinformation, extremist, and far-right content. This goes to the heart of the surveillance ad industry that thrives on massive data collection by algorithmically amplifying content which makes users stay online longer and engage more. And in the case of Elon Musk and X, the options of citizens to respond, are often increasingly limited. As when X disabled a feature in 2023 that allowed citizens to report misinformation about elections.

For those reasons, in times of social media, keeping these platforms accountable is a must. Moderating content on platforms is not without traps or blind alleys, and the DSA is not the perfect solution, including because it lacks teeth. But if the ongoing far-right campaign is successful, it would dial back even the modest improvements that have been made to hold Big Tech platforms accountable.

To the ADF, however, the DSA is seen as a threat to their problematic political goals. These are indicated at in the way that the ADF routinely put the phrases "hate speech" and "protection of democracy" in inverted commas, as if they were imaginary concerns.

(Mis)guiding on the DSA

So, how is the DSA a threat in the universe of an ultraconservative religious group?

The ADF has produced two analyses of some length about the DSA. One is 'A Guide to Understanding the Digital Services Act', another is a 'testimony' delivered to a hearing in the US Congress on "Europe's Threat to American Speech and Innovation" by a senior counsel of the ADF. Both are littered with exaggerations and misinterpretations.

An important example is about what obligations platforms and search engines the DSA requires. In a written statement to Congress, ADF's legal counsel Lorcán Price wrote: "Under the DSA, service providers are obligated to proactively search for and remove so-called "illegal content." Failure to do so — or do so adequately in the eyes of the Commission — will expose the platform to punishment."

This, and many other claims by the ADF about the DSA, are not only exaggerations. They portray the DSA as something it is definitely not.

What the platforms and large search engines are actually obligated to do under the DSA's article 34, is to run "risk assessments" – analysis of how the platform or search engine affects fundamental rights, freedom of expression, consumer protection, respect for privacy, and more. The tech companies have not been asked to systematically monitor their platforms or search engines for lawfulness and act on it. Such a decision would run counter to a principle of platform regulation in European law, and as if to underline this, it is in the DSA's article 8, that there is "no general obligation to monitor the information which providers of intermediary services transmit or store, nor actively to seek facts or circumstances indicating illegal activity shall be imposed on those providers."

What the DSA is really about

What the DSA does is something far more limited. While content moderation is still left in the hands of the platforms themselves, the DSA provides users with a procedure to challenge decisions to erase content. This encourages platforms to adopt their own codes of conduct, and to enforce them, but the DSA does not function prescriptively in the manner claimed by the MAGA campaign. What it does do is apply a simple "what-is-illegal-off-line-is-illegal-online principle", which means that effectively, national law applies, and EU law applies.

The ADF and the US administration's repeatedly claims in their campaign materials that the DSA forces platforms to implement the same rules in the United States as it does in Europe. But there is no basis to these claims as there is no extra-territoriality at play in the DSA and this kind of content moderation can be done on a regional basis.

Small but important steps

Indeed the main flaw of the DSA, is that it does not go far enough in many aspects. Crucially, a lot is still left to the platforms to decide. (For a basic intro to the DSA, see the bottom of this article from Observatoire des Multinationales.) If you think that fundamentally, platform owners must not be the ones who can decide what goes and what doesn't, the DSA only takes us one small step towards reining them in. The platforms continue to be very powerful, and the DSA is only a job half done. Take for example the attempt by the European Parliament to ban surveillance ads as part of the DSA; this was undermined by a Big Tech lobby campaign. Big Tech's business model, based on extensive tracking and profiling of its users, is therefore left untouched by the DSA.

But the steps taken are crucial. At the moment the DSA in the EU, and to some extent the Online Safety Act in the UK, are globally unique, and certainly in stark contrast to recent developments in the US. What is clear is that the MAGA attacks on tech regulation in Europe comes on the back of a quick and aggressive dismantling of regulatory measures in the US, as explained in a report from the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). That campaign includes striking any reference to misinformation in AI regulations, and pressuring platforms to scale down their moderation efforts. It seems it would be too simple to describe this as a campaign for deregulation and free speech. Under pressure from a threat of losing their protection against lawsuits related to user-posted content from Brendan Carr, the head of the US Federal Communications Commission – an agency that regulates communication via radio, cable, television etc – Meta, Google, Microsoft, Apple were all forced to "realign their content moderation policies in a direction more favorable to the Trump Administration and conservative views," Mathilde Velliet of IFRI wrote.

The Trump Administration steps in

Clearly, the ADF laying the groundwork in Europe was handy and useful for the second Trump Administration. Because any campaign needs an entry point. To wage a media battle and engage people to push politicians is different from diplomatic pressure and trade negotiations.

Already in February 2025, only a month into Trump's second term, Vice-President JD Vance, who is a close ally of the ADF, spoke at a security conference in February 2025 in Munich, lashing out against supposed threats to free speech in Europe using the ADF's favourite show cases not least that of Adam Smith-Connor. "A little over two years ago," Vance said, "the British government charged Adam Smith-Connor, a 51-year-old physiotherapist and an army veteran, with the heinous crime of standing 50 meters from an abortion clinic and silently praying for three minutes – not obstructing anyone, not interacting with anyone, just silently praying on his own." It became clear the ADF is far from alone when it campaigns for anti-abortion activists or anti-LGBTQ+ activists in Europe.

As 2025 progressed, the US Congress got involved. In September a hearing was held in the US Congress titled 'Europe's Threat to American Speech and Innovation', with ADF legal counsel Lorcán Price from Ireland as a keynote speaker. The Trump Administration's involvement has been growing steadily, more often than not with the ADF's fingerprint on the actions and discourse of civil servants and politicians. The story about Adam Smith-Connor reappeared in a much discussed article by a young State Department official, Samuel Samson, on the need for the US to find the proper "civilizational allies" that would work with them against "suppression of speech, facilitation of mass migration, targeting of religious expression," and more. When the same Samuel Samson traveled to Europe, he had a meeting with close friends of the ADF, not least with Adam Smith-Connor himself.



At the very beginning of her term as Under Secretary of State in 2025, Sarah Rogers made a trip to Europe and met two of the ADF's main European associates, including Finnish politician Päivi Räsänen.

Sarah Rogers and the ADF

Later in the year, when lawyer and far right firebrand Sarah Rogers was appointed Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, she went on two missions to Europe shortly after taking office,

linking up with far-right parties, including Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), Orbán's party, and far right parties in Spain, France, Poland, Italy, the UK, and elsewhere. And, not least, she met with the ADF's two favourite cases, Adam Smith-Connor and Päivi Räsänen.

As Dean Jackson from Tech Policy Press describes it, both the Heritage Foundation – the organisation in charge of Project 2025 – and the ADF emerge as non-governmental conveners when you look at the way the US Administration addresses the DSA. Using the ADF as a stepping stone, then, the administration is getting set to launch a broader attack.

Rogers is in favour of intervening in Europe to stop the Digital Services Act, that according to her has two purposes: "one, extort and extract from American businesses and two, suppress speech flagged by left-wing NGOs". And it is in her job description to work on several fronts, not just among diplomats and government representatives, but through civil society initiatives as well. In February 2026 she announced that funding was forthcoming for projects and organisations in Europe to promote 'free speech' – the funding that began to fall into place in August. But she wants to do more: she also announced that a new website, freedom.gov, would show Europeans (among others) exactly what had been censored under existing national and European laws, the Digital Services Act included. At the time of publication, that website remains empty.

Linking up with Musk

In the Big Tech community such an ardent defence of their interests is surely welcome. One tech bro in particular has played along from day one, and can safely be regarded as the main pillar of the third part of the triangle. And here too, the ADF has served as a convener.

The relationship between X-owner Elon Musk and the ADF dates back at least to October 2023, when the ADF spearheaded an open letter to Elon Musk, which appealed to him and his platform to step into the fight. The letter signed by 50 people, many known to be in the MAGA coalition, appeals to Elon Musk to support "legal action challenging state-sponsored censorship", and to dedicate X Spaces to bring attention to "censorship cases involving both governments and the workplace".

Since then, Elon Musk has been increasingly vocal in the fight for this particular far-right version of the fight for free speech, including by using his platform to influence politics. Famously, he invited the leader of German far right party Alternative für Deutschland Alice Weidel for a long talk on X ahead of the German parliamentary elections in early 2025. And he began to support the ADF from his own X account, including by reposting an ADF post against the Digital Services Act. This was taken as a crucial sign of support from Musk by the ADF to its campaign to "repeal the DSA" by the ADF.

He also became a very outspoken critic of the Digital Services Act, claiming it is about "censored speech", and X ignored some of the provisions relevant to the platform. As a consequence of ignoring those rules, in December 2025 the European Commission issued a €120 million fine to X for breach of its obligations under the Digital Services Act.

Closest to Musk

This was not lost on the ADF. In February 2026, X launched an appeal against the fine at the European Court of Justice with the support of the ADF. The ADF's press release framed this as all about resistance to "an online censorship regime around the world", claiming that X and Musk had been "singled out by Brussels for the free speech stance of the platform".

Ironically, Musk and the ADF were championing freedom of speech at around the same time that it was revealed that X's Grok AI was generating millions of sexualised images, including 23,000 that appeared to depict children. Is this the famous free speech ADF is so keen to defend? The organisation carried on portraying X as a victim of EU censorship regardless of the emerging scandal, though it did distance itself from the revelation.

And as it turned out, the European Court of Justice fine was about X's lack of transparency of its advertising repository, the failure to provide access to public data for researchers, and about the false claim that "verified" accounts were actually verified, though they were quite simply paid for. Nothing that came close to any free speech issues.



When the ADF lashed out against the DSA in , Elon Musk gave a sign of support.

Musk most aggressive

At first, it seemed like the conflict would vanish quietly. In July 2026 X agreed to enact the changes to avoid daily non-compliance penalties, that satisfied the European Commission. But in September, the Trump Administration stepped in to support Musk and X in the case at the European Court of Justice, attacking what a spokesperson called an

inappropriate attempt by the EU to "expand its regulatory authority to reach American companies not present or operating within its jurisdiction." In their words, this is about "regulatory overreach to try and control American engines of innovation and economic growth."

Not all Big Tech companies follow the same aggressive tactic as Musk on this particular issue. Big Tech companies have intensified their lobbying activities against the EU's digital regulation since the start of the Trump administration, but in Europe, the tactics employed by the main platforms differ. Meta Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg has certainly been aggressive in rhetoric: "Europe has an ever-increasing number of laws institutionalizing censorship," he said in January 2025. "We're going to work with President Trump to push back on governments around the world that are going after American companies and pushing to censor more." Yet, while Meta strongly opposed the DSA, it has chosen a more traditional lobbying approach, and it is going along with eg a voluntary Code of Conduct on Disinformation, which is now linked to the DSA, and forms part of an overall assessment of compliance with the DSA. All major providers have chosen that avenue, except one. The approach of Elon Musk and X is different, highly confrontational, and part and parcel with the MAGA-campaign.

Disinformation and fake news

There is a good deal of hysterical disinformation at play, when this MAGA-coalition in three parts – the 'triangle of madness' – unfolds its campaign against the DSA. None of the three parties have provided evidence to suggest there is repression of free speech under the DSA in the manner JD Vance claimed in Munich. There is no attack on the right to "silent prayer", as claimed by the ADF, and the European Commission does not have a finger on a censorship button, prepared to unleash a global nightmare of dark silence and authoritarianism.

Strikingly, the US State Department have yet to prove the case against the DSA they speak so frantically of. Around the time JD Vance gave his Munich speech, he asked an office in the US State Department to find evidence of online censorship under the DSA. According to the Washington Post, though, nothing was revealed. "There is no evidence that Member States of the European Union are overreaching the DSA to censor and criminalize online content," the conclusion reads. And the freedom.gov website, announced by Sarah Rogers as a document to uncover European censorship, is – at the time of writing – still blank.

That does not mean that Sarah Rogers is sitting on her hands, or that she is not looking for ways to make an impact in Europe with a MAGA perspective. In October, the US State Department attacked an annual event on disinformation, organised by the Brussels based non-profit EU Disinfo Lab, an event for the "counter-disinformation com-

munity", including journalists, researchers, policy-makers. A debate about the US as a FIMI threat (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) led to pressure on both governments and the EU, including from Sarah Rogers, and led to the withdrawal of support to the event from Lithuanian and Canadian governments, as well as the EU.

Hypocrisy

Perhaps if this triangle of madness had looked for evidence of censorship in areas outside their specific political lens, the picture might look slightly different. For example there are signs that the DSA has indeed been weaponised against Palestinians from early on, including by European Commissioner Thierry Breton. This followed a time when Elon Musk had remarked to the European Commission, that the DSA was "very sensible." The Palestinian case in 2023, then, did not lead to the kind of confrontation between the two, that would follow later.

"Looking at the urgency of the matter regarding the Hamas-Israeli conflict," Euractiv wrote, Breton was expecting Musk "to be in contact with the relevant law enforcement authorities and Europol". Breton's material was never presented to the public, so there is no way of knowing just how far the European Commission went with its demand for removing Palestinian content. But at this point, X was extremely cooperative, removing hundreds of accounts.



In February 2026, Sarah Rogers announced that the website freedom.gov would be launched to inform Europeans and others about the censorship they endure. At the time of writing (October 2026), the website remained blank.

However, this sweep had very broad brushstrokes, and on several social media platforms it seems that complaints by rights groups about "over-removal of Palestinian content" were merited. Also, had the US State Department looked in the mirror, it would have been hard to miss the brutal attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of assembly on the Palestine issue in the United States.

There is a thick carpet of hypocrisy underlying the MAGA campaign on free speech, and the ADF is no exception. While they preach free speech, they are involved in work to design US legislation to outlaw information on gender and sexual minority rights. It is quite something to see an organisation deeply involved in the US in banning or censoring books at school and public libraries, and in developing "Don't Say Gay or Trans" laws, present itself as a defender of free speech.

The wins of the ADF

For the moment, content moderation under the DSA – in place since late 2022 – is not in danger. Still, there is no denying that the ADF and the broader MAGA-coalition is making headway in its campaign against digital regulation, and against restrictions on disinformation and hate speech. The effectiveness of their work should be judged by the long perspective the ADF itself applied in its fight against the right to abortion in the US. From that angle, the MAGA pro-hate speech campaign is making a lot of headway in these times.

With that in mind it's worth looking at the national level – which is where European laws against hate speech and disinformation are essentially written, not the European level.

In Germany the ADF has won several cases with local anti-abortion groups, against buffer-zones around abortion clinics, with a first win in Leipzig in June 2023, followed by a similar case from Regensburg in Bavaria, in which "a prayer group" with the support of ADF challenged a restriction of a 100 meter-buffer zone in November 2025, "and the court struck it down," an ADF newsletter reads.

Similarly in Austria in January 2026, a 'Youth for Life' (*Jugend für das Leben*) group that saw a prayer organised near abortion facilities banned by the police, had the decision overturned, thanks to efforts by the ADF.

In Ireland, in late 2023, the ADF waged a campaign against a new law against hate speech, the Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022, flanked by Elon Musk. In an 'X Space' (an online stream within the X platform) by a Irish media outlet, Elon Musk promised to challenge the law in court if it was passed, and promised to cover legal fees if Irish citizens were prosecuted under the new law. This is exactly the kind of support the ADF had asked for from Elon Musk a few months earlier. In September 2024, then, the Irish Government decided to drop the 'hate speech' element from the law, and the ADF cried victory.

Finland: a win despite a loss in court

And then there is Finland, the homeland of the ADF poster child, conservative politician Päiva Räsänen. That case did not go quite the way the ADF had hoped. While acquitted at the first two levels, when her case reached Finland's Supreme Court in March 2026, the court convicted her with a fine at €1,800 for publishing a pamphlet on Facebook and on her own website, in which she claims homosexuality to be a "disorder" of psychosexual development.

But this apparent loss became a new opportunity for far-right messaging and the ADF campaign. Following the verdict of the Supreme Court, several far-right politicians from the True Finns party – including several ministers – responded with dismay and demanded changes to legislation to avoid a repetition. A seed has been planted in Finnish politics.

It is somewhat ironic that Päivi Räsänen was acquitted in the case of the tweet on X with her claim that "the sin and shame" of a Pride parade is incompatible with "the doctrine of the church", leaving the ADF with a case with no further fuel in their campaign against the DSA. However, that didn't stop the Republican-controlled US Congress from inviting Räsänen to testify in February 2026 in a hearing on 'Europe's Threat to American Speech and Innovation'.

MAGA in the European Parliament

Finally, there is the European level, the EU institutions. Is this MAGA coalition making headway? It depends on your metric. If you're asking if they have changed the DSA, or if the Commission is now under pressure from a parliamentary majority to change track, the answer is no. But a force is building up that speaks the same language as the MAGA-coalition, and it is in a more powerful position than most would think.

Tech Policy Press has investigated the presence of the MAGA and the far right narrative about the DSA as a tool for massive censorship, and found nine documents supported by 55 MEPs, "indicating the presence of a minority bloc within the Parliament" in "alignment with the right's censorship narrative". Of the nine documents – most of which are formal questions to the Commission served with a bitter political remark – two mark reactions to US complaints urging the Commission to consider changing or simply abolishing the DSA. Four are supportive of the tech bros Zuckerberg and Elon Musk's complaints over the DSA. And one particularly popular document is supported by 36 MEPs from all far right groups plus the conservative EPP group, which quotes Musk's description of "EU woke Stasi commissars" in one case, and aggressively criticises the decision to fine X for non-compliance.

Moreover, the ADF has been particularly successful in establishing contacts with far-right ECR group in the European Parliament. While the group put out a press release in 2022 hailing the DSA as "a big step forward in promoting greater fairness in digital markets", since the ADF campaign ECR has increasingly labeled the DSA as "censorship".

Building alliances in Brussels

Last October the ADF organised an open letter signed by "one hundred experts" to demand an end to the EU's supposed attempt to "impose online censorship in the EU and

across the whole world". The list of signatories does include quite a few whose 'expertise' or relevance is pretty self-proclaimed, and there are a fair amount of the usual suspects from the ADF community, including its own global Chief Executive Officer Kristen Waggoner, European Director Paul Coleman, Toby Young from Free Speech Union in the UK, and clerics from Mexico, Ireland, Sri Lanka, and the United States. Still, the lists show an organisation able to move in many circles and create bonds and links between academics, politicians, media personalities, journalists, civil servants, and more.

In the context of the European Parliament too, the ADF seems to be building an alliance brick by brick. In early 2025, the far right in the European Parliament felt "empowered" by the attacks to the Digital Services Act by Facebook and X, and initiated work to change the law. Shortly after, in May 2025, the ADF co-hosted a conference in the European Parliament on the DSA and censorship, in which the speakers (so-called experts) exchanged a large amount of nonsense and feverish fantasies. Take the speech by Paul Coleman who once again mentioned the case of Päivi Räsämen as a "harrowing example of what censorship under the DSA could look like in practice" – even though the case had nothing to do with the DSA whatsoever, and actually ended up giving a green light to her aggressively homophobic post against the Pride Parade.

A year later, a similar conference, dubbed 'Free speech vs regulated speech' co-organised by two far right groups (the ECR and the PfE) and run by the conservative Political Network for Values – a network that establishes a dialogue and cooperation between conservative and far right forces on value based issues – seemed to show yet another level of unity on the right. While formally backed only by far right groups, the presence of the PNFV leaves them once again with a snippet of the traditional conservative environment.

Taken together, the ADF is on good terms with all far right groups in the European Parliament, and is making inroads into the traditional conservative group too. That means that they are mingling with circles that form a majority in the European Parliament.

Fighting an imaginary censorship complex

The combined strength of the three corners of the Triangle of Madness, then, must be reckoned with. All three parties bring something special to the table – the US State Department brings political power and money, Elon Musk and X bring massive resources and media outreach, and the ADF brings skills for legal activism and coalition building among conservative and far-right groups across Europe.

In reality the only thing they offer to the issue of free speech, is hypocrisy, fake news, and ignorance. Their discourse is reminiscent of the work of Mike Benz, "a far-right conspiracy theorist", writes Conspiracy Watch, "who is now being welcomed as a thought leader by the U.S. Secretary of State" Marco Rubio. Benz is a proponent of the idea

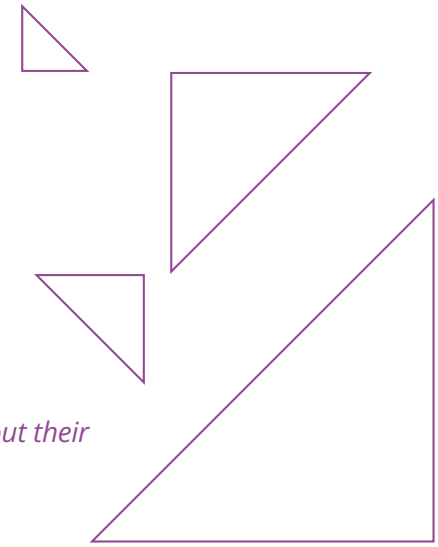
that there exists a "Global Censorship Industrial Complex", a network of governmental bodies, universities, big tech platforms, and NGOs that work to suppress conservative views online. This complex had a grip on the Biden administration, his story goes, but with Trump's second presidency, they lost their sway over US politics.

According to a presentation Benz' made at an ADF event, the ADF Summit 2026, when Trump took the US presidency, this network of censorship had to find support from the EU, from NATO, and from the UK Foreign Office, to build a campaign to beleaguer the United States globally, which then reappeared as the global champion of free speech.

The Triangle of Madness – dangerous nonetheless

Benz' popularity in far right circles goes a long way in explaining the frequently heard discourse in the MAGA campaign waged by the three parts of the triangle. It gives all three a larger narrative that seem to support each of their main priorities, whether it is a big platform's fight against regulation, a government's attempt to support national businesses, or as with the ADF, making a fight *against* LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights such as the right to abortion, into something else: a fight for free speech.

But in today's Europe, that does not exclude the Triangle from influence. What they say about the state of free speech in Europe is bordering on pure fiction, and claims they make are not just wild exaggerations but almost comical. But there is no space for complacency. Achieving political ends is often not as much about having good arguments as it is about having the power to reach your goals. And the money on offer from the State Department opens a new chapter and a new kind of relationship between the EU and the US administration. That money is destined to enact political change 'from below', working through NGOs or companies, and it is reminiscent of covert US operations in other parts of the world.



We contacted the Alliance Defending Freedom and asked them questions about their role and their approach to hate speech, but they have not responded.

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Researched and written by: Kenneth Haar
Edited by: Katharine Ainger

Designed by: João Tiago Tavares

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Corporate
Europe
Observatory

Corporate Europe Observatory
Rue d'Édimbourg 26
1050 Brussels – Belgium

info@corporateeurope.org

https://corporateeurope.org

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