

# Kyiv Independent Deep Dive: The West's In-Kind Answer to Putin's Propaganda

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*While staff members of The Kyiv Independent grandstand about how “independent journalism is the cornerstone of democracy,” they are quietly being funded by Western governments – a fact that should ring alarm bells with critical media consumers.*

As the Russian attack on Ukraine has come to dominate global news feeds, so has a previously little-known outlet called *The Kyiv Independent*. Since its inception in November of last year, the *Independent's* profile has risen rapidly and has been promoted and endorsed by both social media giants and the corporate press.

*The Kyiv Independent* has become the toast of the town. It seems virtually impossible to turn on cable news without seeing its reporters on [CNN](#), [Fox News](#), [MSNBC](#), [ABC](#), [CBS](#), or other networks. Its staff has been given the opportunity to write multiple op-eds in the pages of [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#), something considered the ultimate seal of approval by many journalists. *NPR* listeners might also have heard [interviews](#) with reporters from the *Independent*.

But, while almost universally presented as a collective of unbiased journalists producing credible content, the *Independent's* history, funding sources, and the proximity of many of its key staff to Western governments suggest that the news organization is not nearly as independent as its name implies.

Since November, the outlet has amassed over two million Twitter followers, up from around [just 20,000](#) one week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24. Twitter also constantly promotes its content on its homepage, encouraging hundreds of millions of people to read and follow them.

The *Independent* has also managed to raise more than \$3.2 million from two [separate](#) crowdfunding [campaigns](#) on GoFundMe and rakes in more than [\\$72,000](#) per month from supporters on Patreon. This is partially down to ringing endorsements from the likes of

[The Washington Post](#), [CBS News](#) and [PBS](#), who endorsed their funding drives as the perfect way to do something to help Ukrainians.

“Journalists with *The Kyiv Independent* have done tremendous work covering the war, offering the world constant updates as they fear for themselves, their families, and their homes,” the *Post* [wrote](#). Meanwhile, the *Times* has regularly signal-boosted its coverage as well, [recommending](#) it to readers as a way to “avoid drowning in an ocean of information.” Another article instructing teachers on how to discuss the war [states](#) that “Ukrainian sources like *The Kyiv Independent*” are a “good starting point” as “reliable news sources.”

In short, there has been nothing short of a ringing, wall-to-wall endorsement of the startup news organization. However, few, if any, of these reports and appearances hint at how close *The Kyiv Independent* and many of its staff members are to Western governmental power.

## A newborn raised on the milk of regime change

*The Kyiv Independent* was born in November when dozens of staff members from *The Kyiv Post* clashed with ownership on that paper’s political coverage. New *Post* owner Adnan Kivan [reportedly](#) wished his employees to be more deferential to the administration of President Volodymyr Zelensky, leading to an acrimonious split whereby dozens of *Post* employees were fired and began their own outlet. While some have pointed to this as an example of the *Independent*’s credibility and unwillingness to be controlled, others are not so sure.

Commenting on the split, journalist Mark Ames [remarked](#) that, “Ukraine’s western-backed civil society (along with the hardline Ukrainian diaspora) loathed Zelensky right up to the invasion, suspecting him of being insufficiently nationalist.” Ames’ Moscow-based newspaper, *The eXile*, was closed down by Vladimir Putin in 2008. His analysis seems to have been proven correct by the *Independent*’s editor-in-chief, Olga Rudenko, who [wrote](#) in the pages of *The New York Times* that, “Mr. Zelensky, the showman and performer, has been unmasked by reality. And it has revealed him to be dispiritingly mediocre.”

## Background

It is argued that the Arab Spring highlighted the EU's lack of means to react swiftly and decisively to events occurring in its neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> To tackle this, a proposal from Poland to set up a [European Endowment for Democracy](#) (EED) was [endorsed](#) by the European Council in December 2011. The EED was then established in June 2012, along with a global EU strategy on human rights and democracy.

The EED was proposed as an initiative aimed at facilitating rapid and flexible funding to political actors in countries on their way towards democratisation, which may not otherwise be able to access EU funding. EED is named after and inspired by the US [National Endowment for Democracy](#) (NED).

## Existing instruments for promotion of democracy

The 30 *Kyiv Post* staff members were immediately able to fund their new venture, thanks to more than CA\$200,000 in cash from the Canadian government, which made the donation through the European Endowment for Democracy. Outside of Russia, Canada has the largest Ukrainian diaspora in the world and has taken an active role in trying to shape the country's political trajectory.

Established in 2013 and [directly modeled](#) after the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the European Endowment for Democracy is an EU organization that functions in much the same way as the NED does. Although it couches its actions in the language of "democracy promotion," it exists to hand out large sums of money, support, and training to political groups, journalists, and NGOs in enemy countries with the goal of promoting EU interests, including the overthrow of hostile governments. It does not "promote democracy" inside the EU; its operations are limited to Eastern Europe and the Middle East-North Africa region. In recent years, it has [backed](#) anti-government movements in Belarus, Russia, Syria, and Lebanon.

None of this information, including any connection to Canada or the European Endowment for Democracy, is on *The Kyiv Independent's* website. Indeed, the outlet presents itself as totally independent and supported by readers. In its "About" section, it [proclaims](#) that "*The Kyiv Independent* won't be dependent on a rich owner or an oligarch. The publication will depend on fundraising from readers and donors and later on, commercial activities." It does not expand on who these donors are. However, its staff presents its funding as above board: "We're not taking dirty money," [said](#) one reporter. *MintPress* asked both *The Kyiv Independent* and the Canadian Embassy in Ukraine for comment about their funding arrangement but has not received a response.

## Troubling CVs

The troubling connections undermining *The Kyiv Independent's* credibility do not end there, however. For example, its contributing editor, Liliane Bivings, used to [work](#) and [write](#) for the NATO think tank The Atlantic Council, specifically covering Ukraine. Producer Elina-Alem Kent [worked](#) for the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv in 2017; not exactly the background one would associate with grassroots, independent media. Chief financial officer Jakub Parusinski was previously [employed](#) by the International Center for Policy Studies, a Ukraine-focused think tank sponsored by numerous Western governments. In 2020, culture reporter Artur Korniienko was [awarded](#) a fellowship to work for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, an organization that *The New York Times* once [described](#) as a “worldwide propaganda network built by the CIA.” Meanwhile, contributor to *The Kyiv Independent* Lucy Minicozzi-Wheeland previously worked for the Council on Foreign Relations, was given a scholarship by the State Department to study Ukraine, and also worked at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, an organization [directly funded](#) by the U.S. government.

The unquestioned star of *The Kyiv Independent*, however, is defense reporter Illia Ponomarenko, who, in a short time, has built up a following of over 1.1 million people on Twitter. From the front lines, his tweets and videos go viral daily and provide the basis for much of the Western media’s reporting on the conflict. Yet Ponomarenko is far from a neutral actor, and spends an inordinate amount of his time embedded with the Azov Battalion, the Neo-Nazi group whom he describes as his “[good friend\[s\]](#)” and his “[brothers in arms](#).”



**Illia Ponomarenko**



@IAPonomarenko

Follow

Brothers in arms.

It was a fine day in August 2017 when Azov guys consecrated me an artillery guy

[#Ukraine](#) [#Donbas](#) [#Azov](#)

[@Polk\\_Azov](#)



12:22 PM - 22 Apr 2019

48 Retweets 60 Likes



The Azov Battalion is a Neo-Nazi paramilitary group that has been formally incorporated into the Ukrainian armed forces. Their units wear the mark of the wolfsangel on their sleeves, the symbol that the notorious Nazi 2nd SS Panzer Division – a unit infamous for overseeing the systematic extermination of Jews and Slavs in Eastern Europe – wore during the Second World War.

Azov's first leader, parliamentarian Andriy Biletsky, [said](#) that his mission was to “lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led Untermenschen,” the word Hitler used to describe Jews and other “subhumans,” including Ukrainians.

Ponomarenko has, on at least [two](#) separate [occasions](#), declared himself to be “consecrated” by the Azov Battalion and has previously used language potentially hinting at his political leanings. For instance, in 2019, he [tweeted](#) that he was “absolutely devastated to learn that my good friend, Sn. Lt. Igor Prozapas, the former chief artillery officer with the Azov Battalion, has passed away. Valhalla today meets a dedicated gunman and true patriot. He was a *Kyiv Post* contributor too.” Modern Nazis regularly [appropriate](#) Viking concepts such as



the Valhalla afterlife for warriors killed in combat.



Illia Ponomarenko    
@IAPonomarenko

...

I'm absolutely devastated to learn that my good friend, Sn. Lt. Igor Prozapas, the former chief artillery officer with [@Polk\\_Azov](#) has passed away. Valhalla today meets a dedicated gunman and true patriot. He was a [@KyivPost](#) contributor too...



kyivpost.com

Igor Prozapas: Ukraine's military needs master network-centric warfare - KyivP...

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from an academic article published by Igor Prozapas, a first lieutenant in Ukraine's National Guards who serves as a ...

7:37 PM · Jun 2, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

19 Retweets 13 Quote Tweets 29 Likes

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their contributors, neither *The Kyiv Post* nor *The Kyiv Independent* seems particularly interested in scrutinizing the Azov Battalion or the insurgent Neo-Nazi movement in Ukraine. Indeed, the latter [calls](#) Azov the “defenders of Mariupol”.

Independent journalism™: brought to you by the CIA

As noted previously, virtually all of *The Kyiv Independent's* essential staff came from *The Kyiv Post* exodus. Yet the *Post's* sources of income are, if possible, even more eyebrow-raising than the *Independent's*, coming as they do from the CIA cutout organization National Endowment for Democracy.

At the time of the Russian invasion, the NED pulled from its website all records of its [widespread project](#) of funding a broad range of Ukrainian political parties, NGOs, media outlets, and civil-society groups. From the [few](#), unofficial and incomplete [archived](#) records of NED grants that still exist, however, *MintPress* has ascertained that, through its affiliated

foundations, *The Kyiv Post* has sought and received at least \$459,000 in NED cash. A minimum of \$394,000 went through the Media Development Foundation (MDF), a fundraising vehicle *The Post* launched in 2013 and one of its primary sources of income, [according](#) to former Editor-in-Chief Brian Bonner.

A further \$65,000 went to another *Post* project, the Free Press Foundation (FPF), including one \$35,000 grant to “support the editorial team of a leading independent newspaper to produce investigative reporting on corruption and violations of media freedoms.” That this “leading independent newspaper” was *The Kyiv Post* is barely in question, given that the FPF’s founder and executive director was the *Post*’s commercial director, and therefore responsible for fundraising. Furthermore, *The Kyiv Post* shares the same address as the FPF, whose [website](#) makes it clear that the two organizations are essentially one and the same.

A second, \$30,000, NED project, the FPF [boasts](#), paid for over 100 *Kyiv Post* articles, podcasts, and videos covering the 2019 elections, plus the establishment of a fact-checking team. In Ukraine, the U.S. Dollar evidently goes a very long way.

<b>Project Title:</b>	Increasing the Capacity of Regional Media	<b>Year:</b> 2018
<b>Organization Name:</b>	<a href="#">Media Development Foundation</a>	<b>Award Amount:</b> \$120,000
<b>Project Region:</b>	Europe	
<b>Project Country:</b>	Ukraine	
<b>Project Focus:</b>	Freedom of Information	
<b>Description:</b>	To build the capacity of regional media. The organization will conduct a training and exchange program for reporters and media outlets from across the country. In addition, it will assist regional journalists to develop new media, video news, and editorial writing skills through trainings and internships with prominent news outlets in the capital.	

A now-deleted 2018 NED document shows a sizable donation to *The Kyiv Post*’s primary funding vehicle, the “Media Development Foundation.”

A further example of just how far the NED’s money goes is a \$15,000 grant to the MDF entitled “promoting reforms in key sectors.” In return for the cash, the agreement states that the *Post* would “publish at least 100 articles and analyses on the progress of reforms” in sectors such as defense, the judiciary and healthcare, suggesting that they were directly paying for content to be produced. On its website, however, *The Kyiv Post* [insists](#) that “the donor doesn’t influence the content.”

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*Editor’s Note: Election Watch is a regular update on the state of the presidential race in Ukraine. The country will elect its next president on March 31, 2019, with a possible runoff on April 21. The Election Watch project is supported by the [National Endowment for Democracy](#). The donor doesn’t influence the content. Go to [kyivpost.com](#) for more election coverage.*



Zelensky on shelling of railway station in ...  
April 8, 1:32 pm



Another cyberattack ongoing on Ukraine government ...  
April 8, 1:27 pm

A 2019 *Kyiv Post* article acknowledges the papers NED funding

What “reform” could allude to here is the massive course of economic “[shock therapy](#)” in which the government [conducted](#) a firesale of state-owned businesses and assets, in the process dismantling its welfare state and removing barriers to Western corporations’ operations in the country. This process has helped to keep Ukraine the poorest country in Europe, although both the domestic and international billionaire classes have [benefited](#) enormously.

*The Kyiv Post* was already strongly supportive of many of these reforms. Indeed, the outlet has an entire “Reform Watch” vertical, replete with more than [2,600](#) articles dedicated to assessing and promoting them, more than 1,500 of which have been published since 2017. It has also published glossy [infomercials](#) aimed at foreign investors, describing in glowing detail how the “profound reforms” have reshaped Ukraine into a promising space for international business.

Reading the language of these grants, it is clear that “increasing the capacity” of outlets like *The Kyiv Post* was of primary importance to the U.S.. This led Washington to pay for the training of huge numbers of interns in writing, video editing, camera usage and other journalism skills at “leading Kyiv media outlets” – principal among them, the *Post*. The level of funding also rapidly increased through the years, starting with relatively modest sums in 2014 but rising to over \$200,000 by 2018, no doubt building considerable capacity indeed.

### “Without the NED, there would be nothing”

The NED was set up by the Reagan administration in the 1980s explicitly as a front for the CIA, whose public image had been seriously tarnished by a series of scandals. Technically a private organization, and therefore not subject to the same public scrutiny or legal regulations, the NED carried out the CIA’s dirtiest operations abroad, specifically those of regime change and foreign interference. In this, they are relatively open, although they are careful to couch their activities in the language of “democracy promotion.”

“It would be terrible for democratic groups around the world to be seen as subsidized by the CIA,” NED President Carl Gershman [said](#), explaining its creation. NED co-founder Allen Weinstein agreed: “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA,” he [told](#) *The Washington Post*.

The NED has played a key role in recent U.S. regime-change attempts. In Hong Kong, it [funneled](#) money to the leaders of the domestic protest movement, in order to sustain it. In Venezuela, it has [organized](#) music concerts to undermine the Maduro administration. Last summer, it [fomented](#) a nationwide campaign of demonstrations in Cuba. And it currently has 40 [active projects](#) in Belarus, all with the goal of removing President Alexander Lukashenko from office. Ukraine, however, is the NED’s “top priority” according to its 2019 annual [report](#).

*The Kyiv Post* also sought out and received other highly questionable sources of funding, including, by its own [admission](#), the Danish government and NATO itself.

During the NATO-backed 2014 Euromaidan insurrection, in which the democratically-elected President Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown and replaced by a successor [handpicked](#) by the United States government, the European Endowment for Democracy also rushed through what it [described](#) as “emergency support” to *The Kyiv Post*. What exactly this support entailed is not disclosed in much detail, leaving cynics wondering whether the European Union was channeling cash to pliant local media in order to push through a coup.

The *Post*’s post-split staff might also raise a skeptic’s eyebrow. Among them is the new chief editor, Bohdan Nahaylo, who spent two decades working for *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, rising to become its director of Ukrainian services between 1989 and 1991. Nahaylo’s boss, Richard Carlson (Tucker Carlson’s father) [stated](#) that *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* played a “very critical role” in the dissolution of the USSR and the



transition to a hyper-capitalist model, adding:

International broadcasters were equally important in laying the groundwork for the democratic revolutions that we have seen. Isn't it incredible how Western all those Eastern Europeans sound in talking about freedom, democracy, free enterprise, environmental concerns. And they didn't get those ideas from their own media or from textbooks in their own countries; they got them mainly from international broadcasters like Voice of America, the BBC, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe."

These sources of income mean that almost everybody at *The Kyiv Post* or *The Kyiv Independent* was, for quite some time, in the pay of NATO and/or the U.S. national security state. Indeed, in 2015, Daryna Shevchenko, current CEO of *The Kyiv Independent* and then a staff writer for *The Kyiv Post*, openly acknowledged how much the CIA cutout organization had done for her and her colleagues. "To our partners, the National Endowment for Democracy, without them there would be nothing," she [wrote](#). Shevchenko made the comments after a Media Development Foundation training event attended by a host of *Kyiv Post*/*Kyiv Independent* journalists. Also attending was Aric Toler of *Bellingcat*, another [NED-sponsored outlet](#) which [masquerades](#) as independent journalism. Toler went on to work for The Atlantic Council.

While these journalists often speak in the language of objectivity and neutrality, they are, at the same time, crystal clear that the purpose of *The Kyiv Independent* is to "counter the Russian narrative," in the [words](#) of Editor-in-Chief Rudenko. Thus, they see themselves as fighters in an information war. And as the battle for public opinion rages, they are among the West's most potent weapons.

## A necessary skepticism

While experts disagree on how well or poorly the military invasion is going, it seems clear that Russia is losing the information war. President Putin has been widely condemned, has breathed new life into NATO, and has united European countries in resistance. Russian media and pro-Russian sources have been wiped from the Internet. And while Putin declared that the point of his "special military operation" was to "denazify" his neighbor, few have accepted that premise, despite the [well-documented](#) far-right insurgence in Ukraine. Further undermining this claim was a [video](#) released this week of the head of the Russia-backed Donetsk People's Republic awarding a medal to a soldier sporting two separate fascist symbols on his jacket.

Despite Russia being the chief belligerent in this war and some Russian sources spreading false information, we must still be skeptical of claims made by the other side. In war, the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus noted, truth is always the first casualty.

As ferocious as the fighting has been, the propaganda war has been, if anything, more intense. And supposedly "independent" Ukrainian media have been a key part of it. There is already a serious problem in modern discourse with the term "independent media," a phrase commonly used to refer to any media outlet, no matter how big an empire it is, that is not owned or funded by the state (as if that is the only form of dependence or control to which media is subject).

But even at this extremely low hurdle, *The Kyiv Post* and *The Kyiv Independent* fall. While key staff members [grandstand](#) about how "independent journalism is the cornerstone of

democracy,” they are quietly being funded by Western governments – a fact that should ring alarm bells with critical media consumers. Again, this does not mean that what they publish is false or that there is no worthwhile reporting being done. But it does undermine their claims of independence or impartiality. That *The Kyiv Independent* does not even acknowledge its foreign funding and presents itself as reader-supported is especially troubling.

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