

How US and UK Information-Warfare Fronts Ignited Anti-Government Protests in Belarus

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The at-times fiery protests that raged across Belarus throughout 2020 had largely fizzled out by the time local activist and [seeming](#) neo-Nazi Roman Protasevich was dramatically arrested in May this year.

Now, the country has been catapulted back to the top of the mainstream news agenda, with new life breathed into [controversial](#) self-appointed President Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s hitherto unheeded calls for Western leaders to recognize her as the legitimate Belarusian leader.

True to form though, not a single outlet has deigned to mention that for many years prior to the unrest’s eruption, London and Washington had funded, trained, and promoted the very elements that took to the streets in opposition to President Alexander Lukashenko.

“Not Worth People’s Blood”

In April 2019, the RAND Corporation—a [U.S. government think-tank](#)—published a [report](#), *Extending Russia: Competing from Advantageous Ground*.

It outlined “a range of possible means to extend Russia,” defined as “measures to bait Russia into overextending itself” in order to “undermine the regime’s stability.”

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from Western and Russian sources, this report examines Russia’s economic, political, and military vulnerabilities and anxieties and then “analyzes potential policy options to exploit them—ideologically, economically, geopolitically, and militarily” along with “the likelihood that [these policy options] could be successfully implemented.”

A dedicated section of the 354-page report dealt with “promoting regime change in Belarus.” It noted that, among other welcome outcomes, denying Russia “its one and only true ally” would be “a clear geopolitical and ideological gain for the West,” undermining Moscow’s proposed Eurasian Economic Union, complicating “any attempt to employ military force against the Baltic States,” and further isolating Kaliningrad,” the Russian exclave

situated between Lithuania and Poland.

Fomenting unrest in Belarus was said to “present an opportunity to extend Russia by aiding the opposition, removing a long-standing Russian-allied dictator, and supporting liberalization.” Aid to Lukashenko’s opposition “could come in a variety of forms, ranging from public declarations of support by U.S. leaders to more direct financial and organizational assistance helping the opposition parties.”

Such a course of action was nonetheless forecast to be extremely risky, and likely to fail. For one, the Belarusian opposition mounting a “serious challenge” to Lukashenko was considered unlikely, and in any event would likely prompt Russia to “employ political and economic pressure to keep the regime in place,” if not intervene in the situation militarily, and produce “greater local repression” from authorities.

Furthermore, there was little tangible public appetite for democratization. RAND cited a 2015 survey conducted by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research, which found that 78% of Belarusians believed regime change was “not worth people’s blood” and 70% “did not want a Ukrainian-style revolution.”

“People don’t want more freedom. They want more government. They want the better life they used to have,” a Belarusian expert quoted in the report said in 2017.

Promoting liberalization in Belarus was predicted to require European support, and given the bloc faced “a host of other challenges from Ukraine to refugees to Brexit,” Brussels [European Union] “might not want to add Belarus to the mix” and “rock the boat.”

Still, there was perceived value to attempting to precipitate regime change even if the effort ultimately failed as such a campaign would “create apprehensions among Russian leaders,” making them “worry about the prospect of such a movement in their own country.” This would in turn prompt Moscow to reinforce its military presence and political influence within Belarus, burdening Russia with a “weak, corrupt dependency” and possibly even generating “some degree of local resistance,” the report approvingly suggested.

Essentially, were Moscow “to commit resources to preserve its grasp over Belarus,” it would “extend” Russia, by “provoking the U.S. and its European allies to respond with harsher sanctions.” In other words, mission accomplished.

“Shadow Political Structure”

The question of what if any impact this section of RAND’s report had on U.S. policymakers subsequently is somewhat moot, given Washington had for some time prior to its publication provably been engaged in precisely the destabilization efforts proposed therein, by way of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Founded in November 1983, then-U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Casey was central to its creation. He sought to construct a public [mechanism](#) to support groups and individuals overseas to engage in propaganda and political action undermining “enemy” governments from within—activities historically organized and paid for clandestinely by the Agency—under the bogus aegis of democracy and human rights promotion.

[In 1991](#), senior NED official Allen Weinstein acknowledged that “a lot of what we do today

was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA,” and NED’s work often directly complements Langley’s cloak-and-dagger work.



[Source: chinadaily.com.cn]

[For example](#), during the Reagan administration’s brutal secret war against Nicaragua’s progressive Sandinista government during the 1980s, in which tens of thousands died, NED allocated millions of dollars to “civic opposition” entities—including *La Prensa*, the country’s primary anti-Sandinista newspaper.

Concurrently, the CIA trained, funded, and armed the Sandinistas’ fascist opponents, the Contras. In particular, the Agency’s [“Tayacan” manual](#) on guerrilla warfare was highly influential, leading the group to incite mob violence, “neutralize” government officials and civilian leaders, and attack “soft targets” such as schools and hospitals, among other hideous atrocities.

Publicly available data indicates the NED [funded](#) at least 159 civil society initiatives in Belarus, costing \$7,690,689, from 2016 to 2020 alone.

While the projects have innocent-sounding titles—“strengthening regional youth initiatives; fostering freedom of the media; promoting civic journalism”—the example of Ukraine indicates such endeavors can have highly incendiary results.

As investigative journalist Robert Parry [documented](#) after the March 2014 Maidan coup, the NED bankrolled 65 projects in Ukraine in the years prior to that uprising, in the process creating “a shadow political structure of media and activist groups that could be deployed to stir up unrest when the Ukrainian government didn’t act as desired.”

Six months prior, long-time NED chief Carl Gershman wrote a chilling [op-ed](#) for *The Washington Post* in which he documented Moscow’s growing troubles in its “near abroad”—the constellation of countries that formerly comprised the Soviet Union—and how his organization was exploiting them to the full. Hailing Ukraine as “the biggest prize,” he explained that “Russian democracy” could also “benefit” from Kiev being absorbed into the Western fold.

“Ukraine’s choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents,” Gershman wrote. “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia

itself.”

Further underlying the insidious efficacy of NED’s “democracy-promotion” activities, in May 2021 a pair of Russian pranksters posing as Belarusian opposition figures successfully [duped](#) high-ranking NED representatives into bragging about their involvement in the ongoing unrest in Belarus at the start of 2020.

Among many startlingly frank disclosures, Nina Ognianova, who oversees the NED’s work with opposition groups in the country, revealed that “a lot of the people” who were “trained” and “educated” via the organization’s various endeavors in Minsk were pivotal to “the events, or the build-up to the events, of last summer.”

Gershman added that the organization was working with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and her team “very, very closely.”

“Malicious” Violator

U.S. meddling in Belarus dates much further back than 2016. Five years earlier, an official White House [press release](#) on U.S.-Polish “efforts to advance democracy worldwide” had a dedicated section on the pair’s work to “pressure” the Lukashenko government and “support civil society,” which stated the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) would work with the Warsaw-based Belsat TV station “to develop content and programming on democracy education.”

[Founded](#) in December 2007 by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belsat dubs itself “reminiscent of” U.S. propaganda outlets Radio Free Europe and Voice of America—assets of BBG [now U.S. Agency for Global Media]—describes its mission as “promoting democratization processes” in Minsk, and boasts that events in Ukraine “have shown Belsat TV has influenced the public opinion not only in Belarus, but elsewhere in the region, too.”

Belsat may well have influenced political action and policy too, with lethal consequences. For example, in May 2015 it broadcast a slick [documentary](#) about a young man who went to fight in the war in Donbas for “Tactical Group Belarus,” a Belarusian volunteer group [spun out](#) of Ukraine’s [notorious](#) “Right Sector,” a pro-government neo-Nazi militia.

The film was billed as the stirring tale of a brave protagonist “[risking] his life ... because he believes that the fate of his homeland depends on it,” while every day facing potential extradition back to Minsk and years in prison, as his presence in Ukraine was illegal. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lukashenko has repeatedly [stated](#) there is no place in Belarus for citizens who fight in the Donbas, and hundreds have been [prosecuted](#) for taking part in the conflict to date.

The documentary’s politically charged subtext could not be more blatant, and six months after transmission, the government of then-President Petro Poroshenko answered its seeming call, amending the law to allow foreigners to legally serve in the Ukrainian armed forces, and instructing police and migration services to assist would-be recruits in joining.

This development was enthusiastically welcomed by Belsat—in an article [heralding](#) the move, the broadcaster went to the shocking extent of providing the email and phone number of “Tactical Group Belarus” for any reader who wanted to “help the guys.”

How many Belarusians answered this call to arms, and went on to kill and/or be killed on the

front lines, is an open question, although this obvious consideration clearly did little to dent the station's standing with Western powers.

On an official visit to Warsaw in late 2017, then-UK Prime Minister Theresa May [allocated](#) £5 million of UK funding to Polish organizations to “detect and counter the spread of Russian information operations,” with some of the money specifically earmarked for Belsat.

UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) files leaked by hacktivist collective Anonymous shed some light on the support provided by London to the station via Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), the internationally renowned newswire's charitable arm.

In all, Belsat [received](#) 150 days of intensive consultancy in a three-month period—“of which 97 were delivered in-country”—from consultants, interpreters, and project and finance managers, among them Reuters staff.

If TRF sought to greatly ramp up Belsat's propaganda capabilities, then its counsel was certainly successful. A Media IQ monitoring [report](#) on the station's compliance with journalistic standards “when reporting public-political news” September-December 2019 was utterly damning, finding it to be a “malicious” violator in respect to separating fact from opinion, a staggering 75% of its current affairs output contravening this basic principle during the period assessed.

“Countering Malign Kremlin Influence”

It seems likely TRF's guidance was informed by the findings of an extensive “target audience analysis” of Belarusian citizens' perceptions and motivations [conducted](#) in January 2017, which sought to “identify opportunities” to “appropriately communicate” with them. The study was commissioned by the FCDO in January 2017, under the auspices of a £100 million Whitehall [effort](#) to [weaken](#) Russia's influence in its “near abroad.”

In particular, London was interested in Belarusians' “existing or potential grievances against their national government” that could be leveraged, and “channels and messages” through which the UK government could “appropriately engage with different sub-groups.”

The FCDO's “target audience analysis” was carried out by long-time Whitehall contractor Albany Associates, central to a number of London's covert information warfare operations aimed at Russia.

In one such [connivance](#), the firm sought to “develop greater affinity” among the region's Russian-speaking minority for the UK, European Union, and NATO. In another, it [collaborated](#) with French NGO IREX Europe to “promote media plurality, balance and literacy in Central Asia.”



FCDO Main Building in London, seen from [Whitehall](#). [Source: [wikipedia.org](#)]

In its submissions to the FCDO, Albany noted IREX had been working in Belarus since 2006 “with print, online and radio outlets,” to “improve the quality of their coverage,” and “increase their understanding of the EU and EU member states.” As part of its youth audience offering in the country, the organization was said to have founded Warsaw-based [Euroradio](#), along with online outlet [34mag](#).

IREX is closely [connected](#) with the NED, and created Euroradio in 2006 with [funding](#) from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), another entity that has [frequently](#) been used to insidiously undermine governments in Washington’s crosshairs. Just like the FCDO, USAID—now under the direction of war hawk Samantha Power—operates a multi-faceted [program](#) targeted at Russia’s “near abroad,” Countering Malign Kremlin Influence, “in alignment with U.S. national security strategy.”

A 2015 [report](#) on backing provided by IREX to “independent” media across Eastern Europe under the terms of its “cooperative agreement” with USAID details Euroradio’s exponential rise following its launch. Within four years, it was also receiving sizable funding from the European Union and numerous foreign governments, and running elaborate promotional multimedia campaigns.

By 2008, it was sponsoring 300 events in the region annually, receiving “significant free exposure” by “placing its banners at music and cultural events,” including the annual Right to be Free [concert](#) in Lviv, Ukraine. Bands from Belarus, Ukraine, and elsewhere played to a 10,000-strong crowd, “with many bused in from Belarus.”

During the 2010 election, it broadcast live footage of protests following the vote via the web, Skype, and various instant messaging platforms, “interviewed leading opposition candidates, reported on the arrests of protesters, reported from the election commission, and provided reports from six regions through regional stringers,” tailoring its “content and marketing efforts” specifically for 17-35-year-olds.

These activities among others cemented Euroradio as Belarus's "leading external radio broadcaster" and, come 2012, its "potential audience for terrestrial broadcasts" was two million, more than one-fifth of the country's population, the website receiving hundreds of thousands of visitors monthly.

"Sugar Daddy of Overt Operations"

Throughout 2020 and beyond, Euroradio almost endlessly published footage of violent crackdowns on protesters in Minsk, which in turn was routinely [aired](#) by the mainstream media. The BBC went to the extent of issuing an open call for activists on the ground to submit pictures and videos for use in its coverage, which Euroradio enthusiastically [amplified](#).

It would be entirely unsurprising if much of the content featured in Western news reporting on the unrest was created by individuals and organizations secretly in receipt of funding and training from Open Information Partnership (OIP), the "flagship" [strand](#) of the FCDO's multi-pronged propaganda assault on Russia.

OIP [maintains](#) a network of 44 partners across Central and Eastern Europe, including "journalists, charities, think tanks, academics, NGOs, activists, and factcheckers."

Internal Whitehall documents reveal one of its primary [objectives](#) is influencing "elections taking place in countries of particular interest" to the FCDO. It achieves this disruption by helping organizations and individuals produce slick propaganda masquerading as independent citizen journalism, which is then amplified globally via its network.

In Ukraine for example, OIP worked with a dozen online "influencers" to "counter Kremlin-backed messaging through innovative editorial strategies, audience segmentation, and production models that reflected the complex and sensitive political environment," allowing them to "reach wider audiences with compelling content that received over four million views."

Similarly, in Russia and Central Asia, OIP established a network of YouTubers, helping them create videos "promoting media integrity and democratic values."

Participants were taught to "make and receive international payments without being registered as external sources of funding" and "develop editorial strategies to deliver key messages," while the consortium minimized their "risk of prosecution" and managed "project communications" to ensure the existence of the network, and OIP's role, were kept "confidential."

Belarus, along with Moldova and Ukraine, is [referred](#) to in the leaked files as "the most vital space in the entire [OIP] network," and a "high-impact priority" country for London. This suggests its 2020 election was very much "of interest"—and the shock results of Moldova's November 2020 presidential vote suggest OIP's informational influence can be decisive.

That election pitted upstart pro-Western Maia Sandu against incumbent pro-Russian leader Igor Dodon, with the former emerging victorious in a win widely acknowledged by the Western media to be [surprising](#). Two Moldovan organizations, the Association of Independent Press and Newsmaker, are fellow OIP network members, and could well have served as conduits for FCDO-funded, pro-Sandu, anti-Dodon material.

Slovakian OIP member [MEMO 98](#), coincidentally also [funded](#) by NED, published an extensive [study](#) of the election campaign, attributing Sandu's upset to her social media Nous.

MEMO 98 similarly kept a close eye on the Belarus protests, [publishing](#) several analyses of media reporting and social media activity related to the strife, in the process drawing particular attention to the output of none other than Belsat, praising its "extensive coverage of protests and related intimidation of activists."

In September 1991, *The Washington Post* [published](#) an article on the subject of "spylesse coups" abroad, in which it referred to the NED as the "sugar daddy of overt operations," and noted that throughout the late 1980s, it had "dispensed money to anti-communist forces behind the Iron Curtain."

"Covert funding for these groups would have been the kiss of death, if discovered. Overt funding, it would seem, has been a kiss of life," the newspaper concluded.

NED funding has very clearly been a "kiss of life" to a large number of oft-dubious opposition actors within and without Belarus, in turn unleashing all manner of chaos—and what's more, its "sugar daddy" status is now being challenged by a number of other spectral, malign Western actors.

Whether these efforts ultimately fail or succeed in unseating the Lukashenko government is immaterial to the individuals and organizations responsible for instigating them—for merely attempting to do so serves the purpose of "extending," and thus internationally isolating, Minsk and Moscow alike.

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Featured image: Protesters in Minsk supporting opposition to Alexander Lukashenko and Russia.
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