

## Mayoral Roundtable on Fighting Polarisation and Fortifying Democracy in Cities

### Meeting Summary

On January 19, 2023, the [Strong Cities Network](#) and [German Marshall Fund](#) (GMF) hosted a transatlantic **Mayoral Roundtable on Fighting Polarisation and Fortifying Democracy in Cities**. Held in Washington, D.C. on the margins of the [91<sup>st</sup> Winter Meeting](#) of the US Conference of Mayors, the roundtable convened over 30 mayors and other senior city officials from Europe and North America to delve deeper into what cities are doing to prevent hate, extremism and polarisation, and to safeguard local democracy. Mayors and Deputy Mayors from Antwerp (Belgium), Hartford (Connecticut), Helsinki (Finland), Highland Park (Illinois), Los Angeles (California), Munich (Germany), Nuremberg (Germany), and Stamford (Connecticut), were joined by senior city officials from Charlotte (North Carolina) and New York City. Experts from the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL), [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) and GMF's [Alliance for Securing Democracy](#) (ASD) were also present, as were representatives from the US State Department, US Department for Homeland Security, and [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#).



### *Mayoral Leadership Against Hate, Polarisation and Extremism*

After opening remarks by GMF President, Heather Conley, the roundtable commenced with a conversation on mayoral leadership against hate and extremism, where mayors from both sides of the Atlantic shared relevant practices from their cities, underscoring the importance of mayoral leadership, supported by policies and programmes that promote inclusivity and compassion. In Antwerp, for example, the city has invested in building an “inclusive civic identity” that celebrates the multi-religious and multi-cultural nature of its citizens. The City of Helsinki makes a concerted effort to practice social integration and inclusion throughout the services it provides. This includes investing in “inclusive housing” that is made available to all Helsinki’s residents, which helps to prevent segregation and social isolation of any one community. Munich has created a [“München ist Bunt”](#) (“Munich is Colourful”) network of

local politicians and civil society actors, which the City can mobilise to foster community togetherness preventatively and in response to rising tensions and/or escalations to violence. The concept of a “colourful” Munich is now also entrenched in the city’s identity.

All three cities, as well as the City of Nuremburg, emphasised the importance of education in furthering an inclusive city identity and in preventing social conditions conducive to polarisation and social exclusion. This goes beyond working with schools, however, with participants noting the importance of providing language courses and cultural education to new immigrant communities to build their confidence and ability to navigate the city in which they now find themselves.

A screening of the short film, [“Keep Talking”](#), by the [Bertelsmann Foundation](#) and GMF, further underscored the vital role of cities – and their leaders – in preventing and responding to violence. The film documents how Oklahoma City has shown resilience and fostered community cohesion since the [1995 bombing](#) that killed 168 and injured 680. Specifically, the role of mayors in building and enforcing positive narratives was stressed – following the bombing, for example, the city invested in “rebirth and renaissance” through fostering community-based and focused activities. This included providing more spaces where the community could and still can come together, and bringing a professional sports team (the Oklahoma City Thunder) to the city. This has fostered a sense of collective response and recovery in the aftermath of crisis.

#### *[Transatlantic Dialogue: the Importance of City-City Cooperation](#)*

A broader discussion around the importance of transatlantic city-city cooperation followed: Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network, Eric Rosand, shared ten [key takeaways](#) from an ongoing initiative by Strong Cities to foster and sustain transatlantic city-city learning and collaboration around prevention and response. This includes recognition on both sides of the Atlantic of the need to implement locally-led, multi-stakeholder approaches for sustainable prevention and invest in long-term relationships (with communities and local actors, for example) so they can be leveraged should violence manifest. New York City offers an example of how this can work in practice: in 2019 it launched an [Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes](#) (OPHC), which, among its various roles, identifies, builds relationships, coordinates and otherwise supports a range of community-based actors. It also coordinates 25 city agencies involved in service delivery across the city (e.g., housing, police, education, parks, health and sanitation), working with each of these to better understand the actual threat landscape, gaps in response and how best to scale existing community safety and well-being initiatives. OPHC also upskills the organisations it works with, ultimately “meeting communities where they are at” and helping to professionalise and sustain grassroots responses to hate and polarisation.

Reflecting the key takeaways of the ongoing Strong Cities transatlantic dialogue initiative, participants underscored the importance of having opportunities to share their experiences and learn from inspiring practices, like New York City’s approach to prevention and how Oklahoma City recovered in the aftermath of tragedy. The latter in particular – being able to

learn from how cities across the Atlantic have responded to crisis – was emphasised by officials from Highland Park, which experienced a mass shooting on July 4, 2022 that killed seven and injured 48.



#### *Digital Manipulation and Access to Data*

The roundtable concluded with a timely session on local implications of disinformation and, more broadly, the data that cities require – and the obstacles they face to do so – to mount an informed response to the online hate and extremist threat landscape. ASD, a non-partisan initiative by GMF to identify, track and deter efforts to undermine democracy, provided examples of how state-sponsored disinformation campaigns are targeted at the local level. During the 2016 US presidential elections, for example, Russian trolls were known to take over defunct or build entirely new local news

sites. On the surface, these appeared to be ordinary news sites that post about the weather and upcoming local events. Interspersed throughout this innocuous content, however, were harmful narratives intended to polarise and amplify partisan divides.

Contributions from ISD's Head of Research further stressed the hyper-local consequences of malign content online and the importance of ensuring cities and other local authorities have access to relevant data to be able to prevent and respond to mobilisation offline.

Representatives from New York City and Charlotte, North Carolina underscored this point. Access to data and research has been vital in both cities' ability to address polarisation. In New York City, hate crime data collected through partnerships and relationships with local actors has enabled the city to identify where it needs to scale anti-hate programming. When the City of Charlotte became aware of online disinformation campaigns targeting residents, it was able to mobilise trusted local partners to help dispel the fake content being circulated and to mitigate escalations to violence.

However, accessible resources and data catered to cities and local actors remains limited. Participants highlighted a number of specific needs: these include community-oriented toolkits on identifying and responding to harmful content, as well as digestible and practical research insights that cities can use to inform their policy and programming.

#### *Next Steps*

The roundtable offered mayors and other city officials from Europe and North America the chance to come together to discuss shared threats, learn from one another's approaches to prevention and response and identify areas where these and other cities would benefit from more opportunities to engage and share with each other. Upcoming opportunities for this dialoguing to continue include planned Strong Cities activities (e.g., in Oslo (May); Berlin (June), and New York City (September)), which will help advance the implementation of [The](#)

[Hague Mayoral Declaration on Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation and Safeguarding Local Democracy](#). Further, GMF and Strong Cities are committed to finding ways to build on the roundtable discussions and to continue to partner so as to leverage their respective comparative advantages, both in terms of their city relationships and areas of thematic focus and expertise.

