

**INNOVATIVE MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP
IN CENTRAL EUROPE: FOUNDING
MEMBERS OF THE PACT OF FREE
CITIES**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE
ENVIRONMENT AND CYBER

OF THE

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**INNOVATIVE MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP IN
CENTRAL EUROPE: FOUNDING MEMBERS
OF THE Pact OF FREE CITIES**

Thursday, December 2, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE
ENVIRONMENT AND CYBER,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:12 a.m., via Webex, Hon. William R. Keating (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. KEATING. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee will come to order and without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record subject to the length limitations in the rules.

To insert something into the record please have your staff email the previously-mentioned address or contact our committee staff directly.

Please keep your video function on at all times even when we are recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and un-muting themselves. Please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking.

I will mention that there will be some delays in some of the back and forth with our witnesses because of translation time that would occur. And consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompany regulation staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we do have a quorum. I thank all our members that are here and that will be joining us. I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Pursuant to notice we are holding a hearing today entitled, "Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe: Founding Members of the Pact of Free Cities."

I want to thank you all for being here, thank our witnesses given the time zone issues we have for their participation. It is extremely important.

As many of you know this month is an important month for the Biden Administration as they hold the Summit for Democracy. This event will bring together nations of similar values and principles to share best practices in democratic resiliency. Many of the nations invited have made great strides in terms of democratic development including those in Central and Eastern Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall 32 years ago the countries of Central and Eastern Europe made the transition from communism to democracy, developed market economies, and integrated into the transatlantic community. These countries are now members of the European Union, a union founded on economic integration, but bound by common values such as freedom of the press, rule of law, and an independent judiciary. Together they sought to protect the basic human rights of their citizens while working to ensure access to the fundamentals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In addition, these countries have become strong national security partners of the United States and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. As such, Congress continues to develop and support these security alliances and work together with our European partners to address joint security challenge. This is the one advantage we all have together in the face more malign activities in the world today.

In addition, these countries have become strong national partners and, unfortunately however, in recent years many of my colleagues and I in the transatlantic community, including civil society organizations like Freedom House, which assesses levels of democracy around the world, have become increasingly concerned with some policies and rhetoric that have emerged in Central Europe.

Slovakia. Freedom House notes that, quote, “While civil liberties are generally protected, democratic institutions are hampered by entrenched discrimination against the Roma community and growing political hostility toward migrants and refugees,” unquote. Then they notes that, quote, “Political corruption remains a problem.”

In the Czech Republic Freedom House asserts that several corruption scandals and political disputes have, quote, “hampered normal legislative activity,” unquote, and that, quote, “a liberal rhetoric and influence of power for business entities in the political arena are becoming increasingly visible.”

In Poland the rapid economic growth experienced since 1989 has benefited some parts of the country more than others. Freedom House believes that this disparity in wealth has contributed to, quote, “a deep divide between liberal and pro-European parties and those purporting to defend national interest and traditional Polish Catholic values,” unquote.

The Law and Justice Party, which has led the government of Poland since 2015, has encouraged anti-LGBTQI+ policies and attitudes, politicized the judicial system threatening to reverse much of Poland’s democratic development. An increase in nationalist homophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric has fueled concerns about the safety of minority communities in the country.

While Freedom House ranks Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland as, quote/unquote, “free countries,” there is no doubt there is work to be done to protect marginalized communities, uphold the rule of law, and to crack down on corruption activities.

Finally, and most concerning, since 2019 Freedom House has classified Hungary as, quote/unquote, “party free.” Hungary is the first EU member State to ever be designated as partly free. Following the election of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in 2010, the

governing Fidesz Party has published through constitutional legal challenges and they have pushed through constitutional legal challenges rather than what Freedom House describes, to consolidate control over the country's independent institutions. These changes also, according to Freedom House, hamper the operation of opposition groups, journalists, universities, non-governmental organizations who criticize the government

[inaudible] that the government finds unfavorable.

In recent years the Central European University has forced—to find a new home in Austria, employees of the Moscow-based Russian International Investment banks were given diplomatic status, independent journalism has been threatened by de facto government control over much of the media, and the government has adopted legislation restricting the rights of transgender individuals, to name just a few concerning policies of course that we have seen in Hungary.

Overall, there is no doubt of the seriousness of the concerns regarding democracy in Central Europe. Malign influence in the region, particularly from Russia and China, encourage democratic backsliding, to slip further and further away from the ideals of our transatlantic alliance.

Although the scope is different in the U.S. than it is in Europe, we are also dealing with threats to our Democracy through malign influence campaigns, disinformation, and more. Notably Freedom House has downgraded the U.S.' global freedom rankings by 11 points over the last decade.

Only together as a transatlantic community can we tackle many of the problems facing our democracies. To meet these challenges and many others our four witnesses here today launch the Pact of Free Cities.

The Pact, launched in 2019 as an alliance of Central European mayors, has pledged to protect and advance liberal democracy, recognizing the challenges of democratic development in the region, and establishing joint initiatives to solve climate, housing, and many other social issues that face these cities. The Pact has since expanded from the original *Visegrad* four capitals to include over 20 cities from Los Angeles to Taipei who have joined in the fight to solve the world's challenges.

Recognizing the progress being made in the Pact today I have invited the founding four members of group: Matúš Vallo of Bratislava; Gergely Karácsony of Budapest; Zdeněk Hřib of Prague; and Rafał Trzaskowski of Warsaw. I have invited them to share with us the policies and programs they have initiated in their home cities.

And we are so proud to have you as witnesses here today.

As we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic here and around the world, local leadership is critical in times of peace and times of crisis to respond and prepare for emergencies, as well as to develop initiatives and innovative solutions to local and global challenges.

For example, in the United States during the previous Administration our country moved away from climate change commitments, but local leaders here in the U.S. from State and municipal govern-

ments rose to the occasion and undertook environmental initiatives to reduce your carbon footprint.

As such, like many of our people that are listening here today, I have read a lot about the local policies and programs developed by these mayors, these leaders, and I am eager to hear from them directly. I am proud to have the mayors here today and hear of their successes and their failures.

With that, I welcome an opening statement from our ranking member, Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick, and then we will call on the mayors in alphabetical order to present their testimony.

I now turn to Ranking Member Brian Fitzpatrick for his opening remarks.

Mr. FITZPATRICK. Good morning and thank you, Chairman Keating.

[Speaking foreign language] and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

The cornerstone of this committee is the defense of democratic values around the world. We do so by supporting the rule of law, independent media, peaceful assembly, religious freedom, and the ability to participate in the political process, and these democratic values form the backbone of the transatlantic bond between the United States and the European allies. The strength of our NATO alliance is inextricably linked with the strength of our democracies.

As recognized in the Brussels NATO Summit communique earlier this year autocrats in China and Russia are actively leveraging predatory investments and hybrid tactics to subvert Western institutions. Their coercive policies stand in stark contrast to the fundamental Western values that we all share. And our like-minded allies and partners need to prove that democracy, not autocracy, can provide more for the citizens of the world.

I have been encouraged by some of our witnesses' efforts to stand up to the Chinese Communist Party and their bullying and denouncing the threat it and Vladimir Putin pose to all of our democracies. And I would like to hear more from Mr. Hrib whose approach if fighting authoritarianism has encompassed many topics we have covered in this very committee, from meeting with civil society leaders like Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya to defending Uyghur survivors of the CCP concentration camps.

Your efforts have included some of the most pressing issues on the planet. And particularly your efforts to strengthen relations with Taiwan are incredibly commendable and we thank you for them and we encourage you to continue to do that.

Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have recently welcomed Taiwan's foreign minister and opened dialog to bolster strategic cooperation. Please keep this going.

With that, I would like to hear more about your decisionmaking and standing up to the intimidations of the Chinese Communist Party and what more the transatlantic alliance could do to stand united in the face of their coercive behavior.

Mr. Karácsony, you have also faced the subversive influence of the Chinese Communist Party. When the proposed construction of China's Fudan University threatened to spread Beijing's influence at the expense of Hungarian taxpayers, you took a strong stand in opposition. And I would like to hear from you on what motivated

you to take these strong and principled stances. And we encourage you to continue to do that.

Poland and Mr. Trzaskowski have spoken out extensively on Putin's most glaring malign influence project, Nord Stream 2. I agree with your assessment that gas must never flow through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and your condemnation of Russia's increasingly aggressive posturing. Please continue do that. And we encourage that and we support that.

Firm opposition and clear-eyed recognition to the authoritarian threats are necessary to ensure freedom and democracy prevail around the globe. These goals must not be a partisan issue. The de-stabilizing malign actions from Moscow and Beijing and the threat that they pose to democracies across the globe demand and deserve our full attention and I look forward to hearing from you all today on these very, very pressing matters, particularly as it relates to the existential threats posed by the Chinese Communist Party and the Vladimir Putin regime.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, ranking member.

And I will now introduce our witnesses. Again thank you for being here and thank you for your commitments to democracy.

First, Mr. Matúš Vallo is the mayor of Bratislava in Slovakia. He has served in that position since 2018 and he is an architect by trade and an urban activist, someone who has brought those skills to his position. Welcome.

Mr. Gergely Karácsony has served as the mayor of Budapest, Hungary since 2019. He previously served as the mayor of Budapest's 14th District, as well as a member of the Hungarian Parliament. I want to note for the record that Mr. Karácsony will speak in English for his opening statement but use simultaneous translation for the question and answer portion of today's hearing.

Mr. Zdeněk Hřib has been mayor of Prague, Czech Republic since 2018. He is a member of the Czech Pirate Party and the first member of the party to be elected as mayor in the Czech Republic.

Mr. Rafał Trzaskowski is the mayor of Warsaw, Poland since 2018. In 2020 Mr. Trzaskowski was a Civic Platform candidate for the presidency of Poland. In 2014 he served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Poland. In 2013 as Minister for Administration and Digitalization.

I now recognize each witness for 5 minutes and without objection your prepared written statement will be made a part of the record.

Mr. Vallo, you are now recognized for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF MATÚŠ VALLO, MAYOR, BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKI

Mr. VALLO. Thank you very much. I hope you can hear me.

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the committee, me and my colleagues, mayors from Central European capitals, we are honored to have the opportunity to be here today to discuss the situation in Central Europe and in our cities and to present our collaborative activities.

The four us—of us here today created the Pact of Free Cities 2 years ago from a very specific moment. The voters in our four capitals expressed a clear vision for an alternative to the corrupt and

populist national governments. We realized that the mandate given to us exceeds the boundaries of our capitals.

Then we have become whatever we thought, dressed with civility or not, standard bearers for democratic hopes of many in our countries. That is a mission we take seriously and to better delivered we have team up so as to share experience to encourage each other, but also to jointly represent the hopes of our countries abroad as we are doing today.

We are speaking to you at the moment of rising anti-democratic sentiment in many national governments worldwide. Across the world public trust and the liberal democracy has weakened partly because of our democratically elected leaders are failing to lead. Central Europe is in the eye of the storm. Our democracies are young and therefore more vulnerable to then countries with strong democratic institutions and centuries of democratic tradition.

We are still searching for a new identity that will define us in 21st century. We're no longer countries in transition. We're no longer defined by being ex-communists. But what kind of societies exactly do we aspire to be that has not been settled yet?

Western liberal democracies should be an H.R. model, but Western democracies themselves are under pressure from populists at home. Countries with much longer democratic traditions that ours have fell in victim to the populist bug. The global crisis of democracy has encouraged back home in Central Europe. When you no longer have a clear beacon to follow, it becomes easier for populists to pedal alternatives.

We democrats sell the idea of a positive future, but that is often too distant, blurs things. Far-right leaders sell the idea of hate which is immediate, almost tangible and sadly far to catch.

They say that when the goes gets tough, the tough gets going, and that is what the mayors on the screen in front of you have done. We believe that the best way to represent democracy through direct experience. When people experience trust and freedom on local level, it ceases to be that distant destination which may never be reach. It is here and now and if it can work in a city-wide and in a country. If cities can have transparent public institution that deliver a good service, which is very important with services, why should the Nation not have the same?

That is what we do. We stand as an example. Where the national governments are failing, the cities and regions continue to be island of freedom and democracy, not only serving their citizen, but also service as an example to others in our nations.

Honorable Member of Congress, owing to our intertwined history and cultural proximity we can stand together stronger as the mayors of free cities in Central Europe and offer each other solidarity, mutual support, and collaboration in good times and bad.

We in Slovakia closely watch difficult situation of our colleagues in Hungary and Poland who have to stand for the basic pillars of democracy because we know that democracy is in fact fragile everywhere and we must stand up for it together. We all must stand together.

In 2020 general election in Slovakia people voted for radical change after the tragic murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova. The Slovak people clearly rejected the

sitting government with its close ties to corruption. The new ruling coalition has declared war on corruption and is committed to high standards of transparency.

Unfortunately the reality of governance, especially in COVID-19 pandemics, is proving that the anti-corruption agenda itself, however sincere, is not enough for effective leadership of the country. The crisis need trustworthy leaders who can stand up together and fight for the common good. If they do not, any political program can slip into the empty and dangerous populism.

This is why I strongly believe that is mainly the building of trust that lead us through the tough times and it's extremely important to investigate. If we as a city leaders manage to renew the trust of our democratic institution, our cities could mediate and implement the key cultural change since the imminent threats, whatever it is a climate crisis or democratic crisis, can be only overcome through a completely new political culture and profound changes to the way of life and thinking of our societies.

Let's stand in this uneasy fight for democratic and positive future together. Thank you very much for attention.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Vallo follows:]

Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe: Founding Members of the Pact of Free Cities**Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy,
the Environment and Cyber****Matúš Vallo, Mayor of Bratislava
December 2nd, 2021**

Chairman Keating, ranking member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the Subcommittee,

My colleagues and I, mayors from Central European Capitals, are honored to have the opportunity to be here today to discuss the situation in Central Europe and in our cities, and to present our collaborative activities.

Pact of Free Cities

The alliance of our capitals, which we named the Pact of Free Cities, was **conceived 2 years ago on the wave of the election victories** of four mayors of four capitals in Central Europe, where voters sent a clear message calling for change and an alternative to their national governments. We are close in age and life experience – all of us remember the Cold War, but we grew up and pursued our professional careers in what was already an international and free environment. We all promised our voters cities that are more open, more international, and more professionally governed and offer a good place to live as the direct opposite to the corruption, populism and bad governance which is the everyday experience of many people in our region.

The momentum created by this wave was so unique that we felt it necessary to institutionalize it and to highlight its potential for broader change.

What we are facing at the moment, is the **rise of anti-democratic populism in many national governments** worldwide. The crisis of leadership and public trust threatens liberal democracy worldwide.

Central Europe, with its still-fragile democracy which emerged out of painful transformation processes after 1989, is obviously more susceptible to those threats than countries with strong democratic institutions and centuries of democratic tradition. We are still searching for the new identity which will define us in the 21st century. It is most likely the next stage after eradicating our ex-Soviet or post-communist identity and dealing with the “countries-in-transition” image. It is not easy to define the idea of the future and take the lead in times when there seems – even globally – to be very little light at the end of the tunnel. This is, of course, a good playground for cynical populism, peddling never-existing past identities and trying to define the enemy as everything which is “different”. When the idea of the positive future for which we fight is blurry, far-right leaders pounce on the opportunity to stir the hate in order to unite their voters.

This is the challenge ahead of us, this is the core of the Pact – offering an alternative to populism and undemocratic tendencies and **offering people the fair idea of a future based on the common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, sustainability, equality, rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity.**

Collaboration is crucial

Almost two years have passed since we signed the Pact, and I am convinced that this alliance has proven to be vital and viable. We communicate on a regular basis, exchange experiences not only between mayors but also on the city administration level, we try to define common problems and create task forces to address them, we coordinate our positions on the European level and prepare collaborative projects. But most of all – we feel **the strength of standing together for the common values of democracy and open society**. And apparently this momentum and ethos appeal to many other mayors in Europe and around the world, since in September of this year twenty more mayors across the globe joined the initiative and this expansion is set to continue.

Global issues versus local solutions

We created the Pact as an alliance of mayors focused on collaboration in defending democracy and facing global challenges because we feel that cities and their leaders now have a very major role in addressing global problems and issues. Cities can create pilot projects, offer innovative solutions and focus on informed and aware citizens as agents of change. By making good policies, cities can influence their citizens, their attitudes, values and behavior – and that can trigger positive challenges for entire societies.

Democracy must serve the climate

My generation is now facing several crucial challenges which will define the future of our societies. Climate change is something imminent and widely discussed, but I equally feel there is also the threat of populism and post-truth reality to the fundamentals of democracy. The climate crisis is also a democracy crisis, and the viability of our democracies will be tested by their capacity to face the existential danger of global warming and ability to mitigate its negative impact on our societies.

We formed our Pact of Free Cities alliance with the intention to protect open, free, and democratic societies worldwide. Facing the climate crisis, we recognize our dual responsibility. On the one hand, given our cities' substantial share in national greenhouse gas emissions, we can greatly contribute to the global fight against climate change, be it through urban greening, boosting energy efficiency or the rapid transitioning of public transport systems from fossil fuel-based vehicles. On the other, through shaping bold public policies, cities must remain the bulwarks of liberal democracy and stand united against political forces that use global crises as a pretext for centralized decision-making, self-serving nationalism and inhuman practices against disadvantaged social or ethnic groups.

What we need now is an unprecedented mobilization across borders and industries to tackle the crisis, requiring the concerted action of international, national and municipal policymakers alike. It is extremely important to ensure that the existing and future policy and financial frameworks include, and target cities and local communities and that governments and international bodies actively involve citizens, local communities and civil societies in global climate policy making and negotiations.

That is why we, the mayors of the Pact, urged the European Union in June 2020 to set a more ambitious emissions reduction target for 2030, calling the escalating climate crisis a greater challenge than the coronavirus pandemic, and why we repeated this appeal with a letter and declaration to the COP26 summit in Glasgow. We all promised our voters an alternative to the political reality of their countries - better governed and sustainable cities. It is important to keep this promise, especially in times when many Central European governments are dragging their feet in the climate fight.

Importance of having a Plan B

A few years ago, when I decided to run for mayor, I tried - together with a group of experts who supported me - to define what Bratislava needed. The youngest EU capital has been neglected for decades by its leaders and we wanted to transform it into a modern, thriving and vibrant European city. We understood that it would be a long journey, but we came up with four key ingredients for the successful recovery of the city – the plan, the team, the trust and the cooperation.

We put together Plan B – the plan for Bratislava, the first comprehensive urban plan ever made for the Slovak capital. We assembled an impressive team of people – accomplished professionals from a variety of fields – who wanted to build a better city and run for city council. During the campaign, we invested a lot in trust building and cooperation platforms, since we knew that without these subtle social fabrics, our Plan B cannot be successful.

One year after I started my journey as mayor, the pandemic struck with unexpected force. And since then, we are learning every day how to be flexible enough to adapt our plans and respond to the crises that come our way. Unsurprisingly, the recipe for crisis response is just the same we had at the beginning - the plan, the team, the trust and the cooperation. I promised my city it would have Plan B, and the reality lies in proving my ability to deliver it every single week to an extent I couldn't even imagine before.

Building trust is the key

I strongly believe that it is **mainly trust that leads us through the tough times** and it is extremely important to invest in it.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that often cities are more efficient and successful in a crisis situation than the national government. They are closer to everyday life, more efficient and able to build trustful relationship with the citizens.

In Slovakia, the national government imposed nation-wide COVID-19 testing to be conducted by the cities every week. Suddenly we had a whole new set of responsibilities. Our goal was to make the experience simple, easy and fast for residents. It was a true lesson in agile government, but good services combined with sensitive communication made people feel better in these difficult times, increased their trust in city management in contrast with the chaotic management of the pandemic on the national level, and triggered collaboration and a sense of community. Today, the vaccination rate in the City of Bratislava is significantly higher than in the rest of the country.

Effective policies on the city level could noticeably improve the lives of residents - cleaner air, better public transport, welcoming public spaces, good economic opportunities, social programs, safety, etc. But primarily, cities should mediate and implement cultural change, since the imminent threats – whether it is the climate crisis or democracy crisis – can be only overcome through a completely **new political culture and profound changes to the way of life and the thinking of our societies**.

United we stand

Central Europe, with its complicated history and shifting borders, has faced much turbulence, and the last few decades are no exception. The transformation towards open, democratic societies has not been straightforward and the backlash of nationalism and social and racial hatred is a challenge each of our countries has had to face at one time or another. A high level of corruption and nepotism is

often the lethal agent corroding the soft tissue of social cohesion and solidarity, decreasing the already low level of trust towards democratic institutions and elected representatives.

But thanks to our intertwined history and cultural proximity, we also have the great advantage of having friends and allies in neighboring countries who understand our problems, worries and joys. This is the highest added value of the Pact of Free Cities – the solidarity, mutual support and collaboration in good times and bad. We closely watch the difficult situation of our colleagues in Hungary and Poland who have to stand for the basic pillars of democracy because we know that democracy is in fact fragile everywhere, and we must stand up for it together.

In the 2020 general elections in Slovakia, people voted for radical change. After the tragic murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová, the Slovak people clearly rejected the sitting government with its close ties to corruption and inability to secure justice and rule of law for everybody. The new ruling coalition has declared war on corruption and is committed to high standards of transparency. Unfortunately, the reality of governance, especially in these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, is proving that the anti-corruption agenda itself, however sincere, is not enough for the comprehensive, responsible and effective leadership of the country. The crises need leaders who can stand together and fight for the common good. If they don't, any political program, however good, can slip into empty and dangerous populism.

Liberal democracy is going through a difficult period and I believe the top priority for us – democratic leaders of all walks – is to defend and promote it not only by what we say, but mainly by what we do. If people experience the feeling of trust on a community or local level, if they see credible and transparent public institutions and policies in their cities, if they can identify with democratic leaders in the places where they live, that is the best we can do for the future of democracy and the general level of trust towards democratic institutions. **Where national governments are failing, it is the cities and regions who can still stand with people and democracy.**

Mr. KEATING. Well, thank you, Mr. Vallo.
I will now turn to Mr. Karácsony. You are now recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF GERGELY KARÁCSONY, MAYOR, BUDAPEST,
HUNGARY**

Mr. KARÁCSONY. Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of subcommittee, I am honored to speak with you today on behalf of the people of Budapest. Today I will speak about the decline of democracy in Hungary. I will also speak about the mayors in Hungary and internationally are doing to safeguard democratic principles.

Honorable members, just as in the United States the global financing crisis in 2008 hit very hard in Hungary. Orban Viktor exploited social discontent and built a new form of hybrid regime between democracy and autocracy. The government forced through a new constitution, changed the electoral law, crushed civil society, and occupied the media. In foreign policy the government broke with Hungary's pro-European and transatlantic orientation. Declared—an opening to the East and drastically increased collaboration with Russia and China.

Hungary's two most expensive public investment projects both serve the interest of these countries. The Budapest-Belgrade railway, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, is being financed by a Chinese loan. Similarly, the nuclear power plant in Paks is financed by Russia serving Russian interest. The details of both contracts are kept secret.

The governments also employs Putin's methods. Last year the speaker of the National Assembly told Hungarian Intelligence Services that the opposition is the greatest national security threats in Hungary. Yet their actions speak just as loud as their words. From 2018 Pegasus spyware has been used against Hungarian journalists, businessman and opposition politicians, and there is no sign that intelligence operations have stopped.

Honorable Members of Congress, there is hope. I assure you that the Hungarian government's values do not mirror those of Hungarian society. Millions of my fellow citizens embrace a very different political agenda. In 2019, these voters made their voice heard when the democratic opposition won key positions in Budapest and in many other cities and towns. Running these cities and towns became more difficult because the central government chose to financially squeeze opposition-led local governments. Yet we managed to showcase once more the value of a democratic, respectful, and inclusive governance—to Hungarian citizens.

This, together with the democratic opposition running together for the first time in the more than a decade provide us with a unique opportunity to defeat Orban's nationalist populism in April next year and restore Hungary's rightful standing in the transatlantic alliance.

Honorable Members of Congress, lastly, on the Pact of Free Cities. We believe that cities, where democracy was born, have a responsibility to protect it and improve it. We are proud to represent a broad ideological spectrum who say no to tribalism and

illiberalism and aspire for a livable, equitable, and truly democratic future.

Recognizing that the values and challenges that our initiative is based on transcend the Central-Eastern European Region, we have decide to expand our alliance. And cities worldwide are answering our call. Earlier this year 21, city leaders from all over the world signed on to the new Pact of Free Cities declaration. More mayors will be joining soon.

The Pact stands ready to work with American cities and U.S. Congress to address all that threatens to undermine our democracies. Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Karácsony follows:]

Gergely Karácsony
Mayor of Budapest

**Written testimony at the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy,
the Environment and Cyber**

**Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe: Founding Members of the Pact
of Free Cities, 2 December 2021**

Translated by the Office of the Mayor
Interpretation for the Q&A: Ms Éva Pataky, Mr Ádám Kiss

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to speak with you today on behalf of the people of Budapest, Hungary's capital city.

Speaking here today, I am representing some 1.8 million freedom-loving Hungarians living in the 10th biggest city of the European Union.

In this written testimony I outline the sorrow decline of democracy in Hungary and in the wider world, the struggle of Budapest and other Hungarian opposition-run cities amidst the pandemic against a hostile central government, and our newly founded international cities' alliance: the Pact of Free Cities, which seeks to protect freedom and civic liberties, and to stand up for an open, inclusive society within Central-Eastern Europe and beyond.

The crisis of democracy is, of course, neither unique to my country, nor is it without cause. Starting with the global economic crisis in 2008, large swaths of our constituents have become increasingly discontent with the political establishment, and particularly with the economic order that has created hitherto unprecedented inequality, social injustice, and environmental degradation. Millions of activists, many of them from big, multicultural urban centers, call out establishment parties worldwide demanding transformative change, socially more just policies and climate protection. I stand with their call.

There is, however, another type of backlash against the old ways of representative democracy. Yet other millions of disillusioned voters, typically in suburban and rural areas, fell in the grip of political agendas that reject the rule of law, pluralism, racial justice, and human rights. This trend, as I believe my fellow mayors from Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw will also confirm today, has been particularly strong in some Central European countries. Here populists have dominated the political landscape in recent years. They exploit societal discontent for personal and political gain, and without providing genuine solutions to today's many ills. They claim to represent the nation, but demonize their fellow citizens who take issue with their policies or embrace a more liberal worldview. They whip up historic grievances and embrace the kind of xenophobic nationalism that twice engulfed Europe in war in the previous century.

This is not how I want my country to be. The members of the subcommittee will be familiar with two bright episodes from Hungary's 20th century history, that long echoed, and indeed left their mark on the American political discourse too. In 1956 my nation stood up against communist dictatorship and revolted against Moscow's puppet government. The revolution, that established a multi-party system, introduced media freedom, and declared Hungary's military non-alignment, was crushed with overwhelming Soviet force and left in its wake hundreds of executed freedom fighters, some 200,000 Hungarian refugees, and several years of brutal oppression. In little more than 30 years' time, it was again Hungary which in making a bold decision accelerated democratic transition in the Communist bloc. By opening its border with Austria in the fall of 1989 and thus letting thousands of East German refugees leaving for the West, Hungary greatly contributed to the fall of the Iron Curtain.

These two historic events rightly reputed my country on the international stage as a champion of freedom and democracy. Sadly, this good reputation has been badly tarnished in the past 12 years. Again, my country has been making headlines in the international media, but this time around, I regret to say, for quite the opposite reason.

Prior to the 2010 national elections, now Prime Minister Viktor Orbán infamously said to his fellow party members: "We only need to win once, but we need to win big then." Subsequent developments in Hungarian public life reinforced all the fears that many in Hungary felt about this statement. Riding on widespread discontent with the previous social democratic government, the right-wing nationalist Fidesz party led by Viktor Orban won 52.7% of the votes at the national elections in 2010, and thereby gained a constitutional majority in the Hungarian Parliament. What swiftly followed was a complete break-away from the previous political order (whose democratic credentials had been approved by both EU and NATO membership), and the remodeling of Hungary to a novel form of state which political scientists now call an "illiberal", hybrid regime between democracy and autocracy.

The Fidesz government used its constitutional majority to carry out a near-complete capture of the state. It forced through a new constitution without any meaningful public consultation, made major changes in the electoral law, the media law, and the judicial system, all designed to cement the power of the ruling party and its cronies. It introduced a long range of highly controversial legislation, among others on civil society organizations, workers' rights and gay rights. Gradually, it took control of not only all institutions of checks and balances, including the Constitutional Court, the State Prosecutor's Office, the National Bank, but also centralized the media, and misappropriated key cultural institutions and public education. Characteristic to the government's policy is a highly personalized decision-making, unaccountability, disregard for the rule of law and an open hostility toward all kind of personal and institutional autonomies. Under the ideological disguise of illiberal, populist nationalism, our political system has been diverted from its democratic path and made into one-man rule.

In foreign policy too, the government broke with Hungary's long-standing, value-based, strongly pro-European and Atlantic orientation. It declared an "opening to the East", scaled up its political and economic ties with Russia and China, and started playing their bid at the international stage. When it came to condemning and sanctioning Moscow's and Beijing's misdemeanor, Hungary repeatedly blocked EU-level decisions in the foreign ministers' council. One telling case in point about this new international orientation, - and one that directly

impacted my city, - is the scandalous pushing out from Budapest of the US-based Central European University, a prominent international knowledge hub, and the subsequent, classified deals with China to establish a campus of the Chinese Fudan University in my city. Another is the agreement with Vladimir Putin on hosting the International Investment Bank in Budapest with widespread immunities and exceptions, thus allowing for a hotbed for Russian intelligence activities, and threatening European and NATO allied security.

Currently, Hungary's two most expensive public investment projects are the Budapest-Belgrade railway and the Paks 2 nuclear power plant. The former is being financed by a Chinese loan – an investment that is expected to pay off in more than 900 years. Furthermore, being part of the One Belt, One Road initiative, the railway clearly serves Chinese interests. The Paks 2 nuclear power plant is being financed by Russia, serving Russian interests. What is common in both projects is that the contracts have been classified; and despite being financed from Hungarian taxpayers' money, the details are kept secret.

The Hungarian opposition is determined to stop both investment projects and prioritize the Hungarian national interest over that of China and Russia.

It is still about four months until the elections, and, in this time, those who oppose the current regime are likely to be targeted by operations that go well beyond the limits of democratic competition. As it has been recently revealed, in February 2020, the Speaker of the Parliament, probably the second most influential person in Hungarian politics after PM Orbán, also from the ranks of the Fidesz party, gave a speech to the heads of the Hungarian intelligence agencies, in which he expressed his view that the gravest threat to Hungarian national security was the Hungarian opposition itself. If the president of the legislature makes such a claim at a meeting with the heads of the secret services, it can only be interpreted as a way of setting a task for them. And, indeed, since then, there have been many signs that opposition politicians have been the targets of Russian-style kompromat operations.

All these developments of derailing democracy were closely followed by Hungary's friends and allies, leading to severe clashes and even legal proceedings between Hungary and its own political bloc, the European Union. Over the years, both the European Parliament and high-profile independent watchdog organizations, like the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and others, repeatedly examined Hungary's new laws, and expressed their thoroughly argued critique. The EU also launched the so called "Article 7" proceedings, its only genuine tool to sanction members states that violate basic democratic norms.

The overall impact of the these sweeping changes on Hungary's democracy is painfully obvious. Let me just refer to the annual reports of US-based think tank Freedom House. Hungary in the past 11 years has been steadily moving down Freedom House's list of democracies, and in 2019, it was downgraded from a "free" to a "partly free" country.

Hungary's friends abroad concerned about my country's democratic backsliding often make the point that the international democratic community cannot do much about Hungary's anti-democratic turn as long as Hungarians vote in such big numbers for the ruling Fidesz-party, demonstrating their support for its leader. This argument basically adapts the government's

narrative, which rejects all criticism by making this very claim on democratic legitimacy through broad popular support.

The members of this subcommittee should consider two crucial facts in this regard. First, the Hungarian media landscape is dominated almost entirely by pro-government media outlets, including the public broadcasting company that acts as the government's propaganda arm and regularly engages in hate campaigns and spreads misinformation to crush political dissent. Second, even with this media landscape, the majority of Hungarians does not vote for Fidesz. At the last elections, the ruling party got 49,2% of the votes which, due to our largely disproportionate electoral system (designed intentionally so by the very party that benefits from it), gave Fidesz 67% of the parliamentary seats. The media situation and the electoral system, with heavily gerrymandered electoral districts that are both tailor-made for the ruling party, explain how slightly more than 2 million voters in a 10-million strong nation can keep in power the first autocratic government in post-Cold War Europe.

This, in turn, shows that the Hungarian government's value base does not mirror Hungarian society as a whole. Millions of my fellow citizens, typically living in big urban centers and in the multicultural, diverse capital city, embrace a very different political agenda than the government's self-centered nationalism. In 2019 these voters were able to make their voice heard when the democratic opposition's parties finally joined forces and fielded joint candidates in that year's local elections. In Budapest I became Mayor running on a progressive, green urban platform that emphasized climate mitigation and citizen participation. At the city district level, most of the mayoral seats also went to the opposition, which means I can work together with a stable majority in the Budapest City Council. At the national level, we witnessed similar outcomes with 10 of Hungary's biggest cities voting for opposition mayors. As a result of the local elections one-third of all Hungarians now live in cities run by the government's democratic opposition. This political outcome severely disrupted Viktor Orban's hitherto largely undisrupted rule, and again highlighted the growing socio-political divide between liberal urban voters and the socially more conservative countryside.

It was then, right after the 2019 local elections, that together with my fellow mayors, we decided to launch a value-based city cooperation between the capitals of the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia and Poland). Again, this was motivated primarily by these countries' strikingly similar domestic political landscapes where the central government's sustained attacks on the basic norms and practices of liberal democracy co-existed with the four capital cities' staunchly pro-European and liberal outlook. In December 2019 we signed the Pact of Free Cities' founding declaration, in which we announced that we are joining forces to stand up together against the erosion of democratic norms and to advocate for an inclusive, tolerant, diverse society. Our Pact presented another face of our region to the outside world than the government's illiberalism, and attracted considerable international media attention.

It is important to stress that the four founding mayors of the Pact of Free Cities do not represent the same political ideology. Our cities' movement is not a leftist mayors' alliance against their ruling right-wing governments. In fact, we represent a broad ideological spectrum that includes a liberal conservative, a green leftist, an anti-establishment pirate and an independent technocrat. What unites us is our fierce opposition to autocratic governance

and a staunch commitment to liberal democracy, the rule of law, minority rights, free public discourse and an even political playing field. Values that we think should be common denominators in politics across Left and Right.

Our alliance was formed against the background of a similar global phenomenon, that is the increasing economic and political weight of cities at the international stage. Our era is defined by urbanization as one of the most consequential and dynamic forces in the 21st century. More than half of humanity already lives in cities, and two-thirds of the world's population will be a city-dweller by 2050. By now, urban centers produce over 70% of global GDP. They consume close to 70% of the world's energy and produce more than two-thirds of its greenhouse gas emissions. Cities worldwide realize their increasing power and are rising to the common challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, growing inequality and intolerance, and rising housing costs. They do it increasingly in collaboration, pooling resources and exchanging best practices. They rise above partisanship, focusing on delivering tangible solutions to their residents. In the past few decades, cities re-emerged as hubs for progressive policies, as moral champions and pragmatic problem-solvers, positioning themselves against the reluctance, inability or slowness of national governments and international institutions to rise to global challenges, and increasingly seeking to act independently from their home state.

That also explains why the Pact of Free Cities does not limit itself to joint actions and statements in defense of democracy. We also emphasize public policy and how we can together improve the quality of life in our cities in a tangible fashion. In the first year of our cooperation, we focused on the negotiations of the EU's multi-annual budget and advocated for improved access for cities to EU resources for sustainability-related and post-pandemic economic recovery projects. Given cities' massive share in greenhouse gas emissions, their better access to external climate-related funding would be key to cutting CO₂-emissions at the national level. Our initiative was launched by the Pact of Free Cities, but soon grew beyond it and became a Europe-wide cities' movement with 36 European cities signing on to our proposals for EU budget reform. Most of these proposals were eventually voted down by the member states' governments, but our movement did manage to yield some results and, more importantly, put the topic of direct EU-funding for cities on the agenda of the European Union. This is an important and timely discussion the significance of which will only increase in the coming years.

The better funding of cities in the interest of the global sustainability transition is a cause that many local governments in Europe readily embraced. In Hungary, it bears even more significance as the central government chose not to respect the outcome of the 2019 municipal elections, sparing no effort to bleed out financially the opposition-led local governments. Viktor Orban's political calculation is clear: by cutting funds for these cities, he wants to undermine the opposition's popular support, and showcase by next year's national elections that his political challengers are no alternative to his governance. On the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government introduced varied legislation to cut our city revenues. For example, among many similar measures, it halved the so-called local business tax, the only tax revenue that Budapest directly collects. The sustained cuts to our finances forced us to cancel several planned public investment projects, and, in fact, pushed us to the verge of technical bankruptcy. I know of no other country where the central government not only did

not help, but deliberately hurt municipalities in their pandemic protection efforts. Crucially, the central government also excluded us from the allocation of the \$8 billion EU funding that Hungary is entitled to for post-pandemic economic recovery. This is despite the EU's explicit requirement for member states to cooperate with local governments when designing their national recovery plans. Viktor Orban is not interested in delivering for the millions of his fellow citizens who do not vote for him.

As to the Pact of the Free Cities, our work did not stop with lobbying for European funding for cities. Our vision for the Pact has always been to grow it into a global, informal mayoral network, agile to adapt to the ever-changing political environment while maintaining the necessary substance to bring about meaningful change. Recognizing that the values and challenges addressed in its founding declaration are by no means particular to the Central-Eastern European region, the founders of the Pact have decided to expand the alliance across the globe. It was reassuring to see that within a short period of time so many city leaders answered our call.

On 16 September this year, on the margins of the Building Sustainable Democracies conference that Budapest organized, we held the Pact of Free Cities mayoral summit where 21 city leaders – from Los Angeles to Paris and Barcelona to Taipei – signed onto a new Pact of Free Cities declaration that created the framework of our future cooperation. We have committed ourselves to rebuild and reinforce democracy, counter the erosion of the rule of law, stand up for free and fair elections, push back against unfair electoral practices and misinformation campaigns, facilitate citizen engagement, protest human rights abuses, racism and xenophobia, and engage in dialogue and action to help bridge the emerging urban-rural divide. Today our network consists of 25 mayors from around the world. As we go ahead, I am sure that we will become many more.

Democracy is in danger. We believe that urban centers have a responsibility to protect it, improve it, and drive us toward a better society. We are giving voice to our large urban populations who say no to tribalism, illiberalism, and aspire for a livable, equitable, and truly democratic future.

Thank you for your attention!

Mr. KEATING. Thank you for those very significant statements and we look forward to questions as we go forward.

I will now turn to Mr. Hřib. You are now recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF ZDENĚK HŘIB, MAYOR, PRAGUE, CZECH
REPUBLIC**

Mr. HŘIB. Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, and distinguished guest members—distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is a great honor for me that you have invited me to speak at this platform alongside by colleagues from Central European capitals, and I am happy to provide a few remarks on the State of democracy in the Czech Republic and on the role of the cities in defending global democratic principles and human rights.

Considering the increasing urbanization worldwide, it is inevitable that cities are important stakeholders in defending freedom and democracy, and this brought Prague, Budapest, Bratislava, and Warsaw together to establish the Pact of Free Cities in 2019. And another driving force was our shared concern about the State of democracy in our respective countries.

Just to name a few examples from Czech Republic, in the previous decade the government of the business tycoon Andrej Babis was accompanied by an unprecedented conflict of interest and his way of governing and his scandals undermined the rule of law, press freedom, and other crucial democratic values. President Zeman dragged the Czech Republic closer to China and Russia and the Czech foreign policy experienced a diversion from human rights agenda and the fear of migration became a new political topic misused by populist politicians.

I became the mayor of Prague in 2018 representing the Czech Pirate Party and one of my aims was to restore Prague's reputation as an open-minded, liberal democratic, and progressions city, which is a stronghold of the human rights and local leader in tackling climate change.

And I have been strongly promoting these values domestically often in opposition to the national government. And I have been also actively voicing concerns of violations of human rights abroad. This is a moral duty of liberal democratic politicians. For instance, Prague has been supporting the Belarusian democratic opposition. We have fostered a brilliant relationship with Taiwan and Taipei, the capital of Taiwan.

And just a few weeks ago Prague hosted the General Assembly of the World Uyghur Congress and I had the privilege to meet Uyghur survivors from the Xinjiang concentration camps. And I was horrified to hear what they had experienced then. I would like to use this opportunity to call on the international community to work toward ending these concentration camps, the forced labor, forced organ harvesting, and this Uyghur genocide.

I would like also to emphasize my belief that truly democratic and liberal cities should not be servile to illiberal countries such as China and Russia which try to exercise their business-related and political influence also on the municipal level.

And currently Czech Republic is going through a crucial political change. The populist government of Andrej Babis is being replaced.

The new coalition is pledging to restore democratic principles and the rule of law in the country and I would like to emphasize that this positive development in the Czech Republic does not mean that Prague would be less dedicated to the mission of the Pact of Free Cities. On the contrary. Our experience with the previous populist government was a reminder of the fragile nature of democracy. And there is a lot of work ahead in order to strengthen the vital values in our society and Prague is ready to keep supporting our partners.

So in addition to the original aims I see an important task for the Pact nowadays. We should promote the link between human rights and the crucial contemporary global challenge of climate change. So in September 2022 Prague will be hosting the Pact of Free Cities Summit during the Czech Republic's EU presidency. And this will be an opportunity to bring all the member cities of this growing alliance together and to voice our readiness to fight for democracy, human rights, and the fairer, cleaner, and more resilient society.

And before I conclude I would like to quote the former mayor of Denver, Wellington Webb. He said, "The 19th century was a century of empires, the 20th century was a century of nation States, and the 21st century will be the century of cities." And I would like to slightly modify this great quote by adding that we need to strive toward a century of responsible, sustainable, and truly democratic cities. This is how we make a real difference and help the world. Thank you for your attention.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hřib follows:]

**Written Statement for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe,
Energy, the Environment and Cyber**

by Zdeněk Hřib, the Mayor of Prague

2 December 2021

**Title of the Hearing: Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe:
Founding Members of the Pact of Free Cities**

Chairman Keating, ranking member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the Subcommittee,

It is a great honour for me that you have invited me to speak to the Subcommittee alongside my colleagues, Gergely Karácsony (the Mayor of Budapest), Rafał Trzaskowski (the Mayor of Warsaw) and Matúš Vallo (the Mayor of Bratislava). I am happy to provide my reflection on the state of democracy in the Czech Republic and the Central European region, and on the role of cities in defending global democratic principles and human rights.

I strongly believe that we need to cherish our democracy and defend human rights at all levels of our society – in local communities, in Prague, in the Czech Republic, in Central Europe, in the EU, in the US, and globally. Moreover, by its very nature, it is a never-ending task. This is even more apparent and pressing in the light of the extremely challenging experience globally with the COVID 19 pandemic.

This task is not only about abstract principles. Democratic values and human rights, as well as for instance climate change, the housing crisis, anti-liberal tendencies, COVID 19 and post-pandemic recovery are huge topics that are deeply affecting the everyday lives of citizens in our cities. We need to address these vital challenges appropriately and we need to do it together with reliable, like-minded and experienced partners. This is why the global cooperation of democracies is crucial and cities should play a pivotal role. I appreciate this hearing and the recognition of the Subcommittee of the role to be played by cities.

According to the United Nations 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050. European and Northern American population has exceeded this number already. It is inevitable that cities are important stakeholders in the global geopolitical context and therefore should play an important role in protecting democratic values. International relations shouldn't be fostered only by national governments, but also by other agents including cities. It is important for cities not to be isolated, but to be pro-active, to exchange know-how and to cooperate on mutually beneficial projects.

Myself and my colleagues from Budapest, Bratislava and Warsaw – the other V4 countries' capitals – share this standpoint and it was one of the driving forces which brought us together to establish the Pact of Free Cities (POFC) in 2019.

Another driving force in founding the POFC was our shared experience with and concern about the state of democracy in our respective countries. We share concerns regarding illiberal tendencies, threats to the rule of law, populism, climate change denial, xenophobia and weakening readiness to defend human rights.

The Context of the Czech Republic and Central Europe

In order to explain my motivation to defend Prague as a stronghold of democracy in the Czech Republic, I will briefly outline the broader historical context. In the 20th century, Prague experienced long decades of totalitarianism, both Nazism and Communism. At the same time, Prague has a long tradition of being a centre of democracy and liberal values. Between the two World Wars, the intellectual and political movement emphasising the values of humanism, freedom and democracy led by President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk shaped the spirit of our city. The bravery of the citizens of Prague during the Prague uprising in May 1945 was crucial for the end of the Nazi occupation of our country. Later on, Prague was a home for dissidents unified by Václav Havel during Communism. Their longing for democracy and freedom became reality after the fall of Communism in 1989.

The subsequent political, economic and social transformation in the 1990s was a very complicated process which was far from flawless. Nevertheless, the political vision represented mainly by President Havel, which was based on human rights, democracy and solidarity, shaped Czech society, political culture and foreign policy. Prague as the Czech capital was at the heart of this development. Getting closer to the West, becoming a part of the transatlantic community, embracing its values, lifestyle and economic status, seemed to be the obvious aim and shared direction of development. This trajectory was more or less similar in the other V4 (Visegrad Group) countries, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004.

In the 2010s, the vision of political and societal development ceased to be as clear and unified as it was in the previous two decades. Such fragmentation of society is by no means symptomatic only for the Central European region. Fukuyama's concept of the end of history – suggesting the global universalisation of western liberal democracy and the end of clashes between political ideologies after the end of the cold war – proved not to reflect reality. In the Czech Republic, “becoming part of the West” wasn't the only possibility for collective identity formation anymore. Increasing amounts of people felt left out by the globalised order led by the West. At the same time, the Western economic and cultural hegemony was weakened. Part of the Czech population started to look for different values and trajectories of development. Some politicians proved to be ready to meet this demand.

In 2012, the Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas said that “Dalajlamism” and support of Pussy Riot (Russian art group protesting against Putin's regime) were harming Czech export. This was quite a symbolic and powerful statement, as in the following years, Czech Foreign policy and also the value orientation within the country experienced a diversion from human rights as a crucial value in political discourse and foreign policy.

In 2013, Miloš Zeman was elected as president of the Czech Republic in the first direct presidential election. President Zeman has been strongly inclining towards supporting Russia, China and other unreliable partners with a strong track record of human rights violations. During his official state visit to China in 2014, President Zeman for instance stated in an interview for the Chinese state television CCTV that he did not arrive in China to preach about human rights, but to learn how to stabilise society. Zeman has also been repeatedly disrespectful to the Czech constitution and has contributed to the vulgarisation of political culture.

In 2012, Andrej Babiš, one of the Czech Republic's most wealthy business tycoons (oligarchs), founded the political movement ANO. In 2013 he purchased one of the biggest media groups in the country called MAFRA. In the same year, Babiš's movement ANO succeeded in the general election. Andrej Babiš became the vice-minister and then the minister of finance of the Czech Republic in 2014. ANO won the following general election and Babiš became the prime minister in 2017. For almost three years, his minority government in coalition with the social democrats (ČSSD) secured a majority in Parliament thanks to having a deal with the Communist Party (KSČM). Babiš's premiership was accompanied by an unprecedented conflict of interest. He didn't fully cut ties from his conglomerate holding Agrofert – one of the biggest Czech companies, which includes one of the biggest Czech media houses MAFRA. Babiš's way of governing and his scandals undermined the rule of law, press freedom and other crucial democratic values.

Europe also experienced several crucial tests around this time. In 2013, serious civil unrest began in Ukraine, followed by the Russian annexation of Ukraine's Crimea and the ongoing war at the border between Ukraine and Russia. This was a serious warning, that peace and security in Eastern Europe is fragile and that the clash between the political order of Putin's Russia and European Liberal Democracy is severe.

In 2015, more than a million of migrants mainly from the North African region (including war zones such as Syria) sought asylum in Europe. One of the consequences of this unprecedented humanitarian crisis on European soil, was that suddenly the fear of migration became a political topic in Central Europe and populist politicians misused this topic for their political gain.

In September 2021, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán endorsed Andrej Babiš in his pre-election campaign. They met at the anti-immigration fence in Hungary and they both agreed on the necessity to fight 3 battles in Central Europe targeting the LGBT+ community, migration and green EU goals. This was an alarming reminder of the current state of the Visegrád Group (the V4 countries). This group was formed as an alliance of the central European post-communist countries in 1991. The original purpose of the Visegrad group was to foster freedom and democracy within the region of then Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland and to integrate them into European and transatlantic structures. Three decades later, it seems to me that the project transformed itself into something different entirely. The national governments of two of its founding members (Hungary and Poland) seriously question the fundamental democratic principles and the rule of law. Both the successors of the third one (the Czech Republic and Slovakia) face somewhat similar challenges in this

regard as well. Sadly, for its European allies the Visegrad Group has recently become rather difficult to rely on.

Currently, the Czech Republic is undergoing a significant change as Andrej Babiš and ANO did not succeed in the recent parliamentary election. A new government formed of 5 parties from the former democratic opposition is about to take power. Three ministries will be held by the Czech Pirate Party, including the Ministry of Foreign affairs. This new government is pledging a return to a clear pro EU stance, an increased focus on the importance of human rights in foreign policy and has pledged to restore the principles of liberal democracy in the Czech Republic.

Prague as a Stronghold of Liberal Democracy and Human Rights

I became the mayor of Prague in 2018, representing the Czech Pirate Party. My predecessor was from Babiš's political movement ANO. One of the aims of the city administration under my leadership is to restore Prague's reputation as an open-minded, liberal and progressive city which strongly promotes freedom and democracy. I have been strongly promoting these values domestically, often in opposition to the government, and also within the associations of regions and towns. Together with my colleagues from the Pact of Free Cities, I have proven that the European Union has strong partners and pro-active advocates of its core values within the Central European region, these include: tolerance, justice, inclusion, freedom, rule of law, democracy, human rights, as well as commitments to tackle climate change with an immediate climate action.

Since becoming Mayor of Prague, I have also been actively voicing concerns over violations of human rights outside the EU. It is the moral duty of liberal democratic politicians to speak up against human rights violations and breaches of democratic principles. For example, Prague has been supporting the Belarussian democratic opposition. The Belarussian historic flag – a symbol of the protesters against the dictatorship of President Lukashenko – has been raised at the city hall since the start of mass protests in Minsk after the rigged presidential election in 2020.

I have had the privilege to welcome several remarkable defenders of democracy at the Prague City Hall and to express my support to them: for instance, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (the leader of the democratic Belarussian opposition), Simon Cheng (a Hong Kong activist who is currently in exile), Lobsang Sangay (the former political leader of the Central Tibetan Administration) and Joseph Wu (Taiwanese minister of foreign affairs).

Prague has a brilliant relationship with Taiwan and we are cooperating on several projects, for instance in the area of the circular economy, education and equal opportunities. I have had the pleasure to visit Taiwan twice as the mayor of Prague (for instance as part of the official Czech delegation led by the President of the Czech Senate Miloš Vystrčil).

I have also had the privilege to meet Uyghur survivors from the Xinjiang concentration camps. I was horrified to hear what they had experienced and I would like to use this opportunity to call on the international community to work towards ending these concentration camps,

forced labour and Uyghur genocide. Just a few weeks ago, Prague hosted, under my patronage, the 7th General Assembly of the World Uyghur Congress.

I also believe that truly democratic and liberal cities should not be servile to illiberal countries, such as China and Russia, which try to exercise their business-related and political influence also on a municipal and local level.

The Pact of Free Cities Growing Stronger: The Future Mission

I consider The Pact of Free Cities a great platform 1) to promote freedom, democracy and human rights within the member cities; 2) to garner support for this amongst the member cities; 3) to encourage other cities and regions to strengthen their commitment liberal democracy and human rights; 4) to strengthen these values in countries with illiberal tendencies.

In September this year, 19 cities from Europe and beyond joined the Pact of Free Cities, including Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, Los Angeles, Paris, Taipei, Vienna and Zagreb. More cities have since expressed the wish to join, including Brussels, Rome and Milan. We welcome more members – not only from Europe, but also from the US and other regions. I feel empowered to see that the Pact is growing bigger and stronger.

In addition to the original standpoints and aims stated in the joint POFC declaration, I see an important task for the Pact: we should promote the link between human rights and the two crucial contemporary global challenges – the COVID 19 pandemic and climate change.

The right to a safe, clean and sustainable environment is a basic human right, moreover climate change impacts other human rights. During the COP 26 climate conference in Glasgow last month, the POFC released a joint resolution which puts forward an appeal for the success of democratic societies to be measured by their climate action, their successes in the green transition and their mitigation of the effects of climate change. Climate actions and discourse need to be closely linked with fundamental human and democratic rights, particularly regarding local communities. We simply need to work towards a just transition to the green economy.

Regarding human rights and climate change, Prague has very ambitious climate goals and we have a detailed climate plan in place. For instance, one area of focus will be on reusable energy sources, including solar energy. This will mean an increased demand for solar panels. Uyghur forced labour is being used in the production of a significant proportion of photovoltaics and solar panels. Cities should support the increase in use and production of solar energy, but we also must pay attention to the related ethical and human rights concerns in this area and take appropriate action.

Regarding human rights and the COVID-19 pandemic, the negative economic and social effects of the pandemic are often felt most by those in vulnerable positions. The pandemic is contributing to widening inequality both globally and in local communities. Our cities need to address this issue.

Apart from these tasks, the V4 capitals and some other European members of the POFC are calling for easier and more direct access to EU funds. In light with growing population of urban areas and considering the important role of cities in addressing global issues, such as climate crisis or COVID 19 pandemic, cities must have appropriate decision-making competences as well as adequate access to funds.

As outlined above, the Czech Republic is currently going through a crucial political change. The previous populist government is currently being replaced. The new coalition government will be formed of 5 parties which are significantly different to each other, from conservative democrats, Christian democrats and local independents, to progressive liberals in the Pirate Party. These parties are united in their shared determination to restore democratic principles and the rule of law in the country.

I would like to emphasise that this positive development in the Czech Republic does not mean that Prague would be less dedicated to the mission of the Pact of Free Cities. Our experience with the previous populist government and looming illiberalism was a reminder of the fragile nature of democracy. There is a lot of work ahead in order to strengthen the vital values in our society. Prague is ready to play an important role in this task.

In the second half of 2022, the Czech Republic will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union. It will be an opportunity for the Czech Republic to show its new political direction, as well as determination to be a pro-active and constructive member of the EU. In September 2022 Prague will be hosting the Pact of Free Cities Summit. This will be an opportunity to bring all the members of this growing alliance together and to voice together our readiness to fight for democracy, human rights and a fairer, cleaner and more resilient society.

The former mayor of Denver Wellington Webb said: "The 19th century was a century of empires, the 20th century was a century of nation states. The 21st century will be a century of cities." I would like to modify this great quote by adding that we need to strive towards a century of responsible, sustainable and truly democratic cities. This is how we can make a real difference and help the world.

Thank you for your attention.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Hřib.
I will now turn to Mr. Trzaskowski. You are no recognized for your opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF Rafał TRZASKOWSKI, MAYOR, WARSAW,
POLAND**

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, distinguished members of the subcommittee, on November 1989 Lech Walesa addressed the United State Congress with his famous we the people speech. Today the populist government in Poland is trying to write is own version of history and wipe out Lech Walesa from history books. Can you believe that?

It is only because of the courage of our teachers that Polish children still learn about or historical hero.

Poland has not yet been turned into an undemocratic regime thanks to the strength of the parties of the parliamentary opposition and the courage and dynamism of our civil society. As the opinion polls clearly demonstrate, if the opposition were to be united, it would win the next parliamentary election.

Honorable Members of Congress, Poland is a battlefield between freedom and authoritarianism, between democratic society and the populist government that tries to paralyze or politicize the independent institutions meant to control the excesses of unbridled governmental power. In times when the international context in Poland's neighborhood is so volatile the Russians are amassing troops of the Ukrainian border, the Kremlin is weaponizing energy policy, and Lukashenko has his hand in provoking the migratory crisis on our eastern border. The transatlantic community cannot afford to have a weak link in part of Europe.

Regrettably I just confirm the negative developments taking place in our country enumerated by the chairman confirming the assessments of independent experts. Regardless of what the populist government in Poland claims, the knowledge of these developments is well known and is a source of concern for the friends of Polish democracy. I therefore confirm that most importantly the constitutional tribunal has been turned into a partisan buddy which rubber-stamps the illegal actions of the government.

The government unleashed a vicious media campaign against the LGBTQI community and is trampling over women's rights proposing a draconian anti-abortion law. Moreover, the constitutional tribunal has recently issued a very controversial ruling undermining or membership in the European Union. The Polish public media became a blunt propaganda instrument of the governing party which at the same time is also trying to limit the freedom of independent media. The government also restricts the prerogatives of local communities excessively centralizing power in its hands.

Honorable Members of Congress, Poland still is a democracy because the overwhelming majority of Poles have not given up their fight. Over the past years we have seen hundreds of thousands of men and women gathered on the streets of Poland to protest against the government. And the measures described above have been met with a staunch opposition of the civil society. The iron will of the freedom-loving Poles has not been broken. We will fight

for an open free society which cherishes common values and diversity.

Honorable Members of Congress, I would like to appeal to you and everyone in the U.S. Government sustain your commitment to Poland, countries of the region, and Europe as a whole. Keep on promoting the values of democracy and human rights, support civil society, NGO's and the local governments' initiatives. And above all do not lose hope for Poland because the democratic forces will be back.

Honorable Members of Congress, illiberal democracy is an oxymoron. You either stay true to the common values of democracy or you slide into authoritarianism. We must protect the common values of democracy together.

U.S. engagement in Europe and in Poland guarantees our peace, freedom, and democracy. The chairman is absolutely right. If a vacuum is created in our part of Europe, it will be filled by malign influence from Russia and China. We all need a strong eastern flank of the North Atlantic Alliance, democratic and resilient, and most importantly inoculated against manipulation and propaganda.

We see our membership in the European Union and NATO as well as strong relations with the United States of America as a guarantee of our independence. That is why we treat the commitments to overall security of the continent and the world so seriously. But solidarity of all partners is required in the face of serious threat, therefore I strongly urge the U.S. Congress to prevent Russia from having a leverage against the EU and NATO members in the form of Nord Stream 2 and introduce further sanctions on the Russian regime.

Honorable Members of Congress, regardless of what happens in Poland today do not lose hope. I remain confident that Poland will be back as a strong, proud, and democratic member of the transatlantic community. We the signatories of the Pact of Free Cities remain committed to uphold the democratic values, protect minorities, fight for tolerance and transparency, and realize the common ambitious goals of the Western community.

Whatever the government is not doing we are doing it. We teach tolerance across the schools, we prioritize women's rights, we support independent cultures and NGO's, and we seriously fight for climate change—with the climate change because that's what the proud citizens of Warsaw and of Poland expect from us. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Trzaskowski follows:]

Hearing, December 2, 2021

House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, Distinguished Members of The Subcommittee,

Thirty two years ago, on November 1989, Lech Wałęsa, leader of "Solidarity" and Peace Noble Prize winner, addressed the joint session of the United States Congress with his famous "We the people" speech.

Today the PIS government is trying to write its own version of history and wipe out Lech Wałęsa from history books. It is only because of the courage of our teachers that Polish children even learn about him.

I mention the times of "Solidarity", as it reminds us that the quality and the strength of democracy depends on the strength of the independent institutions and the rule of law, but also on the readiness of the ordinary citizens to fight for human rights and democratic values.

Poland has not been yet turned into an undemocratic regime – but not for the lack of trying on the part of the conservative government, but thanks to the resilience of its people, the strength of the parties of the parliamentary opposition and the courage and dynamism of our civil society.

Poland still is and remains to be a democracy, because the overwhelming majority of the Polish nation has not given up on democratic principles.

Over the past years, we have seen hundreds of thousands of men and women gathering on the streets of Poland to protest against violation of the Polish constitution, support for the independence of the Polish judges, defence of women's rights or protection of minorities. All the opinion polls clearly demonstrate that if the opposition were to be united it would win the next parliamentary election. This is a sound proof of the resilience of the Polish civil society, which provides a backbone for the democratic state.

Honorable Members of Congress,

I accepted your invitation for this hearing not to complain, but to share with you the problems we encounter and the possible ways, in which we are going to deal with them.

Today Poland is a battlefield between freedom and authoritarianism, between the citizens and the governmental political oligarchy, between democratic institutions and the populist government, which questions and undermines the division of power and tries to paralyse or politicize the independent institutions meant to control the excesses of unbridled governmental power.

In times when the international context in Poland's neighbourhood is so volatile, the Russians are amassing troops on the Ukrainian border, the Kremlin is weaponizing energy policy and Lukashenka has his hand in provoking the migratory crisis on our Eastern border we need a measure of bipartisan approach. The PIS government instead is cynically using the crisis to boost its approval ratings and continues to undermine the rule of law in our country.

Let me share with you a few examples what they have been doing:

It began in the Parliament where all the rules and procedures have been constantly violated by the majority. The bills are passed without proper hearings, time for debate and the procedures are bent in such a way as to deny the opposition its parliamentary rights. When the majority loses a vote, the speaker calls for a reassumption and the vote is repeated.

The most egregious example of an attack on the rule of law consists of an attack on the judicial branch of our legal system. Some members of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal were elected in violation of the Polish Constitution (after just five years all of the members were elected by the ruling party, and some of them have never even been judges, but political apparatchiks). As a result, the Tribunal turned into a partisan, political body and a tool used to restrict judiciary independence, women's rights and the right to a fair trial for the citizens.

The Tribunal has recently issued a number of very controversial rulings - questioning the primacy of the European Union Law, hence undermining our membership in the Community, as well as a judgement under which it denied the European Court of Human Rights a right to treat the Polish Constitutional Tribunal as a Court and pass judgments on the legality of the election of the judges, hence questioning the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Tribunal also passed a draconian anti-abortion law, which orders women to give birth to a child even with lethal defects.

During the pandemic the government tried to call the presidential elections through a postal ballot without a proper legal basis (the Prime Minister issued an executive order) and then tried to force the central post office to organize them by printing ballots outside the control of the State Electoral Commission. The illegal elections did not take place only because the local governments refused to share the personal data of the voters without the proper legal basis.

The government also politicized all the independent institutions – the Prosecutor's office (the DEA's office), the anticorruption office, the hitherto independent boards responsible for the independence of the media to name just a few. The independent system for choosing the judges was subverted – and the National Council of Judiciary has been filled with political appointees. As a result, a new disciplinary chamber, has been created within the Supreme Court, which intimidates and even tries to sack judges who pass judgments, which are not supported by the government.

The Polish public media, the biggest media outlet in our country, funded with taxpayers' money, ceased to be an objective source of information, but forms instead a part of the ruling party's propaganda machinery, aimed at fighting the opposition. I experienced that during the presidential election in 2020, when all public news programs openly turned against my candidacy, spreading crude propaganda and misinformation, at the same time openly supporting my opponent. The OSCE report described the election as "free but not fair."¹

The government has also been trying to limit the freedom of the media, among others, taking an aim at the TVN - the most popular independent TV channel. The PIS majority passed a new foreign media ownership bill in the Parliament, on the basis of which undue pressure was applied on the Discovery Group to sell its share in TVN. It also asked the state oil company to buy the shares of most regional and local newspapers to spread propaganda through the new founded network.

¹ Poland presidential election 2020: ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission Final Report
<https://www.osce.org/odihr/464595>

The government also unleashed a vicious media campaign against the LGBT+ community, engaging in hate speech, calling LGBT+ community – “ideology, not people”, thus encouraging hate and discrimination (some local governments even created LGBT+ free zones).

Local governments which I have the honour to represent, regions, cities and villages, are currently subject to the decisions of the government which restrict local democracy and aim at undue centralization of power in the hands of the government. We are being deprived of financial resources (the changes in the tax code take away the revenue from our budget, without proper and commensurate compensation), at the same time the government is shifting new responsibilities to us (especially in education) and is contemplating taking our property away (for example hospitals).

Honorable Members of Congress,

As Mayor of Warsaw and one of the leaders of democratic opposition, I know that renewing democracy begins by looking honestly at ourselves, and by working diligently and transparently to strengthen the democratic foundations in Poland. This requires an immense effort which must be taken by Poles themselves. Nobody will do that for us.

Therefore, we work hard to sow the seeds of new democratic politics. Whether it is in our cities or nationwide we support local initiatives, we build networks and bridges between generations, we create links among local associations and movements irrespectively of their political attitudes.

The campus “Poland of the Future”, we organized last summer, gathered around 1000 young people, who for six days were debating with experts and policymakers on how to fortify democracy, tolerance and a just economic model for Poland and Europe.

To prove our commitment to democratic values we established the Pact of Free Cities. Two years ago, the Pact was just an idea. Today, we the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw are addressing this Congress with a pledge to defend our democracies and our nations against the growing authoritarian tendencies and corrupt politics. The Pact was recently joined by 20 new cities, such as Paris, London or Florence.

Honorable Members of Congress,

I would like to appeal to you, to the Congress, and everyone in the US government:

- Keep on promoting the values of democracy and human rights,
- Sustain your commitment to Poland, countries of the region and Europe as a whole
- Support civil society, NGO’s and local government’s initiatives.

This is how we can together strengthen democratic resilience in Europe, establish and protect modern democratic institutions and the rights and freedoms of all citizens, notwithstanding their ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation or social status.

I see the Summit for Democracy, which is due to take place on December 9-10, the beginning of a true democratic offensive which has been missing in recent years.

I am particularly honoured to be invited to the meeting of 12 Mayors, on December 6, which is one of accompanying events of the Summit for Democracy. I take the invitation as a proof that Warsaw is among those cities around the world which are committed to defending democratic principles and the strong civil society.

Honorable Members of Congress,

Illiberal democracy is an oxymoron. You either stay true to the common values of democracy or you slide into authoritarianism.

We must protect the common values of democracy together. The presence of America in our hearts and minds, but also on our soil, guarantees our peace, freedom and democracy. Even though the democratic tradition is strong in Poland, and at the end of the day the democratic forces will win, your engagement is crucial for the stability of the continent. If vacuum is created it will be filled by authoritarian influence from Russia and China. We all need a strong pro-European, pro-American, Eastern flank of the North-Atlantic Alliance, democratic and resilient, and most importantly inoculated against totalitarian tendencies and propaganda.

We see our membership in the European Union and NATO, as well as strong relations with the United States of America as a guarantee of the independence of our country. That is why treat our commitments to overall security of the continent and the world so seriously, but we also are of the opinion that solidarity of all partners is required in the face of clear and present danger – also of a hybrid type, for instance when Russia is using Nordstream2 as an instrument of its aggressive security policy.

But I remain confident that if we have managed to defeat communism in 1989 and build strong foundations of free and united Europe we will meet all the challenges head on and persevere yet again.

This is what our free and proud citizens expect from us.

Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you very much and be assured we are not giving up in Poland. Be assured that we understand in all your countries how important our relationships are in a transatlantic way.

And be assured, too, that all of your testimony here had a common thread of making sure that basic democratic freedoms are our core and our strength. We certainly have security needs together, and under greater threats than we have seen in decades, yet democracy and our security needs do not travel in different lanes. They travel together and are strengthened together. And your opening statements, of all of you, indicates how important that is going forward. So I thank you for your testimony.

I will recognize members for 5 minutes each. And pursuant to House rules all time yielded is for the purpose of questioning our witnesses. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will circle back to you. If you seek recognition, you must un-mute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

I will now recognize myself for 5 minutes with questions.

I thank all of you for the work you are doing, and you are terrific examples of how the importance of major cities, municipalities, and obviously their importance to the surrounding communities of cities—how important that is. And you have raised issues of transparencies of contracts, and freedoms of the press, basic human rights issues, all cores to what we are dealing with.

And you understand in all of your roles that this isn't—these aren't issues that end at the city barriers. They transcend not only the cities, through the suburban areas, through the country as a whole, but globally. And along those lines I have noticed your work and the Pact of Free Cities' work on climate change.

Here in our own country during the last 4 years as some of—we reneged on some of our commitments here in the U.S. globally, which we have now moved forward to reconstruct, but so many of our States and cities moved forward during this period so importantly. So I would ask all of you if you would like just to jump in to talk about the work you have done on climate change and how your work has been so important and transformative and how it translates to the people you represent.

Maybe perhaps I will start with Mr. Vallo and then the others can jump in.

Mr. VALLO. Thank you very much. We of course I'm having a lot of support in United States, I mean, as mayor of Warsaw, Rafal, or members of—from Bloomberg called Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative. And we taking lot of know-how from different American cities and from this organization as well.

And we—one of the main thing of course for us to fighting climate change is everything is green. We have this program called 10,000 Trees. I know it's not a million trees like New York City, but we have 10,000 Trees on—and we are planting lot of trees. And of course we know the effect of trees today. Is not only scientifically better base effect. We know how—what is happening to raining water on CO2, but it's also very important for health of our citizen. And this is just one of the programs we working lot of public space.

That's something we kind of have in this program of new—of completely renewal of public space in Bratislava that's very important for us.

Very important agenda again is our minorities. We have, as every city in the world today, problem with citizens without a home. We're spending lot of effort, energy of trying to ensure everybody can own a bed for the night and own a house. And that's very important for us.

So we trying to just go with this already tested and already working agenda of other cities which are maybe a little bit more years in the game and trying to follow good examples. And this is important.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you so much.

I would just like to see if Mr. Trzaskowski might want to also add to this and reassure him that we had Lech Walesa here in this committee as a witness just a couple of years ago. And I saw him connect to younger people here as he did back home so importantly. And the climate change issue also connects generation. What have you been doing?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Yes. Yes indeed. When Lech Walesa was having his famous speech I was working at the Capital Hill for a month with John Dingell.

But when it comes to what we are doing when it comes to fighting climate change, I mean, you know, our government, the conservative governments of Poland, of Law and Justice, is very lukewarm toward the idea of global warming. And unfortunately of course they've taken some commitments, but unfortunately they're not very diligent in implementing the. So it's again the cities which have to do it on our own.

And I've declared that Warsaw will be carbon-neutral by 2050, even with our very difficult energy mix. And we are doing a number of things in Warsaw. Of course raising awareness, prioritizing public transportation. We invest billions of euros in public transportation. We're greening our city. We're eliminating coal-powered stoves. We are helping citizens in using renewables and we are paying for that. We are doing quite a lot in order to actually meet the priorities of the European Union and of the world because we have to take some of that responsibility ourselves.

Mr. KEATING. Right. Well, thank you. And I make note of the fact that our Secretary of Energy for the United States, Secretary Granholm, one of her first stops was in Poland. And it opens the door, not just there, but around the world, for important cooperation between the U.S. and all our—particularly our transatlantic allies, which will create not just a greener environment, but also more jobs and more independence security-wise from other powers that do not share our values. So there is a tremendous opportunity in this area for mutual growth.

And I wish I could go to everyone, but my time has expired, and hopefully some of the other members will followup with questions in this regard.

So I will now turn for questioning to Representative Meuser.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it. And for Ranking Member Fitzpatrick.

Thank you very much, mayors, for joining us this morning. Incredibly interesting and informative. Thank you.

In your cities over the course of the 20th century of course survived Nazi occupation, Soviet communism. Throughout the Soviet era we saw uprising notably in Hungary, in Prague, in 1968. Solidarity movement in Poland. The Velvet Revolution in 1989 brought an end to communism in Czechoslovakia.

So today freedom is again under threat. China continues to crack down on Hong Kong's autonomy and threatens Taiwan. Russia similarly is cracking down on opposition and threatening various sovereignties of its neighbors and the militarization of the Ukraine border.

So, Mayor Hřib, you have been a strong supporter of Taiwan and Tibet hosting Tibetan and Taiwanese officials and replacing Beijing as Prague's sister city of Taipei. So Mr. Mayor, how has Beijing responded to these actions?

Mr. HŘIB. Well, thank you very much, Representative Meuser, for this question.

Well, the fact is that of course they are trying to threaten us and the logic or their narrative, or actually it's not mainly the narrative that will be—would be told by them. They are using some sort of proxies to speak up for them.

So for example, in Prague we have found that a company, which is business interests in China, because they have a company which sells the mobile phones on installments there, and is by the way company owned by the richest Czech guy. This is recently. However, they have created a whole network of politicians, journalists, sort of academical people to support their view of China. And they have these invoices of payments and—for the exact jump down in this manner. And this was all published because this—it leaked into the media. And in this way they are trying to form the public opinion.

So for example, their primary narrative is that if we damage the relationship with China, the economy of whole country will be damaged. But specifically in case of Czech Republic; I'm not sure about the other V4 countries, but I believe it could be pretty much the same, the business influence of China is actually why it's overrated, because for example the promises of billions for the investment from China into Czech industry, but actually only a fraction of them happened and they were not investments. They were merely acquisitions of already existing sports clubs, breweries, and other things. So it was not about investments with know-how transfer or creating new jobs and so on.

So when for example we have done this trip to Taiwan with our chairman of the upper chamber of our parliament, Milos Vystrcil, there was a huge, huge threats from China about the impact of this trip on the Czech economy. And the net result, the net result was that some Chinese company was not—canceled their plan to buy 11 pianos from a Czech company, which meant a loss of 5 millions of Czech crowns, which is roughly tens of thousands of euros. And these pianos were actually immediately bought by a sponsor of music, of classical music in Czech Republic and they were donated to schools. So this is—

Mr. MEUSER. Mayor, I think we are out of time.

Mr. HRIB. Yes.

Mr. MEUSER. Thank you. I appreciate it.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

I think you are on mute, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. KEATING. See, they are already muting us.

Thank you very much for your testimony and your questioning.

I now turn to the vice chair of the committee, Ms. Spanberger.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to say thank you to all of our guests today. Thank you for being here and to answer our questions, and your opening statements were extraordinary. These virtual hearings really do allow us to engage with experts and government officials from around the world, so I appreciate you making the time to speak with us.

Mr. Trzaskowski, I would like to ask you a couple questions to begin with. The United States and Poland have a strong security partnership through the NATO alliance, but as we know the types of security challenges that localities are facing continue to evolve. So I would really like to hear more about how Warsaw is working to build some resiliency against the emerging security challenges, be they climate change or cyber security, or other kind of on-the-ground physical threats. What efforts are underway in Warsaw to combat these security threats and is there any structure of engagement internationally that exists?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, you know, I mean, obviously today there are threats of very different nature because we see what's happening on the eastern border of Poland where, you know, the migratory crisis is being created helped by Lukashenko and his regime.

We also see what's happening on the border of Russia and Ukraine. And of course it gives us a lot of grounds to be worried.

But for us on the level of the cities, you know, the biggest threats are of course the threats of a hybrid nature because, you know, the war is now waged differently.

So first of all, there is a question of our resilience when it comes to energy, and that's why, you know, I—in my introductory statements, I was so strong about Nord Stream, and that's why we do so much to fight climate change, not only because we have to save the planet, but also because we cannot allow Russians and others to use energy as a leverage. That's why we invest as much as we can in renewables. That's why we green our cities. That's why we increase the resilience.

But of course there is also a problem of cybersecurity. And, you know, we the mayors cannot do a lot because this is a responsibility of the because but what we try to do, we try to talk to the kids. We try to introduce programs at schools where we teach what manipulation is and how it can be used and to sift information so that students know what they're talking about. But unfortunately this populist government is trying to push all the NGO's out of schools because they want to have schools for their own purposes where they try to introduce a bit of propaganda. So they're pushing out NGO's who for example teach tolerance or teach resilience when it comes to cyber.

We do what we can.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Interesting. And in terms of engagement with companies that might be impacted by cyber attacks, what is the structure in terms of your ability as the mayor of such a large city to either be part of the education—you mentioned to students for issues related to propaganda, but how about to companies and to commerce within your city in terms of the threats that exist online to them?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well again, you know, this is a—this is a problem which needs to be addressed on—on the governmental level. I was a Minister of Digitization, you know, 7 years ago, so I know this problem pretty well. We on the local government, we cannot do much, but there is a lot we can do together because at the end of the day when we talk about cyber, we need to collaborate within NATO, within the European Union. We need to talk to the big giant American companies when it comes to resilience.

I will just give you one example: Recently the government used the Pegasus. This is like a device produced in Israel which allows to catch terrorists. But Apple had to actually send a warning to one of our prosecutors that the government in Poland is using it against prosecutors. And sometimes there are doubts whether it is using such instruments against the members of the opposition.

So we need to address these questions. We need to ask these questions. And you also need to ask these questions to the Polish government because there are quite serious doubts about that. And of course there is a question of regulating the big tech companies. We can only do it together, the European Union and with the United States of America, because we need to protect the free speech and we need to protect the possibilities that, you know, technology gives us, but we need to also be quite worried about cybersecurity and that, you know, those capabilities can be used for adverse purposes by populist governments.

Ms. SPANBERGER. Thank you for that. My next question, which you actually got to in your answer, was focused on how democratic values and human rights—we see them across the world or are under threat and what the role that cities can have in strengthening and revitalizing some of these principles. You spoke about making sure children are aware of propaganda. Certainly the example that you gave of prosecutors being monitored.

I do hope that in the future, Mr. Chairman, we can talk about how the international community can support cities and leaders like Mayor Trzaskowski as they are working to fight those threats that exist.

So thank you very much for your answers.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Chairman, I yields back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you very much.

And thank you for your comments on bringing home the point now renewables create energy independence and how critical that is to our security right now. All these issues overlap.

Now I turn to Representative Pfluger for 5 minutes.

Mr. PFLUGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I do not want to start this conversation by immediately disagreeing on renewables and energy independence, but what we are talking about here is base load power. Base load power—and I come from a district—I

am sorry this was not the line of questioning I was going to start with, but my district produces more wind energy than the entire State of California. And it is wonderful the State of Texas.

When I have talked—I have had dozens of conversations with—from the Baltic States through Central Europe and all the way into the Balkans, and one of the major concerns that I am hearing from every single country is the malign influence that is being basically held hostage on the energy front.

And, Mr. Chairman, I agree with the need to diversify sources, and that is not only the type of energy, but it is also the—where the energy originates from.

And so what I would like to focus on, and maybe we will start with Dr. Trzaskowski, but I would like to hear from all of you on the Three Seas Initiative. We have had a pledge of billion dollars, 300 million, an initial tranche that has been delayed, and I kind of want to hear how that would counter the influence that we are seeing in things like the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Dr. Trzaskowski, over to you. Thank you for all the witnesses, but I will start with you and then like to get to the other witnesses as well.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. A pertinent question. Very important. I mean, that's the problem, that some of those countries actually use energy as a leverage and use energy security to influence the situation in countries such as Poland. And that's why all the initiatives that we have mentioned are so important. It is very importance to work within NATO and within the European Union to counter that.

And we have created an energy union. We have created quite a lot of tools to give us independence, but unfortunately, you know, there are some decisions on the table which try to sort of go round it. And when you mentioned the initiative of Three Seas, fine. That's another initiative which can actually make us a bit more independent, for example, of the Chinese influence. You know, they've invented this form of 16+1 in order to have more influence in the Balkans, especially in those countries which are not members of the European Union. So this is immensely important for us to use all of those initiatives in order to make us stronger, more resilient, and more independent.

And at the end of the day we need to collaborate. We, the European Union and of course the United States of America, because we are the beacons of freedom. And only us working together we can actually counter those malign influences. And that's why it is so incredibly important that countries such as Poland and Hungary remain democratic. We cannot have the weak link here.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, thank you for that and I appreciate the acknowledgement of all the initiatives, specifically Three Seas countering CCP influence, or others.

So and I will just open it up at this point to anyone that has an opinion on the delay of the funding that has been promised to the tune of \$300 million through this Three Seas. Can anyone speak to whether or not that is hurting? Or how it would help would be a better way to pose this question.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, Congressman, I will just say one sentence: I mean, if the European Union upholds its commitments as it always does because we are a member of this organization—but

if the United States stay committed and help us in investing, then there is no room for other investment. No one can, you know, show us a carrot and try to say that they have a better idea. That's why it is absolutely crucial that we keep your engagement in Europe. Then there is no room for anyone else.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, that is kind of point that I am—

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Europe and the U.S.

Mr. PFLUGER [continuing]. Trying to make is that our commitment needs to be our commitment.

Mr. Vallo, just over to you. I do not know if you have any thoughts on this.

Mr. VALLO. Just very, very few words. I mean, in all of this, I mean, nobody's happy to be forced in the corner by energy crisis, that what was happening during these weeks and here. I mean, the—I point to point out a word Mayor Trzaskowski already mentioned is collaboration. That's only way how we going to survive. We are this small nation here with our neighbors, which are much big country as Hungary, Poland, and also Czech Republic. So we are completely depend on EU right now and we are completely been on good collaboration with this V4 countries and our—their democracy is absolutely necessary also for us.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, thank you.

Does anyone in the last 15 seconds have any thoughts on Lithuania's decision to pull out of the 17+1 and to fully support Taiwan?

Mr. HRIB. Well, if I may just say one sentence. Of course I support that, that that is a thing that is very, very—always very specific to us as a country and the points of it. For me as a medical doctor I would perhaps like to emphasize, and I always emphasizing that if I'm asked about this question about supporting Taiwan, I would like to support the membership of Taiwan in WHO because that is something that has been proven that is crucial nowadays as we face the global pandemic as they obviously knew it's coming. They have prepared and they're experience is crucial if we look on what have Chinese down and how they basically lied to the world.

Mr. PFLUGER. Well, mayor, thank you.

Mr. Chairman, my time is expired, but thank you for this hearing, the opportunity with the witnesses giving us their testimony.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, representative.

The chair recognizes Representative Susan Wild for 5 minutes.

Ms. WILD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mayor Vallo, you write in your testimony that “the climate crisis is also a democracy crisis and the viability of our democracies will be tested by their capacity to face the existential danger of global warming and ability to mitigate its negative imPact on our societies.”

My question is about the intersection of these two challenges. We are seeing an alarming tendency of xenophobic leaders on both sides of the Atlantic who oppose strong action on the global climate crisis while seeking political gain by demonizing the growing numbers of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who seek harbor at least in part due to the many direct and indirect ways that the climate crisis is de-stabilizing their societies.

How do you assess this dual crisis and what lessons have you learned from your time as mayor that can help us find solutions particularly when it comes to helping people see through attempts to scapegoat and divide our societies?

Mr. VALLO. Thank you very much. I mean, the—for me what I learn in the last few years is that any reform, any—maybe sometimes, of course data base decision as—for this is very important to have a trust of our citizen. That the main thing.

And of course, climate crisis—today we have a data which is saying exactly what is going to happen in next years and we know—everybody who believes data and science know that climate crisis is here. It's happening. But you still have people—you have president and prime minister who are saying that is not an issue.

So the trust to—general trust not only in politics, but only to the scientists and in numbers and in everybody who wants to be transparent. And democratic is absolutely critical here. And this is what we are doing in a very small scale in a half-million city, Bratislava. We're trying to build a good trust and a good relationship with our citizen.

Ms. WILD. All right. Thank you.

And I would like to direct my next question to Mayor Trzaskowski. Sir, you write in your testimony, "The Polish public media, the biggest media outlet in our country, funded with taxpayer money, ceased to be an objective source of information, but instead formed a part of the ruling party's propaganda machine aimed at fighting the opposition." This is still your quote. "I experienced that during the Presidential election in 2020 when all public news programs openly turned against my candidacy spreading crude propaganda and misinformation at the time openly supporting my opponent."

Can you elaborate for us on some of the specific ways the Polish public media worked to undermine your candidacy and support the incumbent president?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, you understand to—you need to understand one thing: I mean, the Polish public media is first of all funded by taxpayers' money, and this is the only channel which can be reached everywhere in Poland. I mean, other independent channels, by the way which are under attack by the Law and Justice government, are much more difficult to reach.

And, you know, I'm almost 50, so I remember the communist propaganda. It was much more subtle than what they do now on public TV. And it's not only campaign where all the independent institutions said that the campaign in Poland was still free but not fair because all the outlets were attacking me, presenting manipulations all the time, twisting facts, and of course spending much more time covering the president.

But it's more that they use it actually to stoke fears. That they've started a vicious campaign against the LGBT+ people. That they're saying incredible things about refugees and they're magnifying the threats. The threats are there. Let's not minimize them. We need a strong border in Eastern Poland, but we cannot simply allow for this propaganda to spread because manipulations are then spread all around Poland. And they're using it all the time constantly to do that.

And that's why it is very problematic in Poland to wage a normal fair campaign because you can spend just a small amount of money and all the State institutions, propaganda included, are used against the opposition. And that's why the government is also undertaking the peace government, the conservative, the populist government is now undertaking to actually limit the freedom of other independent outlets and press.

One example to end this: A State-owned company, an oil company was asked by the government to buy local press. And they bought newspapers, you know, in order to kill some of those local newspapers and turn them to the government and against—and again sell propaganda.

Ms. WILD. Thank you. We are seeing the buying of media outlets throughout your country as well, so I am very sensitive to that. Thank you very much, mayor.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yields back.

Mr. KEATING. Very interesting line of questioning.

Chair recognizes Representative Deutch for 5 minutes.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for calling this hearing.

Thanks to the mayors for participating.

I want to echo what some of our colleagues have said. I think this is not just an interesting hearing. It is critical to the way that we think about Europe, to the way that we think about the challenges in Europe. And I have to say to all of the mayors who are participating, your words today and the way that you govern and the commitment that you show to liberal democracy is inspiring and I am really grateful for this opportunity.

I want to followup on some of the conversation about the Pact of Free Cities and that the members of the Pact of Free Cities are looking ahead to the Summit for Democracies that the Biden White House is going to be hosting. I would like to know whether the Pact of Free Cities is participating in the Summit for Democracy and what you would like to see as local leaders result from the Summit for Democracy since in your countries what you are doing is so critical to that effort to sustain democracy?

So, Mayor Trzaskowski, I guess we can start with you.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, the problem today is that if we really want to meet the challenges that are before us head on, you cannot do it without the cities. I mean, if you really want to fight climate change, if you want to resolve the problems of education, migration, and so on and so forth, we need to do it together. And that's why it is very important to also recognize the role of the cities.

And for example, when our friends in the European Union, but also in the U.S. are exacerbated by our governments, I mean, why it is absolutely crucial that we talk to each other, that we keep on supporting the NGO's, that we keep on fighting for minorities, and that we keep on realizing common priorities.

And that's why we decided to actually set up the Pact of Free Cities and that's why very different cities from all around the world, from Paris to London to Los Angeles are joining because we have the same problems.

And we're doing the benchmarking. We are learning from one another what to do. We are adopting best practices in order to meet

those challenges head on. And that's why I'm very much satisfied that there is a side event on Monday that the mayors were invited to. I will be there with the mayor of Minneapolis and Jakarta.

Mr. DEUTCH. Great. Thank you.

Mayor Karácsony?

[The following statement and answers were delivered through an interpreter.]

Mr. KARÁCSONY. Yes, thank you. Thank you very much for the question. It's especially important for Hungary since now we hear in the Hungarian press today, and unfortunately soon in the international process—we heard that Hungary wasn't invited by the Biden Administration to this democratic summit. I think this is a clear signal about the future of democracy. U.S. would like to talk with countries who are building and not demolishing democracies. And now the Hungarian government is trying to ban the EU to join in this summit and say that the EU cannot represent all countries since Hungary is not invited.

This is a rather typical way of reasoning from Viktor Orban who always equals himself to the Nation, to the whole of the Nation and he always says that he's representing all of the European Unions and as a government if they are criticized, he always says that every criticism is directed to the whole of the Nation. And now is trying to block the EU participation on this summit and say that EU cannot talk on behalf of Hungary.

When I was invited to this forum, I'm not speaking on behalf of Hungary. I try to speak on behalf of the population of Budapest and about the values that I believe. Of course in democracy you cannot represent everyone at the same time, but everyone has the right to express their opinion. And the fact that the Hungarian government is blocking the EU's participation on this summit I think it's a message to all friends of democracy about the Hungarian government's opinion on democracy.

And I'm sorry that I have to apologize because of this approach. I ask you not to equal Hungary to Viktor Orban and his government. Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. Your words are very important and very well-taken by us.

Mr. Chairman, I do not know if I have time for one quick question. I will just put it on the table; perhaps we will answer it later.

Mr. KEATING. Because of the delay in the translation, yes, take a little bit more time.

Mr. DEUTCH. I appreciate that. I want to circle back to Mayor Trzaskowski again just one last time.

There was a recent restitution law adopted by Poland that effectively prevents Jewish and non-Jewish families who were persecuted by the Nazis from receiving restitution for property seized during World War II. We saw some overtly anti-Semitic rallies around Poland last month. President Duda denounced those, but I am wondering if you could speak to what has been done in Warsaw to protect the Jewish community specifically in response to the rise in anti-Semitism and whether the Jewish community feels safe in Warsaw, and Poland more generally?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Yes, unfortunately we had those incidents in Poland that we are all ashamed of. And it's very good that Presi-

dent Duda denounced. And those guys were actually caught by police and they will be prosecuted.

We do everything we can to protect all the minorities in Warsaw, and unfortunately, for example, on our national holiday, Independence Day, you know, the government allowed for the quasi-fascist organizations to actually take over that day and organize the festivities. And I was in court fighting so that these elements could not organize rallies on the streets of Warsaw. And I won.

But the government at the end of the day decided to—to—to sort of given an umbrella to some of those elements. And make no mistake, some of those guys are—are—are just, you know, nationalistic elements. But unfortunately the things that they said of course should never be condoned. We do everything that we can to protect minorities. That's my job. I'm the mayor of the city.

You know, we need to—not to meddle with—with the affairs of those who get by and protect all of those who are weaker: minorities, senior citizens, people with disabilities. That's what we do. That's our mission, the mission of the local government.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I'm going to finish again just where I started. This has been an inspiring hearing. I am so grateful to our witnesses, to these mayors and I look forward to continuing these conversations to advance democracy in Europe and ensure that continuation of the strongest possible liberal democracies. And I thank you very much. Yield back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you. And I couldn't agree more with the tenor and the remarks and the significance of our witnesses' testimony, how inspiring that is.

Now our next member that will have questions is a former mayor and a person that had a leadership role in our national associations with mayors. And now he is a Congressman and he is recognized—so it is one of your colleagues—recognized for 5 minutes. representative Cicilline.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for this hearing.

And thank you to these extraordinary mayors for being here. And those of us who served as mayors are not at all surprised that mayors are going to save democracy around the world. And just thank you for the cities—the organization you founded. We always tout cities as the great innovators, the incubators of great ideas, the place in government closest to the people. And so the work that you are doing to preserve democracy around the world is extraordinary and, as Congressman Deutch said, really inspiring to hear. And we as Members of Congress want to support you in every way that we can.

And so my first question is to Mayor Trzaskowski. You talked about the vicious campaign against the LGBTQ community and obviously the diversity of cities is one of the great strengths of cities. Could you speak a little bit about the national government was doing and how we can productively work with you and other cities to help support vulnerable populations, whether it be LGBTQ community, the Jewish community as Congressman Deutch mentioned, or other marginalized communities?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Congressman, thank you very much for—for that question. It is very important.

Warsaw was always a proud city, a proud city of its diversity. We had a huge Jewish minority before the War. We had other minorities, A German minority, and so on and so forth. And we will always fight for diversity in our city. And we are in agreement in all the cities on—in Poland that that's what we need to do. And that's why we protect minorities.

I was one of the first mayors to sign the LGBT charter in—in Warsaw because I wanted to protect the minority. I wanted to allow for—for more tolerance in schools. I—I wanted to actually talk about this subject. We've created, for example, a shelter for people from LGBT community who are just thrown out of their houses.

And I was viciously attacked by the media, the—the public media outlet and by the government because they cynically wanted to use that as an argument to fight mayors in Poland. And then when I was running a Presidential campaign they used it against me because they wanted to stoke up xenophobia and—and—and homophobia. For example, the—the—you know the—the president of the republic was on record saying that—and other officials saying that—that LGBT is not—those are not people, but ideology and so on and—and so on and so forth.

But we will keep on fighting because we think that—that our beautiful cities should remain open and—and transparent and we will not allow anyone to—to attacked our citizens who—who—who have full rights. And as I said, that's our mission. Whoever is attacked in Warsaw will be defended by—by me and by—by the people who—who work with—with me. We will never allow it. And—and again, it was just used cynically by the government because they—they always undertake such attacks when they see or think that they can score some points.

Mr. CICILLINE. And may I ask, Mayor Vallo and—whether or not the role of social media—what role it has played in terms of disseminating information that has led to the undermining of democratic institutions, the marginalization of minority populations and what role that has played in your country, in your city?

Mayor Vallo?

Mr. VALLO. Can you hear me?

Mr. CICILLINE. Yes.

Mr. VALLO. Ah, perfect. I mean, today we're already know that what we thought that is going to be a instrument for democracies, better democracy is becoming a instrument of hate. This is what we strongly feel that social—some social networks are not protecting the democracy enough, just giving the—a stage to do hate speech, to populism and to people who are pressing hard to minorities. That's also what happen in Slovakia, I think around all the Europe.

So in my case again I'm going back to the trust and the regime with the citizen. What we are trying to do is to explain, to communicate and to really show we have all the instrument. We—if we are not the populist, we are liberal mayors let's say, we have all the instrument how to fight it to show our results, to show the

work. The work must be done. That's the only way how we—how we can—can show people the democracy is—is working.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you.

I am just going to get in one last question. Mayor Karácsony; I hope I am pronouncing that OK, I had a very interesting conversation with Prime Minister Orban when I visited Hungary and he said there are three areas of common interest: economics, security, and human rights. When I pressed him about the human rights issue, he said isn't two out of three enough? I tried to make the case that they are related and two out of three is not enough.

But would you speak a little bit about the role of the Chinese and Russian investments in Hungary and how that is impacting the—or influencing the trajectory of democracy in Hungary and how we can effectively work with you as a mayor of a city to promote democracy and human rights?

Mr. KARÁCSONY. Once Prime Minister Orban Viktor said that you shouldn't see—look at what I say, but what I do. So this is how you can translate his politics.

So he says something. He does lip service and he says that he serves human rights and democracy, but at the same time you can see that he does everything what you can see in Poland, these—these attacks against different communities. For example, here in Hungary again there's an attack against sexual minorities.

It is very important to point out that democracy and pushing it, marginalizing it and opening toward the Russians and Chinese, these two go hand in hand. And as I have mentioned earlier, the Hungarian government is eager to build on the investments from Russia and China. And obviously is paid by Hungarian taxpayers, but they serve Chinese and Russian interests.

And I would like to draw your attention to the fact that thank the European Union, we thank the commission. There's a representative, a Hungarian representative who is responsible for the Western Balkans' expansion and they did everything to increase Chinese influence there.

The Budapest-Belgrade railway is closely connected with the thought that China wants to have oversight over critical infrastructure so that they can have access to West Balkans' ports so that they can get Chinese goods to Europe through these ports. So they have economic interests and Hungary does not have any economic interests here. Only those companies which are close to the Fidesz Party, the ruling party.

For me the expansion of the European Union is very important and—but at the same time I think the EU and the U.S. should closely follow not only EU countries, but also the Western Balkans region where there's a very strong Chinese influence. And Hungary is something like a Trojan horse, everything the EU, because it wants to represent this influence within the EU and this way they weaken our international reliance.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yields back.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Mr. Mayor.

And the chair now recognizes Representative Titus from Nevada for 5 minutes.

Ms. TITUS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our mayors. It has been most interesting and very impressive and reassuring as we see democracy backslide in so many parts of the world to hear your values and what you all are doing.

We heard a little bit about the harassment in one Presidential campaign, but just speaking politically is being such a popular mayor in your city a good stepping stone politically to run for a national office when you might find yourself with some support from over here?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, yes, of course, you know, there is this understanding, increasing understanding that democracy at the local level is very important. So when you're doing a good job at your home town or at your regional level, that allows you to actually carry the banner of democracy, of values, of freedom further. Yes, that's true.

Ms. TITUS. That is reassuring. Let me ask you this: in the U.S. with our Federal system there are a number of laws and constitutional provisions and systemic features that make local governments have to cooperate with the Federal Government. They do some of the implementation, some of the carrying out of policies. Sometimes there are too strings attached. It could be both good and bad.

You do not seem to have that relationship generally with the national government, but I think in the case of Hungary have you seen some negative impact from this power you are gaining through the Pact?

And in the case of Prague in the Czech Republic are you seeing something positive coming from the fact that your party is now part of the national coalition? Is it really just political or are there systemic things that also affect that relationship? Anybody.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, I mean, you know, I'll—I'll just say three sentences. I mean, the problem is that the national government is treating local government almost as an enemy. So they're trying to do whatever they—they can to take away our prerogatives, to take away our money. For example, half of the taxes stay in the local government. So now they're changing the tax code in order to—to—to actually take money away from us. So it is problematic.

And even when we fight together the pandemic, you know, we try to collaborate, but unfortunately, you know, the government is introducing politics into that as well. That's why, you know, we have to keep on fighting because local government is so important.

Ms. TITUS. Any other mayor want to comment? Budapest mayor?

Mr. KARÁCSONY. Unfortunately we have a similar process in the past years. In the past 2 years since I've been mayor of Budapest our city has lost 40 percent of our income and this loss was not because of the pandemic. It was mainly because of governmental steps which targeted the drowning of our city. And they do not look at us as a partner who are legitimate partners. They look at us as a power challenge and they know it all too well that if the municipality is successful, then it will be visible that they are not so strong. They only want to have power and they want to influence politics.

With such an amount of loss of money you are just unable to— to manage that. And for us next April the elections are going to be of key importance. A lot of things will be decided in the year of 2022 in Hungary, among others the fate of municipalities because. Without money even the best mayor cannot do anything for the development of the city.

Ms. TITUS. Now that the Pact of Cities has—Free Cities is growing I think from 4 to about 20, does this strengthen your power, or what are—do you find international partners and things that you can work on across lines, even if you cannot work with your own governments?

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Yes, of course because at the end of the day—you know, today what really counts is access to knowledge, access to facts, you know, that we can actually look at the best practices that we can benchmark together. We are doing it in very different fora. As mentioned by Mayor Vallo, we for example were fortunate to participate in Bloomberg Harvard Initiative, but we also—Warsaw is the only city from the region which is part of the C40 organization which fights climate change.

But the Pact of Free Cities also allows us a platform to collaborate. And for example, we are lobbying within the European Union so that at least a small part of the money can be used directly with the local government so that it doesn't go through the national government. But we can realize certain projects together such as for example taking the diesel-powered buses off the streets of European cities. We are very much—much more—much more effective when we do it with other cities such as London, or Paris, or—or—or Florence, or Milan.

Ms. TITUS. Well, thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, I think a lot of this is worth pursuing, getting—

Mr. HRIB. Sorry.

Ms. TITUS. —[inaudible] because it is quite and valuable.

Mr. HRIB. Sorry. If I may add just a short comment on this. Actually I believe that the situation of my colleagues in Poland, in—in Warsaw, in—in Budapest, in Hungary is actually much harder than our position here judging from the information from them and the situation on the—with the media and so on, and also with the funds.

But actually we have experienced recently; that means a year ago, actually a similar situation when the central government had lowered the taxes, which would be a—a good thing, but at first they didn't have a relevant savings plan. And second, they actually lowered the taxes that is used for financing the cities. So they basically took the money from us.

And this is actually how authoritarian regimes start. They take away the money from the cities. That means that they are usually subsidy programs. Only the friends got the subsidies. And if you suddenly became a non-friend; you were a friend but you became a non-friend, that means that probably some audit or some—some—some people will come and they will try to criminalize you for, for example, some form or problems with the subsidy. And there is always some. And this is actually I think the way how the authoritarian regimes start. And this was a situation that was very, very imminent in Czech Republic a year ago, but we have—

had opposed that and we had let's say at least partially saved the situation.

Ms. TITUS. Interesting. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Representative. The Chair recognizes Representative Costa for 5 minutes. Is Representative Costa here? I can see him on the screen. Representative Costa. OK. We'll move to Representative Schneider. You're recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank all of our witnesses today, not just for sharing your vision, experiences, and perspectives with us in this hearing but for what you guys are doing collectively and with your colleagues in the Pact.

You know, I've been struggling to conceptualize the threats to liberal democracy, small L and small D, and earlier in that conversation the term nationalist populism, which is as good a definition of the opposite of liberal democracy as I can think of. And I believe it was Mayor Trzaskowski who said that the national governments are treating the cities as the enemy. And the flip side of that is also that the cities and the work you are doing in defending and protecting and nurturing liberal democracy is a challenge to those who are seeking power and trying to establish their legitimacy for their nationalist aims.

So my broad question for the group is what do you see as the biggest threats to the ongoing ability of the Pact to hold together and to continue to nurture and develop liberal democracy? And second backup question to that is what can United States and to the extent that we can be involved as the U.S. Congress do to support your efforts, in addition to giving you a forum like we have today.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Well, Congressman, if I may, of course, we will persevere. We will keep on collaborating, and nothing will change that. But, of course, you know, why the local government is under attack in Poland and why they are trying to take away money from us institute centralized programs and then they distribute money according to political criteria? Because we are independent, you know. All the independent institutions are under attack because the government does not, the current government does not like independent institutions. But we are strong enough and then, you know, the civil society is strong enough for us to be effective.

But at the end of the day, yes, I mean, they take away prerogatives, they take away the money; but we keep on doing what we are doing. And the important thing is that and that's what I said in my opening remarks is that you need to stay committed, the United States of America, the European Union, and we need to do whatever we can to support networks such as the Pact of Free Cities or other networks that we collaborate with, with, for example, the cities of, you know, the mayors of the cities of the United States, because we can really do a lot of things together, exchange information and so—for example, we were working together throughout the pandemic, and the information that we had from our American colleagues helped us a lot in managing better our hospitals.

So there's a lot we can do, I mean, helping directly. And it's not only a question of money. It's a question of creating fora, you know,

supporting institutions or networks that really help us do what we do.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. I do not know if any of the other mayors want to add to that.

Mr. TRZASKOWSKI. Maybe I just want to outline everything Mayor Trzaskowski just said. I mean, we are on the same place, we are in the same place, and it's very, for us, important to keep the collaboration going on. And, of course, any help from outside, any help to any network which is fighting for democracy here in Europe is a big help.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Great. Thank you. And before I go to my next question, Mayor Vallo, the sign behind you, it always seems impossible until it's done, I love that quote. A variation, quoting someone, our former Secretary of State Condi Rice, is making the impossible seem inevitable in retrospect. I think that's the challenge we all face in serving our communities and ensuring liberal democracy is the path we can all proceed.

Let me turn again to Mayor Trzaskowski. I'm sorry for butchering your name, but, following up on what Congressman Deutch touched on, and I appreciate your answer about rising anti-Semitism, and we're seeing it not just in Europe but across the globe, and very much appreciate your answer. But speaking to, more broadly, the Jewish community in Poland, and this probably can apply to communities everywhere, what are you saying to the community to tell them that there is a place for them in Poland in Poland's future and that they're safe and secure in their homes?

Mr. VALLO. Yes. Thank you very much for that question. I would just add one thing because you said what the United States can do. I mean, what we are doing in Poland and Hungary and Czech Republic and other cities, you know, we are supporting the non-governmental organizations which do a lot of work for us. They fight homophobia, they work with minorities, they help refugees, and so on and so forth. That's why we should keep on supporting them.

But answering your question, I mean, I wanted to say that, you know, Poland is one of the safest countries in Europe. And when it comes to safeguarding, you know, the rights, the constitutional rights of the minorities, we do whatever we can. And I have to say, honestly, that there is no agreement of the conservative governments to attack, for example, our Jewish minority. I mean, it's not happening. Unfortunately, sometimes they create an atmosphere in which, you know, those nationalistic elements can actually do what they do.

But I can assure you that the Jewish community in Warsaw is safe. We are doing everything to collaborate with them, and, of course, they're part of our DNA, part of our culture, in Warsaw. And, of course, they have an incredibly important part of our life. That's why we support the Museum of Polish Jews where we show the contribution of Polish Jews to our Nation, to the development of Poland. That's why they're springing up, you know, Jewish schools in Warsaw and other cities and the Jewish culture is incredibly vibrant in Poland. And we will keep on supporting that because that's what gives us richness and diversity that Warsaw was

always so well-known for, and we will keep on doing that, regardless of whatever happens.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you. I appreciate that. Just in closing, I had a chance to first visit Warsaw in 1990. Before World War II, Warsaw was one-third Jewish, and it's part of the history of Poland. I'm grateful for your remarks, and, to everybody, thank you again for all you're doing. I look forward to continuing our conversations and working to make sure that we're supporting what you all are doing but also collaborating to do this work around the world together.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back, and thank you for this hearing.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Representative. And I thank all of Committee members that participated. With all that's going on around Congress right now, we had amazing participation from our members because of the interest of the mayors that were here today. Your comments have inspired, informed, and I hope create a continuation of a dialog that we can have on the important issues, the shared values that we have.

While we were here in this hearing, the world goes on. And I'll inform you that, during this time, the U.S. has announced sanctions, further sanctions, against Belarus for their actions targeting migrant smuggling and victimization of migrants. And also Russia has issued a warning of fight in the separatist Donbas region, as they describe it, as they term it.

So we can see going ahead the challenges that we have in front of us, the threats to security and military action and aggressiveness, the use of economic factors, particularly energy, to break this union, to break this greatest strength that we share together, our coalition, our European—U.S. coalition for our shared values and for democracy.

I hope those that, from an authoritarian standpoint, realize and I hope this hearing was greater proof that these type of aggressive actions, these heavy-handed actions, these authoritarian actions, potentially these military actions, will never be ultimately successful if we hold together in unity and we surround ourselves and the core of shared values and beliefs in democracy.

And when you look at this, from any of those standpoints, a security standpoint, our military standpoint, an economic standpoint, the strong pillars of our major cities remain one of the most critical elements of this united strength. So your leadership, what you said today, your beliefs, your courage in going forward is not just important to the present, but we will face continued and, I'm afraid, greater challenges in the near future. And this alliance to our trans-Atlantic and shared democratic beliefs, which all four of our witnesses displayed today with great strength and courage, will continue to inspire all of us in this coalition as we go forward.

So I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the time you've taken, the content of what you've said, the strength of what you've conveyed, strength in democracy and strength that will be, I believe, a bond to the people you represent because, ultimately, it's those people in our countries and we cannot fail to recognize this. And I think there were some comments that were made before about do not give up on us. We look to your people, as you do as

mayors, as the strength. So we look to continue to work together, even given greater challenges we may face.

So thank you so much for being here. This is one of the most important hearings that we have had, and it was because of your participation and what you had to say. So I want to thank you and remind the members we have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous materials, and questions for the record, subject to the rules of this committee.

Again, thank you for this important hearing. And with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, the above-entitled matter went off the record at 11:57 a.m.]

APPENDIX

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber

William R. Keating (D-MA), Chair

December 2, 2021

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber via Cisco WebEx (and available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Thursday, December 2, 2021

TIME: 10:00 a.m., EST

SUBJECT: Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe: Founding Members of the Pact of Free Cities

WITNESS: Mr. Rafał Trzaskowski
Mayor of Warsaw

Mr. Gergely Karácsony
Mayor of Budapest

Mr. Zdeněk Hřib
Mayor of Prague

Mr. Matúš Vallo
Mayor of Bratislava

By Direction of the Chair

To fill out this form online, either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber HEARING

Day Thursday Date 12/2/2021 Room Cisco Webex

Starting Time 10:12 Ending Time 11:57

Recesses (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___) (___ to ___)

Presiding Member(s)
William R. Keating

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session Electronically Recorded (taped)
Executive (closed) Session Stenographic Record
Televised

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:
Innovative Municipal Leadership in Central Europe: Founding Members of the Pact of Free Cities

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:
See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

Mr. Rafal Trzaskowski's Testimony
Mr. Gergely Karácsony's Testimony
Mr. Zdeněk Hřib's Testimony
Mr. Matúš Vallo's Testimony
Representative Dan Meuser's QFR for Mr. Rafal Trzaskowski
Representative Dan Meuser's QFR for Mr. Gergely Karácsony
Representative Dan Meuser's QFR for Mr. Zdeněk Hřib
Representative Dan Meuser's QFR for Mr. Matúš Vallo

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____
or
TIME ADJOURNED 11:57

Benjamin Cooper
Subcommittee Staff Associate

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
EUROPE, ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CYBER SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

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DECLARATION

Hearing, December 2, 2021

House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, Distinguished Members of The Subcommittee,

Thirty two years ago, on November 1989, Lech Wałęsa, leader of "Solidarity" and Peace Noble Prize winner, addressed the joint session of the United States Congress with his famous "We the people" speech.

Today the PIS government is trying to write its own version of history and wipe out Lech Wałęsa from history books. It is only because of the courage of our teachers that Polish children even learn about him.

I mention the times of "Solidarity", as it reminds us that the quality and the strength of democracy depends on the strength of the independent institutions and the rule of law, but also on the readiness of the ordinary citizens to fight for human rights and democratic values.

Poland has not been yet turned into an undemocratic regime – but not for the lack of trying on the part of the conservative government, but thanks to the resilience of its people, the strength of the parties of the parliamentary opposition and the courage and dynamism of our civil society.

Poland still is and remains to be a democracy, because the overwhelming majority of the Polish nation has not given up on democratic principles.

Over the past years, we have seen hundreds of thousands of men and women gathering on the streets of Poland to protest against violation of the Polish constitution, support for the independence of the Polish judges, defence of women's rights or protection of minorities. All the opinion polls clearly demonstrate that if the opposition were to be united it would win the next parliamentary election. This is a sound proof of the resilience of the Polish civil society, which provides a backbone for the democratic state.

Honorable Members of Congress,

I accepted your invitation for this hearing not to complain, but to share with you the problems we encounter and the possible ways, in which we are going to deal with them.

Today Poland is a battlefield between freedom and authoritarianism, between the citizens and the governmental political oligarchy, between democratic institutions and the populist government, which questions and undermines the division of power and tries to paralyse or politicize the independent institutions meant to control the excesses of unbridled governmental power.

In times when the international context in Poland's neighbourhood is so volatile, the Russians are amassing troops on the Ukrainian border, the Kremlin is weaponizing energy policy and Lukashenka has his hand in provoking the migratory crisis on our Eastern border we need a measure of bipartisan approach. The PIS government instead is cynically using the crisis to boost its approval ratings and continues to undermine the rule of law in our country.

Let me share with you a few examples what they have been doing:

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Gergely Karácsony
Rep. Dan Meuser
Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber Subcommittee
December 2, 2021

Question 1:

Why is Hungary such an attractive investment for China?

Answer 1:

Just as with Chinese investments in Africa or the Western Balkans, the attractiveness to invest is predicated on the ‘host country’ government’s attitude towards corruption. The Hungarian government managed to divert significant EU funds to cronies with techniques such as overpricing and skewed bids. But in the case of Chinese investments, there are virtually no transparency and fair competition requirements, which opens the door to cronyism. This is why the Hungarian government is so interested in attracting Chinese investment, e.g., large infrastructure projects such as Budapest-Belgrade railroad and Fudan University, which would have high costs and little benefit to Hungarian citizens.

Chinese investors are intrigued by the excessively investor-friendly legal environment in Hungary, as well as the possibility of backroom deals and cutting corners. This represents an opportunity for China to enter the EU common market through investing in Hungary. Moreover, unlike most other EU countries, Hungary is silent on the abysmal human rights record, labor conditions, and environmental standards in China, and ignores national security concerns represented by a vastly increased Chinese presence in Hungary.

I as mayor have been sending clear signals: we will block as many of these dodgy deals as we can. Some steps are symbolic, like renaming four roads in Budapest to Dalai Lama Road, Free Hong Kong Road, Road of Uyghur Martyrs and Bishop Xie Shiguang Road, named after a persecuted Chinese Catholic priest. Others are more direct, such as organizing a massive rally last June, where I argued that the Fudan project is bad for anyone who does not want their tax forints to serve the Chinese Communist Party’s influence. I have also told the Hungarian government that Fudan University cannot be built in place of the planned Student City, or I will withdraw Budapest’s approval to host the 2023 World Athletics Championships. And now, just last week, we received the signature collection sheets for a planned referendum on the “Fudan Act”. Faced by the increased attention and opposition, as well as lack of public support, both the Hungarian government and the Chinese Communist Party already seem to be backing out of the deal.

Question 2:

How is the United States and the West perceived in your cities and how can we better convey to your citizens and leaders that freedom, enterprise, and democracy are the right direction?

Answer 2:

It is well documented that Hungary has been experiencing declines in democracy ratings in the past years. In 2020, the deterioration of democratic principles culminated with Freedom House removing Hungary from the list of democracies, moving it to the group of “hybrid regimes”. Hungary’s decline is mostly linked to high corruption and the lack of civil liberties and electoral justice.

I want to stress, as I did during the Subcommittee hearing, that hope is not lost. The Hungarian government’s values do not reflect those of Hungarian society, do not equate Orbán with Hungary. The majority of Hungarians are committed to the country’s Euro-atlantic orientation and are looking for Western leadership in defending democracy and the rule of law across the globe.

Hungarians in general demonstrate high levels of support both for the EU and NATO. Most young Hungarians want the country to align geopolitically with the West. But while only a few Hungarians think that the United States threatens their identity and values, it has become less of a role model in the eyes of many. Russia and China are increasingly seen as more important players in Hungary and in the region.

Thus, more vocal US stance on the dangers of democratic erosion and the corrosive effects of endemic corruption and more robust US support for free enterprise, independent media and civil society would be critical to counter malign influence and cement the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Hungarian society.

Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Rafał Trzaskowski
Rep. Dan Meuser
Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber Subcommittee
December 2, 2021

Question 1:

How is the United States and the West perceived in your cities and how can we better convey to your citizens and leaders that freedom, enterprise, and democracy are the right direction?

Answer 1:

Mr. Trzaskowski did not respond in time for printing.

Questions for the Record Submitted to Mr. Zdeněk Hřib
Rep. Dan Meuser
Europe, Energy, the Environment, and Cyber Subcommittee
December 2, 2021

Question 1:

What more can the transatlantic alliance do to join you in standing-up to the authoritarian regimes in Beijing and Moscow?

Answer 1:

Mr. Hřib did not respond in time for printing.

Question 2:

How is the United States and the West perceived in your cities and how can we better convey to your citizens and leaders that freedom, enterprise, and democracy are the right direction?

Answer 2:

Mr. Hřib did not respond in time for printing.