

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

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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 changes 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.**