

What American Mayors Can Learn From Budapest

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Most people in the United States have not given much thought to the role of mayors in their system of democracy, including many mayors themselves – they never had to. While the degree of coordination between the federal government, states, and cities waxed and waned over time, mayors and their residents could mostly count on Washington, D.C., for basic adherence to checks and balances, respect for the rule of law, independent federal prosecutors, a normal flow of funds to local government for housing, education and infrastructure, and so on.

Not anymore. Also not in Hungary for most of the last two decades. There, during the 16-year reign of illiberal autocrat Viktor Orban, local leaders have been the stewards of freedom. Orban, finally defeated last month by an opposition led by Peter Magyar, had targeted cities mercilessly and constantly, draining their [resources](#), and pitting them against [rural areas](#) to curry favor with his base. Most mayors did not subscribe to his program for Hungary – they promoted civil liberties and protected the rights of vulnerable communities. Many local elected leaders in Hungary exercised the mechanisms and norms of democratic governance and rule of law every day – making government operations transparent, rooting out corruption, offering trusted information (sometimes via messages on public trash containers, as that was the only channel for communication left to them after independent media were hijacked). And they delivered on basic things that residents need and want as best they could with less and less money allocated to them.

Take Budapest’s Mayor Gergely Karascony, for example. I have met some of his senior advisors and have seen that he and his staff work closely with [civil society](#), bringing some into government. Cities are where young public servants can begin their careers, and Karascony made sure his staff was safe and paid. He kept his constituents close by polling them routinely. He fostered belonging and celebrated pluralism. He tried to use the [courts](#) to defend against unfair taxes Orban’s government sought to levy [against municipalities](#). When Orban’s regime passed a law last year prohibiting gatherings that “promote or display” LGBTQ+ content, Karascony re-characterized the annual Pride

parade as a municipal “Budapest pride parade,” and [hundreds of thousands of people attended](#) from across Europe. Orbán’s government [pressed charges](#) against him.

Shattering the ‘Aura of Invincibility’

Did this kind of mass mobilization, mocking and challenging a central government edict, give Hungarians extra courage to throw Orbán out? It’s impossible to draw a direct causal line – many factors were at play – but some [analysts credit](#) the open defiance of Budapest pride with helping to shatter the “aura of invincibility” around Orbán and his party. Right before the election, Hungarian mayors also [collectively demanded](#) that city functions the central government had commandeered be restored to them, thus signaling their support for a change.

U.S. mayors, who are consistently [ranked the most trusted political leaders](#) in America, are stepping up, too. Boston’s Mayor Michelle Wu (who my organization ALLIES invited to join [our event at the Munich Security Conference](#) earlier this year) was out front in March 2025, at a time when every day brought another story about other major public figures – heads of law firms and universities, tech billionaires – bending their knees to the Trump administration. Wu spoke bold truth to power at a congressional hearing, stating the facts, and accusing the federal government of sowing [fear](#) and distrust. Reflecting in an interview, she [said](#): “It is objectively true that when you’re faced with a retaliatory and law-agnostic federal government, the cost-benefit analysis usually points to keeping your mouth shut. Yet that is how our democracy slips away.” Minneapolis’s Mayor Jacob Frey, along with countless brave Minnesotans, ran a massive operation to protect his immigrant constituents and protestors from violent, masked federal agents, with actions ranging from prohibiting the use of city property for ICE operations staging to establishing support centers for immigrant communities. Other [mayors](#) did the same.

Many more American mayors, quietly or loudly, are pushing back against the worst overreach of this federal government, offering city space to [protest organizers](#), poking fun at federal enforcement operations. Protecting their constituents is what mayors everywhere do – it’s the job. But nearly invisibly, they also [nurture and often bring innovations](#) to basic democratic norms and systems.

Cooperation Across Borders

Mayors also coordinate across national borders on shared challenges. They have long exchanged best practices globally in areas such as [clean energy](#), and [women’s empowerment](#). With renewed vigor, they are now convening on issues of democratic backsliding and central government overreach. In 2019, the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, all facing illiberal, elected, autocrats ruling their countries’ central governments, founded the [Pact of Free Cities](#), which ALLIES is now working with, to build solidarity and learn from one another. Since then, the Pact has expanded to nearly 40 mayors and has, for example, given support, political and tangible, to

Ukrainian cities. It has [spoken out](#) about the [arrest](#) of Istanbul's Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu the day after he became his party's nominee for president of Turkey to challenge autocratic incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The statement helped pierce the central government's false narrative about the mayor's alleged corruption and espionage.

While transatlantic and global patterns of local collaboration on fundamental freedoms are not yet well worn, they are in progress. Next week, the Pact will officially welcome 10 U.S. cities into its network, including Boston, Chicago, Montgomery, Oklahoma City, San Diego, and San Antonio.

Mayors hold the strands of trust between people and their government. Hungary demonstrates that, when the time is right, local leaders may be able to take those threads and help reweave the social fabric. For Americans looking to heal their democracy, a good place to start is in their own town.

FEATURED IMAGE: European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Hadja Lahbib (L), Vice-President of the European Parliament Nicolae Stefanuta (R) and Budapest Mayor Gergely Karacsony (C) address a press conference at City Hall in Budapest on June 27, 2025. one day ahead of the Budapest Pride march. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban had said police would not "break up" the Budapest Pride march on June 28 despite issuing a ban, but he warned attendees and organizers about the legal consequences. Orban's ruling coalition amended laws and the constitution earlier that year to prohibit the annual celebration, advancing his widely condemned, years-long clampdown on LGBTQ rights in the name of "child protection." (Photo by Attila Kisbenedek/AFP via Getty Images)
