

USA Is Defunding Regime-Change NGOs: This Changes Everything | Dr. Glenn Diesen

For the longest time, USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have been funding foreign NGOs to influence local populations through media propaganda and the pretense of a civil society consensus. Donald Trump just pulled the plug on that one by defunding USAID and even going after the NED. This is unprecedented in modern history that a state dismantles its own cognitive warfare apparatus. What happened? I'm discussing these tectonic shifts with Professor Glenn Diesen, a professor at the University of Southeast Norway. Find Glenn on other platforms: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com> YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@GDiesen1> Twitter: https://x.com/glenn_diesen?s=21

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So if you're Trump, you see these NGOs as being very ideological, globalist, left-wing, and also ones that try to perpetuate the war in Ukraine. Defund them. This is the main idea, and they're doing this. They're just defunding everything. Of course, there's a money issue here as well, as the U.S. is obviously heading for bankruptcy, so they also need to cut their costs significantly.

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Hello, everybody. I'm still talking to Glenn Diesen here, my friend and colleague from Norway. And now, in the second part of the interview, after we discussed what was going on in Europe, we need to talk about one of the mechanisms with which the discourse in Europe and worldwide has been, to a large part, monopolized and also guided. Through this, the way of the propaganda network, we learned that recently with the revelations about the funding of all of these NGOs all around the world, including in Europe. The funding is now being revealed because Donald Trump is investigating the U.S. AID agency and other agencies on how they spend money.

And we are learning that there are millions and hundreds of millions going into different NGOs. This is also channeled through the National Endowment for Democracy. I want to discuss this with you, Glenn, because on the one hand, you've been observing it for a long time. On the other hand, you've been on the receiving end of the influence that the NGOs are wielding, even in Europe. Do you also see this as one of the mechanisms through which narrative control and consent are being manufactured?

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Yeah, of course. I think this is a key instrument of power. Again, we have economic power, military power, and then we have a fight for information in the media. In this effort to shape public opinion, why would trying to influence the civil society of other countries be off the table? Of course, it is in one's interest to change the minds of people in other countries. This is an instrument of power, and this has always been the case. What is so shocking about this is not just what has been revealed, but the extent of this influence.

And as you said, this is to manufacture consent. Across the Western countries, we use the same NGOs here to manufacture consent, making sure that there's no real dissent against the main ideas. And in adversarial countries, we have efforts to use the same NGOs for regime change. Now, what is a bit surprising is how much surprise there is, because we kind of already knew this. All the evidence was already out. You mentioned the National Endowment for Democracy. This was set up by Reagan and the CIA director in the 1980s for this exact reason. There have been so many leaked documents, declassified documents. You had CIA whistleblowers.

You had the people who set up the National Endowment for Democracy, all confirming that, yeah, yeah, what the CIA used to do, we do. And it makes a lot of sense. But it's also a very controversial topic. First of all, civil society is very important. This is what balances the state. The government doesn't decide everything. Your role as a citizen is not just to vote every couple of years, but you should be able to engage more. But we made up this idea that these non-governmental organizations, they are now, they are civil society. They're the ones who get to represent civil society, which is a very strange thing to argue because suddenly a lot of power is vested now in the NGOs.

If now we claim that NGOs are the ones who get to represent civil society, it makes it much worse. What if all the major NGOs are financed by governments? What if they're staffed by people close to the intelligence community? And what if their interpretation of, for example, human rights always aligns with geopolitical interests? So when you have issues, I often bring up the Assange issue, because often these NGOs see Julian Assange, and they don't care that much about what he reveals, but they spend a lot of time smearing him. So, you know, you always have this. And again, this is not a conspiracy theory. We have all the evidence already. We know that they're financed almost completely by governments. We know from all these leaks that they have been staffed by people close to the intelligence community, that they've been working with the intelligence community.

Because they're a great instrument for manipulating civil society, they become the main facilitator to organize it. And also, instead of having military leaders try to do it, they get to present themselves as altruistic. They're there to support democracy and human rights. And as anyone who studies communication theory knows, how the message is received very much depends on who's delivering it. If you claim to be an organization that's just there to promote freedom, it's more likely that your

messages will be accepted. If the CIA stands there handing out money to protesters, you know what's happening. If it's a non-governmental organization fighting for democracy, there's not that voice in the back of your head opposing this as much.

So it has been a very big tool. And this is what we find out now as well. When the US cuts funding to USAID, suddenly 85% to 90% of Ukrainian media no longer get their paychecks, and we see the political groups are not financed. We see protesters suddenly not receiving their money. I mean, this is part of politics, and it should be addressed. But the beautiful part of these NGOs is that if you criticize them, now you hate civil society. This is what I discovered. I criticized an article about how the NGOs were hijacking civil society, and one of these NGOs actually wrote a letter to my university to explain to them how dangerous I was because I actually undermine and threaten civil society by criticizing them. I mean, it's absurd.

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You, as a member of civil society, threaten civil society by criticizing it.

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No, you have to subordinate. You have to accept NGOs. You rule a civil society. And this is a point of departure. If you don't accept that they represent civil society, then you're not allowed to speak anymore. And yeah, they will come for you.

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It's the same mindset that we talked about in the first part of the interview, right? It's like equating a higher good with yourself and then making everybody else believe that. But I want to talk about your experiences, too, in just a second, because I have two more related questions. One question is, of course, why does the U.S. itself now dismantle this tool of its own power, which has worked beautifully? I mean, think about it from the perspective of the United States. This thing is responsible for convincing enough people in Ukraine to actually be the sacrificial lamb, right, to go to the battlefield and fight a war that the Biden administration wanted to fight, right?

This is a very, very powerful tool, and the U.S. is dismantling it itself. Secondly, this tendency now of the media to actually still bemoan this. Reporters Without Borders, a French organization, complained that, oh, now so many journalists are not getting paid anymore because the U.S. is cutting this funding. And this is so horrible because independent journalism is so important. Not understanding that that post is still up. They equate being paid by journalists, NGOs, and by U.S.-funded or EU-funded money in some parts with independent journalism, as in they still don't understand that that is not independent. That's more or less the definition of being dependent on somebody. Can you speak to these two questions?

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Yeah, well, this is why it was referred to in the '80s when they set up these NGOs as hiding in plain sight. Because if American intelligence agencies give money to journalists, now you have a scandal. If the CIA sets up NGOs as an intermediary, the intelligence agencies still give money to the NGOs, and they work with the intelligence agencies, and they give it to the journalists. Now it's okay. Now it's not a scandal anymore. Again, you can hide in plain sight. But this is something very, very crazy. I've seen these headlines popping up everywhere, not just... Yeah, this idea that they're cutting money for independent media.

But when you're being financed by the United States and organizations linked to intelligence agencies, it's going to impact your reporting. And if it's not telling you what to do, at least it's limiting who gets access to these funds. The people who end up on the payroll have certain ideological positioning. And you see all of these independent media outlets they have in Ukraine, which 85-90% have been financed. Well, they don't tend to report on the realities on the battlefield. They don't report on the most basic things happening. For example, the shooting on Maidan, what's actually happening in the court, which has been proving that it was the opposition groups who later took government, who were behind the shooting.

They don't address these issues because, well, why would you? That's not why you were hired. So I think this is, I think, but also, why would the US, why would Trump cut it? Because, as you said, they've been very good. And I think they became too ideological. And this is a problem when a society becomes polarized, because if it's just an instrument for US interests against the rest of the world, why would you cut it? But you also see now that some of the concern in the United States is, as society polarizes, they see a lot of this USAID promoting a lot of woke projects. This is not something they like because that's some of the things that divide them internally.

But it's also in terms of foreign policy interests. As we see now, the Trump administration wants to take the US in a different direction. They can't go after Russia, China, and everyone at the same time. So it's important to see how these NGOs are used. Not only have they been used in the color revolutions, but if you look at Ukraine, for example, the NGOs had a very central role when they toppled the government in Ukraine in 2004. They also had an important role when they toppled the government in 2014. But also, in the efforts to have peace, the NGOs are very good at opposing this situation.

As we spoke about earlier, in 2019, they had a presidential election in Ukraine. As we remember, Zelensky ran on a peace platform. He was going to talk to Donbass, actually have diplomacy. He was going to try to make peace with the Russians. And most of this was going to be achieved by implementing the Minsk Agreement. But what happened? Well, we know the United States, of course, had all of these right-wing fascist groups, which they have been financing, that threatened Zelensky's life if he would do this. Very open in the media, by the way. But we also had NGOs, such as the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, and they actually sent a letter of warning to Zelensky.

They said, as a civil society, you know, because they're a civil society, we have a list of red lines not to be crossed. One of the important things was, well, I think the first one was, don't hold a referendum on negotiations with the Russians. Something along those lines. If there is going to be talk with Russia, it can't be done without the Western states. So again, this is the NGO financed by the Western states who are not permitting the Ukrainian government, which just won a landslide election, to actually negotiate without them or to hold a referendum on autonomy.

You can't make any concession that might undermine our national interest, which is very vague. And you can't even delay EU and NATO membership. Also, don't implement any security policies which contradict those of the former government. So all these strange things effectively translate into your whole election platform, the peace mandate you were given. If you try to actually implement this, it is a red line, and political stability will suffer as a result. This is more or less what the fascist groups, which the US financed as well, said, except they said that Zelensky would hang from a tree if he tried to implement the peace mandate he had won.

So... Again, this is an NGO. They help to topple the government. Once the government is toppled, they're there to make sure that any election cannot reverse it, that there won't be any peace with Donbass, there will be no peace with Russia, and that the conflict will continue. So if you're Trump, you see these NGOs as being very ideological, globalist, left-wing, and also ones that try to perpetuate the war in Ukraine. Defund them. This is the main idea, and they're doing this. They're just defunding everything. Of course, there's a money issue here as well, as the U.S. is obviously heading for bankruptcy, so they also need to cut their costs. And yes.

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Well, we'll see about that one. But yeah, I think you're absolutely right. And also, maybe Donald Trump's personal experience is that some of these NGOs have been turned away from the outside and turned to the inside. And you know how we also know, at least since the Church Committee, that the security state, the intelligence state, has been turned not just to the outside, but also to the inside against the American people. And that's something the US takes very, very seriously, right, about using military or military-like force against their own population, which they are supposed to protect. But when it comes to these outside forces, it's just also so important to keep in mind that the Europeans too, European populations, are very much the target of this, right?

And your own experience, I mean, the Ukrainians are one thing, and I think what you're adding here is a very important second level to the discussion that Nikolai Petro also addresses in his books about the internal politics of Ukraine and how significant the pressure was to move toward this war, and the pressure on Zelensky to turn away from the peace platform. So now we know the NGOs are also part of that puzzle to kind of whip up policy adherence, which is mainly made in Washington and not in Kiev. But you yourself, too, I mean, inside Europe, you've experienced pressure from these NGOs. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about this, how that works?

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Sure. Let me just say first, though, with the Europeans, because we also do this, and Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, recently made this comment as well, that we all have to transfer money into Brussels, and then Brussels uses this to finance NGOs, which are financing protests and anti-government activities in our own country. So they're financing, essentially, activities to destabilize their own government. This is what the NGOs have done. So he was very much in favor of defunding this. Again, the Indian foreign minister, Jaishankar, was also making this point. We don't want all these NGOs.

Civil society is part of democracy, but our civil society is not to be run by the European Union. This is not democracy, and, you know, he calls for a distinction between democracy and what we now call liberalism. We have the same situation in this country, in Norway, with some of the same actors. For example, the National Endowment for Democracy, which is now being drained of funds by Donald Trump, is also very active in this country, but it's not for regime change because we have a very aligned government. They don't dissent much from the United States.

Well, now they might actually, after the Munich conference, but, yeah, they make sure that they connect themselves very closely to the media. So whenever something happens in the international system, any conflicts, the journalists will go and speak with these NGOs because they allegedly represent freedom and democracy. So then they get to frame all the issues around the world. What's happening in China? What's happening in Russia? And because they're a human rights organization, an NGO, they get to frame it as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. So every conflict around the world is disseminated to the media as a conflict between good and evil.

So, of course, the Ukraine crisis, well, obviously, with all the complexity, all the main issues that have sparked this conflict and continue it, it's always dumbed down to this idea that, well, they want freedom and democracy. Russia is evil, and they hate democracy. And this is the narrative. But it's more convincing when it comes from the NGO. So they really immerse themselves with the media. But of course, when you dissent, when you criticize the war, and I have criticized it since 2014, I'm very, very critical of how NATO and the West have been involved in this and pushing the war. Well, what happens then? Then they have to smear, censor, and, of course, cancel anyone who opposes it. So this one NGO in Norway, it's called the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. It's financed by the U.S. government.

It's the foreign ministry. It's financed by the National Endowment for Democracy, which is the CIA cutout from 1983. And it's also financed by my own government. And they write these regular smear pieces in articles where I'm always a Russian propagandist, a Russian agent. I'm in breach of international law because I spoke to a Russian newspaper. It's just nothing really makes sense. And they sit on their social media writing tweets all the time, not just smearing me, but also the university because they always put the link to the university so they will see that they're smearing them because of me. The implication is, if I wasn't there, then this wouldn't happen.

They also make calls for other academics and colleagues to stand up against me, to counter Russian propaganda. They're retweeting and advocating this, what do they call it, this Vatnik soup, all this online troll army who tries to intimidate and harass people. They send letters to my university. They call the head of my university to say how problematic I am. Every time I have a speaking event, they try to have it canceled. If it's like a union and they're not able to get the people organized to cancel, they will encourage people to withdraw from the union in opposition. And yeah, everywhere I speak, if it's a public event, they go to the organizer, the people attending.

Anyways, they do what they can to cancel it. And no, it's become quite extreme to the point, you know, you can imagine I get a lot of hate mail and hate calls. And one of their employees actually posted a picture of my house on social media as well. So yeah, it's very vile. And all of this is, of course, under the banner of a human rights NGO. Democracy. It's very dark. So when I see Trump defunding all of this, I can't help but think, yeah, let it burn. This should be brought down. This has nothing to do with civil society. It's about political propaganda. It's about manufacturing consent. And it's about canceling and censoring any dissenting voices.

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I am very sorry to hear that you go through all of these horrible experiences yourself in free, democratic, and pluralist Norway, right? Of all places. Just one thing, though. I would like to also state that having NGOs in and of itself is a good thing, right? It's a good thing to have civil society and to have organizations, and Reporters Without Borders does important work in order to shed light on the places in which journalists are being shot and killed, although not enough, for instance, about Gaza, but in other places. No, I think actually in Gaza, they did. They did.

They did mention that. So it is a good idea to have NGOs that represent the interests of certain groups of civil society. The problem, just like with human rights, is when you abuse that in order to create these systems of repression, right? So do you think that we can do away with the repression and the control part, societal control, and what they call cognitive warfare, right? Using these NGOs to target populations and change their views. Can we destroy that while still maintaining the socially useful function of these NGOs?

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Well, that's a good question because that's the core of it. We don't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater because there are a lot of NGOs that do excellent and important work. There are many problems and much suffering around the world. The whole concept of international civil society indeed has some merit. If you see people suffering in another country, shouldn't there be some common humanity with them? Shouldn't we hear that? Should we not take an interest and

stand with other people in another country if they need assistance or help? There's no reason why national borders should necessarily sever what is considered to be civil society. So I'm not opposed to civil society, obviously.

I think this is immensely important as a check on government power. But my criticism is when governments hijack the representation of NGOs, of civil society, because civil society is a check on government power. Now, if the government gets to represent civil society, it doesn't need to explain why this is problematic. But yeah, how do you do this? And I think the main thing is, first, there has to be some transparency and honest discussions about this and not just say any criticism of NGOs is hatred of civil society, because whenever you have a concentration of power, you should be concerned. And again, representing civil society, such as NGOs often do, is a huge power. And then you have to be honest, like, oh, who would want to wield this power? Well, there's some interest group, isn't there?

Intelligence agencies, anyone who essentially has a job to manipulate the civil society of other countries. So I think it has to be honest there. And it's the same with the think tanks. Once you have these organizations that put all the government officials on their payroll, who are able to supply a lot of articles to the media, you should see who's financing them, who's able to influence foreign policy to such an extent to create essentially what we believe to be knowledge that dictates the narratives. And you find then, of course, who's going to pay for this? Well, then we see it's the main arms manufacturers. So you have to be honest when power concentrates. But again, you don't want to throw out everything.

Again, on the think tank issue, one of the main organizations writing about the destructive influence of think tanks is a think tank themselves, Responsible Statecraft. So you can't just cancel all of them. So how do you split the good ones from the bad ones? I think there has to be some transparency around the financing. I think this has to be it. And, yeah, when you have government financing NGOs and working with intelligence agencies and then pursuing national geopolitical interests, I think it should be quite obvious that civil society is not being assisted, that it's not being elevated. I think then it's being controlled. But how do you do this? I think that's an excellent question to answer.

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I think this is absolutely right. Transparency about the money flows. So make it clear, not just for the NGOs, but also how things are running on the economic side, because you basically have two base models, right? One is you receive money in order to do what you do from some other source, or the thing that you do is what you sell, which finances itself, which is how the private sector usually works. And there we need to be transparent as well. Just an example, YouTube. You and I are able to receive money from what we do, not because somebody externally pays us, but because we deliver eyeballs to YouTube, right? And YouTube serves these eyeballs to the advertisers.

And advertisers pay YouTube, and YouTube gives us a share of that money, right? That's the model. That's what allows it to do what it does. So YouTube is not actually a video-sharing platform; YouTube is an eyeball delivery platform for advertisers, right? And we are engaged in that. But that then allows us to do what we do. And as long as we deliver the eyeballs, we can continue doing this. In the NGO sector, it works differently, although some NGOs sell the product that they deliver. If we make that clear, it would create the transparency and honesty about what's going on that would give enough information to viewers and readers to understand what system they're engaged in.

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No, I think that's important because a key challenge is when you allow society to become an appendage of the market. And I'm not trying to sidetrack to the think tanks, but actually, the director of the Kennan Institute, which is also a think tank, was also making this point, which is, you know, we have to be honest about where the money comes from. Because if it's like, you know, the YouTube model you have, it becomes very problematic. But he said, what we're essentially doing is becoming peddlers of influence. So this is all we do. And in the NGO area, yeah, this is also what you do. You're effectively putting civil society up for sale, and there's only one buyer, which is the main governments and intelligence agencies.

But there's also this, I guess a fair rule would be, and it might be easier now that the world becomes more multipolar, because I think it's a reason why these NGOs ran a bit rampant over the past 30 years when all power was concentrated in the West. In a multipolar system, it suggests that others will also be able to do this. So a good rule would be to think, what if other countries did this? Would we accept it? Let's say China, Russia, or another country we're being told to hate would pump billions of dollars into non-governmental organizations. And these NGOs, of course, would work with their security services. And all human rights would be because they are human rights.

And whatever is good for us is good for human rights. So it's a way of promoting their policy directly through people's public. Would we accept this? And I think it's quite obvious, no, of course not. We would consider this a hybrid war. We would say it's an attack on democracy. But what exactly is different when we do it? And we always go back to the same thing. So we are a democracy, so it's okay when we do it, but not others. This is why it was fascinating to listen to the Indian foreign minister at the Munich conference, because they are the largest democracy in the world. And he was making kind of the same argument: who are these self-appointed custodians of democracy coming from the West?

They have no democratic legitimacy in India, yet they demand to interfere and tell everyone what to do and even start to get organized themselves and manipulate because there's a lot of NGOs involved, funded by the West in India. And he made this great comment, which everyone should watch in his speech. He said, if India would do in your countries what you do in ours, you would be up in arms. You would never tolerate this. And this comes from India, again, the world's largest democracy, a country we're not supposed to hate, which seems to be a friendly country. So what

would we say if it was the Chinese or the Russians who did this to us? Under no circumstance would that be acceptable.

So why is it that when they talk about NGO laws in countries like Georgia, we only have to dismiss it as, oh, these are Putin laws, and then we have to remove the government? Otherwise, they will abandon democracy because this is democracy, apparently, to have Western governments finance your civil society. There's no honest debate. I think if we were allowed to discuss things, to have debates, it would be very different. But we don't; we have the slogans, as we spoke about before. If you're for transparency on NGOs, which was the law the Georgians pushed, then you're having Putin laws, and this is evil. So you have to let the NGOs from the West, not from Russia, do what they want. Otherwise, yeah, you're evil.

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That's how simplified reality can be. And this is what we have to oppose. We need to recognize the complexities of it all. And one of the people who helps us a lot to recognize complexity is Glenn Diesen from Norway. You have your own YouTube channel and your own Substack, and the links will be in the description. I encourage everybody to subscribe to Glenn. He delivers fantastic analysis and does wonderful talks as well. Anything you would like to add at this point about where people should find you?

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No, mostly, yes, Substack or YouTube or Twitter, or X as it's called now, sorry.

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Twitter, or X as well. He has a big following there as well. Glenn Diesen, thank you very much for your time today.

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Thank you, Pascal.