

Once-fringe Soros conspiracy theory takes center stage in Hungarian election

By Griff Witte

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An advertising campaign by Viktor Orbán's party has plastered the face of Hungarian American billionaire George Soros all over Hungary. (Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images)

BUDAPEST - After eight years of bending this nation to his increasingly autocratic and illiberal will, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has only a smattering of disorganized opposition parties to overcome on the road to winning four more in elections next month.

But in his own telling, he is locked in an epochal struggle with a far more worthy competitor: a shadowy international puppet master whose dangerous ideas and limitless resources put him on par with the great invaders and occupiers defeated across centuries of Hungarian history.

“We sent home the [Ottoman] sultan with his army, the Habs-burg kaiser with his raiders and the Soviets with their comrades,” Orbán thundered to an adoring crowd of more than 100,000 people in central Budapest this past week. “Now we will send home Uncle George.”

George Soros, that is.

With his left-wing views and deep pockets, the 87-year-old New York-based financier and philanthropist has in recent years become the ultimate boogeyman for far-right

ideologues, demagogic despots, tin-hat conspiracy theorists and anti-Semites the world over.



George Soros, founder of the Open Society Foundations, advocates for open government and humane treatment of refugees. (Olivier Hoslet/AFP/Getty Images)

But nothing compares to the intimacy and intensity with which he is now being assailed in his native land. As Hungary's parliamentary campaign enters its final weeks, Orbán has made attacks on his onetime benefactor the centerpiece of his reelection campaign.

Although Soros has not visited Hungary in years, his craggy face is a constant here, peering out from bus stations and looming over highways as part of a ruling-party advertising campaign. The ads put a dark spin on Soros's call for a more welcoming approach to refugees, suggesting that the billionaire has a secret plan to flood the nation with migrants.

The campaign goes well beyond rhetoric. Orbán warned ominously Thursday that Soros's allies in Hungary would face "revenge" after the April 8 vote, and there are already indications of a crackdown to come.

The prime minister's party has vowed to pass legislation that would severely curtail the work of nongovernmental organizations. Such groups, many of which are funded by Soros, are among the last remnants of Hungarian society that haven't fallen prey to the ruling Fidesz party's iron grip. The prime minister has dubbed the bill the "Stop Soros" law.

Is Hungary's election the country's last chance to avoid autocracy?

Hungary is in the midst of a divisive election that will decide if the country's anti-immigrant prime minister gets a third straight term in office. (Griff Witte, Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

"It's not just an election trick," said Marta Pardavi, co-chair of the [Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#), a human rights group. "There's a very strong determination on the part of the government to not only stigmatize NGOs, but to make it very hard for them to even operate."

Orban's demonization of Soros, to the exclusion of virtually all other issues, reflects just how far Hungary has drifted from the European mainstream since his election in 2010. A fringe obsession in other parts of the West, Soros-bashing in this nation of 10 million has moved to the very center of political debate.

The focus is meant to distract voters from paying attention to any other issues, said Csaba Csontos, spokesman for the Budapest branch of Soros's [Open Society Foundations](#).

"Unfortunately, Fidesz has no other message," he said.

It is not clear the party needs one; Fidesz has about as much support in the polls as all other parties combined.

And far from being a pariah in the European Union, Orban is increasingly seen as a model for electoral success. Power players in nations such as Germany and Austria have embraced his uncompromisingly hostile stance toward immigration two years after the continent reckoned with an unparalleled influx.

That mass movement of people — Europe's refugee crisis of 2015-2016 — is where Hungary's anti-Soros campaign began.



Hungarian authorities in September 2015 closed railway routes to migrants, creating a backlog of thousands. (Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images)

The scenes of hundreds of thousands of people making their way [across the continent](#) — -replayed endlessly on television for months — came at a fortuitous time for Orban. His popularity had been starting to slip as the focus turned to plans for a tax increase and to alleged Fidesz corruption.

Orban [seized the moment](#) to change the conversation. While other European leaders waived asylum seekers through their territory, Orban tried to block their path to destinations deeper in Europe. For several days in the late summer of 2015, he forbade them from traveling by train or bus, creating a backlog of thousands of frustrated people living on the streets of central Budapest.

Then he [finished building a fence](#) on the [country's southern border](#). Other nations soon followed in closing their crossings, and for the past two years, the once-saturated refugee trail has been largely empty.

But Orban has kept the issue front and center by warning of the “Muslim invasion” to come in “Christian Europe,” and fingering “the international speculator” Soros as its mastermind.

The message resonates with Orban’s base, which tends to be older voters from rural areas who are suspicious of all Soros represents: globalization, multiculturalism and, at least for some in a country where anti-Semitic currents can still run strong, the Jewish faith.



Soldiers patrol the fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border, near Hercegszanto, in December 2017. (Attila Kisbenedek/AFP/Getty Images)

“It’s the good old method of the Frankenstein monster,” said opposition party leader Bernadett Szel, who recounted being denounced as a “traitor” by Orban supporters for spending several months helping refugees through a Soros-funded NGO. “You create an enemy then tell people that only you can protect them from this enemy.”

Soros and Orban, perhaps the world’s two best-known living Hungarians, have a history together. Orban was a young democratic activist in the dying days of communist control in the late 1980s. Soros funded a scholarship for him to study at Oxford and even helped with the launch of Fidesz, which began as a liberal student movement.

If Orban — a man whom even critics describe as brilliant, with ego and ambition to match — has felt gratitude to the Budapest-born Holocaust survivor, he has not shown it.

Last summer, the government posted billboards across the country depicting a grinning Soros and the words: “Let’s not allow George Soros to have the last laugh!” Several were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti.

That was followed by a supposed “[national consultation](#)” in the fall in which the government mailed surveys to every household in Hungary. The survey asked a series of leading questions, including whether respondents supported the “Soros plan” to “resettle at least one million immigrants from Africa and the Middle East annually on the territory of the European Union, including Hungary.”

Soros dismissed the survey as a collection of “distortions and outright lies” that employed “anti-

Semitic tropes reminiscent of the 1930s.”

The latest anti-Soros campaign — tied to the election — is a doctored image of Soros with his arms around opposition leaders, each of whom holds wire-cutters they are using to break down the border fence.

Soros has long advocated what he describes as a more humane approach to those displaced by war and oppression, of whom there are a record 66 million worldwide, according to U.N. data. He has poured billions of dollars into groups, parties and politicians that work on behalf of asylum seekers and other marginalized groups, and has denounced leaders who use xenophobia to whip up support.



Political advertisements in a Budapest metro station, photographed in July 2017, warn against the influence of George Soros. (Pablo Gorondi/Associated Press)

Those activities all make him a legitimate target, said Fidesz party spokesman Balazs Hidveghi.

“If you enter the political arena, you should not be surprised by a political answer,” he said.

But those on the receiving end of Soros funds say the government is going much further, creating a climate of hatred around migration and rewriting the law to make it as difficult as possible for refugee-support groups to do their work.

Pardavi, the Helsinki Committee leader, said proposed legislation would give the government broad discretion to ban her organization’s activities, which include providing asylum seekers with legal advice.

“It’s not overstating the situation to say that for us this is an existential risk,” she said. “This is a serious threat to civil society in Hungary, and it has no place in a democracy.”

Andras Kovats, director of Menedek, an organization that provides refugees with psychological counseling, said his staff often receives verbal abuse and threatening messages. Tucked in the mail one recent day was a letter packed with excrement.

“There’s a shrinking space for us to do our work,” he said. “The atmosphere has become very, very hostile.”

The hostility starts at the top. In his speech on Thursday in Budapest to mark Hungary's independence day, Orbán scarcely mentioned the economy, health care, education or any of the other issues that might be at the heart of a reelection campaign after eight years in power.



A Fidesz party supporter holds a placard with a photograph of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán during a Hungarian independence day rally in Budapest on Thursday. (Akos Stiller/Bloomberg News)

Instead, he spent nearly the entire 25-minute address depicting what he described as a “clash of civilizations” between the patriotic defenders of a traditional Christian nation and “international forces” that want to repopulate Europe with Africans.

“We will fight against the Soros empire,” he vowed.

His flag-waving backers, who spilled out of the city’s grand parliamentary square and deep down several side streets in one of the larger demonstrations of the country’s recent history, cheered and pronounced themselves ready for the battle.

One group of supporters came with a life-size Soros cutout, the mouth taped shut, as well as a placard depicting Soros as the Austin Powers-series movie villain Dr. Evil. A Hungarian retiree who lives in Paris came with a homemade sign denouncing Soros in French.

“Soros is the mastermind behind the Islamization of Europe,” said the woman, 64-year-old Gyongyi Horgasz. “But he’s also a puppet.”

For whom? She wouldn’t say.

“A superior power,” she said, smiling knowingly. “I don’t want to give any names.”
Gergo Saling contributed to this report.

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