

Blinken OSA Archivum  
Visegrad Fellowship Report  
July 1-31, 2024

**Communicating Open Society:  
George Soros and the Post-Cold War Information Order**

Stanislav Budnitsky, PhD  
Visiting Assistant Professor  
Russian and Eurasian Studies Program  
Colgate University, USA

**Project Background**

Between venturing into philanthropy in 1979 and retiring in 2023, financier George Soros donated \$32 billion to advance his vision of an open society—a liberal socio-political order based on democratic governance, free exchange of ideas, and respect for human rights. To this end, Soros founded a global network of charitable institutions coordinated by an umbrella organization headquartered in New York City, Open Society Foundations (OSF). A significant proportion of Soros’ contributions supported information initiatives worldwide, including training journalists, building telecommunication infrastructure, publishing books and periodicals, and equipping media organizations.

The project hypothesizes that George Soros’ investments in the practices, political economy, infrastructure, and other facets of information exchange impacted, sometimes lastingly, world media and political environments. For instance, in the early 1990s, Romania’s first televised presidential debate was envisioned at a Soros-co-funded workshop on Western reporting standards for local journalists. In 1995, Soros fully subsidized the establishment of the Media Development Investment Fund, which pioneered low-cost financing for independent media under repressive regimes and whose loanees today reach nearly 270 million audience members. In the late 1990s, a reported ten percent of Russian internet users accessed cyberspace through a nationwide network of Soros-funded internet classrooms, one of the world’s largest non-commercial internet development projects worth nearly \$200 million in today’s prices.

Despite the unprecedented funding, geography, and diversity of Soros-sponsored information initiatives, their role in the evolution of the post-Cold War information order is yet to be scrutinized. Most communication studies scholarship has approached Soros and his philanthropy as an *object* of media coverage, particularly (anti-Semitic) conspiratorial narratives. Only a handful of works have analyzed Soros and the OSF as *subjects* of the information world, primarily focusing on specific case studies, such as the dissemination of copying machines in late 1980s Hungary. By contrast, *Communicating Open Society: George Soros and the Post-Cold War Information Order* situates Soros-funded

multinational, multifaceted, and multimillion information initiatives within the Open Society's overarching ideational and institutional framework to analyze their collective impact on the post-Cold War information landscape. The project aims to insert George Soros and his organizations into post-Cold War historiography to argue that we cannot meaningfully understand the information order of the past three and a half decades without analytically incorporating Soros/OSF's informational philosophy and philanthropy.

The project's exploratory research before the Visegrad Fellowship consisted of several strands. First, I have been familiarizing myself with George Soros' books and articles expounding his conceptual framework. Second, I interviewed several executives and program heads of the International Science Foundation and Open Society Institute-Russia, Soros-funded Russia-based organizations. Third, at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, I examined the papers of Valery Soyfer, Soros' close advisor and head of the ten-year International Soros Science Education Program (1994-2004). Fourth, I have archived relevant online sources, including corporate annual reports, publications, websites, and Russian and Western media coverage of George Soros and his information initiatives.

### **Visegrad Fellowship (July 2024)**

*Please, see the Appendix for the box-level breakdown of the collection highlights.*

The Blinken OSA Archivum is the primary corporate repository of Soros-funded philanthropic institutions open to researchers. The original goal of my archival visit was to research the communication activities of two of the three Soros-funded Russian institutions as illustrative of the wider significance of Soros-funded information philanthropy for the post-Cold War information order: the Cultural Initiative (CI) (1988-1995) and the International Science Foundation (ISF) (1992-1996).

The Cultural Initiative and the International Science Foundation's information initiatives reflected the socio-political circumstances of their times. George Soros established the Cultural Initiative as his first Soviet Union-based institution upon seeing Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalizing reforms in the late 1980s as the opening of the Soviet society. The institution, established in partnership with the Soviet Cultural Fund and the Soviet Peace Fund, aimed to strengthen the fledgling Soviet civil society through funding grassroots humanities initiatives. This included funding multiple journalistic and media initiatives that flourished during the governmental *glasnost*' (opening) policy.

The Soviet Union's end in December 1991 fundamentally altered the context of Soros' philanthropy in the country: the radical cultural opening of the post-Soviet Russian society was accompanied by an equally radical socio-economic collapse that was particularly felt in the humanities and non-profit sectors. State funding of scientific research practically vanished, putting thousands of scientists before an existential choice of leaving the country or the profession. George Soros founded the International Science Foundation at

the end of 1992 to help sustain post-Soviet science through its most financially devastating moment with a \$100 million donation distributed among tens of thousands of individual scientists and dozens of institutions. Alongside the Emergency Grants program, providing scientists with a one-time stipend for living expenses, the Travel Grants program for conference attendance, the Long-Term Research Program for research funding, and the Library Program for academic journal subscriptions, the Telecommunications Program aimed to equip scientific research institutions with global Internet access to exchange information with the world.

The \$9 million Telecommunications Program accomplished several goals. First, it connected dozens of Moscow and St. Petersburg academic and cultural institutions among themselves and to the global Internet. Second, it established university-based telecommunication hubs in Kyiv, Novosibirsk, and Yaroslavl. Third, using Yaroslavl as a pilot, the program connected non-academic municipal institutions (the administration, clinics, secondary schools, libraries, and others) to the Internet via the university. Fourth, the program funded the creation of online resources by the networked institutions to populate the then-bare Russian-language cyberspace.

At the Archivum, I was allowed to expand my research scope beyond the original focus on CI and ISF to include materials from the Open Society Institute-Russia (OSI) (1995-2003), the Russian branch of the global network of national Open Society Institutes that took over the CI and ISF's work. OSI funded many media and communication initiatives, such as journalistic professional development programs. The largest information-related program was the Internet Program, which vastly expanded ISF's networking efforts. Its primary project was the \$100 million University Internet Centers—internet classrooms at 33 regional classical (non-scientific/technical) universities built in 1996-1999—with a \$30-million contribution from the Russian government and commitment from participating regional and municipal authorities to provide technical support. This was one of the largest non-commercial ICT development projects of its time—and to this day. Only 1-2% of Russians enjoyed Internet access at home, so the classrooms opened the Internet for millions as community members were allowed access alongside students. Replicating the ISF Telecommunications Program approach, each Center became the node connecting dozens of non-academic municipal and regional institutions. Beyond access, the Centers provided classes on Internet literacy, content creation, and other media skills. Alongside building infrastructure, the Internet Program funded hundreds of projects aimed at filling the Russian cyberspace with content and otherwise developing the Internet culture.

The detailed archival findings on the ISF Telecommunications Program and the OSI Internet Program prompted me to focus on the Soros-funded efforts to network post-Soviet space as the case study for the initial output from this archival research (see “Future Steps” below). In this light, in addition to the Russian institutions, I examined the Open Estonia Foundation collection to introduce a comparative lens to illuminate the affordances and limitations of information philanthropy. Estonia made digitizing its state and society a national priority in the 1990s, globally promoting itself as “e-Estonia” to present itself as

technologically advanced and ready to join the Euro-Atlantic community. The Foundation's materials include annual reports and the in-house publication, *The Courier*, showing the Foundation's critical contribution to "e-Estonia's" materiality through funding dozens of small and large-scale digital projects.

### **Oral Histories**

In addition to archival access, the fellowship allowed meeting some key figures in the OSF information initiatives. My fellowship supervisor and OSA Director, Istvan Rev, was directly involved in the work of the OSF Information Program. During my fellowship in Budapest, I spoke with Frances Pinter, a founder of the Central European University Press and longtime head of the Information Program, and Jerzy Celichowski, an executive of the Information Program in the 2000s. I plan to snowball my interviewee base from these contacts to complement archival materials with oral histories of the OSF information initiatives for a more comprehensive account.

### **Future Steps**

The ultimate intellectual ambition of this project is to forge a research program on Soros' information philanthropy by forming an international collaborative scholarly network focused on this underresearched topic. The first step is to publish an article conceptualizing and delineating this arena. To this end, by August 2025, I plan to submit a scholarly article introducing Soros/OSF's significance to the post-Cold War information order to a communication studies journal. The article will contextualize Soros' information philanthropy within the open society idea and institution, estimate the scale and scope of his information philanthropy, discuss the illustrative case study of helping digitally network Estonia and Russia in the 1990s-early 2000s, consider the impact and limitations of information philanthropy, and call upon the field to join the effort to reconstruct its place within media and communication historiography.

Following the article's publication, I intend to organize an international in-person workshop on the Soros/OSF information philanthropy based on an open Call for Submissions. The diversity, scale, and scope of Soros-funded information initiatives make them impossible for any one scholar to study. Instead, bringing scholars of different national and regional contexts, historical periods, communication mediums, and theoretical and methodological approaches into conversation can be a productive starting point for reconstructing and interrogating the history and legacy of Soros' information philanthropy.

I wish to publish the workshop's contributions as an edited volume, a multi-author monograph, and/or an academic journal special issue.

**APPENDIX  
COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS**

**THE CULTURAL INITIATIVE**

HU OSA 349-3-3 | Box 1  
349 Records of the Cultural Initiative Foundation  
3 Programs

**3 Media Program Files**

From: Plan for Independent Television in the Former Soviet Union, 1993  
To: School of Parliamentary Journalism: Reviews by Kopeiko A., 1993

Folder: Plan for Independent Television in the Former Soviet Union, 1993

Folder: Radio Project, 1993

Folder: School of Parliamentary Journalism, Depiction of the Project, 1993

Folder: School of Parliamentary Journalism, Depiction of the Project, 1994-95

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HU OSA 349-3-5 | Box 2  
349 Records of the Cultural Initiative  
3 Programs

**5 Other Program Files**

From: General: Program Leaders' Meeting, 1993  
To: Local Projects, 1992-1994

Folder: Reports on Projects, 1989-1992

Requests to the Cultural Initiative for equipment from leading media organizations during the anti-Gorbachev putsch on August 19-22, 1991

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HU OSA 349-2-1 | Box 1  
349 records of the cultural initiative foundation  
2 Executive offices

**2 Minutes of the executive committee**

From: Executive committee meeting 1, 1992-1992  
To: Executive committee meeting 2, 1992-1992

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 1 [2], 1992  
Application for the BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind  
Materials on the Commission on Television Policy

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 2 [3], 1992

Funding request for the BBC Muzzy cartoon

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HU OSA 349-2-1 | Box 2

349 records of the cultural initiative foundation

2 Executive offices

**2 Minutes of the executive committee**

From: Executive committee meeting 3, 1993-1993

To: Executive committee meeting 6, 1993-1993

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 3 [2], 1993

Application for the World Eco Reform publication, including multiple letters of support from federal officials

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 4 [1], 1993

Funding request for *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, including a personal letter to George Soros from the renowned poet Evgeny Yevtushenko

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HU OSA 349-2-1 | Box 3

349 Records of the cultural initiative foundation

2 Executive offices

**2 Minutes of the executive committee**

From: Executive committee meeting 6, 1993-1993

To: Executive committee meeting 9, 1994-1994

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 6 [2], 1993

A report on the state of Russian media by Sasa Vucinic based on the trip to Moscow and St Petersburg 03.07-10.07 1993

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 7 [1], 1993

Support for the School of Scientific Journalism

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 7 [2], 1993

School of Parliamentary Journalism competition rules

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting 8, 1993

Announcement of an open call for radio equipment

A news agency proposal by the Radio Echo of Moscow

An article on the US/NIS Commission on Radio and Television Policy

**INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION**

HU OSA 116-1-1 | Box 1

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**3 Executive Board Files**

From: Executive Board Correspondence, 1993-1993

To: Executive Board Meeting, 14 Dec 1993-14 Dec 1993

Folder: Executive Board Meeting May 9, 1993

Telecommunications Program status update

Folder: ISF Executive Board September 1993 Meeting [1 of 2]

A detailed report on the progress of the Telecommunications Program

Brochure: International Science Foundation: Programs to Support Basic Sciences in the Former Soviet Union and Baltic States 1993/1994

Outlines the goals of the Telecommunications Program

Folder: ISF Executive Board September 1993 Meeting [2 of 2]

Status update on the Telecommunications Program by Steven Goldtsein, an ISF consultant

Folder: ISF Executive Board November 1993 Meeting

Telecommunications Program status update

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HU OSA 116-1-1 | Box 2

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**1 Executive Board Files**

From: Executive Board Meeting, 14 Mar 1994-14 Mar 1994

To: Executive Board Members Directory, 1993-1995

Folder: ISF Executive Board Meeting, March 14, 1994 [1 of 2]

Telecommunications Program status update by Program Coordinator Rob Blokzijl and Program Director Ilya Mafter

Folder: ISF Executive Board Meeting, April 1994

Telecommunications Program status update by Dr. Alexander Goldfarb

Folder: Executive Board Meeting, May 16, 1994

Telecommunications Program status update by Ilya Mafter

Folder: ISF Executive Board June 1994 Meeting

The Telecommunications Program presents the Mega Project to network cities across the former Soviet Union beyond academia

Folder: ISF Executive Board October 1994 Meeting  
Telecommunications Program status update

Folder: ISF Executive Board March 1995 Meeting  
**Minutes of the ISF Executive Committee Meeting, January 13, 1995**  
Telecommunications Program status update

**Minutes ISF Executive Committee Meeting, March 10, 1995**  
Telecommunications Program status update

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HU OSA 116-1-2 | Box 2

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**2 Executive Committee Files**

From: Executive Committee Meetings, 1994-1994

To: Staff Meetings, 1996-1996

Folder: Executive Committee Meeting, 1994 [9 of 10]  
May 4, 1994 “Open Networking for the Open Society” presentation by Ilya Mafter

Folder: ISF Executive Committee Meeting, April 1997  
ISF/OSI-RIP [Regional Internet Program] Telecommunication Grants

Agenda for Telecommunications/Internet meeting: June 14, 1995

Minutes of the ISF Telecommunications Program Executive Committee Meeting

Draft document: The Current State of Networking in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus and the Role of the ISF Telecommunications Program to Date

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HU OSA 116-1-3 | Box 4

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**3 Programs Administration Files**

From: Grant Letters from OSI, 1996-1999

To: ISF Ukraine, 1994-1995



Folder: International Center for Telecommunication – Kiev, 1996

Folder: International Center for Telecommunication — Novosibirsk, 1996-1997

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HU OSA 116-1-3 | Box 8 [Restricted access, cant photograph, viewed on 23 July 2024]

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**3 Programs Administration Files**

From: Long Term Research Grants: Russian Grantees, 1994-1994

To: Program Announcements, 1993-1994

Folder: Open Society Institute-Moscow: Foundation and Programs Documents [1 of 2] 1995

Announcement for the Competition for Analytical Journalism (Grants of up to \$5,000 to individual journalists to undertake investigative projects, 1997)

Folder: Program Announcements, 1993-1994

Includes announcement of the Telecommunications Program

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HU OSA 116-1-3 | Box 9

1 Executive Office

**3 Programs Administration Files**

From: Program Descriptions, 1994-1995

To: Travel Grants Program: Memos to Staff, 1994-1995

Folder: Regional Internet Program, 1996

Program description

Folder: Telecommunication Programs Announcements, 1993

Program announcement by ISF Director Harley Balzer (June 1993)

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HU OSA 116-1-3 | Box 10 [Restricted access, cant photograph, viewed on 22 July 2024]

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**3 Programs Administration Files**

From: Turkmenistan Advisory Committee, 1994-1994

To: United States Civilian Research and Development Foundation: Proposal, 1994-1996

Folder: Telecom Advisory Board, April 1995 Meeting

Minutes of the only Telecom Advisory Board meeting, co-chaired by the Librarian of Congress James Billington and with participation by co-inventor of the Internet protocol Vinton Cerf

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HU OSA 116-1-3 | Box 11

116 ISF

1 Executive Office

**3 Programs Administration Files**

From: United States Civilian Research and Development Foundation: Proposal, 1994-1996

To: Uzbek Advisory Committee, 1993-1994

Folder: University Internet Centers, 1996

Description of the project by the Open Society Institute-Russia

Memorandum on the Russian Internet Advisory Board meeting

Memorandum on the implementation of the University Internet Centers

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HU OSA 116-1-5 |Box 1

116 ISF

1 Executive office

**6 Press Clippings**

From: Central European university: press, 1994-1994

To: Cultural initiative foundation, 1992-1995

Folder: Cultural Initiative Foundation, 1992-1995

Announcement of a journalism competition co-organized with Internews

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HU OSA 116-1-6 |Box 1

116 ISF

1 Executive office

**6 Publications**

From: Annual Report, 1993-1993

To: Research Projects of Ukrainian Scienti [...]

Annual Reports for 1994, 1995, 1996 containing information on the Telecommunications Programs

Irina Dezhina's book on the ISF history containing detailed information on the Telecommunications Programs

## **OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE-RUSSIA**

HU OSA 25-2-8 | Box 1

Cultural Initiative annual reports for 1987-88, 1989, and 1990, including information initiatives

Open Society Institute annual reports for 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000, including information initiatives

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HU OSA 25-2-8 | Box 2

Open Society Institute annual reports for 2002 and 2003, including information initiatives

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HU OSA 25-2-8 | Box 3

Publication "Chronicle of the Decade: Facts, Figures, Events," a detailed report on ten years of activity in Russia

Publication "George Soros: I Welcome the Changes Now Under Way in the USSR"

Publication "The Internet Center (St Petersburg)"

Publication "It Is Hard to Do Good" by Leonid Nikitinsky, an in-house produced book detailing ten years of activity in Russia

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HU OSA 25-2-8 | Box 5

Issues of the in-house quarterly magazine "Open Society" for 1998-2002 with news of ongoing projects

## **OPEN ESTONIA FOUNDATION**

HU OSA 9-1-1  
Open Estonia Foundation  
Executive Office  
Publications

Annual reports for 1992-2000 and the in-house publication, the Courier