

How Vilification of George Soros Moved From the Fringes to the Mainstream

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WASHINGTON — Hours after he was informed last week that an explosive device had been delivered to his suburban New York home, George Soros, the billionaire investor and Democratic donor, got on a call with colleagues to discuss yet another threat: the authoritarian Hungarian government’s crackdown on a university he had founded.

The attempted attack in New York — subsequently determined to have been part of a wave of pipe bombs targeting prominent critics of President Trump — did not come up. But it was no coincidence that Mr. Soros would be facing intense opposition and threats at the same moment in two countries thousands of miles apart.

On both sides of the Atlantic, a loose network of activists and political figures on the right have spent years seeking to cast Mr. Soros not just as a well-heeled political opponent but also as the personification of all they detest. Employing barely coded anti-Semitism, they have built a warped portrayal of him as the mastermind of a “globalist” movement, a left-wing radical who would undermine the established order and a proponent of diluting the white, Christian nature of their societies through immigration.

In the process, they have pushed their version of Mr. Soros, 88, from the dark corners of the internet and talk radio to the very center of the political debate.

“Soros is vilified because he is effective,” said Stephen K. Bannon, Mr. Trump’s former campaign strategist and White House adviser, who is now trying to promote a coordinated nationalist movement across Europe and in the United States that explicitly aspires to mirror and counteract the influence Mr. Soros has built on the left.

“I only hope one day I’m as effective as he has been — and as vilified,” Mr. Bannon said, calling threats like the pipe bomb “the admission ticket for playing in this arena.”

On Fox News, in Republican fund-raising appeals and in research by conservative advocacy groups, his name is invoked as an all-purpose symbol of liberalism run amok.

Mr. Trump references him in Twitter posts and speeches as a donor to anti-Trump protesters, and the president’s family and closest advisers sometimes go much further. Donald Trump Jr. retweeted a claim this year by the comedian Roseanne Barr that Mr. Soros is a Nazi. And the president’s lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, retweeted a comment saying that Mr. Soros is the Antichrist whose assets should be frozen.

In at least one case, the attacks made their way into United States government-funded media. The Spanish-language Radio Television Marti network, which broadcasts pro-United States content in Cuba, aired a report in May that is now the subject of a government investigation. The report called Mr. Soros a “multimillionaire Jew” of “flexible morals,” who was “the architect of the financial collapse of 2008.”

In the final days of the midterm election race, in which he is spending heavily to elect Democrats, Mr. Soros is being heatedly, if implausibly, cast as the financier of the immigrant caravan, a deep-state presence in the federal bureaucracy and the hidden hand behind the protests against Mr. Trump’s Supreme Court nominee.



Activists removed an ad sponsored by the Hungarian government that vilified Mr. Soros and The Open Society Foundations in Budapest last year. Pablo Gorondi/Associated Press

In Europe, the effort to demonize him has been both fueled and harnessed by nationalist leaders like Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and politicians in formerly communist countries like Macedonia, Albania and Russia.

“He’s a banker, he’s Jewish, he gives to Democrats — he’s sort of a perfect storm for vilification by the right, here and in Europe,” said Michael H. Posner, a human rights lawyer and former State Department official in the Obama administration.

Mr. Soros has given his main group, the Open Society Foundations, \$32 billion for what it calls democracy-building efforts in the United States and around the world. In addition, in the United States, Mr. Soros has personally contributed more than \$75 million over the years to federal candidates and committees, according to Federal Election Commission and Internal Revenue Service records.

That qualifies him as one of the top disclosed donors to American political campaigns in the modern campaign finance era, and it does not include the many millions more he has donated to political nonprofit groups that do not disclose their donors.

By contrast, the network of conservative donors led by the billionaire industrialist brothers Charles G. and David H. Koch, who have been similarly attacked by some on the American left, has spent about \$2 billion over the past decade on political and public policy advocacy.

A Rising Profile

Mr. Soros initially focused his activism on nurturing the democracies that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But as he has evolved in the United States into a more traditional political operator, conservatives have become increasingly driven to discredit him — and, in turn, to use him to discredit the candidates and causes he supports — sometimes by exaggerating or mischaracterizing his role in actions taken by groups he helps to fund, and sometimes with imagery widely seen as anti-Semitic.

The closing advertisement for Mr. Trump's 2016 campaign featured Mr. Soros — as well as Janet L. Yellen, the chairwoman of the Federal Reserve at the time, and Lloyd Blankfein, the chief executive of Goldman Sachs, both of whom are Jewish — as examples of “global special interests” who enriched themselves on the backs of working Americans.

If anything, Mr. Soros has been elevated by Mr. Trump and his allies to even greater prominence in the narrative they have constructed for the closing weeks of the 2018 midterm elections. They have projected on to him key roles in both the threat they say is posed by the Central Americans making their way toward the United States border and what they characterized as Democratic “mobs” protesting the nomination of Brett M. Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

The National Republican Congressional Committee ran an ad in October in Minnesota suggesting that Mr. Soros, who is depicted sitting behind a pile of cash, “bankrolls” everything from “prima donna athletes protesting our anthem” to “left-wing mobs paid to riot in the streets.” The ad links Mr. Soros to a local congressional candidate who worked at a think tank that has received funding from the Open Society Foundations.

Even after the authorities arrested a fervent Trump supporter and accused him of sending the pipe bombs to Mr. Soros and other critics, Republicans did not back away. The president grinned on Friday when supporters at the White House responded to his attacks on Democrats and “globalists” by chanting, “Lock ‘em up,” and yelling, “George Soros.”



Mr. Soros in 1986. The Economist called him “surely the world’s most intriguing investor” the next year. Ted Thai/The LIFE Picture Collection

Mr. Soros’s attackers in the United States and in Europe have increasingly found common cause in recent years.

The conservative legal organization Judicial Watch, which has received funding from major conservative donors, this year began an effort to expose United States government assistance for what the group considers Mr. Soros’s “far-left agenda” in South America and Eastern Europe.

The group's research director, Chris Farrell, referred last week to the "Soros-occupied State Department" on Lou Dobbs's television program on Fox Business. Fox Business later condemned the remark and banned Mr. Farrell from further appearances. But criticisms of Mr. Soros have been amplified on both Fox Business and Fox News.

Judicial Watch's efforts pick up a theme pushed by Republican members of Congress in letters to the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development this year accusing Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations of using taxpayer funding to push a liberal agenda in Albania, Colombia, Macedonia and Romania. A spokeswoman for the Soros group said the programs in question focus on issues that are consistent with "American ideals," like fighting corruption and promoting the rule of law.

The conservative party in Albania is represented in Washington by a lobbyist who is close to Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas, who signed one such letter, while Mr. Orbán's government has made payments to lobbyists and think tanks with connections to Mr. Trump's team.

Anti-Semitic Attacks

Mr. Soros was born into a Jewish family in Hungary, and survived the Nazi occupation as a child in part by posing as the Christian godson of a government official.

After World War II, Mr. Soros fled Hungary for England as the Soviet Union consolidated control in his home country. He worked as a waiter and a railroad porter and studied at the London School of Economics, where he was deeply influenced by the theories of an Austrian philosopher who taught there, Karl Popper. Mr. Popper wrote about the consequences of what he called "closed" and "open" societies — concepts that shaped Mr. Soros's investment strategy and philanthropy for decades.

His daring investments in companies and currencies proved hugely lucrative, prompting *The Economist* to call him "surely the world's most intriguing investor" in 1987. His decision to short the British pound in 1992 earned his funds a reported profit of \$1 billion.

By then, he was turning his attention to democracy-building in Eastern Europe.

Mr. Soros and his foundations supported groups and individuals seeking to bring down Communism, including the Solidarity and Charter 77 movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The leaders of both groups would later lead their countries in the post-Communist era.

In Hungary, Mr. Soros distributed photocopiers to universities and libraries as a means to fight government censorship, and he paid for dissidents to study in the West. The recipients included a young Mr. Orbán, then a liberal activist.



Supporters of President Trump at a campaign rally in Nevada. The National Republican Congressional Committee is running an ad in Minnesota suggesting that Mr. Soros funds “left-wing mobs paid to riot in the streets.” Doug Mills/The New York Times

After the end of the Cold War, with the Open Society Foundations as his main vehicle, Mr. Soros funded new work for destitute Soviet scientists in Russia, paid for free school breakfasts for Hungarian children and set up a college, the Central European University, that later drew the ire of Mr. Orban’s government.

In the United States, where Mr. Soros was granted citizenship in the 1960s, Mr. Soros’s efforts often won bipartisan applause. A professed admirer of President Ronald Reagan’s efforts to topple Communist rule in Eastern Europe, Mr. Soros, who at the time described himself as a political independent, was seen by anti-Communist Republicans as a fellow freedom fighter.

As his activities grew more prominent in Europe, and he began funding drug reform efforts in the United States, he started being cast in the 1990s as a central figure in a shadowy Jewish cabal by extremist figures such as the fascist presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. and allies of repressive Eastern European leaders who were targeted by groups funded by Mr. Soros.

The theories were initially confined to the anti-Semitic fringe, though Mr. Soros is not closely associated with Jewish or Israeli causes, and in fact has been accused of being anti-Israel and was criticized by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Mr. Soros first became a major target for Republicans when he donated \$27 million in the 2004 election cycle to an effort to defeat President George W. Bush, whose administration Mr. Soros condemned for rushing to war in Iraq and compared to Hitler’s Nazi regime.

J. Dennis Hastert, Republican of Illinois, suggested in 2003, when he was House speaker, that the money that Mr. Soros was spending to defeat Mr. Bush “could be drug money.” And in 2010, the talk show host Glenn Beck accused Mr. Soros of “helping send the Jews to the death camps,” devoting three hourlong episodes of his top-rated Fox News show to a series branding Mr. Soros a “puppet master” intent on engineering a coup in the United States. The claims were repudiated by the Anti-Defamation League.

The efforts by Mr. Soros and a small band of wealthy donors to defeat Mr. Bush in 2004, while unsuccessful, later led to the creation of a network of major liberal donors that reshaped the American political left, marked Mr. Soros as a leading figure in Democratic politics and reinforced his status as a perennial election-time foil for the right.

“Back then, it was a handful of crackpots; it was considered fringe; and it was contained,” said David Brock, the self-described right-wing hit man who switched sides and started a fleet of liberal groups to track conservative disinformation, including from hosts like Mr. Beck.

“But it started coming back with a vengeance during the 2016 campaign,” said Mr. Brock, whose groups have received millions of dollars from Mr. Soros.

During the 2016 campaign, Mr. Soros had expressed even greater alarm about Mr. Trump than he had about Mr. Bush, and he donated more than \$16 million to groups supporting Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Soros, his allies say, interprets the attacks from Mr. Trump, Mr. Orban and their supporters as an effort to intimidate him into backing down. But the intimidation has backfired, they say.

When friends reached out to express concern for his safety after the pipe bomb news broke, Mr. Soros, who was not there when the package was delivered, changed the subject to what he called “the damage” being done by the Trump administration, said his political adviser, Michael Vachon.

Mr. Vachon said that Mr. Soros in recent days has drawn a connection from the president’s rhetorical attacks on his critics to the pipe bombs and even to the killing of 11 people on Saturday at a Pittsburgh synagogue.

In an email to The New York Times, Mr. Soros said he was grieving for the victims of the Pittsburgh shooting and their families. He added: “I came to this country to find refuge. I am deeply distressed that in America in 2018 Jews are being massacred just because they are Jewish.”

A Big 2018 Role

Mr. Soros has donated more than \$15 million in this election cycle to support Democratic candidates at the federal level, according to election commission records, and he has also donated to nonprofits that do not disclose their donors.

Mr. Soros’s representatives say he gave \$1 million to one such group, the Democracy Integrity Project, which was established after the 2016 election to investigate foreign interference in elections and to research Mr. Trump’s connections to Russian interests. Mr. Soros is considering additional donations to the group, which has paid for research from Fusion GPS, the firm behind the controversial dossier containing salacious claims about Mr. Trump’s ties to Russia.

The very scale of his activities has given Republicans an opening to portray him as a nefarious driving force behind divisive political conflicts.

After two protesters confronted Senator Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, inside an elevator on Capitol Hill in late September and urged him to vote against Mr. Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court, Mr. Trump dismissed the protesters as Soros pawns.

“The very rude elevator screamers are paid professionals only looking to make Senators look bad,” Mr. Trump wrote on Twitter. “Don’t fall for it! Also, look at all of the professionally made identical signs. Paid for by Soros and others. These are not signs made in the basement from love! #Troublemakers.”

One of the women did, in fact, work for a group called the Center for Popular Democracy, which has received significant funding from the Open Society Foundations. But the group said that neither it nor Mr. Soros had paid people to protest.

At the same time, his network of European nonprofit groups was increasingly making him a target of authoritarian leaders, including President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and Mr. Orban in Hungary.

Mr. Soros’s foundations have been banned from distributing funds in Russia, while Open Society chose to move its offices out of Hungary this year after a smear campaign by the Orban government. The Central European University announced last week that it may soon follow.

In a campaign this year, Mr. Orban’s party ran an advertisement that depicted a smiling Mr. Soros, overlaid with the slogan: “Let’s not let George Soros have the last laugh.” Critics argued that the image was meant to remind viewers of the “Laughing Jew,” a common anti-Semitic trope.