



Primer: The National Endowment for Democracy and an NGO Ecosystem Actively Undermining America

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Synopsis

The role that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in facilitating the progressive policy agenda has garnered significant attention over the last several years. These NGOs, which utilize so-called “soft power” to enforce progressive orthodoxy in the increasingly corrupt institutions of the administrative state, receive significant taxpayer-funded resources through federal grants and appropriations. These resources are then utilized to empower a constellation of entities that create a “whole of society” approach to reinforce the prerogatives of a woke and weaponized federal bureaucracy at the expense of the American people’s well-being and interests.

Some Members of Congress have correctly begun targeting these entities for their prominent role in facilitating the Biden administration’s border crisis under the guise of providing “humanitarian aid.”¹ The scope of NGO activities, however, is far more encompassing than merely providing manufactured emotional cover for the border invasion ravaging America’s communities. Indeed, NGOs are at the forefront of efforts to export woke ideology abroad, drag the United States into unending military conflicts, and censor disfavored political movements both overseas and at home.

Defunding these harmful organizations should be a top priority for both the 119th Congress and the incoming Trump administration.

In Focus: The National Endowment for Democracy

The NGO that has arguably received the most public scrutiny—both historically and recently—is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Created in 1983 at the height of the Cold War, NED was conceived by former CIA Director William Casey and former CIA operative Walter Raymond Jr.² The entity is a “quasi-independent” non-governmental organization designed to

¹Press Release (September 5, 2024). “America Invaded: How the Biden-Harris Border Crisis Is Fundamentally Transforming the United States,” *Office of Congressman Chip Roy*.

<https://roy.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/roy.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/America%20Invaded%20-%20How%20the%20Biden-Harris%20Border%20Crisis%20is%20Fundamentally%20Transforming%20the%20United%20States.pdf>

²Vlahos, K. (November 29, 2024). “DOGE’s Best First Target: The National Endowment for Democracy,” *The American Conservative*.

<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/doges-best-first-target-the-national-endowment-for-democracy/>

take what were once covert CIA practices and put an overt sheen on them beneath the stated aim to grow and strengthen democratic institutions around the world.³ NED accomplishes this through the dispersal of grant monies to favored and well-connected interests abroad. This dynamic purportedly allows activities to maintain an air of independence from official U.S. government actions.

Some of NED's early activities in the 1980s included bankrolling dissident groups in Soviet bloc states as well as funding anti-communist organizations in strategic geopolitical locations throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. These efforts saw some success at foiling communist Soviet influences abroad while simultaneously reinforcing anti-communist narratives out of Washington, D.C. For example, grant resources from NED were used to grow the Solidarity movement in Poland and help that nation transition toward a free-market democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴

President Ronald Reagan once described the concept of NED in a speech to the British Parliament as an operation designed to “foster the infrastructure of democracy—the system of free press, unions, political parties, universities.”⁵ As a tool to combat communism, one can argue that NED achieved its designated objectives in 1991 following the Soviet Union's collapse. However, as is the case with most government-affiliated entities, NED metastasized into something else entirely in order to justify its continued existence. The fall of the Berlin Wall began the organization's steady evolution into an actively harmful and increasingly opaque entity hostile to the interests of the American people.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a memo in 1991 that suggested NED provide specific rationales for its ongoing operations following the Soviet collapse. This turned into a strategic plan released by NED's board the following year, which reoriented the organization toward more deliberate efforts to “expand its programs in those countries and regions where democratic breakthroughs have yet to occur.”⁶ Among the locations listed for future intervention were China, Vietnam, Cuba, Africa, and the Middle East.⁷

It is little surprise then that in the following decades, NED became a leading tool for neoconservative nation-building exercises both before and after the 9/11 attacks. This includes training and financing key political movements in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and other nations that sparked the so-called “Arab Spring” in 2011, directly contributing to the geopolitical turmoil that has engulfed the Middle East over the last 13 years.⁸ Among the groups unintentionally

³*Ibid.*

⁴Domber, G. (October 2014). “Empowering Revolution: America, Poland, and the End of the Cold War,” Chapter 3

⁵Pierson, J. (December 3, 2024). “The DOGE Versus the NED,” *The New Criterion*. <https://newcriterion.com/dispatch/the-doge-versus-the-ned/>

⁶Board of Directors (January 1992). “Strategy Document,” pg. 14, *National Endowment for Democracy*. https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1992_Strategy_Document.pdf

⁷*Ibid.* pgs. 7-12

⁸Nixon, R. (April 14, 2011). “U.S. Groups Helped Nurture Arab Uprisings,” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/world/15aid.html>

empowered by NED's "pro-democracy" meddling in the Middle East are radical jihadists like the Houthis in Yemen, the Al-Nusra Front in Syria, and the Islamic State (otherwise known as ISIS) in Syria and Iraq.

Further, NED served as the tip of the proverbial spear for heightened CIA and State Department efforts to foster political revolution in Ukraine. A steady stream of NED grants to myriad Ukrainian political entities and movements advanced both the 'Orange Revolution' and 'Maidan Revolution' that paved the way for the current Ukraine-Russia war.⁹ Among the hundreds of grants to Ukrainian political entities going back to 2014 are payments to judicial organizations and judges, grants to NATO-adjacent political entities like the European Institute for Democracy, and funding for the Media Development Foundation to train Ukrainians to develop effective anti-Russian propaganda.

Before NED turned off its searchable grants feature in 2022, data showed the organization had funneled tens of millions in U.S. dollars to Ukrainian entities and anti-Russian interests in Ukraine with more than 330 unique grants.¹⁰ During the height of the Orange Revolution in 2005, NED infused more than \$2.3 million directly into anti-Russian institutions and activists—including the activist arms of Ukrainian political parties and George Soros' Open Society Foundations—in support of preferred candidate Viktor Yushchenko.¹¹ NED's funding streams for anti-Russian activists and institutions increased by 52 percent the following year to more than \$3.5 million following the end of the Orange Revolution.¹²

In 2022, one of NED's special projects, called the "Center for International Media Assistance," outlined the role that international NGOs played in helping facilitate both the 2004-05 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine.¹³ It is imperative to note that among the results of NED's activity in Ukraine was the ouster of pro-Russia president, Viktor Yanukovich, followed by the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine that resulted in the Russian annexation of Crimea. At the time of the Maidan Revolution in 2014, foreign policy scholar John Mearsheimer laid the blame for the outbreak of war in Crimea at the feet of the West, with particular emphasis on NED's meddling in the country. Mearsheimer quoted then-president, Carl Gershman, characterizing Ukraine as "the biggest prize."¹⁴ Yet, it was populist political movements in the United States and other Western nations that pushed NED from being merely harmful to America's national interests to engaging in outright hostility. What began as an NGO designed to

⁹Vlahos, K. (November 29, 2024). "DOGE's Best First Target: The National Endowment for Democracy," *The American Conservative*. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/doges-best-first-target-the-national-endowment-for-democracy/>

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.* (Excel Database Search)

¹²*Ibid.* (Excel Database Search)

¹³Cherevko, A. and Dvorovyi, M. (October 5, 2022). "Long-Term Investments Pay Dividends in Ukraine," *Center for International Media Assistance*. <https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/long-term-investments-pay-dividends-in-ukraine/>

¹⁴Mearsheimer, J. (August 18, 2014). "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>

deter communist aggression transformed into a fully partisan political weapon aimed at delegitimizing popular democratic movements at odds with modern progressive orthodoxy.

Background: A Growing Record of Weaponization and Radicalism

The rise in populism and nationalist political movements in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere over the last decade sparked a significant internal shift within NED and like-minded NGOs. The culmination of paradigm-shattering election results in the United Kingdom with Brexit, the first election of President Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of nationalist movements in India and Brazil presented direct threats to the established transatlantic consensus of globalist elites.

In 2016, NED's long-standing bipartisan approach was abandoned in an overt effort to stop and then stymie President Trump. The former president of NED, Carl Gershman, published an op-ed one month before the election pushing the now-debunked Russia hoax that President Trump was working with Russian dictator Vladimir Putin to win the election.¹⁵ Board member Jendaya Frazer stated in 2016 that she was a Republican, but said she would "rather my country not go down the fascist route" when referencing Donald Trump's nomination.¹⁶ Writing for the globalist Atlantic Council in 2019, NED board member and current president Damon Wilson claimed that President Trump had "an uncanny ability to divide both Americans and the United States from its democratic allies."¹⁷

These efforts to delegitimize domestic political movements and leaders as "threats to democracy" have not abated. Robert Kagan, who sits on the editorial board of NED's *Journal of Democracy*, penned an op-ed in 2023 arguing that Trump voters were akin to Germans who supported Adolf Hitler.¹⁸ Rachel Kleinfeld, who sits on NED's board, offered only slightly less extreme rhetoric when she claimed that the Republican Party is an antidemocratic operation under Trump.¹⁹

Another NED board member, Anne Applebaum, published a recent book characterizing President Trump as an authoritarian in the same mold as Vladimir Putin and Nicolas Maduro.²⁰ She then doubled down before November's election, arguing that the populist America First

¹⁵Gershman, C. (October 6, 2016). "Remembering a Journalist Who Was Killed for Standing up to Putin," *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/remembering-a-journalist-who-was-killed-for-standing-up-to-putin/2016/10/06/d3a9e176-8bf7-11e6-bff0-d53f592f176e_story.html

¹⁶Peat, C. (August 10, 2016). "Republican Says She Will Vote Against 'Fascist' Trump as Security Experts Condemn Tycoon," *Express*. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/698381/Republican-Donald-Trump-security-newsnight-fascist-US-President-Jendayi-Frazer>

¹⁷Wilson, D. (January 2, 2019). "Washington and Its Friends Are More United Than You Think," *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/washington-and-its-friends-are-more-united-than-you-think/>

¹⁸Kagan, R. (November 30, 2023). "A Trump Dictatorship Is Increasingly Inevitable. We Should Stop Pretending," *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/30/trump-dictator-2024-election-robert-kagan/>

¹⁹Podcast Interview (February 18, 2023). "Rachel Kleinfeld on Why America Isn't About to Have a Civil War," *Persuasion*. <https://www.persuasion.community/p/kleinfeld>

²⁰Applebaum, A. (July 2024). "Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World," pg. 148

movement led by President Trump “dehumanizes” people, allegedly by utilizing similar language as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Mussolini.²¹ As a sitting NED board member, Applebaum compared the former and soon-to-be future President of the United States to the most evil despots in history, who murdered or were responsible for the deaths of more than 100 million human beings.

Similar attacks have been levied by NED staffers against other prominent populist leaders: Narendra Modi in India,²² Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil,²³ and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador.²⁴ This new strategy comports with NED’s brazen progressive shift over the last decade, with the organization transitioning from promoting democracy abroad to countering disfavored democratic movements that threaten the CIA and State Department’s ability to control narratives and maintain power in nation-states.

This shift has been adopted by NED staffers as de facto doctrine through a clever sleight of hand to alter the meaning of democracy. As characterized by former State Department official Mike Benz, “There’s been a redefinition of democracy from meaning the consensus of individuals to meaning the consensus of institutions.”²⁵ Under that definition, any political movement or politician that opposes the agenda of these globalist institutions is, by way of this new standard, a “threat to democracy.” Or as Benz puts it, “What they are doing to populism is what they used to do to communism.”²⁶

Perhaps the most disturbing evolution in NED’s increasingly weaponized posture toward the American people is its role in promulgating censorship campaigns abroad and at home against American citizens. The current NED president, Damon Wilson, helped develop the Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab). This entity was one of four founding members of the Election Integrity Partnership, which worked hand-in-glove with Big Tech entities and the Department of Homeland Security to censor Americans during the 2020 presidential election.²⁷ In fact, a bombshell report revealed that NED was one of the key facilitators of the “censorship industrial complex” through the funneling of grant dollars to a British anti-speech organization called the Global Disinformation Index (GDI).²⁸

²¹Applebaum, A. (October 18, 2024). “Trump Is Speaking Like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini,” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/10/trump-authoritarian-rhetoric-hitler-mussolini/680296/>

²²Tudor, M. (July 2023). “Why India’s Democracy Is Dying,” *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/why-indias-democracy-is-dying/>

²³Hunter, W. and Power, T. (January 2019). “Bolsonaro and Brazil’s Illiberal Backlash,” *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.com/articles/bolsonaro-and-brazils-illiberal-backlash/>

²⁴Melendez-Sanchez, M. (February 2024). “How the World’s Most Popular Dictator Wins,” *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/elections/how-the-worlds-most-popular-dictator-wins/>

²⁵Mike Benz Interview (August 28, 2024). “The Deep State’s Step-by-Step Plan to End Free Speech,” *The Tucker Carlson Show*. <https://tucker Carlson.com/tucker-show-mike-benz-2>

²⁶Mike Benz Interview (August 28, 2024). “The Deep State’s Step-by-Step Plan to End Free Speech,” *The Tucker Carlson Show*. <https://tucker Carlson.com/tucker-show-mike-benz-2>

²⁷Meisburger, T. (August 6, 2024). “The Undemocratic National Endowment for Democracy Needs Oversight and Reform,” *The Heritage Foundation*. <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-undemocratic-national-endowment-democracy-needs-oversight-and-reform>

²⁸Kaminsky, G. (February 9, 2023). “Disinformation Inc: State Department Bankrolls Group Secretly Blacklisting Conservative Media,” *The Washington Examiner*.

The report showed that GDI had taken significant grant funding from both NED and the State Department's Global Engagement Center—another weaponized entity in need of permanent dissolution. With that funding, GDI had labeled the top ten “riskiest” news outlets in the United States as the *American Spectator*, *Newsmax*, *The Federalist*, *The American Conservative*, *One America News*, *The Blaze*, *The Daily Wire*, *RealClearPolitics*, *Reason*, and *The New York Post*.²⁹ GDI then flagged these conservative and right-leaning publications as bastions of disinformation to corporate publications in an attempt to dry up advertising dollars and blacklist them.

Following the release of the report linking NED to domestic censorship efforts, NED severed ties with GDI. Nevertheless, the damage to NED's legitimacy is permanent and its lengthy track record of outright hostility toward half the American citizenry cannot be denied. The anti-democratic authoritarians running NED have come full circle: “strengthening democracy” by waging war on the Constitution and the very foundations of American free speech and political freedom.

It is a sickening twist of irony that the very entity once created to allegedly “foster the infrastructure of democracy” has instead become one of the bleeding edge tools to undermine it.

Policy Approach: An Entity Ripe for Removal

Funded almost entirely by congressional appropriations to the State Department, NED disperses grants to entities in places where traditional U.S. diplomatic infrastructure is limited or constrained by local considerations. NED funding is not considered a line item, as the appropriations go to the Department of State, which operates a grant agreement with NED codified in the National Endowment for Democracy Act of 1983. The State Department is also authorized to provide discretionary grants as needed to NED beyond the existing funding arrangement. Annual appropriations have spiked since NED's inception, growing from roughly \$15 million during the Cold War to more than \$362 million in FY2023.³⁰ In fact, NED has received over \$1 billion in federal grants over the last four years.

During the Cold War, the locales that received most of NED's attention included eastern Europe, and other Soviet bloc states. Unsurprisingly, the post-Cold War era has seen the footprint and mission profile of NED significantly expand to now incorporate activities in roughly 130 nations.

Through these funds, NED operates the *Journal of Democracy*, a publication aimed at reinforcing the globalist consensus among political elites to ensure continued alignment with the

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/finance/2773271/disinformation-inc-state-department-bankrolls-group-secretly-blacklisting-conservative-media/>

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Auditor's Report (September 30, 2023). “FY2023 National Endowment for Democracy Financial Report,” *National Endowment for Democracy*. https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/National-Endowment-for-Democracy_23-FS_Final.pdf

organization's new mission to thwart populist political movements. Funding is also used to funnel grant money to entities that promulgate the established ideological consensus within the State Department and CIA—whether its support for perpetuating the Ukraine-Russia war, advancing woke ideology on abortion and LGBT issues, or dogmatically demonizing political leaders skeptical of the failed uniparty foreign policy establishment.

NED grantees have historically spanned the gamut of political and socioeconomic leanings—with longstanding ties to organizations like the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) as well as the international affiliates for the Chamber of Commerce and AFL-CIO. These entities have historically received a large share of NED's annual funding and comprise the “core four” components of NED's engagement arm as representatives of the two major political parties, corporate America, and labor.³¹

Just prior to the outbreak of war in Ukraine and following its culpability in the censorship of American citizens during the 2020 election cycle, NED curiously ended its longstanding transparency practice of publishing the list of its grant recipients. This year, the organization labeled nearly the entirety of its State Department-funneled appropriation as “sensitive” in order to justify hiding its grantees from the public.³² This sudden opacity has not gone unnoticed, with independent audits determining that NED has remained out of compliance for the last several years regarding its statutory obligations to report grantees of their federal dollars.³³ Simply put, the organization is out of control and behaving in a manner that suggests a belief among its leadership that it is accountable to no one.

In 2018, President Trump released his budget proposal, which slashed NED's funding by 60 percent. A full-scale counterattack was launched by NED and its allies in the corporate press and elite D.C. political circles that temporarily blunted efforts to cut the organization's funding.³⁴ Six years later, it is abundantly clear that the tide has turned, and there is now a political mandate for aggressively defunding weaponized entities like NED, which have advanced priorities antithetical to America's national interests and declared war on significant swaths of the citizenry.

The reasons for defunding NED are as numerous as they are imperative. Among the most clear and pressing rationales include:

³¹Lawson, M. and Epstein, S. (January 4, 2019). “Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance,” *Congressional Research Service*. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R44858.pdf>

³²Buynevich, O. (November 18, 2024). “Black Box: Global Censorship Hub NED Reached Agreement with State Department to Conceal Government Grants from the Public,” *Foundation for Freedom Online*. <https://foundationforfreedomonline.com/black-box-global-censorship-hub-ned-reached-agreement-with-state-department-to-conceal-government-grants-from-the-public/>

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Press Release (February 11, 2018). “United States: Cuts to Democracy Funds Reduce U.S. Security,” *Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/united-states-cuts-democracy-funds-reduce-us-security>

1. **Ukraine Warmongering:** NED has been at the forefront of fomenting political revolution in Ukraine for two decades through tens of millions of dollars in grants to Ukrainian political, security, and socioeconomic entities. NED has helped drag the United States into a war that is not in the U.S. national interest.
2. **Middle East Meddling:** NED actively facilitated dissident political groups throughout the Arab world that directly led to the “Arab Spring” and the subsequent turmoil that has engulfed much of the Middle East. These actions have empowered deadly jihadist groups from Libya to Iraq.
3. **Partisan Weaponization:** NED’s leadership has abandoned any pretense of bipartisan comity and unity of purpose through the bombastically partisan activities of its board members. Unapologetic efforts to delegitimize President Donald Trump and the American political right underscore the organization as yet another weaponized entity.
4. **Increased Opacity:** NED has abandoned its transparent grantmaking process and, for the last three years, has mostly obfuscated its grant recipients from the American public. It is a curiosity that this occurred after its role in censoring Americans and in the lead-up to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. This sudden divestment from transparency has only increased concerns that NED is funneling taxpayer resources to entities that are dragging Americans into conflicts abroad and that seek to censor the very citizens who fund the organization.
5. **Tyrannical Domestic Censorship Efforts:** NED is complicit in utilizing taxpayer resources to fund campaigns aimed at censoring American citizens and blacklisting conservative media organizations in order to tilt elections in favor of progressive outcomes.

Bottom Line: NED is actively participating in the censorship of American citizens who hold “undesirable” opinions in a wholesale attack on the First Amendment and the very idea of America in the absurd name of “promoting democracy.” It is operating a rogue foreign policy independent of the Executive Branch (i.e. President) that is fomenting wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East that are not in America’s national security interests and threaten the well-being of the American people.

The United States Congress **must defund** all appropriations to NED in the 119th Congress and enact statutory provisions that prohibit State Department funding from flowing into NED. If the organization wants to operate as a “quasi-independent” agency, then as a fully partisan entity advancing anti-American globalist policies it can attempt to survive through donations. An NGO actively at war with at least half the American public that continues to advocate for policies contrary to those espoused by the soon-to-be sitting President of the United States is simply not one that should continue to receive hundreds of millions in annual taxpayer funds.

The time to defund NED has arrived. It is also imperative for policymakers to realize that NED is but one of many “quasi-independent” entities operating on behalf of the consent of the ruling institutional elite instead of the consent of the governed. To that end, NED must be the first of many dominoes to ensure that unelected bureaucrats and radical ideologues no longer possess the ability to thwart the will of the American people.

Other entities that should be considered as hostile toward an America First policy agenda that should have their taxpayer funding eliminated or blocked include:

- **The Center for an Informed Public**, which is led by radical progressive professor Kate Starbird and is complicit in domestic censorship campaigns, received over \$2 million in funding from the National Science Foundation.³⁵
- **The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service**, which provides services and transportation to illegal immigrants entering the United States, received roughly 80 percent of its funding from taxpayers in 2021.³⁶
- **Meedan**, an emerging nonprofit that is developing technologies to censor “misinformation,” received \$5.7 million in funding from the National Science Foundation.³⁷
- **Digital Forensic Research Lab**, a brainchild of the Atlantic Council and Damon Wilson, actively participated in efforts to censor American citizens during the 2020 elections.

Concluding Assessment

NGOs have become the vanguards of progressive orthodoxy. Many of these quasi-independent organizations fuel woke and weaponized ideologies and a whole-of-society approach that steers government resources toward radical progressive priorities. Further, the ostensible veil of independence that NGOs claim to possess with regard to the official activities of federal agencies is often little more than a technicality.

The National Endowment for Democracy remains the soft power arm of both the CIA and the U.S. State Department. It is an entity that advances a policy agenda designed to protect the institutions at war with the American people and to assail domestic political movements that dare to prioritize the interests of American citizens over global elites. The time to permanently defund this rogue and actively harmful NGO has arrived.

³⁵FFO Staff (December 13, 2023). “Kate Starbird: ‘Freedom of Speech’ Should Not Be Centered Because A ‘Level Playing Field’ For Ideas Is ‘Tilted in Favor of Misinformation,’” *Foundation for Freedom Online*.

<https://foundationforfreedomonline.com/kate-starbird-freedom-speech-favors-misinformation/?swcfpc=1>

³⁶Ventura, J. (June 7, 2023). “NGOs Use American Tax Dollars to Relocate Migrants,” *NewsNation*.

<https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/immigration/border-coverage/ngos-american-tax-dollars-migrants/>

³⁷Award Profile (Accessed December 10, 2024). “Contract to Meedan,” *USASpending.Gov*.

https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_49100421C0035_4900_-NONE_-NONE-