

UK Mega Meddling - UK Sets Up Media Influencing Project in Venezuela Amid Secretive £750,000 'Democracy Promotion' Programme

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The UK government has established a journalism project to 'influence' Venezuela's 'media agenda' while a Foreign Office-funded foundation is spending £750,000 on a secretive 'democracy-promotion' programme in the country, as Britain appears to deepen efforts to remove the Maduro government.

As Venezuela's political crisis continues, the UK government has initiated a new project promoting investigative journalism in Latin America which furtively covers Venezuela.

The project, launched last summer and intended to "influence" the media agenda in the country, follows a long history of the British government using journalism as an influencing tool. It raises suspicions that it aims to help remove the leftist government of Venezuela president Nicolás Maduro.

In a separate programme, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), a majority UK-government funded organisation, has spent over £750,000 to "strengthen democracy" in Venezuela since 2016, according to documents obtained by *Declassified*.

The WFD's programmes in the country are shrouded in secrecy due to apparent concerns about the security of its staff, although its country representative advertises his affiliation to the organisation online.

The British government controversially [recognises](#) Venezuelan opposition figure Juan Guaidó as president and is running a number of anti-government programmes in the country using the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) which [supports](#) projects designed "to tackle instability and to prevent conflicts that threaten UK interests".

The aim of the fund's new journalism project is [stated](#) to be the creation of a "new platform that strengthens media organisation [sic] throughout the region and provides journalists with a platform in which they can collaborate and build regional stories".

Programme literature [notes](#) that successful applicants should display "a capacity to link into - and ultimately influence - local and national media agendas".

But they are warned that "the British government — and its resourcing of the project — should not be expressly referred or linked to the individual outputs of the project (i.e.

individual articles, events etc).”

Run by the British embassy in Bogotá, Colombia, the call for applications noted that successful bids would start in August 2020. There has been no public update since, although the Foreign Office told *Declassified* there had been delays due to the coronavirus pandemic.

On the public advert, applicants are advised to budget up to £250,000 for their projects, but the Foreign Office told *Declassified*: “it is not currently possible to confirm what budget will be available for this project.”

Declassified's repeated questions about the project to its two coordinators in Bogotá went unanswered. However, a Foreign Office spokesperson told *Declassified*:

“It is inaccurate to conflate this call for bids with the UK position on Venezuela, which has not changed. We want to see a democratic transition with free and fair elections take place in Venezuela.”

The CSSF put out a public [call](#) in June last year for applications from journalists seeking to cover crime and corruption in Colombia, Peru and Panama, adding there was the “potential to cover linked events in other neighbouring countries”. The word Venezuela did not appear.

However, CSSF documentation [published](#) three days before the advert outlined the same programme with the addition of Venezuela in its title. The furtive inclusion of the country appears to reflect Foreign Office reticence to publicise its increased involvement in Venezuela.

The [summary](#) of another CSSF programme, again in Colombia for the year ending March 2020, includes the recommendation to “engage” Foreign Office officials “about options to develop CSSF programmes in Venezuela”.

A September 2019 job [advert](#) for a CSSF programme manager in Lima, Peru, notes that the successful applicant will work “with colleagues in Colombia, Panama and, potentially, Venezuela”.

Declassified recently [revealed](#) that the CSSF has spent £450,000 setting up an anti-government coalition in Venezuela, again by furtively adding the project to an existing programme focused on Colombia and beginning in 2019.

Journalism as information war

The UK government has long used the media to undermine foreign leaders and political movements it perceives as a threat to British business interests.

Declassified recently [revealed](#) that a secretive Cold War propaganda unit, named the Information Research Department (IRD), tried to prevent Chilean socialist Salvador Allende from winning presidential elections in 1964 and 1970.

Declassified files also [reveal](#) that during the Brazilian dictatorship of 1964-1985, the IRD “assiduously cultivated” one of Brazil’s leading left-wing publishers, Samuel Wainer.

Though the unit was shut down in 1977, Britain has continued to sponsor journalistic

ventures in Latin America. In response to a freedom of information [request](#), the Foreign Office revealed that, between January 2016 and September 2018, it funded Venezuelan news outlet *Fundación Efecto Cocuyo*, as well as the *Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría* and *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa*.

While receiving funds from the British government, *Efecto Cocuyo* [teamed up](#) with two British organisations — Bellingcat and Forensic Architecture — to “call for more evidence” regarding the killing of Óscar Pérez at the hands of Venezuelan police. Pérez, a police officer, had hijacked a police helicopter and, on 27 June 2017, used it to [attack](#) a number of government buildings in central Caracas.

In July 2019, *Efecto Cocuyo*'s editor, Luz Mely Reyes, [spoke](#) at the UK government's “Global Conference for Media Freedom” event in London. Then foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt, [addressing](#) the conference, said Reyes “has defied the Maduro regime by co-founding an independent news website, *Efecto Cocuyo*”, without mentioning the website's links to the British government.

London's support for media projects in Venezuela appears to mirror that of the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). According to its accounts, the NED has [funded](#) “freedom of information” projects in Venezuela aimed at [fostering](#) a “greater understanding of the spillover effects of Venezuelan corruption and criminal activity” by working with “investigative journalists and partner organisations”.

A 2017 NED project, with a [budget](#) of over \$60,000, aims to “increase transparency and accountability in the Venezuelan government procurement processes. And to foster collaboration with journalists across the region”.

Media freedom group, Reporters Without Borders, which is also [funded](#) by the NED, notes: “Venezuela's president since 2013, Nicolás Maduro persists in trying to silence independent media outlets and keep news coverage under constant control.”

It adds: “The climate for journalists has been extremely tense since the onset of a political and economic crisis in 2016, and is exacerbated by Maduro's frequent references to ‘media warfare’ in an attempt to discredit national and international media criticism of his administration.”



Venezuelan journalist Luz Mely Reyes speaks at the UK government's Global Conference for Media Freedom alongside Jeremy Hunt, then UK foreign secretary, London, 10 July 2019. (Photo: Twitter / Press Gazette)

The embassy in Bogotá

One of the two Foreign Office points of contact for the project at the British embassy in Bogotá is Claudia Castilla, a Colombian national who [was](#) a UK government-funded Chevening Scholar in London from 2017-18.

Castilla appears to be a strong supporter of the Venezuelan opposition, [writing](#) in February 2014 "I think I fell in love with Leopoldo López", referring to a leading opposition figure. At the time US-educated López was promoting street [protests](#) in a strategy known as "The Exit", after Maduro won presidential elections in April 2013.

From 2014-15, Castilla [worked](#) as a research assistant for the Colombian chapter of Transparency International, where she "formulated public policy recommendations". *Declassified* recently [revealed](#) the UK government funded Transparency International's Venezuelan chapter to set up an "anti-corruption" coalition in the country.

From 2012 to 2013, Castilla worked for the Cerrejón Foundation, the [charitable arm](#) of the controversial Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia which is run by three [London-listed](#) mining multinationals. For the latter period of her employment, Castilla was the foundation's "social control advisor".

'Democracy promotion'

Documents obtained by *Declassified* also show that the Westminster Foundation for Democracy — Britain’s “democracy promotion” arm — has been running expensive programmes in Venezuela.

The WFD claims to be “the most effective organisation sharing the UK democratic experience”, but its operations are shrouded in secrecy.

Venezuela [hosts](#) the WFD’s only full-scale programme and permanent office in Latin America as part of a project which [began](#) in 2016. Since then the WFD has spent £760,680, according to figures obtained by *Declassified*.

The largest outlay was £248,725 in 2017-2018, as the EU [announced](#) a sanctions regime against Venezuela and British officials intensified calls for “different people at the helm” of the Venezuelan government.

Alan Duncan, then minister of state for the Americas, [said](#) in 2018: “Maduro’s double crime is that his destruction of the economy has been followed by the systemic undermining of democracy.” He added: “The revival of the oil industry [in Venezuela] will be an essential element in any recovery, and I can imagine that British companies like Shell and BP, will want to be part of it.”

Last year, the WFD spent £113,193 on its Venezuela operations, while *Declassified* understands a bid for funding of just over £27,500 for next year is awaiting approval. The WFD has two full-time staff in Venezuela.

In December, UN human rights experts [found](#) that “since November 2020 Venezuela has systematically stigmatised and persecuted civil society organisations, dissenting voices and human rights defenders”.

The WFD has no similar [programmes](#) in UK government-allied dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, or the United Arab Emirates.

The Foundation told *Declassified*: “WFD works to strengthen democracy around the world. We are funded by the UK as well as other governments (including Canada, Germany, Norway and Switzerland) and international organisations (such as the United Nations Development Programme) and are operationally independent.”

But the vast majority of the WFD’s funding comes from the British government. In the year to March 2020, it [provided](#) £11.4-million to the Foundation, while all other sources of income added up to £1.5-million.

The WFD said that in Venezuela it works “with a range of MPs, National Assembly staff, civil society, and academics” but it refused to disclose to *Declassified* information about who those partners are. It said this was “to avoid endangering the physical health or safety of those partners”.

However, the WFD’s country representative in Venezuela advertises his position on his public LinkedIn page, and his email and phone number are available through WFD job adverts.

As its Venezuela programme began in 2016, the WFD published an article on the independent news site *openDemocracy* in association with Daniel Fermín, a Venezuelan

researcher.

The article [asked](#): “Can Venezuela’s president [Nicolás Maduro] be unseated peacefully?”. In the following two years, *openDemocracy* was [awarded](#) \$99,661 (£74,131) by the US analogue of the WFD, the National Endowment for Democracy.

According to a 2018 WFD posting for a job in Venezuela’s capital, Caracas, its country representative is expected to work with the British embassy and must “contribute to development of future business opportunities in Venezuela”.

When asked why it focused on Venezuela, the foundation told *Declassified*: “WFD programmes have been active in other countries across Latin America. We stand ready to launch new programmes and country offices when the opportunity arises.”

Neutrality

The WFD [says](#) that it “works on a cross-party basis” in Venezuela, “seeking to engage all sides of the political divide while supporting democratic institutions in the country”.

In January 2019, shortly after Guaidó proclaimed himself president, the WFD’s country representative wrote that “last years elections [sic] were a sham and therefore Maduro is an usurper”.

The next month — after trucks of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) attempted to enter Venezuelan territory — he said: “Non-intervention cannot be an absolute principle that doesn’t consider other factors”.

On 30 April, when Guaidó launched an [armed coup attempt](#) in Caracas, the WFD’s representative announced that Guaidó’s actions were “not an assault on democracy but the other way round”. Elsewhere, he has described Chavismo — referring to former president Hugo Chávez — as a “plague”.

UK parliamentarians overseeing WFD’s operations have also disparaged the Venezuelan government. Conservative MP Richard Graham, the chair of WFD’s board of governors for the duration of its Venezuela project, [said](#) in December 2019 that “Islington Corbysistas [sic] don’t get that extreme left ideas never work, whether in 2019 Venezuela or 80s Liverpool”.

The WFD’s board is [appointed](#) by the UK foreign secretary and is modelled on the NED, which has been [described](#) by the *Washington Post* as the “sugar daddy of overt [US] operations”. Since Chávez’s election in 1998, the NED has been the [guiding hand](#) behind a number of efforts to overthrow the government in Venezuela.

While the NED’s operations abroad have received some independent scrutiny, the WFD — has largely [operated](#) under media silence.

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Featured image: UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab meets Juan Guaidó, recognised by Britain as Venezuela's 'interim president', in London, 21 January 2020. (Photo: UK government)

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