

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 Lukaschenko – 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.