

MANUFACTURING HEGEMONY

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The Technologies of the Cultural Cold War and Their Application in the Post-Soviet Space

"A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

— Allen Weinstein, co-founder of the National Endowment for Democracy, in *The Washington Post*, 1991^[1]

Introduction: A Declassified History

In 1999, the British historian Frances Stonor Saunders published a book that reshaped how we understand twentieth-century cultural politics. *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* documented a sweeping covert operation by American intelligence to shape the intellectual climate of Western Europe and beyond.^[2]

The central instrument of that operation was the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), founded in 1950 and active until its exposure in 1967. Nominally an independent association of intellectuals, the CCF was in fact bankrolled by the CIA through a network of pass-through foundations—the Ford Foundation, the Farfield Foundation, and dozens of others.^[3] The Congress published prestige journals (*Encounter* in Britain, *Preuves* in France, *Der Monat* in Germany), convened conferences, mounted exhibitions, and underwrote concert tours—while systematically advancing a particular ideological agenda.

Saunders's book was a sensation not because it exposed a conspiracy but because it laid out, in documentary detail, the *systemic* nature of the project: a clear strategy, generous funding, long-term planning, and—crucially—real effectiveness. Its significance extends well beyond the historical record. The techniques developed during the classical Cold War did not vanish with the Soviet collapse. They were scaled up, refined, and redeployed across the post-Soviet space.

This article offers an analytical reconstruction of those techniques and traces their evolution through the case of Ukraine—the country that has served as the most extensive proving ground for "democracy promotion" methods in the twenty-first century.

I. Anatomy of a Cultural War: Saunders's Findings

1.1. The Institutional Architecture of Influence

Saunders's central contribution is not the disclosure that the CIA was involved in cultural politics—that had been public knowledge for years. Her achievement was a granular account of the *mechanism* by which government money was converted into "independent" intellectual output.

The architecture rested on several operating principles.

Layered intermediaries. Money never flowed directly from the state to the recipient. Between the CIA and the ultimate beneficiary stood charitable foundations, private donors, and cultural organizations. Each layer added another degree of plausible deniability.^[4]

High-quality content. Unlike crude propaganda, CCF output was intellectually first-rate. *Encounter* ran first-rate writers—not because they were "agents," but because its editors had unlimited resources to attract the best.

Negative selection. Funding determined not so much what was published as what was *not* supported. Left-wing intellectuals sympathetic to the USSR found themselves isolated: no journals, no grants, no conferences.

Built-in career ladders. The system offered young intellectuals a legible path: the right publications, the right conferences, the right grants, the right research topics. Those who stayed on the track received resources and recognition.

1.2. The Ideological Function: The "Non-Communist Left"

The CCF's strategic objective was not framed as "fighting communism" but as promoting the *non-Communist Left*. The distinction is subtle but decisive. Overt anti-Communist propaganda would have been too blunt for a European intelligentsia much of which sympathized with socialist ideas. The CIA instead funded social democrats, liberals, even selected Trotskyists—anyone who could offer an *alternative* to pro-Soviet communism while staying within acceptable bounds.^[^5]

Abstract Expressionism became the emblem of the strategy. The CIA actively promoted Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning—not because their paintings carried any political message, but because they embodied *creative freedom* as the antithesis of socialist realism. The art served as proof of Western superiority without having to argue the case in words.^[^6]

II. Institutional Continuity: From the CCF to NED

2.1. "Doing Openly What the CIA Used to Do Covertly"

The 1967 exposure of the CCF created a problem: an effective instrument of influence had been compromised. The solution was to institutionalize the same practices openly. In 1983 the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was created—funded directly through the U.S. budget via USAID, but formally constituted as a private foundation.^[^7]

NED president Carl Gershman explained the rationale in 1986: "It would be terrible for democratic groups around the world to be seen as subsidized by the CIA. We saw that in the 60s, and that's why it has been discontinued."^[^8]

The network expanded. USAID, the Open Society Foundations, a host of European foundations, and various government programs joined NED in the field. Aggregate "democracy promotion" budgets grew from millions into the billions.

2.2. Ukraine as Priority Theater

From 1991 onward, Ukraine became one of the principal recipients of "democracy development" money. The scale is unprecedented:

- Since 1991, the United States has invested more than **\$5 billion** in support of democratic institutions in Ukraine, as Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland acknowledged in December 2013.^[^9]
- In the run-up to the 2004 Orange Revolution, the United States spent **\$65 million** supporting political organizations in Ukraine.^[^10]
- From 2014 through 2022, U.S. institutions spent more than **\$2.8 billion** on Ukraine programs, of which USAID provided roughly \$1.2 billion.^[^11]
- By 2024, total support for Ukraine's humanitarian, development, and government sectors—excluding military aid—had reached **\$38 billion**.

The International Renaissance Foundation, the Ukrainian arm of George Soros's network, began operations in the late Soviet period and had spent more than **\$180 million** in Ukraine by 2015.^[^12]

III. The Production of Ideological Hegemony

3.1. The Paradox of Electoral Marginality

The central analytical question of the Ukrainian case is this: how does an ideology without mass electoral support become state policy?

The data on support for Ukrainian nationalist parties is telling:

- Through the 1990s and 2000s, support for ultra-nationalist parties ranged from **0.36 percent** (2006) to **0.76 percent** (2007)—well below the threshold for entering parliament.^[^13]
- Svoboda's historic peak in 2012 (**10.44 percent**) was an anomaly driven by anti-Yanukovich voting rather than by endorsement of the nationalist program itself.^[^14]

- In the 2014 elections, despite the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas, Svoboda lost more than half its support, drawing roughly **6 percent**—below the 5 percent party-list threshold.^[^15]
- In the 2019 elections, the combined coalition of all far-right parties—Svoboda, the National Corps, and Right Sector—took just **2.15 percent** of the vote.^[^16]
- Ruslan Koshulynsky, the single nationalist candidate in the 2019 presidential race, received **1.6 percent**.^[^17]

These numbers show that in a multiethnic country, ethnic nationalism has *never* commanded mass support in Ukraine—not even under conditions of armed conflict with Russia.

The paradox of electoral marginality is the gap between a radical ideological group's electoral support (single-digit percentages) and its institutional weight on the corresponding agenda (up to 100 percent of state policy on the issues it cares about). The paradigm case is Ukraine: the far-right coalition—Svoboda, Right Sector, the National Corps—drew 2.15 percent of the vote in 2019, yet the symbolic agenda it had been pushing—decommunization, language legislation, the glorification of the OUN-UPA, the ban on the Communist Party—became official state policy.

The paradox resolves through the mechanism of *grant-based legitimation*: the infrastructure around an agenda—media, expertise, international backing, legislative scaffolding—is not distributed in proportion to electoral weight. It is distributed by the logic of selective funding. Mass support without infrastructure becomes invisible in the public sphere; a marginal ideology with infrastructure becomes the official line. The paradox, then, is not an anomaly. It is the empirical signature of what I call grant-based legitimation.

3.2. A Nationalist Agenda as State Policy

The nationalist agenda did indeed become official state policy:

- **Decommunization laws (2015)**: the removal of Soviet monuments, the renaming of streets and cities, the criminalization of Soviet symbols.
- **Language legislation**: the systematic displacement of Russian from education, media, and the service sector.
- **Glorification of the OUN-UPA**: the recognition of organizations that had collaborated with Nazi Germany as "fighters for independence."
- **The ban on the Communist Party (2015)**: the liquidation of the country's largest left-wing political force.

It's telling that after Yanukovich was overthrown in 2014, Svoboda—with its roughly 10 percent of the vote—received four ministerial posts in the interim government. The representation was wildly disproportionate to the party's electoral strength. It reflected ideological weight, not electoral weight.^[^18]

3.3. The Mechanism of Grant-Based Legitimation

Call the mechanism that resolves the paradox **grant-based legitimation**: selective funding that turns a marginal ideology into the mainstream not through direct propaganda but by *structuring the field of possibilities*—who gets the grant, the fellowship, the seat on the editorial board, the conference slot, the English translation. The critical distinction is between the level of content (what gets published) and the level of reproduction (who will do the publishing, who will be read, who will count as an expert). Grant systems operate primarily at the second level. I have argued elsewhere, on Ukrainian material from 2011, that the Yanukovich-Tyahnybok-Kolesnichenko configuration already showed this logic at work: opposing ideological poles were funded from a single institutional source, and the entire political field was held in a managed condition by the spread running between their audiences.^[^21] That earlier piece described the mechanism only

implicitly, and on domestic rather than external infrastructure. The present article names it, and traces its genealogy back to the CCF.

Selective funding. Grants do not go to "civil society" in general but to specific segments of it. Pro-Western NGOs get support; left-wing organizations do not; trade unions are funded minimally; nationalist initiatives packaged as "patriotism" get funded.

Narrative control through media. The television channel Hromadske TV is a revealing case. Launched in November 2013, on the eve of the Euromaidan, it reported in its interim financial statement that in 2013 it was funded by the Dutch embassy (793,089 hryvnia), the U.S. embassy (399,650 hryvnia), and George Soros's International Renaissance Foundation (247,860 hryvnia).^[^19] By June 2014 the channel had picked up additional funding from the Canadian government and other Western sources.^[^20]

Forming an expert class. Scholarships for study abroad, research grants, and publication in the "right" outlets create an entire stratum of intellectuals whose careers and incomes are bound up with the grant system. These people become the experts, the consultants, the media commentators—and they transmit the associated ideology not by order but because the ideology is the bedrock of their professional socialization.

IV. Nationalism as a Function: A Structural Analysis

4.1. Why Nationalism, Specifically?

The choice of nationalism as the principal ideological frame is not accidental. It performs several functions that are critical from the standpoint of Western capital.

First, nationalism blocks class analysis. A left or socialist frame defines the principal contradiction as the conflict between classes and the enemy as capital and oligarchy. The solution is redistribution and working-class solidarity. The nationalist frame redefines the principal contradiction as a conflict between nations and the enemy as an external power—Russia, "the Soviet." The solution is national unity, which by definition excludes internal criticism of the elite.

Second, nationalism secures the geopolitical rupture. Ukrainian ethno-nationalism is organically hostile to Russia and to the Soviet inheritance. Support for the nationalist agenda is automatic support for the "European choice"—that is, for integration into the Western system.

Third, nationalism discredits the alternatives. If the Soviet past is "occupation" and communism is a "crime," any left-wing idea is automatically delegitimized. A welfare state is "the Soviet"; workers' rights are "a Communist holdover"; critique of inequality is "betrayal of the national interest."

4.2. Comparative Analysis: The CCF and the Ukrainian Case

Placing the techniques of the cultural Cold War side by side with their application in Ukraine reveals structural continuity across a vast gap in scale.

Element	CCF (1950–1967)	Ukraine (1991–2025)
Umbrella structures	Congress for Cultural Freedom	NED, USAID, Open Society Foundations
Media	<i>Encounter, Preuves, Der Monat</i>	Hromadske, Ukrainska Pravda, Kyiv Independent
Education	Fellowships, conferences	"New Ukrainian School" reform, grants
Intermediary foundations	Ford Foundation, Farfield	Ford Foundation, IRF (Soros), European foundations
Cultural content	Abstract Expressionism	Ukrainian national identity
Ideological objective	Break with communism	Break with Russia and the Soviet past
Scale	~\$100–200 million over 20 years	\$38+ billion over 30 years

V. Gramsci Against Gramsci: Manufacturing Consent

Antonio Gramsci, who theorized cultural hegemony, could scarcely have imagined that his concepts would end up being used to analyze anti-Communist projects. Yet the Ukrainian case is a textbook example of the production of hegemony in the Gramscian sense.

Hegemony, for Gramsci, is not mere domination. It is the *consent* of subordinate groups to an order that benefits the ruling class. That consent is produced through control of "civil society"—education, media, cultural institutions.

The Ukrainian case demonstrates how hegemony can be produced *from outside*. External funding does not simply "support" an existing civil society. It *forms* that civil society—determining which organizations will exist, which ideas will be articulated, which voices will be heard.

An essential qualification: grants do not conjure sentiments out of thin air. They work with real, existing contradictions—resentment of the Soviet past, desire for a "European" standard of living, regional and cultural differences. But the grant system *formulates* those sentiments in a particular way and *amplifies* the ones that are functional for donor interests.

Without external funding, Ukraine's nationalists would have remained what they have always been electorally: marginal figures in a multiethnic country.

With external funding, their ideology becomes state policy, their narrative becomes the media mainstream, their version of history becomes the school curriculum, and their opponents become criminals.

Conclusion: Lessons and Prospects

Saunders's book showed that the cultural Cold War was not a "conspiracy" but a *systemic project* with a clear strategy, generous funding, and long-term planning. The Ukrainian case shows that these techniques did not disappear. They were scaled up and refined.

Takeaways:

- **The form has changed; the substance has not.** The CCF operated covertly; NED, USAID, and Open Society operate openly, under the banner of "democracy promotion" and "civil society support." The function is the same: shaping the ideological climate in the interests of Western capital.
- **Nationalism is functional for neoliberalism.** In the post-Soviet context, nationalism plays the same role the "non-Communist Left" played in Western Europe in the 1950s: it blocks alternatives incompatible with the interests of capital.
- **Hegemony does not require democratic legitimacy.** An ideology without mass support can become state policy through control of the production of meaning—education, media, the expert community.
- **External funding is not neutral.** "Assistance" for the development of civil society inevitably determines *which* civil society gets developed, and in whose interests.

Ukraine is not a unique case but the largest and best-documented implementation of an ongoing project. The same techniques have been and are being applied in Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, the countries of Central Asia, and far beyond the post-Soviet space. Understanding the mechanisms is the first step toward answering them.

Notes

[^1]: Allen Weinstein, interview, *The Washington Post*, 1991. Cited in William Blum, "Trojan Horse: The National Endowment for Democracy," in *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*. See also Wikipedia, "National Endowment for Democracy."

[^2]: Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999). The book won the Royal Historical Society's William Gladstone Memorial Prize.

[^3]: Ibid. Saunders documents how the CIA used the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and purpose-built pass-through foundations to fund the CCF.

[^4]: Ibid., chapter on funding mechanisms.

[^5]: Ibid. The CIA funded social democrats and the "non-Communist Left" as an alternative to pro-Soviet intellectuals.

[^6]: Ibid. See also Saunders's documentary *Hidden Hands: A Different History of Modernism* (Channel 4, 1995).

[^7]: NED was established in 1983 under the Reagan administration. See Wikipedia, "National Endowment for Democracy."

[^8]: Carl Gershman, president of NED, interview with *The New York Times*, 1986. Cited in Wikipedia, "National Endowment for Democracy."

[^9]: Victoria Nuland, speech at the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation conference, December 2013. Confirmed by the U.S. State Department. See PolitiFact, "The United States Spent \$5 Billion on Ukraine," March 19, 2014.

[^10]: Wikipedia, "Orange Revolution": "In the two years before the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, the United States spent \$65 million to aid political organizations in Ukraine."

[^11]: U.S. Government Accountability Office; USAID reports. Figures cited across reports on Ukraine program funding.

[^12]: International Renaissance Foundation (Soros), *Annual Report 2015*. Cited in NationofChange, "How and Why the U.S. Staged a Coup in Ukraine," August 15, 2018.

[^13]: Wikipedia, "Svoboda (political party)": the party received 0.36 percent in 2006 and 0.76 percent in 2007.

[^14]: Ibid. Svoboda received 10.44 percent in the 2012 elections. See also OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, "The Electoral Success of the Svoboda Party," November 28, 2012.

[^15]: Anton Shekhovtsov, "From Electoral Success to Revolutionary Failure," *Eurozine*, 2014. See also *War Is Boring*, "Ukrainian Election's Real Losers—Far Right Parties," October 2014.

[^16]: Central Election Commission of Ukraine, official results of the 2019 Verkhovna Rada elections (primary source). See also Forum for Ukrainian Studies, "Will Ukraine's Far-Right Parties Fail Again in 2019?" March 14, 2019; Reporting Radicalism in Ukraine, "The Far Right and the 2019 Parliamentary Election."

[^17]: Central Election Commission of Ukraine, official results of the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election.

[^18]: Svoboda received the posts of Defense Minister, Minister of Ecology, Minister of Agrarian Policy, and Prosecutor General in the interim Yatsenyuk government. See Wikipedia, "Svoboda (political party)."

[^19]: Wikipedia, "Hromadske": "According to the interim financial report, Hromadske TV was funded in 2013 by the Netherlands Embassy (793,089 Ukrainian hryvnias), the U.S. Embassy (399,650 ₪), and by George Soros' International Renaissance Foundation (247,860)."

[^20]: RFE/RL, "Out of Ukrainian Protests, a New Media Outlet Is Born," December 21, 2013; *Kyiv Post*, "Scandal Shakes Donor-Funded Hromadske TV," January 19, 2016.

[^21]: Igor Kaminsky, "Viktor Yanukovich and the Prospects of Nationalism in Ukraine," Regnum News Agency, January 8, 2011. The piece lays out, empirically, the layered configuration of Yanukovich, Tyahnybok, and Kolesnichenko—a setup in which opposing ideological poles are funded from a single institutional source, with field control maintained through the spread held between audiences. The mechanism I now call grant-based legitimation was visible in that earlier account only by implication, and on domestic rather than external infrastructure.

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