

ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

A large, dark purple triangular graphic on the right side of the cover. Inside the triangle, a hand in a suit sleeve is shown pulling strings that control a small, dark marionette figure. The marionette is in a dynamic, almost dancing pose.

GEORGE SOROS
THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Contents

3	Who is George Soros?
4	Background on Conspiracy Theories about George Soros
6	Manifestations of Anti-Soros Antisemitic Conspiracies
7	Case Study 1: United States
9	Case Study 2: Hungary
11	Spread of Anti-Soros Conspiracy Theories Online
12	Conclusion

Cover image: Internet meme of George Soros as a puppet master

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Who is George Soros?

George Soros is a Hungarian-born American financier and investor. Born to Jewish parents in Hungary in 1930, Soros and his family survived the Second World War by assuming a false Christian identity and changing their name from Schwartz. Soros fled Communist Hungary in 1947 and moved to the UK where he worked as a railway porter and studied at the London School of Economics, before working in merchant banks and moving to the United States. Soros's subsequent success as a hedge-fund manager has made him one of the wealthiest men in the world. He is a major political donor, funding Democratic candidates and progressive causes in over 100 countries.

Soros believes in free societies, free but regulated markets, and in the ability of liberalism to contribute to peaceful relations between nations, equality, freedom and prosperity.¹ In 1993, Soros set out to combat authoritarianism and racism by devoting nearly 80% of his wealth – about \$20 billion – to establishing a philanthropic organisation named the Open Society Foundation. The foundation supports projects that claim to promote the development of liberal democratic systems and values around the world.² Soros's involvement in national and international politics, his wealth and his religion, have made him a target to many who disagree with him; particularly those on the populist radical-right and authoritarian leaders, some of whom view his work as a threat to the world order that they would like to promote and to their position in it but also those on the radical left that see his work as forming part of a conspiratorial capitalist elite.

There are those on both left and right that take issue with Soros's political positions or with his actions. Doing so is not an automatic indicator of antisemitism, nor does it mean someone is engaging in antisemitism, unless drawing on particular tropes and imagery, as set out in this briefing.



A deeply offensive meme about Soros which seeks to spread misinformation



Another meme seeking to spread misinformation about Soros

1 Bessner, D. 'The George Soros philosophy – and its fatal flaw.' The Guardian, 6 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/06/the-george-soros-philosophy-and-its-fatal-flaw>

2 Berend, I., Against European Integration: The European Union and its Discontents (Taylor & Francis Group; London, 2019)

Background on Conspiracy Theories about George Soros

For centuries, tropes of the rich Jewish financier pulling political strings behind the scenes, or a shadowy cabal of Jews controlling and manipulating world events, have been used against Jewish people. Over the past few decades, and more recently exponentially through social media, Soros has become the conduit for these infamous tropes. Across all the conspiracy theories, Soros embodies the age-old antisemitic canard of the globalist, disloyal Jewish mastermind who is plotting a destructive revolution against a white, Christian social order to achieve global control.

The explosion of conspiracy theories surrounding George Soros has been closely linked to the rise in populist movements across the world, from the U.S. to Poland, from Brazil to India, from France to the United Kingdom. In recent years, conspiracy theories have been migrating from the margins of society to the centre of politics and public life.³

Populism, according to Mudde, is an “ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’”.⁴ In this context we can see that, far from being a coincidental phenomenon, conspiracy theories, serve populist movements that feed off national anxieties and grievances (both real and imagined), and claim to represent popular rage against the so-called “enemies of the people”.⁵

Conspiracies are typically exploited by populist leaders and extremists who seek to divert attention away from their own failures, particularly during times of crises.⁶ These leaders and their supporters redirect peoples’ focus, often depicting society as being unknowingly manipulated by a secretive elite that is to blame for social ills. Typical scapegoats have included ethnic minorities, immigrants or the LGBTQ+ community.



3 Plenta, P., ‘Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe,’ *Contemporary Politics* 26:5 (2020) pp. 512-530

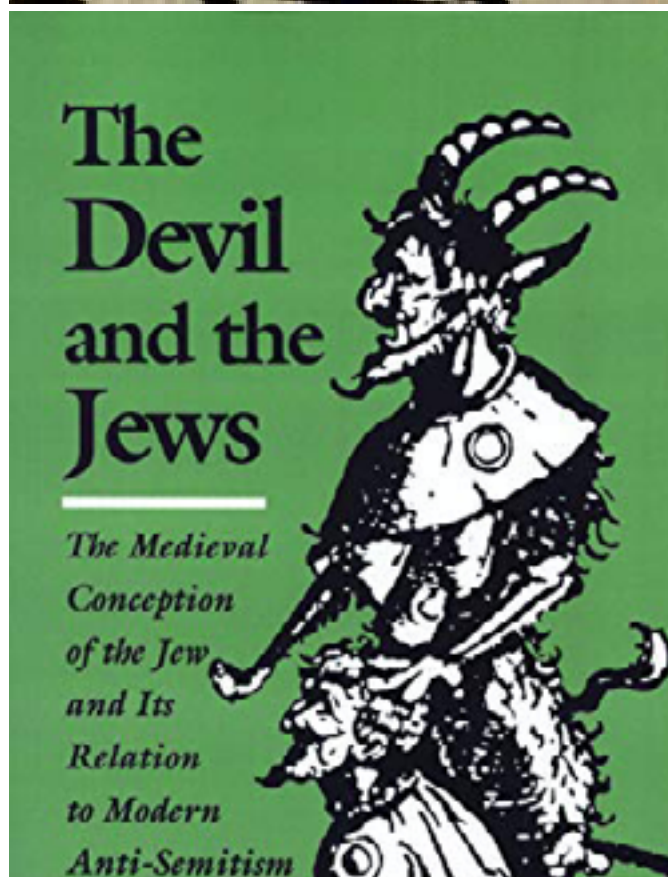
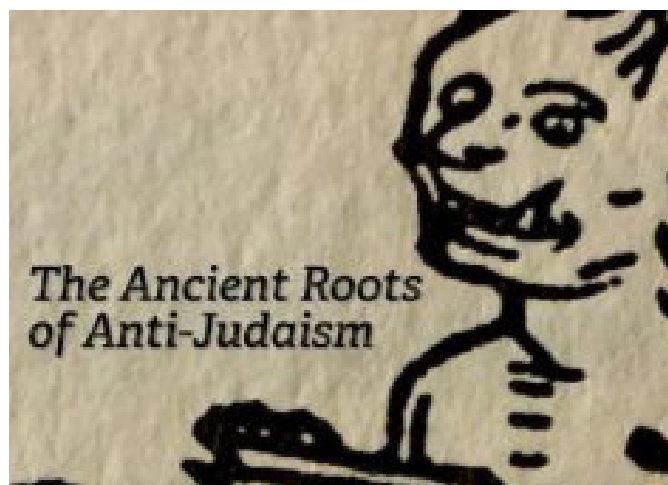
4 Mudde, C., ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2004) pp. 541-563

5 Hirsh, D., ‘Dangerous Lure of the Modern Populist Party,’ *Jewish Chronicle* (15 November 2019) <https://www.thejc.com/comment/analysis/dangerous-lure-of-the-modern-populist-parties-1.493179>

6 Plenta, P., ‘Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe,’ *Contemporary Politics* 26:5 (2020) p. 519

One of the oldest forms of hatred, that has been fuelling prolific and long-standing conspiracy theories on both the radical right and the radical left, is antisemitism.⁷ Unsurprisingly, many populist leaders have made Jews their scapegoat of choice.⁸ Jews have historically been treated as outcasts in society, perpetually regarded with suspicion and frequently the target of communal violence. Jews have been demonised as the exploitative greedy capitalist; as the dangerous revolutionary communist; as the corrupt liberal elite; and most recently as the racist colonial power in the Middle East. Ultimately, antisemitism has demonstrated its ability to evolve in order to meet whatever mould required of it in any given context.⁹

A common trope that resonates with antisemitic conspiracy theories today is that of the Jew as inherently untrustworthy and disloyal. This notion stems from the ancient antisemitic image of the “eternally wandering Jew” which was a fundamental element of historical Christian antisemitism.¹⁰ The notion that Jews have no national roots or loyalties has justified the portrayal of Jews as “parasites” or “aliens” within their own countries.¹¹ It follows therefore, that the image of the anti-national Jew, presented as globalist and cosmopolitan, has been employed in conspiracy theories as explanation for contemporary uncertainties around national identities, which are of particular concern to many populists and far-right leaders.¹² Indeed, George Soros has come to embody many of these antisemitic conspiracy theories, becoming the stand-in for the age-old antisemitic trope of the disloyal, internationalist, rich Jewish financier who is plotting the downfall of Christian traditional society.



- 7 Byford, J. & Billig, M., 'The Emergence of Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories in Yugoslavia during the War with NATO,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 35:4 (2001) pp. 50-63
- 8 Aronin, D., 'Populism and the Jewish Question', *The Times of Israel* (1 January 2020) <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/populism-and-the-jewish-question/>
- 9 Gerstenfeld, M., 'The Deep Roots of Anti-Semitism in European Society,' *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17:1 (Spring 2005) pp. 3-46
- 10 Chase, J. S., 'The Homeless Nation: The Exclusion of Jews in and from Early Nineteenth-Century German Historical Fiction,' *Jewish Culture and History*, 6:1 (2003) pp. 61-74
- 11 Musolff, A., 'Metaphorical Parasites and "Parasitic" Metaphors: Semantic Exchanges between Political and Scientific Vocabularies,' *Journal of Language and Politics*, 13:2 (August 2014) pp. 1-16
- 12 Wodak, R., *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Sage Publications: London 2015)

Manifestations of Anti-Soros Antisemitic Conspiracies

On the far-left and far-right, conspiracy theories about George Soros have claimed that he is responsible for illegal immigration, voter fraud, violent protests and Covid-19.¹³ Soros has been accused of being behind the government crisis in Macedonia,¹⁴ unrest in Venezuela,¹⁵ the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States,¹⁶ and the fall of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe.¹⁷



Many of these conspiracy theories have been given prominence recently through their amplification by world leaders, politicians, and other influential public figures.

In 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the “famous Hungarian Jew Soros” of trying to divide and destroy nations by allegedly funding the 2013 anti-government protests.¹⁸ In 1997, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir blamed the collapse of the Malaysian ringgit on the “Jewish agenda” and claimed that Soros was key in triggering the economic meltdown of Southeast Asian currencies.¹⁹

One particularly hateful conspiracy theory levelled at George Soros is the accusation that he was a Nazi collaborator who turned in fellow Jews to be murdered during the Holocaust. This false accusation has become widespread despite the fact that Soros, born in 1930, was a young child when the Nazis invaded Hungary. Later in the war, as a teenager living under an assumed identity, Soros worked for a local bureaucrat who once had Soros accompany him whilst making an inventory of confiscated Jewish properties. This event has fuelled the tales about Soros being a collaborator, by greatly exaggerating it to the point where this brief episode bears no relation to reality. These conspiracies seek to undermine Soros’s reputation as a liberal philanthropist by making him seem manipulative and untrustworthy.

- 13 Antisemitism Policy Trust, ‘Antisemitism in the Time of Coronavirus,’ Special Policy Briefing (May 2020) <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Coronaviru-antisemitism-May-2020.pdf>
- 14 Reporter, ‘Obama Illegally Sponsored Soros in order to Overthrow Macedonian Government,’ Geopolitica (26 April 2017) <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/news/obama-illegally-sponsored-soros-order-overthrow-macedonian-government>
- 15 Reporter, ‘Venezuela Rocked by More US Sponsored Violence,’ News Front (19 April 2017) <https://en.news-front.info/2017/04/19/venezuela-rocked-by-more-us-sponsored-violence/>
- 16 Reuters Staff, ‘Fact Check: False Claims about George Soros,’ Reuters (29 September 2020) <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-false-george-soros-claims/fact-checkfalseclaims-about-george-soros-idUSKBN23P2XJ>
- 17 Egbuna Jr, O., ‘George Soros’ Wallet: From Ferguson to Harare,’ Sunday Mail (15 February 2015) <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/opinion-george-soros-wallet-from-ferguson-to-harare>
- 18 Reporter, ‘Soros Foundation to End Work in Turkey amid ‘Baseless Claims’,’ BBC News (26 November 2018) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-46347975>
- 19 Schwen, C., ‘Beck Revives Anti-Semitic Soros Conspiracy Theory,’ Media Matters (10 June 2010) <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-nation/beck-revives-anti-semitic-soros-conspiracy-theory>

Case Study 1: United States

The most protracted endorsements of antisemitic conspiracy theories about Soros can be found in his country of birth, Hungary, and the country he now calls home, the United States.

In the U.S., conspiracy theories about George Soros have festered considerably, in large part because of the credibility gained due to endorsements from American politicians and public figures. These conspiracy theories have even reached the highest levels of the U.S. political establishment; For example, in 2018, former President Donald Trump accused George Soros of paying people to harass Senator Jeff Flake in an attempt to pressure the Senator into voting against Trump's Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh.²⁰ He also claimed that Soros funded protests against Kavanaugh.



Rudolph Giuliani, Trump's personal attorney, called Soros the "antichrist" who is "intent on destroying our government for some sick reason of his that goes back to his sick background."²¹ These anti-Soros sentiments are also prevalent in mainstream right-wing media in the U.S. For instance, in 2017, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly labelled Soros as "off-the-charts dangerous" and "an extremist who wants open borders, a one-world foreign policy, legalised drugs and euthanasia."²²

Soros has been said, when judged against some of America's super-rich conservatives, to 'stand out' by openly supporting liberal causes domestically and globally.²³ When Soros supported Barack Obama's nomination, he was falsely accused of grooming a Muslim American "sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood" to be president of the United States.²⁴ Soros has also been 'blamed' for orchestrating the Black Lives Matter protests and other anti-Trump demonstrations;²⁵ of funding anti-fascist movement Antifa;²⁶ and of paying a caravan of migrants from Honduras to enter the United States. This particular conspiracy theory has been repeated by members of Congress²⁷ and by Donald Trump.²⁸ The attacks on Soros as bankrolling capitalists and communists alike, and of financing movements that have been accused of seeking world domination, are reminiscent of age-old antisemitic tropes that have been used against the Rothschilds for example, and against Jewish communities more widely.

20 Tweets from Donald Trumps account - now suspended. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1048196883464818688>

21 Tobin, J., 'Rudy Giuliani Backs Calling George Soros the 'anti-Christ'. Is that Anti-Semitic?' Haaretz (8 October 2018) <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-rudy-giuliani-called-george-soros-the-anti-christ-is-that-anti-semitic-1.6534666>; Oster, M., 'Giuliani says Soros Wants to Destroy Government due to his 'Background,' The Jerusalem Post (20 August 2020) <https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/giuliani-says-soros-wants-to-destroy-government-due-to-his-background-639285>

22 Bondarenko, V., "George Soros Is a Favorite Target of the Right — Here's How That Happened," Business Insider, May 20, 2017

23 Berend, I., Against European Integration: The European Union and its Discontents (Taylor & Francis Group; London, 2019)

24 Palma, B., 'Is George Soros 'Grooming' a Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Gubernatorial Candidate in Michigan?' Snopes (11 December 2017) <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/soros-michigan-el-sayed-brotherhood/>

25 Reuters Staff, 'Fact Check: False Claims about George Soros,' Reuters (29 September 2020) <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-false-george-soros-claims/fact-checkfalseclaims-about-george-soros-idUSKBN23P2XJ>

26 Cohen, S., 'The Troubling Truth about the Obsession with George Soros,' Forbes (12 September 2020) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/09/12/the-troubling-truth-about-the-obsession-with-george-soros/?sh=5336bc6d4e2e>

27 Heath, B., Wynn, M. & Guynn, J., 'How a Lie about George Soros and the Migrant Caravan Multiplied Online,' USA Today (31 October 2018) <https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2018/10/31/george-soros-and-migrant-caravan-how-lie-multiplied-online/1824633002/>

28 Associated Press, 'George Soros Conspiracy Theories Surge as Protests Sweep US,' Snopes (21 June 2020) <https://www.snopes.com/ap/2020/06/21/george-soros-conspiracy-theories-surge-as-protests-sweep-us/>

The proliferation of anti-Soros conspiracy theories in the U.S. has been contextualised by many as a feature of other contemporary political attitudes, such as anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism and wider social mistrust and divisions.²⁹ Anti-Soros conspiracies have been embraced by a significant portion of the American public. A study into conspiracy theories and public opinion found that 19% of Americans believe that “Billionaire George Soros is behind a hidden plot to destabilize the American government, take control of the media, and put the world under his control.”³⁰ In relation to this, after the American conspiracy theorist Dinesh D’Souza accused Soros in 2017 of “backing domestic terrorism” through alleged support for the left-wing movement Antifa, and despite being unfounded and false, a petition submitted to www.whitehouse.gov gathered over 138,000 signatures, demanding that President Trump “declare George Soros a terrorist and seize all of his related organisations.”³¹

The emergence of the conspiracy theory QAnon predominantly from users in the U.S. has fuelled anti-Soros flames. QAnon spread false and bizarre claims that Soros is the puppet-master of an international network of paedophiles and others seeking to establish a new world order, again embodying the antisemitic trope of the ‘globalist Jew.’ (See more on QAnon below).

Anti-Soros attitudes among the American far-right reveal the intersection between antisemitic conspiracies that suggest Soros is working to undermine American society, and xenophobia and racism directed towards migrants who are demonised as a threat to American traditional society. These fake conspiracies and reinvented antisemitic tropes are spreading at an alarming rate online – carrying dangerous falsehoods to millions around the world. Furthermore, Soros conspiracies can provide a gateway to the ‘Great Replacement’ theory, in which Jews are falsely claimed

to be orchestrating the downfall of white western civilization through mass-immigration. Whilst the Soros conspiracies have become more commonplace, there are similarities in the narrative which bridge extreme and mainstream.



29 Szombati, K. & Szilágyi, A., ‘Enemy in the Making,’ Political Research Associates (9 July 2020) <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2020/07/09/enemy-making>

30 Oliver, J. E., Wood, T. J., ‘Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,’ American Journal of Political Science, 58:4 (October, 2014), pp. 952-966

31 David Gelles, ‘Soros Gives Billions to his Charity, Not the Second Biggest in US,’ New York Times, October 18 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/business/george-soros-open-society-foundations.html>

Case Study 2: Hungary

George Soros has been particularly vilified in his birth country. Hungary currently ranks as one of the most antisemitic countries in Europe according to the Anti-Defamation League's Global Index.³² Furthermore, recent surveys have found Hungary to be the second most conspiracy-prone country in Central Europe (behind Slovakia), with 38% of the population believing that secret groups control global events as part of a plan to establish a total world order.³³

Conspiracy theories hold particular sway in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where Western countries were often dubbed under the communist regimes as imperialist enslavers, puppets of the CIA and other secretive organisations.³⁴ Many of the conspiracy theories in the post-communist block also have antisemitic undertones. Antisemitism and a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories often coalesce, with one survey revealing that 51% of Hungarians believe that George Soros has a plan to bring masses of refugees to Europe.³⁵ The act of blaming Soros for the country's problems has become so common that it has warranted the creation of a new verb in Hungarian - 'sorosozni' – 'to Soros'.³⁶

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's embrace of anti-liberal, anti-Soros conspiracies raised their popularity and people's propensity to believe in them. Orbán has been exploiting conspiracy theories in order

to weaken social cohesion and seemingly polarise Hungarian society in his favour.³⁷ The anti-Soros, anti-Muslim and anti-immigration sentiments that Orbán has repeatedly expressed appear to resonate with much of his political base, which tends to be older voters from rural parts of Hungary, some of whom may harbour suspicions about much of what Soros represents: multiculturalism, globalism and, in no small part for a country where antisemitic currents run deep, the Jewish faith.³⁸

Orbán's anti-Soros rhetoric

Prime Minister Orbán has led a persistent campaign against George Soros since at least 2017.³⁹ He has repeatedly vilified Soros with accusations of not only attempting to undermine the government, but of working to transform Hungarian society through immigration and liberal ideas. As the migrant crisis snowballed in 2015-2016, Orbán portrayed himself as the protector of conservative and Christian Europe, presenting migration as a threat to the very heart of the Hungarian nation. It was at this point that caricatures of George Soros increased. By exploiting these, Orbán was able to run a campaign almost exclusively on a platform that presented himself as the saviour of Hungarian society against the Jewish enemy represented by Soros. This is a trend that resonates in many ways with the Hungary of the 1930s, with

32 ADL, 'Global 100: An Index of Anti-Semitism', Anti-Defamation League <https://global100.adl.org/country/hungary/2019>

33 Hajdu, D., Klingová, K. & Milo, D., 'Central Europe: One Region, Different Perspectives,' GLOBSEC (11 May 2018) <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2018-central-europe-one-region-different-perspectives/#rZ8rc9EUi6SZCCU.99>

34 Hajdu, D., Klingová, K. & Milo, D., 'Central Europe: One Region, Different Perspectives,' GLOBSEC (11 May 2018) <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2018-central-europe-one-region-different-perspectives/#rZ8rc9EUi6SZCCU.99>

35 Verseck, K., 'Hungary: Europe's Champion of Conspiracy Theories,' Deutsche Welle (11 December 2018) <https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-europes-champion-of-conspiracy-theories/a-46689822>

36 Gati, C., 'Why Hungary's Prime Minister Blames George Soros for all the Country's Woes,' Washington Post (23 May 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-hungarys-prime-minister-blames-george-soros-for-all-the-countrys-woes/2018/03/23/cb73ac16-26de-11e8-b79d-f3d931db7f68_story.html

37 Plenta, P., 'Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe,' Contemporary Politics 26:5 (2020)

38 Witte, G., 'Once-fringe Soros Conspiracy Theory Takes Centre Stage in Hungarian Election,' Washington Post (17 March 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/once-fringe-soros-conspiracy-theory-takes-center-stage-in-hungarian-election/2018/03/17/f0a1d5ae-2601-11e8-a227-fd2b009466bc_story.html

39 Plenta, P., 'Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: utilisation of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe,' Contemporary Politics 26:5 (2020)

its strong rhetoric around the need for a pure, white, Christian nation.⁴⁰

In 2017, a Hungarian government official named András Aradszki gave a speech to the national parliament titled 'The Christian Duty to Fight Against the Soros/Satan Plan,' in which he described Soros as Satan, perpetuating the age-old antisemitic conspiracy that Soros, here representing the 'global Jew', is a devil, and hates Christian Europe's heritage and traditions.⁴¹

Orbán and his political party, Fidesz ran an anti-Soros campaign that went well beyond rhetoric and verbal attacks. Orbán warned ominously that Soros's Hungarian allies would face "revenge". Indeed, following the 2018 elections the Prime Minister initiated a crackdown on progressive non-governmental organisations, many of which were connected to Soros.⁴² Later in 2018, the parliament and other state institutions in Hungary approved and implemented numerous legislative initiatives such as the 'Stop Soros Package,' which has obstructed the activities of NGOs, particularly those supporting refugees and migrants.⁴³

Perhaps the most infamous anti-Soros campaign in Hungary was the "Don't Let Soros Have the Last Laugh" poster and billboard nationwide campaign, ordered at a reported cost of over £16.3 million by Orbán's government as part of his election campaign.⁴⁴ The posters, many of which were defaced with

antisemitic graffiti, depicted a smiling George Soros - an image which many observers understood to be a direct reference to the Nazi propaganda of the "laughing Jew," an antisemitic trope frequently cited by Hitler.⁴⁵ The control that Orbán's government enjoys over Hungary's public media, and of much of the private media in Hungary through Orbán's associates, means that these antisemitic campaigns against George Soros have been hugely influential in shaping Hungarian public opinion.⁴⁶ This demonstrates the intersection and interplay between antisemitism and anti-migrant, Islamophobic sentiments that exists in Hungarian society today.



40 Lipstadt, D., *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (Schocken: London, 2019).

41 Novak, B., 'Satan is Using the Soros Plan and Brussels to Usher in the Apocalypse!' Budapest Beacon (9 October 2017) <https://budapestbeacon.com/satan-using-soros-plan-brussels-usher-apocalypse/>

42 Witte, G., 'Once-fringe Soros Conspiracy Theory Takes Centre Stage in Hungarian Election,' Washington Post (17 March 2018) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/once-fringe-soros-conspiracy-theory-takes-center-stage-in-hungarian-election/2018/03/17/f0a1d5ae-2601-11e8-a227-fd2b009466bc_story.html

43 Reuters, 'Hungary Passes Anti-Immigrant 'Stop Soros' Laws,' The Guardian (20 June 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/20/hungary-passes-anti-immigrant-stop-soros-laws>

44 Thorpe, N., 'Hungary Vilifies Financier Soros with Crude Poster Campaign,' BBC News (20 July 2017) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40554844>

45 Reuters Staff, 'Hungarian Government to End Anti-Soros Poster Campaign: Spokesman,' Reuters (13 July 2017) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-soros-idUSKBN19Y0UQ>; Bruinius, H., 'An Old Beast Re-Awoken, Anti-Semitism Stalks Europe, US Once More,' The Christian Science Monitor (11 April 2018) <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0411/An-old-beast-re-awoken-anti-Semitism-stalks-Europe-US-once-more>

46 Bajomi-Lázár, P., 'An anti-migration campaign and its impact on public opinion: The Hungarian case,' European Journal of Communication, 34: 6 (2019) pp. 619-628

The Spread of Anti-Soros Conspiracies Online

Antisemitic conspiracy theories about powerful Jewish financiers have existed for centuries. These days, such dangerous tropes are being disseminated even wider and faster using social media platforms. Analysis conducted by the Anti-Defamation League found that during a four-day stretch in May 2020, negative and antisemitic tweets about Soros soared from around 20,000 a day to more than 500,000 in a single day, rising in tandem with the US-wide demonstrations against the police killing of George Floyd.⁴⁷ The Institute for Strategic Dialogue also identified a significant jump in negative mentions of George Soros on Facebook, hitting an all-time high of 68,746 mentions during May 2020.⁴⁸ Soros is also one of the targets of the American conspiracy theory, QAnon, which baselessly suggests that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping democrats and billionaires is running the world while engaging in paedophilia and human trafficking. Q supporters cite Soros with various degrees of reference to antisemitic conspiracy theories. Worryingly, QAnon is rapidly transitioning from obscure right-wing online message boards to mainstream social media platforms, gaining wider international audiences.⁴⁹

It has been found that countries in which an anti-Soros rhetoric exists in the public sphere and is being disseminated by political and public figures, as it has been in the U.S. and Hungary, were also characterised by higher levels of similar rhetoric online. A study from

2017 found that the majority of posts across social media platforms that included the keyword 'Soros' came from the U.S. – 195,031 in a two-month period in 2017.⁵⁰ Hungary was second with 4,404, which may seem much less significant than the figure for the U.S.; however, per capita, the proportion of Hungarians posting about Soros (0.0449%) came close to that of the USA (0.0599%).⁵¹ A correlation also exists between the proliferation of antisemitic conspiracy theories by public figures and their popularity among the population, demonstrating the dangerous ease with which the theories can spread.

Online hate speech and conspiracy theories can have serious consequences for offline behaviour.⁵² In the U.S. for example, following news reports of a migrant caravan approaching the US-Mexico border, Cesar Sayoc, a Floridian man, repeatedly named Soros as responsible on social media, before sending pipe bombs to Soros, as well as to newsrooms, Democrat politicians, and other public critics of Trump.⁵³ Another example is the killing of eleven Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018. The man who perpetrated the attack had posted extensive antisemitic content on social media. One of his posts alleged that Soros was secretly controlling the Honduran migrant caravan, including circulating an image of refugees in Guatemala apparently climbing into a truck with a Star of David on its side.⁵⁴ The killer had previously attacked the Hebrew

47 ADL Blog, 'Soros Conspiracy Theories and the Protests: A Gateway to Antisemitism,' ADL (2 June 2020) <https://www.adl.org/blog/soros-conspiracy-theories-and-the-protests-a-gateway-to-antisemitism>

48 Hart, M., 'Anti-Soros Conspiracies on Facebook and Twitter Surge during George Floyd Protests,' Institute for Strategic Dialogue (20 October 2020) https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/soros-conspiracies-on-facebook-and-twitter-surge-during-george-floyd-protests/

49 Oryszczuk, S., 'JN Investigation: Inside Q-Anon – Comfort through conspiracy (10 September 2020)' <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/jn-investigation-inside-qanon-comfort-through-conspiracy/>

50 Kalmar, I., 'Islamophobia and anti-antisemitism: the case of Hungary and the 'Soros plot', 'Patterns of Prejudice, 54:1 (2020) pp. 182-198

51 Kalmar, I., 'Islamophobia and anti-antisemitism: the case of Hungary and the 'Soros plot', 'Patterns of Prejudice, 54:1 (2020) pp. 182-198

52 Antisemitism Policy Trust, 'Online and Offline Harms: The Connection,' Special Policy Briefing (August 2020) <https://antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Online-Harms-Offline-Harms-August-2020-V4.pdf>

53 Della Cava, M., Weise, E. & Murphy, B., 'For Accused Pipe Bomber Cesar Sayoc, Life was a Stage where the Truth was a Bit Player,' USA Today (26 October 2018) <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/10/26/cesar-sayoc-life-stage-where-truth-bit-player/1778580002/>

54 Heath, B., Wynn, M. & Guynn, J., 'How a Lie about George Soros and the Migrant Caravan Multiplied Online,' USA Today (31 October 2018) <https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2018/10/31/george-soros-and-migrant-caravan-how-lie-multiplied-online/1824633002/>; Burton, T., 'The Centuries-Old History of Jewish "Purppoe Master" Conspiracy Theories,' Vox (2 November 2018) <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/2/15946556/antisemitism-enlightenment-george-soros-conspiracy-theory-globalist>

Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) for its work in refugee settlement, further demonstrating the bond between antisemitism and xenophobia in America's far right.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Antisemitism and conspiracy theories about all-powerful Jewish figures or organisations are not new. Unfortunately, anti-Soros rhetoric is increasingly becoming what historian and former leader of the Canadian Liberal Party Michael Ignatieff called a “faithful reprise of every single trope of antisemitic hatred from the 1930s.”⁵⁶ There is a difference between criticising or disagreeing with Soros's political views and philanthropic activity and spreading baseless, fabricated antisemitic and other hateful conspiracies about him. Memes, images and other material depicting Soros as a global puppet master should act as a warning sign: behind them sit age old tropes waiting to be reborn.

Politicians, religious and community leaders, entertainers and other high-profile individuals can provide legitimacy to conspiracy theories by repeating or endorsing them. It is therefore crucial that they understand the responsibilities involved in sharing and perpetuation antisemitic and other conspiracy theories, and appreciate the damage caused to individuals,

communities and society as a whole, by spreading hateful, divisive and unfounded material.



55 O'Donnell, S. J., 'Antisemitism under erasure: Christian Zionist anti-globalism and the refusal of cohabitation,' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44:1 (2019) pp. 39-57

56 Reporter, 'Why is Billionaire George Soros a Bogeyman for the Hard Right?' BBC News (6 September 2019) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-49584157>

The Antisemitism Policy Trust's mission is to educate and empower parliamentarians, policy makers and opinion formers to address antisemitism. It provides the secretariat to the British All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism and works internationally with parliamentarians and others to address antisemitism. The Antisemitism Policy Trust is focussed on educating and empowering decision makers in the UK and across the world to effectively address antisemitism.

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