

# Private philanthropy or policy transfer? The transnational norms of the Open Society Institute

*Diane Stone*

The Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private operating and grant-making foundation that serves as the hub of the Soros Foundations Network, a group of autonomous national foundations around the world. OSI is a mechanism for the international diffusion of expertise and 'best practices' to post-communist countries and other democratising nations. Focusing on the 'soft' ideational and normative policy transfer, the article highlights the engagement in governance that comes with OSI transnational policy partnerships.

## Introduction

Founded in 1993 by the billionaire philanthropist George Soros, the Open Society Institute (OSI) is a private operating and grant-making foundation that serves as the hub of the Soros Foundations Network, a group of autonomous foundations and organisations in more than 60 countries. OSI and the network implement a range of initiatives to promote open societies, seeking to shape national and international policies with knowledge and expertise. This article evaluates its roles and activities as a transnational policy actor through the analytical lens of policy transfer and norm brokerage.

OSI transfers expertise and 'best practices' to transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former Soviet Union (fSU). The 'open society' discourses of transition and reform is multifaceted. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to support the rule of law, education, public health and independent media. Simultaneously, OSI works to build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as combating corruption and rights abuses. The idea is to give 'voice' to communities, and emerging policy elites, in transition countries through capacity building, the spread of 'best practices' and country-specific translation of 'open society' values.

This article draws on the literatures of policy transfer and diffusion (Levi Faur, 2005; Stubbs, 2005; Simmons et al, 2006). The objective is to widen our understanding on two fronts.

First, the aim is to broaden awareness of the domains *where* policy transfer occurs from its horizontal intergovernmental focus to vertical supranational policy venues. This article is distinctive from public policy and international relations analyses operating within a frame of methodological nationalism that explain norm diffusion in terms of its impacts only on *domestic* politics (Checkel, 1997). The focus here is on a transnational philanthropic actor seeking to inform and give shape to the domains of global and regional governance. This accords with the notion that non-state actors represent a new logic of governmentality (Sending and Neumann, 2006). Non-state

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involvement, specifically transnational philanthropy, in certain fields of policy making promotes the 'transnationalisation of policy'. National and subnational venues of policy making are not displaced but become interconnected with policy actors in international organisations and multilateral initiatives.

Second, the aim is to extend the range of *who* engages in policy transfer to include transnational non-state actors such as OSI and the various academics, specialists and consultants engaged by OSI. Transnational policy communities of experts and professionals share their expertise and information and form common patterns of understanding regarding policy through regular interaction via international conferences, government delegations and sustained e-communication (Bennett, 1991: 224–5); that is, an international policy culture. Addressing the role of international actors in transferring policy and diffusing knowledge, a dynamic for the transnationalisation of policy comes into analytical sight. In particular, 'soft' forms of transfer – such as the spread of norms and expertise in which non-state actors play a more prominent role – complement the hard transfer of policy tools, laws and practices pursued by government agencies and international organisations.

As a diffuser of policy ideas, the legitimacy of OSI's expertise is drawn through a circular process. That is, between the knowledge it produces and the audiences that help legitimise and institutionally consolidate that knowledge. It becomes a mutual validation process, but one that gives intellectual credibility to OSI norm advocacy and policy transfer. This credibility construction so as to inform policy deeply implicates OSI in global governance. Accordingly, this article disputes orthodox views of civil society as a 'third sector' separate from state and market, drawing attention to the manner in which a philanthropic actor has sought privileged access into policy domains and debates.

Research for this article was based on a combination of methods. First, extensive information was drawn from OSI's website, annual reports and other policy publications. Second, participation-observation formed one core component of research. This involved collaboration with OSI colleagues during a two-year appointment at Central European University (CEU) from 2004 onwards. CEU shared offices with OSI. Third, interviews with OSI staff in New York, Washington, DC and London were undertaken. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of their management roles in OSI Initiatives that involved transnational activity and also serve to counterbalance the CEU standpoint for participant observation. Finally, literature on philanthropy, some of it of a critical disposition towards OSI (eg Roelofs, 2003; Stubbs, 2005; Guilhot, 2007) is combined with an international relations literature on civil society and transnational activism to provide the general analytical context. This is done to argue that the concept of global civil society becomes attractive as it can be used to justify institutions of global governance (Bartelson, 2006). The role of private philanthropy thereby becomes legitimated.

The next section outlines the concept of policy transfer and philanthropy as non-state mechanisms of transfer. The following section focuses on OSI as an organisation and how it creates itself as an expert body. Then, a section outlines the norm brokerage and policy transfer activities of OSI. This is followed by a section that concentrates on the policy scholarship of OSI. The penultimate section addresses OSI's 'global turn' and 'policy awakening' while the conclusion returns to the theme of authority construction.

## Policy transfer

Policy transfer is a transnational policy process whereby knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements or institutions in one place is used in the development of policy elsewhere. The objects of transfer can include (i) policies, (ii) institutions, (iii) ideologies or justifications, (iv) attitudes and ideas, and (v) negative lessons (Dolowitz, 1997). Additionally, there are different degrees of transfer in that actors engage in straightforward copying of policy, legislation or techniques as well as various forms of emulation, synthesis and hybridisation, and inspiration (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996: 351).

Policy and normative transfers can be voluntary or coercive or combinations thereof. Terms such as 'lesson-drawing' portray transfer as a voluntary and somewhat rational activity. Other terms emphasise compulsory conformity; that is: 'penetration' by international policy actors (Bennett, 1991). By contrast, the more atmospheric and apolitical term 'diffusion' has been used in World Bank circles (Stiglitz, 2000). Some international relations scholars recognise the role of agency and the prospects for individual and organisational learning. This literature leans towards methodological nationalism when it asserts that 'International policy diffusion occurs when government policy decisions in a given country are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other countries' (Simmons et al, 2006). Assuredly, policy diffusion occurs between countries. However, this article goes beyond this hypothesis of *national* interdependence to suggest that policy transfer creates *transnational* policy spaces.

The mechanisms of transfer are multiple. One mechanism is *coercion* such as exercised directly or indirectly by powerful nations or international organisations. The Bretton Woods institutions have long been accused of dispensing 'one-size-fits-all' policies coercively imposed through loan conditionality (although the discourse is now 'putting countries in the driving seat'; Stiglitz, 2000:9). Coercion is not at the disposal of a non-state actor like OSI. Instead, developing shared understandings and consensual knowledge via 'international policy communities' (Bennett, 1991) is the strategy of non-state actors.

Nevertheless, non-state actors are better at the 'soft transfer' of broad policy ideas via transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), that is, influencing public opinion and policy agendas as 'norm brokers' (Acharya, 2004). Philanthropic capacity-building, expert-based organisations transfer knowledge, practice and people. In theory, bodies like OSI have the institutional capacity to scan the international environment and undertake detailed evaluations of policy that will help prevent the simplistic, ad hoc copying of policy that leads to inappropriate transfer and policy failure.

The non-governmental status of a philanthropic body is a major structural constraint to policy transfer. A philanthropic foundation cannot bring about policy transfer alone but is dependent on governments, international organisations and local communities to see policy ideas accepted and instituted. Ideas can have the power of persuasion, but they need institutions and interests behind them. Accordingly, non-state actors are often to be found in partnership or coalition on either an ad hoc or more permanent basis with government departments and agencies, international organisations or other non-state actors.

Globalisation dynamics have provided new opportunities for foundation influence. There is a complex relationship between first, economic globalisation, and second, the thickening of international rule of law and new forms of political authority as drivers of globalisation. Civil society is a third 'driver' of globalisation. These drivers are creating new transnational processes and networks of policy making. Rather than network density and diversity disrupting hierarchies, opening participation and dispersing power, networks can represent new constellations of privatised power. Instead of being civil society manifestations of bottom-up, non-statist globalisation, networks are viewed here as 'mutually implicated' in the affairs of states and international organisations (Baker, 2002: 936; Sending and Neumann, 2006). Civil society is therefore not a separate domain but a space for new 'governmental rationality where political power operates *through* rather than *on* civil society' (Sending and Neumann, 2006: 669).

One neglected aspect of global civil society is the 'elite' forms of associational life. This includes a variety of groups with different modes of membership, networking and organisation. This diversity can only be itemised here with a few examples:

- foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation or the Aga Khan Foundation that provide funding and resources to other civil society organisations;
- policy dialogue groups such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, which acts as a transnational convener of opinion leaders in government, business, academe and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- activist promotional groups such as Freedom House engaged in the advocacy of certain values and ideals;
- business associations such as the Trans Atlantic Business Dialogue or the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS;
- scientific associations and research groups such as the Global Tobacco Research Network.

These are professional bodies with substantial financial resources or patronage (and sometimes interlock). They are aimed at influencing policy and engaged in transferring experts and policy ideas between countries and professional communities.

This global sphere of civil society is not only hierarchical, but also exclusive; that is, more accessible to wealthy, Westernised professionals and their agencies. It is characterised by intense competition for funds, donor patronage or political recognition where national public institutions no longer serve as the sole organising centre for policy. Instead, multi-level polycentric forms of public policy in which a plethora of institutions and networks negotiate within and between international organisations and private regimes have emerged as pragmatic responses in the absence of formal institutions of global governance (Levi-Faur, 2005; Stone, 2008). Examples include private regimes such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) or global standard-setting agencies such as the International Association of Insurance Supervisors alongside transnational policy communities working on issues such as anti-corruption. Non-state actors like OSI are players in these transnational policy spaces.

## OSI philanthropy

The Open Society Institute is:

[A] private operating and grantmaking foundation, (that) aims to shape public policy to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, legal, and social reform. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to support the rule of law, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI works to build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as combating corruption and rights abuses.<sup>1</sup>

Created in 1993, OSI has been built as an international network but it overlays and funds a series of *national* foundations that emerged from 1984 onwards. The network consists of national foundations in 29 countries, foundations in Kosovo and Montenegro, and three regional foundations – the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA), the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and a third initiative for East Africa (see Appendix).

OSI headquarters are located in New York and provide administrative, financial and technical support to the nationally based Soros foundations. OSI–New York (OSI–NY) also operates initiatives, which address specific issues on a regional or network-wide basis internationally (see Appendix). The second main office is in Budapest.

The Soros national foundations operate as autonomous organisations with a local Board of Directors and considerable independence in determining how to implement the ideals of the open society. Due to an ethos of localism and of budgetary control within national boards, ‘the Soros national foundations are often perceived in their host countries as being organizations of those countries’ rather than subordinates of OSI–NY or subject to the personal whims of Soros (Carothers, 1999: 273). In addition, there have been gradual pressures on the national foundations to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on OSI funds. To varying degrees, these foundations participate in network-wide activities coordinated from New York and Budapest. This article is primarily focused on the network-wide activities and initiatives as these are most transnational in design and hold greater potential to observe policy transfer than at the level of national foundations.

OSI is a multifaceted organisation. First and foremost, it is a philanthropic body as it funds the types of groups itemised earlier. But it is also actively engaged in local communities and international affairs as an ‘operating foundation’.

Accordingly, a second feature is that parts of OSI operate as venues for policy dialogue. For instance, think tank initiatives like the new European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) ‘promote a more integrated European foreign policy with open society values at its core’.<sup>2</sup> OSI managers contribute to numerous policy dialogues while Soros has occasionally attended the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Third, OSI advocates normative projects. For instance, EUmapp is an advocacy programme that works with national experts and NGOs to encourage broader participation in the process of articulating the European Union’s (EU’s) common democratic values as well as in ongoing monitoring of compliance with human rights

standards throughout the EU. Similarly, OSI's East–East programme is an exchange programme to 'develop advocacy networks for the transnational promotion of open society' (OSI, 2004: 156). It supports exchanges among actors from civil society in order, *inter alia*, to share best practices and lessons learned in social transformation. Finally, OSI supports various research groups inside and outside its organisational domain as well as sponsoring scholarships. Although it is legally separate from OSI, the CEU is connected with OSI.

As an organisation, OSI is a policy transfer agent. Certainly, it is involved in the spread of best practices at a country- and region-wide level (interview 6). Key individuals such as Aryeh Neier, President of OSI, have shaped OSI to give it a strong 'human rights' orientation. Even so, the Directors of programmes and initiatives have considerable autonomy in implementation and their engagement with policy communities as norm brokers.

Access of OSI actors into international debates is conditioned by official recognition and public perceptions of legitimacy to participate. The authority and legitimacy for non-state public action in global affairs is not naturally given but cultivated through various management practices and intellectual activities. The private authority of the World Economic Forum, or Freedom House or OSI rests in large degree with their establishment as non-profit or charitable organisations. Their executives can argue, on the one hand, that they are not compromised by the need to generate profits in tailoring policy analysis to the needs of clients, and on the other hand, that they have independence or autonomy from bureaucracies and political leaders. Indeed, the Annual Reports of the Soros Foundations Network are littered with references to the 'independence' and 'autonomy' of the national foundations (see also Carothers, 1999: 273). Such portrayals coincide with the contestable idea of foundations being based in the 'third sector'.

Another strategy to enhance legitimacy is rhetorical resort to the professional and scientific norms of scholarly discovery and intellectual investigation (Lera St Clair, 2006). Universities have long held this status. CEU is no exception. Think tanks set themselves apart from other non-state actors as independent knowledge organisations, and often cultivate a reified image as public-minded civil society organisations untainted by connection to vested interest or political power. Mixed sources of funding reinforce this discourse of dispassionate expertise and critical distance.

A related discursive tactic is when non-state actors adopt the mantle of protectors of the principles and philosophies underlying democratic societies. Not only OSI, but also numerous bodies lay claim to participation in public debate by 'representing' the interests of minority groups or the human rights of oppressed communities and future generations.

The ends of both the donor and the grantee organisation are served. Such discourses of authority and legitimacy are a necessary component in effectively diffusing ideas and propelling them into official domains. Via these three discourses of conduct – non-profit legal and financial independence; dispassionate scientific endeavour; and democratic representation – credibility is manufactured for non-state actors. But in creating their credibility, they become 'harnessed to the task of governing' (Sending and Neumann, 2006: 656). Or as another observer has stated,



'the concept of global civil society should be understood in terms of its *rhetorical function*' (Bartelson, 2006: 372).

Civil society dialogues with governments and international organisations have become more frequent where such groups are treated as 'partners' and 'stakeholders' in international development. It is within this context that OSI can be found. Like most private philanthropic enterprises, OSI is legally independent. However, various units of OSI are to be found in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank or parts of the European Commission. As OSI expands its 'global agenda, partnerships with other donors are becoming ever more significant' (OSI, 2006: 174). Many more organisations that are recipients of OSI grants are likewise enmeshed in regional policy dialogues, international alliances or multilateral initiatives. With their substantial financial resources, foundations are in a prime position for promoting norms and setting agendas for policy debate.

For some, private philanthropy is a privileged strategy for generating new forms of 'policy knowledge' convergent with the interests of their promoters (Guilhot, 2007). This is apposite when assessing OSI and its sister institution – CEU – regarding the political and ideological functions of philanthropic initiatives in higher education:

[I]t gives us indications regarding the strategic value of these fields as laboratories of social reform – both as the training ground of new elites and as generators of policy knowledge. Investing in higher education does not only earn philanthropists some social prestige: it allows them to promote 'scientific' ideas about social reform and to define the legitimate entitlements to exercise power by reorganising traditional curricula and disciplines. Educational philanthropy allows specific social groups, using their economic and social capital, to shape the policy arena not so much by imposing specific policies as by crafting and imposing the tools of policy-making. (Guilhot, 2007: 449)

CEU represents the transfer of Western educational values and systems. OSI is a vehicle for the transfer of a wider range of policy ideas and practices.

## Transferring open societies

OSI is engaged in normative transfers. Indeed, the OSI motto – 'Building a Global Alliance for Open Society' – is indicative of the organisational function of brokering norms.

Yet, 'soft' ideational modes of persuasion – such as reflected in accusations from politicians that OSI actors played a catalytic behind-the-scenes role in the Rose and Orange Revolutions of Georgia and Ukraine – suggest that norms and policy activity promoting them can have counter-hegemonic impact. Russian President Vladimir Putin accused George Soros of orchestrating the 'colour revolutions'. The contagion potential of 'powerful pro-democracy groups in neighboring countries apparently represent a very effective power resource for would-be democratizers' (Gray, 2006).<sup>3</sup> OSI funds and diffuses opposition ideas, alternative experts and 'open society' norms. Yet, 'open society' principles have had a mixed reception within target countries and communities. National foundations have faced real difficulties

in Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan due to the oppressiveness of the incumbent regimes towards OSI and other non-state actors.

OSI operates as a norm broker for 'open society' values. That is, it generates and disseminates norms concerning 'rule of law; respect for human rights, minorities, and minority opinion; democratically elected governments; market economies in which business and government are separate; and thriving civil societies' (OSI, 2004: 187). OSI engages in policy transfer primarily as a generator and disseminator of ideas and people via network-wide initiatives, and less so as an implementer. The national foundations have been more closely involved in implementation. And these foundations can be seen as both norm brokers and exercising choice as 'norm takers'. That is, 'local agents reconstruct foreign norms to ensure that norms fit with the agents' cognitive priors and identities' in a dynamic process of 'localisation'. Norm takers 'build congruence between transnational norms ... and local beliefs and practices' (Acharya, 2004: 239–241). Or what Joe Stiglitz (2000: 8) paraphrased as 'scan globally, reinvent locally'.

For instance, an early programme that developed out of New York, and is now managed from London, is the 'East–East: Partnership Beyond Borders' programme. After 1989, with the onslaught of East–West exchanges, Soros wanted to provide opportunities for an 'East–East' 'communications space'. A remarkably low-cost programme, it was designed to educate people into the idea that there could be more to learn from each other rather than going to the West where inappropriate models, different historical and economic circumstances and mismatch of experience could occur. East–East has been 'de-mystifying' who you can learn from and where lessons lie. Rather than displacing East–West exchanges, the East–East programme is "additional or supplemental" (interview 1).

East–East is rooted in the national foundations. The programme works because it is 'bottom-up' where the London-based Director relies on people in the national foundations "who have the pulse" (interviewee 1) to deliver ideas and plans on what kinds of exchanges are needed. "The national foundations fill in the content." (interviewee 1). The local autonomy bestowed on national foundations is designed to promote the most favourable environment for learning and 'local ownership' of policy ideas (Carothers, 1996).

East–East also serves as a mechanism to link the national foundations to prevent them from working in isolation (interview 1). A clear example of policy transfer, one initiative was 'to help European Union actual and prospective candidate countries learn from the experiences of Central European countries that succeeded in acquiring EU membership' (OSI, 2006: 138). But whether such exchanges promote policy learning, or merely the dissemination of information and techniques, remains a moot point.

The 'soft' transfer of ideas and information is relatively easy. It is a more difficult enterprise first to see knowledge about 'best practice' structure official thinking or public discourse and second, to ensure that policy knowledge becomes institutionalised. Notwithstanding a considerable degree of information sharing, policy research and expert advice disseminated between OSI head offices and the various national foundations, the causal nexus between transferred policy ideas and their adoption is muddled by many intervening variables.



While the causal impact of policy ideas on individual and group behaviour is invariably a muddy one in methodological terms, it is nevertheless the case that through the OSI network, non-state actors share discourses and help construct the consensual knowledge that defines an international policy community. For instance, on the advocacy front, OSI was a donor to the Campaign to Ban Landmines. It has also partnered with multilateral initiatives such as the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Among scientific communities, OSI has long supported research in the public health field such as the international effort on extremely drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB). The OSI network also enables actors to operate beyond their domestic context and empowers some OSI-funded experts to project their ideas into policy thinking across states and within issue-specific global or regional forums.

A matter for discussion in interviews concerned tendencies to 'universalisation' within OSI, that is, the assumption that there is commonness of the CEE experience (a homogenisation of the different country and local experiences) and a policy belief in the replication of the experience in other venues, that is, what was done in CEE can be transmitted into Central Asia. Such a development in thinking loses what was innovative and special in the encouragement of 'local knowledge' and 'local ability' via the national foundations during the 1990s. The bureaucratisation of OSI as the organisation consolidates has prompted a universalising dynamic that is in tension with the 'reflexive' spirit favoured by Soros.<sup>4</sup> It presents a challenge for OSI management given limited resources resulting from the networks' growing geographical spread, and where staff expertise is founded on transition experiences in the CEE and fSU that prompts a default to 'second world lessons for third world contexts... We need to avoid this' (interview 7).

As the national foundations are encouraged to become more autonomous and financially independent of OSI, a subtle transformation is occurring. OSI is gradually moving away from its 'bottom-up' strong contextual approach to capacity building of local and national communities towards a 'top-down' professionalised dynamic of policy interaction with decision makers, that is, it is "more like a traditional foundation with programme officers in New York" (interview 5). In short, OSI is moving away from public action that is focused on capacity building at local and national levels (built in the historical context of post-communist transitions) to activity aimed at transnational levels and at higher-level policy processes. "The losers are the traditional national foundations" (interview 7). This centrifugal dynamic has created a more vertical set of relationships within OSI and with its grantee organisations.

## OSI policy expertise

OSI has played a prominent role in the region, 'promoting policy research, evaluating policy options, initiating and disseminating best practices, and monitoring policies'. As the 'Communist menace' receded in the early 1990s, it 'pursued individual grant making for scholarly research, academic advancement of the local expert communities, and enhancing diversified civil societies and independent media' (Krizsán and Zentai, 2005: 169–70).

The Local Government and Public Sector Initiative (LGI) and PASOS are good examples of OSI as a generator and disseminator of policy ideas. PASOS is the Policy Association for an Open Society – a network of policy institutes from 22 CEE countries and the newly independent states. It provides institutional infrastructure for pooling and exchanging policy-related knowledge. PASOS was established by LGI, an older OSI initiative to promote democratic and effective governance in the countries of the Soros Foundations Network. LGI has specialised in financial management reforms.

An important component of PASOS activity is to improve the capacity of the participating centres through exchange and sharing of best practices in a collaborative manner. LGI has targeted both the managerial capacity of the centres and their capacity to prepare better policy documents and advocacy (through training workshops and mentorship). Considerable attention is dedicated to twinning centres and the sharing of good practices. One area where policy transfer has already been facilitated by LGI as a ‘knowledge broker’ concerns the spread and adoption of ‘quarterly economic indicators’ in Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine and in national accounting systems (Ionescu et al, 2005).

One PASOS member is the Center for Policy Studies (CPS), an academic unit at CEU. CPS conducts ‘research and advocacy’ on public integrity and anti-corruption; social diversity and equal opportunities; and rural development. These are project areas where there is some impetus and aspiration for the diffusion of policy ideas and their inculcation in emerging policy elites through training programmes. For instance, the Public Integrity Education Network managed by CPS and part funded by OSI is a network of universities and civil service colleges in 60 countries engaged in the development of new courses and resources in the field of governance, integrity and administrative reform.

CPS incubated a Masters of Public Policy that eventually spawned an independent Department of Public Policy at CEU. In tune with the wider objectives of the university, it is aimed at training professionals to become sensitive to global governance (Guilhot, 2007). CPS also manages OSI’s International Policy Fellowship initiative (Pop, 2006). The motivation for this programme is largely to counter ‘brain drain’ by giving in-country fellowships to researchers and activists who have potential as open society leaders. ‘Soft’ modes of policy transfer occur through the mentoring process of fellows who gain professional advice on how to write policy documents, spark public discourse in transition countries, and propel their ideas into official domains (OSI, 2004: 159).

The transfer undertaken is of Western standards of policy professionalism. One of the most widely utilised resources of LGI has been *Writing effective policy papers* (Quinn and Young, 2002). The book adapts Anglo-American ideas of policy writing for post-transition regional audiences adapting to new policy environments. Its authors are regular participants in various capacity-building workshops organised by OSI and other multilateral donors in the region to transfer professional experience and technical advice about public policy processes.

Notwithstanding historical and individual ties between OSI and various parts of the university, the relationship between the two is increasingly marked by different trajectories. Like many universities, disciplinary boundaries are hardening in that scholars orbit around their departments and research communities. Employment

contracts no longer require CEU staff to devote 20 days' work to OSI. The pursuit of academic norms has implications in providing little incentive for faculty to engage with OSI.

## The 'global turn' and the 'policy awakening'

From the end of the 1990s, the Soros Foundations Network engaged in various debates regarding global transformations and as a consequence, ventured to reach out to new regions of the world (Palley, 2003). The programmes of the Network sought to critically examine issues of emerging democracies not only in a post-socialist but also in a global context (Krizsán and Zentai, 2005). As Soros became interested in globalization, he was less inclined to close down OSI as originally intended (interview 2).

The 'global' strategy was also pushed by the accession of the new 10 member states to the EU. This 'global turn' is perceived by interviewees 1 and 3 as a horizontal stretch of OSI activity across national geographies rather than a vertical conceptual expansion of influencing global debates and international organisation. This view can be contrasted with that of George Soros who stated: 'Our global open society lacks the institutions and mechanisms necessary for its preservation, but there is no political will to bring them into existence' (Soros, 1997: 7). One event to mark the refashioned goals of OSI was CEU's 10th Anniversary Conference in 2001. For CEU and its sister institution OSI, the conference was a venue to publicise their joint commitment to the 'global open society' and the objective 'to articulate critical and policy views in the global public sphere' (Krizsán and Zentai, 2003: 37, 35). An objective has been to get the 'network programmes to think global, to spread expertise' (interview 7).

Through the mechanism of the Chair's and Presidential Grants, there are further signs of the global agenda. Grant giving to transnational advocacy programmes (interview 7) is especially apparent in the fields of human rights and anti-corruption. In 2003, funding went to bodies such as Global Witness, the Data Foundation (for educating the US public about debt relief, aid and trade), TIRI (formerly known as Transparency International Research Institute) and longstanding OSI partners such as Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group (OSI, 2004: 190).

Another indicator of the 'global turn' is the degree of interaction and partnership between OSI and international organisations such as the World Bank, the EU and the World Health Organization as well as a range of other non-state international actors (OSI, 2006: 174). OSI has a Memorandum of Understanding with the UNDP. There is the longstanding record of work of OSI regarding Roma communities, support for the establishment of the European Roma Rights Center and the regional Roma Participation Programme. Much work involved surveys and data gathering simply to understand the dimensions of the situation faced by Roma. In mid-2003, OSI, in conjunction with the World Bank, initiated the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion: 2005—2015'. The two institutions have subsequently brought to the partnership most regional governments as well as that of Finland and Sweden, the European Commission, the UNDP and the Council of Europe (Krizsán and Zentai, 2005: 175–80). Others in OSI also see the Roma Decade as a success albeit more as a "rhetorical device" (interview 3) and an "empty frame" to fill (interview

5). Even though Roma concerns are advocated in regional or global institutions, a change in attitudes and practice in local communities and national administrations has been considerably slower.

As such, the global turn has many dimensions. It includes the internationalisation of civil society at national and subnational levels through capacity-building initiatives to educate local communities and policy actors about the impact of globalisation and regionalisation. Additionally, OSI partners with international organisations and governments in arrangements described as ‘global public policy networks’ (OSI, 2006: 174; Stone, 2008). The global turn is also apparent in the rearticulation of the Network’s driving principles for a ‘global open society’.

However, the global turn is not an evenly spread dynamic throughout OSI. Few of the national foundations work on regional issues, or on international organisations, or even on other countries. “Most work on public policy”; that is, advocacy, capacity building and research at the national level (interview 4). Instead, the ‘global turn’ is more pronounced in OSI initiatives directed from New York or Budapest, and increasingly the London office.

Related to the global turn is its ‘policy awakening’. As OSI has matured, it has advanced from a focus on capacity building to using built capacity to influence policy. For instance, as stated by the former LGI Research Director:

We ... have started to gradually move towards new forms of international development. Beyond traditional action-oriented, grant-giving and capacity-building activities, we are actively involved in policy design and policy-making. (Gabor Peteri, preface to Quinn and Young, 2002)

Institution building and open society advocacy have not been supplanted. However, recognition that ‘the collapse of a repressive regime does not automatically lead to the establishment of an open society’ (Soros, 1997: 10–11) prompted a more nuanced, targeted and policy-focused approach in the Network. Indicative of the policy awakening is the support given to PASOS and other think tanks like the ECFR as well as the International Policy Fellowships.

This ‘policy turn’ has been by design, but was also an economic necessity:

“Grant making in 1990s style is no longer feasible. The US dollar was stronger and went a long way. We have expanded our reach, so foundations have become smaller in real dollar terms.” (Interview 3)

“The global and policy turn happened simultaneously. We had focused on generalised civil society development but resources were starting to decrease. We concentrate on policy change now rather than a thousand flowers blooming.” (Interview 7)

The focus on policy work is succeeding civil society capacity building, and represents a more self-conscious approach in OSI. At the same time, there is an “ongoing internal discussion” about the crisis of sustainability for many civil society organisations in CEE (interview 5; Koncz, 2006).

OSI combines activities with normative aspirations and advocacy alongside scientific pursuits and scholarly analysis. To this extent, the Network has 'functioned as a mechanism of bridging knowledge production and policy' (Krizsán and Zentai, 2005: 169). The organisation is sufficiently broad and flexible (some say 'fragmented') to encompass a variety of differently motivated actions. While there are contradictions or tensions inherent in such combinations of norm advocacy and knowledge generation, there are also potential benefits in consolidating the mission of OSI. The network structure potentially facilitates the incorporation of local expertise into more traditional and elite research approaches. Parts of the Network can be engaged in policy from conceptualisation through to policy advocacy, concrete action and monitoring, although this does not happen as often as hoped (Krizsán and Zentai, 2005: 174, 182).

Its image as a knowledge actor is a significant source of authority for OSI. Many of its operatives have social status as experts and reputable policy analysts. Many OSI operations are think tanks or other types of research and analysis organisation. Attributed as public-spirited and with a steadfast commitment to independence, objectivity and scholarly enterprise bestows authority on OSI in a dynamic that also boosts the reputations of the individuals associated with it. These groups (and sometimes the media in its quest for expert commentary) legitimate OSI staff as 'serious' and 'expert' persons. To maintain their organisational reputation and repudiate accusations of politicisation, lobbying or ideological polemic, OSI executives have encouraged engagement with academic communities. In this regard, the relationship and physical proximity of OSI-Budapest to its sister institution – CEU – is important.

In sum, OSI has been in constant renegotiation and reconstruction of its identity and pushing out its sociopolitical boundaries as a transnational actor. In reinventing itself from a norm broker in opposition to communism and advocating open society values to become a body with stronger research capacity, it has also sought to bridge social science and praxis. Finally, although it is a non-state actor, its partnership activities and policy aspirations implicate OSI in transnational policy making.

## Transnational policy networks

The source of OSI power and influence does not lie in numbers; it does not have or seek electoral support, and it is not a social movement. Nor does it have the power and authority of public office; it is outside the international civil service of intergovernmental organisations and state bureaucracies. In terms of material power, OSI is puny compared to that of corporations and the economic clout of business, notwithstanding the hundreds of millions ploughed in by its founder. Instead, the sources of its power in policy lie in the appeal of its norms, knowledge and networks. That is, the norms of the open society and human rights bolstered by knowledge creation through think tanks, university and policy fellowships.

OSI seeks to provide the conceptual language, the normative paradigms, the empirical examples that then become the accepted assumptions for those making policy. OSI does not act alone in such intellectual action, but frequently in coalition with like-minded thinkers and activists in journalism, the professions, universities and so forth. Through its networks, OSI draws together intellectual resources, allowing

the national foundations to do the work of articulation between the national, regional and global levels of governance. The very notion of 'open society' has also been represented by Soros as 'as a universal concept (that) transcends all boundaries' (Soros, 1997: 7). That is, a concept and value system that can be transferred.

However, rather than just transcending boundaries, OSI – and numerous other transnational actors – are also carving out new transnational spaces for public action. The Habermasian notion of a public sphere goes some way to accommodating this idea of a realm for the evolution of public opinion (Hodess, 2001: 130). However, this notion is based predominantly on debate and dialogue, neglecting in considerable degree the variety of institutional developments that populate this space and the global policy processes that networks form. Instead of a simple co-option into governance, OSI is proactive in the creation of transnational policy transfer processes through its own international network infrastructure and identity, as well as through multiple policy partnerships.

Within this sphere of global policy debate and networking, OSI has been consolidating its own credibility and authority in part by creating its own audiences and reference points. Funding intellectuals, NGOs, the CEU and other academic centres helps build clientele relationships between these grantees and OSI, as well as with other foreign donors. By no means is this exceptional to OSI, but a common feature of philanthropic foundations (Roelofs, 2003: 188). However, OSI subsidises various experts and intellectuals to inform professional or bureaucratic audiences. Instead of the linear transmission of knowledge with OSI as a one-way conveyor belt of policy ideas, a circular process is in operation whereby the constituencies of OSI are sources of legitimation of OSI as a 'transnational expert institution' (Lera St Clair, 2006).

Recognition of OSI-supported think tanks as centres for expert, scientific and authoritative advice occurs because of the scholarly credentials and output of these organisations. It transpires because of the relationship with public institutions and donor groups that have a vested interest in the general belief that policy institutes are rational social tools for policy planning. Commissioning and funding studies, these interests want independent and rigorous analysis. On the other side of the coin, these international agencies can then legitimise their policy position by arguing that they are interacting with and consulting independent civil society organisations. The various policy networks of the national foundations further embed OSI in a range of official actions and public policies. Clear distinctions between state and non-state, public and private, become blurred. Moreover, hierarchies in civil society are generated.

OSI therefore becomes a 'meta-NGO' where its primary purpose is to provide support to other NGOs and groups but can 'end up "governing" other NGOs' (Stubbs, 2005: 81). And in taking a 'global turn' in its 'policy awakening', OSI-NY and Budapest become more distant from local associations and closer to international organisations and other 'transnational expert institutions'.

To conclude, this article avoids the assumption that non-state actors are in a distinct domain of civil society separate from emergent forms of transnational authority. Nor does it regard philanthropic foundations as located in a hermetically sealed 'third sector' separate from state or market. Focusing on the 'soft' ideational and normative policy transfer undermines notions of clear-cut boundaries between an



independent philanthropic body in civil society and highlights the intermeshing and mutual engagement that comes with networks and coalitions, funding, partnerships and shared policy dialogues. While OSI has origins as a grassroots civil society actor in the post-communist countries, it is becoming an elite global policy organisation engaged with the rather more closed societies of multilateral initiative and transnational policy networks.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [www.soros.org/about/overview](http://www.soros.org/about/overview)

<sup>2</sup> Email from Mabel van Oranje-Wisse Smit, 8 June 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Most interviewees distanced OSI from such interpretations, considering journalistic portrayals to be an oversimplification of the role that OSI played and a gross overstatement of its influence. “We are not the driving force behind oppositions in Ukraine or Georgia ... they would be there anyway” (interview 3).

<sup>4</sup> John Gray (2006: 23) paraphrased Soros’ position on ‘reflexivity’ as follows: ‘social objects are partly created by human perceptions and beliefs, and when these perceptions and beliefs change, social objects change with them. This introduces an element of uncertainty into our view of the world: ... we can never have objective knowledge of society’.

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### Interviews

Note: Interviews are listed in alphabetical order (distinct from numerical order).

Tom Carothers, OSI Board member, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 8 March 2007

Allison Giffen, Policy Analyst, OSI-Washington, DC, 6 March 2007

Robert Kushen, Director of International Operations, OSI New York, 26 February 2007

Mary Frances Lindstrom, Open Society Foundation, London, 7 December 2006

Bronwen Manby, Open Society Foundation, 7 December 2006

Jonas Rolett, Regional Director for Southern Central and Eastern Europe, Washington, DC, 6 March 2007

George Vickers, Regional Director for Latin America, Washington, DC, 6 March 2007

**Diane Stone**, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, UK,  
diane.stone@warwick.ac.uk

## Appendix: OSI Initiatives and Soros Foundations Network

OSI has an extensive research Grants, Scholarships, and Fellowships scheme. The National Foundations and the Initiatives are the operational part of OSI.

### Soros Foundations Network

Open Society Foundation for Albania	Open Society Fund–Lithuania
Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation–Armenia	Open Society Foundation
Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation–Azerbaijan	Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia
Open Society Fund–Bosnia and Herzegovina	Soros Foundation–Moldova
Open Society Institute–Sofia	Open Society Forum (Mongolia)
Open Society Fund–Prague	Foundation Open Society Institute–Representative Office Montenegro
Open Society Initiative for East Africa	Stefan Batory Foundation (Poland)
Open Estonia Foundation	Soros Foundation Romania
Open Society Georgia Foundation	Fund for an Open Society–Serbia
Fundacion Soros–Guatemala	Open Society Foundation–Bratislava
Fondation Connaissance et Liberte	Open Society Foundation for South Africa
Soros Foundation–Hungary	Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa
Soros Foundation – Kazakhstan	Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation–Tajikistan
Kosovo Foundation for Open Society	Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation–Turkey
Soros Foundation–Kyrgyzstan	International Renaissance Foundation (Ukraine)
Soros Foundation–Latvia	Open Society Initiative for West Africa

### Initiatives

Most of the initiatives are administered by OSI–New York or OSI–Budapest and are implemented in cooperation with Soros foundations in various countries and regions.

AfriMAP  
 Arts & Culture Program  
 Burma Project/Southeast Asia Initiative  
 Central Eurasia Project  
 Closing the Addiction Treatment Gap  
 Community Fellowships  
 Documentary Photography Project  
 Early Childhood Program  
 East Africa Initiative  
 East East Program: Partnership Beyond Borders  
 Economic & Business Development Program  
 Education Support Program  
 English Language Programs

## EUMAP

Global Drug Policy Program

Governance &amp; Public Policy

Human Rights &amp; Governance Grants Program

Information Program

International Higher Education Support Program

International Policy Fellowships

Latin America Program

Local Government &amp; Public Service Reform Initiative

Media Program

Medicine as a Profession

Middle East &amp; North Africa Initiative

Middle East &amp; North Africa Initiative

Open Society Fellowship

Open Society Justice Initiative

Open Society Mental Health Initiative

OSI-Baltimore

OSI-Brussels

OSI-Washington, D.C.

Program on Reproductive Health and Rights

Project on Death In America

Public Health Program

Roma Initiatives

Scholarship Programs

Think Tank Fund

Turkmenistan Project

U.S. Programs

Women's Program

Youth Initiative

Youth Initiatives