

The reputation of George Soros and the OSF across Europe

In advance of the discussion on reputation I spent some time talking to our national offices and some of my board members about the challenges in different parts Europe where ECFR is active. What follows is an attempt to capture some of the cross-cutting lessons that can be drawn from these countries and some ideas on things that could make a difference. It is not scientific but it might be helpful as part of the mix and show some of the differences and similarities between different European countries and other parts of the world. The values of open society are in recession in many parts of the world. They are being weaponised in a series of culture wars which have put their champions on the back foot. At the same time the OSF and GS have become a focus of opposition in many countries, and their association with these causes is being used to silence local NGOs, grantees, and politicians. The conflation of antisemitism, concerns about unaccountable money and power, capitalism and globalism have proved a toxic brew. What is worrying is that the reputational challenges go beyond online attacks by the far-right and far-left groups to include mainstream forces in the media and political parties. Because the OSF does not have any public-facing representation in European countries, it remains poorly understood with even educated groups who have only the vaguest idea about its role and activities. People do not seem to distinguish between the stance and actions of GS and the work of his foundations or grantees (the term 'sorosoid' is becoming widespread to describe grantees or associates of OSF).

The Dimensions of the Challenge

Because of the nature of the causes that OSF supports and the original source of the money, the reputational challenges facing OSF are seen as more challenging than for other big philanthropies such as the Bill and Melinda gates Foundation. They can be seen across three dimensions:

- **What GS supports.** Many of the causes taken up by OSF have become bound up in European culture wars. Real or imagined support for refugees and saving lives in the Mediterranean, minorities (including Roma, LGBT rights, gender), drug legalisation, debt mutualisation have all been used to foment opposition. But even more difficult for the OSF agenda is the fact that it is not simply about supporting individuals but rather trying to bring about 'systemic change'. The idea of trying to change the system rather than relying on individual responsibility runs against the prevailing culture, is harder to explain in concrete terms, and is much scarier to established elites.
- **Who GS is.** The challenge goes beyond classical antisemitic tropes about puppet masters. The OSF does not have a public-facing presence in most of the countries where it operates and it has done very little to explain its mission or goals. Because GS is not able to respond to all the claims there is a vacuum which is filled by others. OSF various structural problems: GS is by necessity a foreigner in almost all the countries where OSF is active which raises questions of legitimacy. This is reinforced by the fact that many countries do not have a tradition of private philanthropy, and strategic advocacy. Finally, the fact that GS is seen an active investor and speculator adds to the confusion and bleeds into the third dimension.
- **Why GS does it.** The most corrosive questions concern the motives behind OSF activities. In countries with no tradition of private philanthropy there is general

confusion about why OSF supports particular causes. This leads to speculation about the motives. Will GS benefit from his philanthropy by buying favours or advancing his financial investments?

Why does it matter?

What is the “hit” of these reputational problems to the OSF’s ability to advance its mission, and what are the risks in the future? Is the problem that the open society values are in recession, that association with OSF weakens grantees, or that the OSF is prohibited from functioning or maintaining advocacy links with governments?

What Is to be done?

The first instinct of progressives is to double down in the face of anti-semitism and illiberal forces and wear the criticism as a badge of pride but in many settings OSF will be better placed if it can defuse the tensions around the issues on which it is working. Trying to change the debate on the internet is a Sisyphian task but there are some simple things that OSF could do to sharpen its engagement of European elites. The goal should be to maintain a reputation among the mainstream, identify who are the engageable and persuadable sceptics and put a clear boundary between extreme populists and the mainstream elites.

A Tool-Kit

1. To Develop a **Narrative** to explain what OSF is, what it does and why it does it. The goal should be to find an exciting and positive terminology that isn’t just a guilt trip. In order to do that it would make sense to spend some time developing some materials and candidates with political, comms and foundation people. It would then be good to give the materials to some comedians and writers and ask them to help find some ways to describe it.
2. Develop a small number **symbolic grant-making activities and campaigns** which perfectly express the narrative. It is important to choose concrete and material issues

Spokespeople

- The narrative needs to be embodied and carried by **spokespeople**. GS and his personal story and legacy are incredible powerful, but his activities need to be flanked by other articulate and credible voices from other members of the family and the leadership of OSF in New York and relevant countries.
- As well as defending itself, OSF needs to **identify, mobilise and equip** allies with material, arguments and reasons to support it when it is attacked. These will vary from country to country but can be an important part of maintaining a licence to operate and to drawing a line between extreme and mainstream voices.

Some Principles

- **Try not to be the caricature of yourself that your opponents want you to be.** On the issues OSF is working on, it should look for a way of framing the issues that puts it in a majority. For example, you should try to avoid a Hungary vs. rootless cosmopolitan frame but instead look for a corrupt elites vs. civic participation frame.
- **Defend core principles while defusing polarisation.** It is important not to concede territory around core rights but at the same time it is helpful to try reframe the

issues so that it becomes less tribal as polarisation will tend to help our opponents. OSF does not have to take on every battle and should set some red lines around core principles. For example, by defending CEU or going after people who claim that GS collaborated with the Nazis it is possible to extend the coalition. Equally by

Issues from Different countries where ECFR has offices

Bulgaria

- Issues: OSF often associated with support for inclusion of Roma (in the eyes of the public this has failed); support for LGBTQ; work is often seen as intrusion of unelected foreigners in the political process; the term “Sorosoid” is used to discredit people when they for example studied at the Central European University or have gotten support from Soros > can be the end of your political career
- The battle for the soul of democracy will start again and there is a role for OSF to play if they are still interested

France

- Issues: OSF known for work on migration, Roma, ethnic profiling during police controls; there are conspiracy theories about GS as financial speculator with a hidden agenda
(Valeurs actuelles article in February 2020 <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/monde/enquete-soros-les-revelations-de-valeurs-actuelles-provoquent-des-reactions-a-letranger/> ; Cover in 2018 <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/cette-semaine-dans-valeurs-george-soros-le-milliardaire-qui-complote-contre-la-france/>)
- Main critics; Soros is of course a regular target of French conspiracy sites and groups, and the cover story in Valeurs Actuelles in 2018 was probably a reflection of this. There was another piece in Valeurs Actuelles last year, which interviewed ultra-conservative and nationalist politician Philippe de Villiers about how Soros manipulates the EU. But the story has been limited to that corner, it has never really taken off. Soros himself still has the image of the currency speculator/billionaire turned philanthropist - and you probably know about the complex relationship that the French maintain with money and rich people. But the choice of his philanthropic activities is not particularly controversial in mainstream circles. Political people are generally sympathetic towards him in the way he has been treated by Orban.

Germany

- Issues: Support for Debt Mutualisation, Migration; there are many conspiracy theories eg. Annalena Baerbock is supported by George Soros and she is “his” candidate
- Main Critics: George Soros and OSF are closely watched by AfD > parliamentary inquiries (last time in Feb about what kind of activities the German government funds together with OSF)
- There is also some suspicion beyond extreme right/left circles > questions about hidden agenda, billionaire getting involved in politics.
- Despite move of regional HQ to Berlin OSF is less visible than other foundations such as Mercator or Bosch and is not well embedded in Berlin bubble.

Italy

- Issues: George Soros is accused of standing for financial speculation, drug legalisation and mass migration
- Main critics: The first Conte government with Lega and 5 star movement have used a lot of anti-Soros propaganda in their campaigns, massively on social media rather than in public debates where they knew they could not find space for discussion. The Brothers of Italy Party regularly proposes the idea to advance a parliamentary law against Soros (national identity law to protect Italy from any foreign interventions which could destabilize Italian identity and financial stability). However this is just easy propaganda as they don't have the necessary minimum of parliamentary seats to advance it, even if League would join.

Poland

- Issues: For the Polish right George Soros is an enemy, but not as much as in Hungary
- Critics: Anti-Soros propaganda is more part of media discourse than of political discourse (portrayed as defender of Polish liberals, ally of the opposition)
- OSF not visible also because they don't have an office
- Stefan Batory Foundation much better known and affiliated with George Soros (often labelled as Soros foundation) > known for support to LGBTQ community, minorities, feminism etc. > often under attack

Spain

- Issues: Migration, support for Catalan Independence
- Main critics: The controversy around the 'Aquarius ship' and support for migration was an entry-point for an anti-Soros campaign led by Vox, that rose to become an important force in Spanish politics.
- GS is portrayed as dangerous leftists and as alleged supporter of separatist movement in Catalonia