



## Event Report

# Western Balkans Regional Hub Kosovo City Roundtable

Prishtina, Kosovo  
21 March 2023



## Summary

On 21 March 2023, the Strong Cities Network Western Balkans Regional Hub, in partnership with the Municipality of Prishtina, hosted a Kosovo City Roundtable. The event brought together municipal leaders, practitioners, civil society representatives and international donor community members from Kosovo to discuss the role of mayors and the local governments they lead in safeguarding their communities from extremist and hate-motivated violence. With support from the U.S. Department of State, the roundtable aimed to assess the threat landscape affecting cities in Kosovo, explore their needs to effectively address hate, extremism and polarisation on a local level, and introduce the Western Balkans Regional Hub and its pillars, which are designed to help amplify existing and catalyse new city-led prevention initiatives.

Participants welcomed the launch of the Regional Hub, emphasising its importance in strengthening local capacities and elevating city voices to lead prevention and counter threats to safety, security and social cohesion. During his welcome remarks, Lulzim Fushtica, Director for Security and Emergencies, Prishtina Municipality, praised the longstanding cooperation with Strong Cities since 2016, and reflected on the newly formed Western Balkans Regional Hub as an opportunity to further strengthen this partnership and support his municipality's prevention efforts. Mr. Fushtica further



added that “[i]t is particularly important that the municipalities take a leading role in prevention with bigger support from the central government and organisations such as the Strong Cities”, urging his counterparts to actively engage in and work together on local prevention efforts.

A central focus of the roundtable was on mapping city prevention needs in Kosovo and consolidating local government insights and perspectives to inform the Western Balkans Regional Hub’s workplan moving forward. Two primary themes arose from these exchanges. First, city representatives elaborated on the lack of a clear mandate for local governments to lead prevention efforts. As a result of this, participants agreed local prevention work hinges heavily on political will of municipal leaders, while inadequate national-local coordination further impede efforts of cities to engage, let alone lead, on prevention. Second, participants emphasised the lack of capacities on a local level to develop strategies, implement programs, reach out to marginalised groups, and build a comprehensive understanding of the hate and extremist landscape. To address some of these issues, the participants agreed that there is a need to develop guides and onboarding documents for incoming mayors on addressing these challenges. Furthermore, participants underscored the need for training of designated municipal staff that would lead and coordinate the work of local multi-stakeholder prevention mechanisms. Lastly, participants highlighted the need for strengthened national-local coordination, especially at a time when Kosovo’s new National Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategy is being updated.

### Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

In addition to local manifestations of globally recognised threats such as Salafi-jihadist and right-wing extremism, unresolved tensions with Serbia not only fuels interethnic tensions on a local level between Albanians and Serbs but contributes to broader instability to the region. Coupled with this, Kosovo is currently addressing challenges associated with returnees from Iraq and Syria. This includes facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) of returnees into local communities. Participants stated that municipalities lack the necessary resources and support to effectively lead and coordinate local R&R processes.



Municipal representatives also shared cultural aspects that can hinder prevention efforts. For instance, Faton Jakupi, Deputy Mayor of Kamenica, argued that due to perpetual distrust towards institutions and security services, citizens are averse to referring to local police or government members of their community who may be showing signs of radicalisation to avoid being branded as “spies”. In smaller communities this kind of sentiment is even more pronounced, making it difficult for municipalities to obtain adequate information about potential threats before they manifest in violence. This is further exacerbated by a lack of trust in institutions due to widespread corruption which puts government entities, including local authorities, at a disadvantage in reaching marginalised groups in their communities.



## Key Themes

### Clearer Mandate for City-led Prevention

A recurring theme of the discussions was concern regarding a lack of guidance, structure and understanding among municipalities about their mandate in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation. Participants elaborated that, traditionally, security agencies have been leading countering violent extremism initiatives without substantial cooperation and coordination with local governments. However, this has slowly been changing since it has been recognised – and articulated in Kosovo’s National CVE Strategy – that prevention warrants a multi-disciplinary approach. However, participants noted that the strategy does not provide clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of municipalities in prevention.

Additionally, at the city level, even though local multi-stakeholder mechanisms exist, participants stated that their role is not clearly defined, particularly around extremism and hate prevention, and their *modus operandi* is not standardised. Equally important, mayors and local practitioners often do not fully appreciate their potential in this space. For instance, while mayors are expected to chair local prevention mechanisms, more often than not, they do not take part in their regular meeting sessions due to a lack of time or competing priorities.

“The role of the municipal Departments for Security and Emergencies in Kosovo is very weak and unclear, leading to gaps in capacity and resources within the municipality to lead prevention. I hope we can use this meeting to start a discussion and explore ways to improve and strengthen the role and the capacities of the Department for Security and Emergencies country-wide.”

Kujtim Gashi, Deputy Mayor of Prizren

Participants pointed to the requirement for each municipality to have a Department for Security and Emergency and said the national government should consider opportunities for empowering these bodies to lead local prevention efforts. This particular need could be addressed through national-local dialogue and cooperation facilitated by Strong Cities. Additionally, participants spoke of the need for clear guidelines for mayors and practitioners on how best to operationalise multi-stakeholder prevention networks in their cities, including through regulations on structures and funding.

### Building Institutional Knowledge and Capacities

Cities have a broad portfolio and deliver a number of public services which strains the administration’s human and financial resources. Consequently, prevention is often deprioritised and there is rarely sufficient devoted staff to work on this issue. Moreover, even when there is



designated staff, or multi-stakeholder prevention mechanisms are developed, capacities to deliver local programmes are insufficient.

“The Municipality of Ferizaj/Uroševac has a local security council, but it is not effective enough; we lack trained professionals to implement concrete and informed action.”

Shkelzen Marevci, Municipality of Ferizaj/Uroševac

An additional challenge is retaining trained municipal staff within the municipality, given the often-poor working conditions and low wages. In many cases, participants noted, although capacity building is conducted for certain members of staff, they depart leaving little institutional trace of the knowledge they have. On the municipal leadership level, there is significant disparity between the capacities of mayors, or deputy mayors, to work on extremism and hate prevention. Additionally, many mayors decide not to actively invest in prevention because it is not seen as politically beneficial as a result of the difficulty to evaluate and communicate impact. Hence, other services with more tangible results are prioritised.

Participants urged systematising local knowledge and creating a framework which will not hinge on people, but on processes. Many argued that this can be done through the development of local CVE action plans and commitment to its activities. So far, Mitrovica South is the only local government in Kosovo that has developed such a plan; it is now working with community-based organisations to achieve its objectives.







## Connections and Next Steps

For cities in Kosovo, a key priority is learning from relevant good practices on extremism and hate prevention and response, including through city-to-city exchanges with peers from region and beyond. Developing the necessary knowledge and skills within municipalities will allow cities to effectively develop prevention frameworks in their jurisdictions as well as design and deploy contextualised prevention initiatives. This needs to be coupled with more structured national-local communication and coordination around CVE to clarify the mandates for municipalities and prescribe roles and responsibilities that will empower cities to effectively engage different groups in their community including youth, women, ethnic minorities and others.

Mayors, as elected leaders and political figures, hold important positions in public life. It is critical that current and incoming mayors understand the nature of the extremism, hate and polarisation threat landscape affecting their citizens and the importance of addressing drivers and impacts. Creating a system of onboarding, along with the tools and other resources they need in this space, will enable mayors to develop an understanding of the challenges and the state of play in their respective municipalities and enable them to contribute more effectively to and lead on city-led prevention.

## Donors & Partners



## Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities Western Balkan Regional Hub, please contact [wbrregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org](mailto:wbrregionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org).

