

Soros has created a superpower for democracy. But he could use some help.

The Washington Post

19th October 2017

If a person is to be judged by his enemies, George Soros can feel proud. Autocrats across Eastern Europe, including his native Hungary, as well as those from China to Egypt and many in between, have expressed fear and loathing — and taken action against — the civil society organizations that Mr. Soros has generously supported for three decades. Dictators do not like Mr. Soros at all, so it is good news that he has now contributed \$18 billion of his fortune to his Open Society Foundations.

The contributions, made in recent years but disclosed only this week, will make Open Society the second-largest philanthropic organization in the United States, behind the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Mr. Soros has now created a philanthropic superpower for liberal democracy.

And none too soon. The past decade, in particular, has witnessed a rising tide of illiberalism across the globe. The Stanford University-Hoover Institution scholar Larry Diamond calls this the decade of democratic recession. From Presidents Xi Jinping of China and Vladimir Putin of Russia to Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Abdel Fatah al-Sissi of Egypt, Hun Sen of Cambodia, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Viktor Orban of Hungary and Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, government leaders have been aggressively rolling back democracy and human rights. They have used traditional coercion such as imprisoning innocent people for dissent or for expressing views freely in news and social media. They also have subverted freedom by staging “elections” that are rigged; funding news media that are not independent; labeling civil society organizations as “foreign agents” or spies; blocking access to the Internet; and other insidious and innovative techniques.

Mr. Soros, who lived in Nazi-occupied Hungary as a boy, is at the forefront of pushing back against totalitarianism and authoritarianism, and his new commitment suggests that his foundations will sustain this mission for years to come. Mr. Soros was moved many years ago by the 1945 book by Karl Popper, “The Open Society and Its Enemies,” written during the struggle against totalitarianism in World War II but holding lessons for today. Then as now, a healthy civil society — the connections of free citizens to one another through the press, informal associations, advocacy organizations and otherwise — is the bane of authoritarianism.

Alas, even the richest foundations cannot fill the gap left when governments fail to act. This is salient and urgent now as President Trump turns his back on decades of U.S. support for democracy and human rights. Nothing compares to the persuasive power and overarching influence of the United States as the exponent of freedom.

As former president George W. Bush said in an important address on Thursday, “For more than 70 years, the presidents of both parties believed that American security and prosperity were directly tied to the success of freedom in the world. And they knew that the success depended, in large part, on U.S. leadership.” For all the positive works Mr. Soros envisions for his billions, it would be doubly good if the government of the United States were walking in tandem with him, and it is a tragedy that it is not.

New York Times

David Gelles

17th October 2017

George Soros, the billionaire hedge fund manager and a major Democratic donor, has given \$18 billion to his Open Society Foundations, one of the largest transfers of wealth ever made by a private donor to a single foundation.

The gift, made quietly over the past several years but disclosed only on Tuesday, has transformed Open Society into the second-biggest philanthropic organization in the United States, behind the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It will also place Mr. Soros, a lightning rod for conservative critics, squarely in the middle of the social and political debates convulsing the country.

Founded by Mr. Soros more than 30 years ago, Open Society promotes democracy and human rights in more than 120 countries. In recent years, the organization has increased its attention on the United States, investing in programs to protect gays and lesbians and reduce abuses by the police.

The organization funded treatment centers during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, a center for Roma art and culture, and efforts to protect people in the United States from what it described as “a national wave of hate incidents” after the 2016 election. After that spike in hate crimes, Mr. Soros, 87, committed \$10 million to preventing such violence.

“We must do something to push back against what’s happening here,” Mr. Soros said in November, lamenting what he called the “dark forces that have been awakened” by the

His political focus — including large donations to Hillary Clinton and other Democratic politicians — has made Mr. Soros a target of criticism from both the Republican establishment and fringe elements of the far right. The conservative website Breitbart, for example, has accused Mr. Soros of attempting to make Ireland a “pro-abortion country” and undermining the control of European countries over their borders.

“Given America’s place in the world right now, I think he’s making an enormous statement,” said Eileen Heisman, chief executive of the National Philanthropic Trust, a nonprofit that works with foundations. “He has a very clear point of view and he’s not trying to hide it.”

Patrick Gaspard, the vice president of the Open Society Foundations, who will take over as president at the end of the year, said the election of President Trump had given the organization’s work a new sense of urgency.

Mr. Gaspard specifically cited Mr. Trump’s commission on voter fraud, a panel that has faced much criticism from Democrats and that Mr. Gaspard said “utterly lacks integrity.” “Our work on equal access and protection is more vital than it’s ever been,” he said.

Mr. Soros’s philanthropy is rooted in his past.

He lived in Nazi-occupied Hungary as a boy. With Budapest under Communist rule in 1947, he left for London and then the United States, where he found success on Wall Street.

In 1992, Mr. Soros made a \$1 billion bet against the British pound, a trade that famously earned him the nickname “the man who broke the Bank of England” when his aggressive selling of the currency pushed the government to devalue the pound.

As his fortune grew, Mr. Soros began funding efforts to promote democracy and human rights, establishing the first Open Society foundation in Hungary in 1984. Mr. Soros took the name from a book by the philosopher Karl Popper, “Open Society and Its Enemies,” in which he

“He lived through Nazi Hungary,” Ms. Heisman said. “He knows what it’s like to live in a closed society.”

Mr. Soros eventually became one of the biggest donors to Democrats, including Mrs. Clinton. During the last election cycle, Mr. Soros gave millions to super PACs that opposed Mr. Trump and supported other Democratic candidates and causes. He also bet big in the markets that Mr. Trump would lose the election, a wager that cost him about \$1 billion.

For decades, Mr. Soros funded the Open Society Foundations through annual donations of around \$800 million or \$900 million per year. But beginning a few years ago, he increased his contributions as part of his estate planning, bringing the organization’s endowment to about \$18 billion this year. The total donation figure was first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

Mr. Soros is expected to contribute at least another \$2 billion in the coming years.

“There is no foundation in the world, including the Ford Foundation, that has had more impact around the world than the Open Society Foundations in the last two decades,” said Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation. “Because there is no part of the world that they have not been. Their footprint is deeper, wider and more impactful than any other social justice foundation in the world.”

Despite the infusion by Mr. Soros, the foundation said it did not plan to increase the amount that it hands out in grants or via programs in the near future. Open Society already spends about \$900 million annually on programs and grants, more than it is legally required to.

And Mr. Soros’s fortune will still be managed by familiar hands. Soros Fund Management, the entity that manages the billionaire’s personal fortune, is also responsible for overseeing the Open Society endowment’s investments.

Mr. Soros remains closely involved in the foundation’s work.

“I talk to George constantly, regularly,” said Mr. Gaspard, the foundation’s incoming president. “George is incredibly engaged on these issues.”

This year, Mr. Soros has fended off attacks by the prime minister of Hungary, who has been displeased with a university that the Open Society Foundations funded there.

Mr. Gaspard said the public pressure did not bother the foundation’s leadership.

“Since its inception, the Open Society Foundations has worked with leaders in civil society, whether they are the Roma in Eastern Europe or African-Americans in Cleveland, Ohio, who continue to be subject to a second-class form of justice,” he said.

Stacy Palmer, editor of the Chronicle of Philanthropy, said that no matter how the billions were spent, the gift by Mr. Soros would keep him in the center of social and political debates for years to come.

“He has been so transparent about his views, so we know where he stands on these issues,” she said. “This is going to fuel as much happiness as it is controversy.”

The dirty tricks that demonise George Soros

Nick Cohen
The Guardian
16th April 2017

As the politics turns hard right, the creased face of an elderly Hungarian Jew has become the prime target for resurgent nationalists across the world. George Soros is their essential enemy. If he did not exist, they would have to invent him. As the “George Soros” they credit with supernatural power does not exist, you could say that they have invented him.

A trawl of corrupt regimes lands this haul. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump ruled that Americans protesting against him were “professional” agitators. Roger Stone, who has worked for the filthy wing of the right since Nixon’s day, followed up by announcing he had discovered the agitators were “paid for” by none other than Soros.

Now it is commonplace for right-wing Americans to say that only Soros’s corrupt influence can explain why their fellow citizens take to the streets. A typically sly report in the *Washington Times* said one in three Trump voters believed Soros paid protesters to join the women’s march on Trump’s inauguration day. Naturally, it did not produce a shred of evidence to support the fantastic accusation. That the gormless believed a straight lie was all the proof it needed.

Republican senators are now trying to persuade the Trump administration to cut support for Soros’s campaign to promote democracy and human rights in eastern Europe. Soros’s Open Society Foundation has no difficulty in showing that their Putin-influenced propaganda is riddled with errors. But a better riposte is to turn to Europe and see why democracy and human rights might need promoting. It’s not just Putin who goes for Soros. Macedonia’s former autocratic prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, has called for a “de-Sorosisation” of society, as the country’s right uses every trick it can think of, including the threat of street violence by “patriotic associations”, to stop the opposition taking power.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s self-proclaimed illiberal democracy is threatening the Soros-funded Central European University. Its president, the former Canadian Liberal party leader and former *Observer* columnist Michael Ignatieff, is bewildered. He protests that he is running a university, not an opposition political party that might take Orbán’s power away. I could go on. Romania’s socialist elite imitates Trump and claims Soros pays citizens to take to the streets to demonstrate against corruption. The supposedly reputable financial analysts at Zero Hedge claim Soros “singlehandedly created the European refugee crisis”. Steve Bannon’s Breitbart says Soros’s funding of Black Lives Matter was part of an agenda to swing the US presidential election. The European far right claims he is trying to destroy Christian white Europe by importing Muslim refugees.

Rather than go on, however, it is better to understand what is going on. When fighting foul movements, the question arises whether you should play the man or the ball. Playing the ball is the sporting thing to do. Lies have to be nailed. The factual record has to be defended. You should never regard it as a chore to insist on the truth. It is a duty, which if you shirk it, leaves the field clear for race baiters and dictatorial movements. This is why historians take the time and trouble to shred the Labour left's claim that Hitler was a Zionist. This is why Soros's supporters give journalists detailed rebuttals of the conspiracy theories that swirl around him. But playing the ball means playing the extremists' game to some extent. You treat their arguments as worthy of debate. However wrong you show them to be, you acknowledge their point of view. When you are up against dangerous men, playing the ball is not enough. You must play the man, too, and expose not just what he says but why he says it.

I hold no brief for Soros. To my mind, it is natural for Republicans to dislike a hedge fund billionaire who finances their Democrat rivals. If it were up to me, billionaires would not be able to give money to politicians, even billionaires I agree with. That said, Soros is the recipient of a hatred far beyond normal partisan rancour. The satanic influence attributed to the man who escaped the Holocaust as a child and resolved after the fall of the Berlin Wall to use his wealth to stop xenophobia returning to Europe isn't normal. Not remotely so. It is one of the most striking signs of the crisis in conservatism, which is threatening free societies across what we used to call "the west".

Most of Soros's charitable efforts are not devoted to funding politicians, but values conservatives once claimed to believe in: transparency, free elections, free speech and a free press. Instead of upholding them, the dominant faction on the right has turned to a nationalism that treats opposition as treason. To learn about its antecedents, listen to the antisemitic echoes of the Nazi and communist eras in the vilification of Soros. They are so loud they deafen.

Orbán says he is against "the globalists and liberals, the power brokers sitting in their palaces with ivory towers" and "the swarm of media locusts". Behind them all stands the "transnational empire of George Soros, with its international heavy artillery and huge sums of money". March against Orbán in Budapest or Trump in Washington, DC, and you are a hireling of Soros's cosmopolitan conspiracy. I may be doing him a disservice, but Ignatieff sounded naive when he wondered why Orbán was attacking mere academics. Invented enemies are essential. Foreign agents must be found everywhere and if the only place to find them is a university, so be it. They allow the powerful to blacken legitimate opponents as traitors and keep the faithful in line.

Orbán controls most of the Hungarian media. Hungary's opposition parties are no threat to him. Trump's Republicans, in turn, control the White House, Senate, House and most of America's governors' mansions. It says all you need to know that, to maintain their power, both use Soros to create a state of perpetual paranoia.

I will not argue that our nationalists are as bad. Yet, as the independence referendum approaches, I wonder if the SNP will be able to resist the temptation to blacken their opponents as false Scots betraying their country to the English. As the problems with Brexit mount, I also wonder whether English nationalists will be able to refrain from casting their opponents as enemies of the people and servants of the cosmopolitan EU.

If it does happen here, it will not be enough to play the gentleman and play the ball. You will need to go in hard, with studs showing.