

# Statement before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

# "Upholding OSCE Commitments in Hungary and Poland"

A Testimony by:

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Thank you, Chairman Cardin and Co-Chairman Cohen, Ranking Members Wicker and Wilson, and distinguished Members of the Commission for holding this important hearing regarding the long-term democratic erosion in Poland and Hungary, and for the opportunity to share my views. I hope you never lose sight of how powerful these hearings are; the U.S. Helsinki Commission remains a beacon of hope to those who work tirelessly to strengthen democratic institutions.

This is a particularly timely hearing two months before Poland assumes the OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office. The government has promised its chairmanship will be "guided by a human-centric perspective" and will respect the work of the Representative for Freedom of the Media and the Office for Democracy Initiatives and Human Rights. However, thus far Poland has not lived up to this promise.

#### The Illiberal Adores a Policy Vacuum

The Helsinki Commission is justified in holding this hearing: the United States has expended enormous resources—diplomatic, economic, and military—alongside its European partners to integrate Central and Eastern European countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. We believed that the social, political, and economic integration of Poland, Hungary, and other Central European countries would strengthen Europe and support U.S. global policy objectives. The transatlantic community was initially very successful in achieving these goals; so successful in fact that the United States convinced itself it had earned its return on investment by 2004 and could leave this diplomatic garden largely to be "tended" to by Europeans alone.<sup>2</sup>

Washington believed it had other, more important work to do in South Asia, the Middle East, and most recently in the Indo-Pacific. It ultimately became more important to the United States that our Central Europeans allies support U.S. policy goals with regards to Afghanistan, Iraq, or China than addressing their democratic backsliding. But we comforted ourselves in the belief that, should something go radically wrong with these countries by way of democratic backsliding, the institutional "straitjacket" of NATO and EU membership would be sufficient to contain their worst behavior.

Well, something has gone radically wrong. Unfortunately, EU and NATO membership have proven to be insufficient straitjackets. In fact, not only are these institutions incapable of addressing democratic backsliding, they—and, more accurately, the politics within them—have perversely enabled some of this democratic backsliding. NATO does not wish to acknowledge the security vulnerabilities that democratic backsliding presents even though it speaks repeatedly of needing greater political cohesion. The European Union does not have adequate or swift mechanisms to address backsliding and even if it did, there is not sufficient political will to deploy them, as we observed during last week's European Council meeting. This lack of will to address democratic and governance concerns has created a policy vacuum.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "Poland's 2022 OSCE Chairmanship to focus on OSCE's fundamental tasks, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau tells Permanent Council," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, July 15, 2021, <a href="https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/492955">https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/492955</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Nicholas Burns, "The Diplomat as Gardener," *Foreign Affairs*, February 19, 2021, <a href="https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-19/diplomat-gardener.">https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-19/diplomat-gardener.</a>

While nature may abhor a vacuum, the illiberal adore it.

What both the United States and Europe have forgotten—about themselves and about Poland and Hungary—is that that the hard work of democracy and civil society building never ends. Put differently, there is no "mission accomplished" banner when new NATO or EU members are welcomed. Democracies, by definition, are all works in progress, with steps taken forward and backward, which is why steady and credible diplomatic and economic investment is required.

Yet even that is not necessarily sufficient. The European Union continues to make massive investments in Poland and Hungary—with the current exception of the temporary suspension of pandemic recovery funds—while those governments continue to dismantle democratic institutions, undercut or end judicial independence, undermine civil liberties and freedom of the press, and preside over a corrupt system of party patronage. Budapest, in fact, uses EU funds to further the government's own corrupt practices. The United States and NATO have made massive security investments in Poland since 2014, but Washington has not demanded changes in a series of Polish decisions that impinge on press and judicial freedom (for example, the license of a U.S. majority-owned and independent media outlet, TVN, and crippling the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal).<sup>4</sup>

Step by step, one of the United States' greatest foreign policy achievements has evolved into an own goal: an increasingly illiberal and unstable Central Europe and a defeat for democracy. While it is true that transatlantic policy attention has been diverted elsewhere—the 2008 financial crisis, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russian military incursion in Donbas, the 2015 migration crisis, Brexit, acute political polarization, and the rise of China—the transatlantic community lost sight of what is most important: its own democratic values.

Amid our transatlantic silence, beginning well over a decade ago Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban pioneered a template for illiberalism—Orbanism—which proclaimed in 2010 that while Budapest was "sailing under a Western flag, ... an Eastern wind is blowing," meaning Moscow, and more recently Beijing. This illiberal template was a guide to consolidate power over once-democratic institutions while wholly benefitting from EU and NATO membership, even as Orban simultaneously undercut both institutions. Absent a strong and consistent U.S. and European response, this template is now being replicated or adapted in Poland, Slovenia, and EU-aspirant Serbia.

The strategic implications of this transatlantic policy vacuum have far broader ramifications than the diminishment of democracy within Hungary, as significant as that is. Democratic backsliding has now reached a point where it is shifting the strategic orientation of the region away from the West and toward Orban's illiberal template. At a joint government session with Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić in September, Orban declared that it was up to Serbia and Hungary to rebuild

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Selam Gebrekidan, Matt Apuzzo, and Benjamin Novak, "The Money Farmers: How Oligarchs and Populists Milk the E.U. for Millions," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/03/world/europe/eu-farm-subsidy-hungary.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Silvia Amaro, "Poland pushes through new media law and angers the U.S.," CNBC, August 12, 2021, <a href="https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/12/poland-pushes-through-new-media-law-and-angers-the-us-.html">https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/12/poland-pushes-through-new-media-law-and-angers-the-us-.html</a>.

and protect Central Europe.<sup>5</sup> Implicit in this declaration is a rejection of transatlanticism in favor of an alignment with Moscow and Beijing to ensure both regimes' ability to preserve their own power and patronage networks.

### The Illiberal Template

Today, Hungary exemplifies the tragic U.S. policy arc for Central Europe. It once represented a successful transition, with Viktor Orban as a young, leading anti-Communist freedom fighter who received a scholarship from George Soros to study at Oxford. Thirty years later, Orban blames all of Hungary's misfortunes—real or perceived—on George Soros (a message with clear anti-Semitic undertones), the European Union, or the United States. He has become a self-described "freedom fighter" for national sovereignty against the tyranny and social decadence of the European Union. Since 2010, he has methodically consolidated his Fidesz party's influence over all major government institutions to ensure the continuation of his power, to the point where last year Freedom House declared Hungary unfit to be called a democracy and labeled it a "hybrid regime."

Once again drawing inspiration from Russia—or perhaps in a feedback loop between Moscow and Budapest—the Hungarian government has instrumentalized faith, tradition, and values to maintain power. It has used its media dominance to create the impression that Hungary, and its identity as a Christian nation, were under constant attack and only Viktor Orban could save or protect it. Refugees are "Muslim invaders"<sup>8</sup>; critical journalists who expose the regime's corruption are agents of George Soros; and LGBTQ rights are foreign imports from a decadent, non-Christian West.<sup>9</sup> In arguing that Hungary is threatened by the precepts of liberal democracy, Orban expands his own power and his illiberalism beyond Hungary itself. He does so in the name of all the perceived "threats" against national sovereignty (from Brussels) and against national identity (from migrants and non-Christian faiths), and anyone who disputes these threats (Washington and Brussels) must be an enemy of the state.

The tactical congruence between Viktor Orban and the Kremlin is quite remarkable and is well financed. As detailed in CSIS' *Kremlin Playbook* report, Hungary has long been a welcoming recipient of Russian political and economic influence, particularly in the energy and financial sectors, where Russia has invested significantly.<sup>10</sup> For example, in 2014 the Hungarian government awarded Russian state-owned nuclear operator Rosatom a €12 billion sole-source

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia, Hungary Will 'Rebuild, Protect Central Europe,' Orban Says," *Balkan Insight*, September 8, 2021, <a href="https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/08/serbia-hungary-will-rebuild-protect-central-europe-orban-says/">https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/08/serbia-hungary-will-rebuild-protect-central-europe-orban-says/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> John Chalmers and Gabriela Baczynska, "Hungary's Orban rejects criticism over rule of law, says he is a 'freedom fighter'," Reuters, September 25, 2020, <a href="https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-interview-idUSKCN26G26Q">https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-interview-idUSKCN26G26Q</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Zselyke Csaky, "Dropping the Democratic Façade," Freedom House, April 2020, <a href="https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade">https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Emily Schultheis, "Viktor Orban: Hungary Doesn't Want 'Muslim Invaders," *Politico*, January 8, 2018, <a href="https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-doesnt-want-muslim-invaders/">https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-doesnt-want-muslim-invaders/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Zack Beauchamp, "How Hatred of Gay People Became a Key Plank in Hungary's Authoritarian Turn," *Vox*, June 28, 2021, <a href="https://www.vox.com/22547228/hungary-orban-lgbt-law-pedophilia-authoritarian">https://www.vox.com/22547228/hungary-orban-lgbt-law-pedophilia-authoritarian</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Heather Conley et al, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

contract to build two new nuclear reactors at the Paks facility (the contract was not made public); in 2019, Orban announced Hungary would get gas from the TurkStream pipeline (a re-do of Gazprom's defunct South Stream project) by 2021. Hungary hosts the headquarters of Russia's International Investment Bank (IIB), which is viewed by analysts as an intelligence operation in Budapest with regional implications as IIB staff and directors were granted diplomatic immunity. In return, Hungary has advocated for lifting sanctions against Russia (although it has not blocked EU sanctions) and has blocked the convening of the NATO-Ukraine Commission due to Ukraine's alleged treatment of ethnic Hungarians, which is driven as much by domestic politics as its relationship with Russia – but serves the latter nonetheless. Is

Another concerning tactic also shared with Russia is Hungary's use of passportization and economic support to ethnic compatriots abroad. Just as Russia provides hundreds of thousands of Russian passports in the post-Soviet space, in 2011, the Hungarian government passed a law to make it easier for ethnic Hungarians with a knowledge of the Hungarian language to apply for citizenship. He by 2015, approximately 700,000 people had received Hungarian citizenship, most from neighboring Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine. Loyalty to Budapest rather than to the host country is due in part to the millions of dollars in aid the Hungarian government allocates to cultural, religious, and political organizations for Hungarians abroad. Ethnic Hungarian politicians abroad receive significant funding from Hungary through vehicles such as the Bethlen Gabor Fund, which is managed by a state-owned company, tying them closely with Fidesz. And, just as in the recent Russian Duma elections, these newly passported citizens are then allowed to vote in support of the regime from outside its borders. Prime Minister Orban himself has admitted that he owes his electoral success to the votes of these Hungarians abroad, the vast majority of whom can be expected to vote for Fidesz.

Hungary has also eagerly courted Chinese investment and is one of the largest recipients of Chinese investment in Europe, including China's \$1.9 billion "loan" for the construction of a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Sara Stefanini and Nicholas Hirst, "Hungary's Russian-built nuclear plant powered by politics in Brussels," *Politico*, November 22, 2017, <a href="https://www.politico.eu/article/hungarys-russian-built-nuclear-plant-powered-by-politics-in-brussels">https://www.politico.eu/article/hungarys-russian-built-nuclear-plant-powered-by-politics-in-brussels</a>; Pablo Gorondi, "Hungary expects gas from TurkStream pipeline by late 2021," Associated Press, November 7, 2019, <a href="https://apnews.com/article/0787ffa47425437fb12abdb92931e86d">https://apnews.com/article/0787ffa47425437fb12abdb92931e86d</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> "U.S. Senators See Security Threat in Russian Bank's Move to Budapest," Reuters, September 26, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/hungary-russia-senators/u-s-senators-see-security-threat-in-russian-banks-move-to-budapest-idUSL5N26H3LO.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> "Hungary to block Ukraine's NATO membership over language law," Reuters, December 4, 2019, <a href="https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-nato-hungary/hungary-to-block-ukraines-nato-membership-over-language-law-idUSKBN1Y823N">https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-nato-hungary/hungary-to-block-ukraines-nato-membership-over-language-law-idUSKBN1Y823N</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Laurence Peter, "New Hungary citizenship law fuels passport demand," *BBC News*, January 4, 2011, <a href="https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-12114289">https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-12114289</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Heather Conley, "How Viktor Orban Turned a Century of Hungarian History into a Secret Weapon," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2020, <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/03/how-viktor-orban-turned-century-hungarian-history-into-secret-weapon/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/03/how-viktor-orban-turned-century-hungarian-history-into-secret-weapon/</a>; Chris Harris, "What's the Link Between WWI and Hungary's 675,000 New Citizens," EuroNews, January 28, 2015, <a href="https://www.euronews.com/2015/01/28/whats-the-link-between-world-war-1-and-hungarys-675000-new-citizens#graphic1">https://www.euronews.com/2015/01/28/whats-the-link-between-world-war-1-and-hungarys-675000-new-citizens#graphic1">https://www.euronews.com/2015/01/28/whats-the-link-between-world-war-1-and-hungarys-675000-new-citizens#graphic1</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Michal Hudec and Vlagyiszlaw Makszimov, "Why Orban Pumps Billions Abroad," *Euractiv*, October 28, 2021, <a href="https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/why-orban-pumps-billions-abroad/">https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/why-orban-pumps-billions-abroad/</a>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Lili Bayer, "Viktor Orban Courts Voters Beyond 'Fortress Hungary," *Politico*, August 22, 2017, <a href="https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-courts-voters-in-transylvania-romania-hungarian-election-2018/">https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-courts-voters-in-transylvania-romania-hungarian-election-2018/</a>.

railway between Budapest and Belgrade and a \$1.5 billion "loan" for the construction of a satellite campus for China's Fudan University in Budapest (which has encountered significant public resistance). Budapest is also home to Huawei's Research and Development Center. These investments have similarly paid off for China as they did for Russia: closer diplomatic ties between Budapest and Beijing have ensured that Hungary supports Chinese policy stances within the European Union.<sup>19</sup>

#### Poland's Version of Orbanism

The illiberal transition in Poland is fueled by the current Law and Justice party (PiS), which, like Orban, had its origins in freedom-fighting from the days of the Solidarity Movement. Its nationalistic, socialistic, and religious platform is driven by current party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, but these tendencies were apparent in the party's first term in office in 2005. They accelerated in the aftermath of PiS's electoral loss in 2007 and the tragic death of President Lech Kaczynski and 98 others in a plane crash in 2010 over Smolensk, Russia. The loss of power (similar to Orban's electoral loss in 2002) combined with a deep-seated conspiratorial view of the world attracted Law and Justice to the perceived success of Orbanism when PiS returned to power in 2015. To ensure PiS remained in power, the government curtailed the independence of the judiciary by controlling judicial appointments outside the constitutional process, gradually took over public as well as independent media and state-owned enterprises—placing loyalists at the helm—and began targeted campaigns against perceived enemies of the state.<sup>20</sup>

Over the past two years, the government's attacks against democratic institutions have intensified as PiS and its coalition partners' grip on power weakens. In 2019, the government created a disciplinary chamber that could penalize judges for their decisions against the government and a National Council of the Judiciary that appoints loyalists in the guise of judicial appointments. Having already dismantled the independence of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, it is not surprising that the court recently found some elements of EU treaties to be incompatible with the Polish constitution. This has far-reaching implications for the primacy of EU law in Poland and could jeopardize the European Union's legal order. 22

Just as in Hungary, the dramatic diminishment of Poland's independent, democratic institutions has an ideological component that relies heavily on a grievance-based vision of a Poland under attack from perceived enemies and the need to defend its unique, Christian national identity. Similar to both Orbanism and Putinism, the Polish government is fighting against the perceived cultural decadence of the West, which manifests itself through anti-LGBTQ and other values-based campaigns. By blaming the West (particularly Brussels) for its decadence and abandonment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Gabriela Baczynska and Thomas Escritt, "German Official Rebukes Hungary for Blocking EU Criticism of China," Reuters, June 4, 2021, <a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-cant-work-like-this-german-official-says-after-hungary-blocks-china-statement-2021-06-04/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-cant-work-like-this-german-official-says-after-hungary-blocks-china-statement-2021-06-04/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Anne Applebaum, "A Warning from Europe: The Worst Is Yet to Come," *The Atlantic*, October 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/poland-polarization/568324.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Jan Cienski, "Poland risks EU membership with legal reforms, court warns," *Politico*, December 18, 2019, <a href="https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-risks-eu-membership-with-legal-reforms-court-warns">https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-risks-eu-membership-with-legal-reforms-court-warns</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> "EU court fines Poland 1 mln euros per day in rule of law row," Reuters, October 27, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-top-court-orders-poland-pay-1-million-euros-day-rule-law-row-2021-10-27.

of Judeo-Christian roots, the government justifies its democratic backsliding by painting any criticism of itself as an attack against Poland's national identity—one only PiS can and will protect. I have often wondered why this Polish government, one that views itself as virulently anti-Russian, does not understand it is employing the Kremlin's tactics in the weaponization of faith, traditions, and values to separate itself from its allies in the West, therefore weakening itself and increasing its susceptibility to Russian malign influence. Forty-five hundred U.S. forces in Poland cannot deter this.

# Implications for NATO and EU Political Cohesion

The preamble of the 1949 Washington Treaty calls on NATO member states to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law."<sup>23</sup> Democratic backsliding in Poland, Hungary, and other member states presents a clear and present threat to the cohesion of the alliance. Democratic deficiencies and a lack of respect for the principles of the NATO alliance create internal vulnerabilities that strategic competitors can easily exploit; lead countries to take actions that run counter to the alliance's collective defense interests; and empower states to bring bilateral disputes into the alliance.<sup>24</sup> Failing to uphold the values that underpin the alliance should be viewed as a violation of the Washington Treaty, and a violation should be raised at a North Atlantic Council (NAC) meeting for a discussion of democratic backsliding of select members.<sup>25</sup>

Article 4 of the Washington treaty states that NATO members can "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any parties is threatened." Recognizing that political independence can be threatened internally, consultations on Article 4 could be used to raise attention to democratic deficiencies within member states in dire circumstances. Article 8 of the Washington Treaty, which deals with the compatibility of the Washington Treaty with other international engagements, could be invoked for consultations when member states "enter into international engagements in conflict with" the treaty and threaten peace and security. NATO has the tools to address these challenges but lacks the political will to do so.

Addressing these threats is critical to restoring NATO's and the European Union's political cohesion and unity. As democracy deteriorates, both institutions at best become less effective in responding to regional and global challenges or at worst are increasingly held hostage to the agendas of their most illiberal members, impairing functionality. Both institutions become less attractive to countries that seek greater alignment with the West. Without political courage to confront this challenge, the effects of illiberalism will continue to consume NATO and the European Union and erode these important institutions from within.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> "The North Atlantic Treaty," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official texts 17120.htm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Rachel Ellehuus and Pierre Morcos, "'Lifting Up Our Values At Home:' How to Revitalize NATO's Political Cohesion," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 12, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/lifting-ourvalues-home-how-revitalize-natos-political-cohesion.

25 Heather A. Conley, "The Strategic Argument for a Political NATO," NATO Defense College, March 2021,

https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1533.

The European Union in particular has proven incapable of stemming this backsliding due to a lack of political will. Accommodation rather than confrontation has been the preferred approach, with the exception of the European Parliament, which has sought greater action by the Commission. U.S. silence has also contributed to this backsliding, as we seek to compartmentalize this growing problem from our regional security posture, particularly in Poland. While it is encouraging that the European Union has now imposed fines on Poland of €1 million (around \$1.17 million) a day, if Poland does not recognize the authority of the Court of Justice of the European Union, it is unclear whether the Court can force these fines to be paid. The time for accepting "small steps" from either Poland or Hungary in response to democratic backsliding has now passed. More focused transatlantic action is required.

# Lack of Consistent U.S. Policy Response

We must be honest with ourselves: democracy in Central Europe corroded under our watch. While the United States celebrated these countries' accession to NATO and the European Union in 2004, immediately afterwards we walked off the pitch. Successive U.S. administrations have either largely ignored the region, overlooked the governance weaknesses that have arisen or, on occasion, responded to a specific event but did not follow through with renewed diplomatic investment. These increasingly partisan policy fluctuations, where Republican-led administrations love Poland and Hungary too much and Democratic-led administrations chronically underinvest in the region, have significantly undermined the creation of a cohesive and long-term U.S. strategy toward the region, sending mixed signals to Budapest and Warsaw. Again, the illiberal adores and thrives in a policy vacuum.

However, the United States cannot do this alone. It must engage institutionally with Brussels to stiffen political spines and work within the European Quad format. Unfortunately, Berlin, Paris, and London all have a different policy approach toward Budapest and Warsaw. For historical, economic, and political reasons, Germany always opts for a softer and accommodative stance. <sup>26</sup> Paris equivocates between disdain toward Poland and Hungary and opportunism to support French interests (e.g., Posted Workers Directive and economic relations) while reducing Berlin's (and U.S.) regional influence. London has shamefully used Budapest's and Warsaw's illiberalism as a wedge strategy for its own perilous post-Brexit negotiations with Brussels. Absent a coherent European approach and with an episodic U.S. response, a perfect cover is provided to Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and others to continue following the illiberal playbook. The longer it is allowed to happen, the harder it is to reverse—until it becomes impossible.

# Where Do We Go from Here?

The Biden administration has pledged to work closely with allies and partners to achieve a long list of goals, including to "lead and sustain a stable and open international system" and "revitalize democracy." Poland has been invited to join the White House's virtual Summit for Democracy; Hungary has not. Does this mean Poland can be saved and Hungary cannot? The Biden

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Mujtaba Rahman, "Europe's Next Rule of Law Problem: Angela Merkel," Politico, October 26, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-rule-of-law-angela-merkel-poland-hungary/.

https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-rule-of-law-angela-merkel-poland-hungary/. 

The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, <a href="https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf">https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf</a>.

administration's focus on anticorruption and clear opposition to illiberalism sends a positive signal, but if there is no concrete action, follow-through, and a transatlantic approach, it will have little long-lasting impact.

Fortunately, citizens and civil society are fighting to take back their democracies from illiberalism. In 2019, Zuzana Caputova was elected as president of Slovakia on a platform of anti-corruption and anti-graft reforms, which resonated deeply following the assassination of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak. A year later, the SMER party's political dominance ended and an anti-corruption coalition was formed (with its own challenges). Last month, in the Czech Republic, Prime Minister Andrej Babis's party came in second in the elections following repeated corruption scandals and revelations in the Pandora Papers. After a decade of political fragmentation, Hungary's opposition has aligned behind a single candidate who is basing his candidacy on restoring Hungary's democracy and an anti-corruption platform. And last month, nearly 100,000 people thronged Warsaw's historic square to protest government control over the judicial branch and its confrontation with the European Union.

This is the true legacy of U.S. investment in Central Europe: the power of the individual to demand dignity, transparency, and accountability of the leaders he or she elects. This is what the U.S. Helsinki Commission and the human dimension of the Helsinki Final Act stands for. Although it will take years to undo the graft, patronage networks, and accumulation of power that has occurred over the last illiberal decade in Poland and Hungary, we must stand with those who seek a different future and are fighting for freedom and stronger democratic institutions. Illiberal leaders will always insist they are needed for something more important – imposing or maintaining sanctions, increasing defense spending or financial support, or reducing carbon emissions – than the condition of their democratic institutions. Instead, we must ask ourselves: if there is no democracy or freedom, what is the transatlantic community really fighting for?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Scilla Alecci, "Czech Prime Minister secretly bought lavish French Riviera estate using offshore companies," International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, October 3, 2021, <a href="https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/czech-prime-minister-andrej-babis-french-property">https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/czech-prime-minister-andrej-babis-french-property</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Krisztina Than, "Hungarians to pick Orban's 2022 contender in tight opposition primary," Reuters, October 15, 2021, <a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarians-pick-orbans-2022-contender-tight-opposition-primary-2021-10-15">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarians-pick-orbans-2022-contender-tight-opposition-primary-2021-10-15</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Piotr Skolimowski, "100,000 in Poland Take to the Streets Asking to Stay in the EU," Bloomberg News, October 10, 2021, <a href="https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-10/pro-eu-protest-brings-100-000-poles-to-the-streets-in-warsaw">https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-10/pro-eu-protest-brings-100-000-poles-to-the-streets-in-warsaw</a>.