

Transatlantic Mayoral Dialogue on Preventing Hate, Extremism, and Polarization, and Safeguarding Local Democracy



NOVEMBER 15 – 16, 2022
THE PEACE PALACE, THE HAGUE



Dialogue Summary

Overview

On 15 – 16 November, more than 100 mayors, deputy mayors and other city officials, civil society actors and national government representatives gathered at the Peace Palace in The Hague for the Strong Cities Network’s Transatlantic Mayoral Dialogue on Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarization, and Safeguarding Local Democracy. The two-day event was organised in cooperation with the City of The Hague, Human Security Collective, The Glocal Connection, and with generous support from the US Embassy, The Hague.

Through a series of mayoral and other keynotes, plenary conversations and interactive breakout sessions, participants exchanged experiences and shared lessons and good practices around a range of common challenges threatening not only public safety, but the very fabric of local democracy in cities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Participants discussed the increasingly interconnected set of threats facing their communities, with rising polarisation and anti-government sentiment among the most concerning. They underscored that since mayors and local governments know their cities, citizens and communities, and understand the local dynamics fuelling many of these threats, they must be key actors in driving local prevention and response efforts.

Participants demonstrated a strong interest in connecting with each other more consistently around how to prevent and respond to these threats and challenges and acknowledged the useful and unique platform SCN offers for local leaders and practitioners in cities in Europe and North America to share with each other on these issues and for elevating their voices of mayors and the needs of local governments to the global stage. Moreover, they recognised that while different cities might look at these issues through different lenses – from violent extremism, hate, crime or violence prevention, or social cohesion – they nevertheless have a lot to learn from each other.

The event premiered [Stronger Than Hate](#), a graphic animation of the 2018 attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, focusing on key mayoral decision points during and in the wake of attack. Following the screening of the movie, which was a joint production of SCN and the Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), former Mayor of Pittsburgh Bill Peduto shared further insights on mayoral leadership and strengthening social cohesion following such an attack.

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The dialogue culminated with the Mayors of The Hague (Jan van Zanen) and Columbus (Andrew Ginther) signing [The Hague Mayoral Declaration](#). The declaration, which has been endorsed by 40 cities, is a demonstration of the commitment and determination of cities to work together to counter hate, extremism and polarisation, and safeguard local democracy. It outlines a series of practical steps they will take to address these challenges, including by continuing to engage with and support each other, and offers a strong foundation for SCN's continuing transatlantic work.

Key Findings

1. The confluence of global trends – including the mainstreaming of mis/disinformation, conspiracy theories and extremism, and rising hate and polarisation – represents a significant threat at the local level, a threat that requires mayors and the cities they lead to play a key role in prevention and response. Although Jihadist extremism remains a threat, the rise of far right extremism in confluence with upcoming anti-establishment movements is of greater concern for municipalities in terms of recognition, understanding and formulating adequate responses.
2. These threats are relatively new and more aligned with mainstream political debate than the Jihadist threats to which the existing preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) frameworks and programmes were a response. As such, the existing structures, frameworks, programmes and tools may not be appropriate for addressing these relatively new challenges. Among other things, this increases the relevance of mayors and local governments in both prevention and response.
3. The proximity of mayors and municipalities to their citizens makes them best placed not only to identify how these global trends are manifesting in and impacting their communities and in the context of local dynamics, but also to identify community actors with whom to partner for effective prevention and response.
4. There are important lessons to learn from mayors and municipalities who have led their communities through attacks. From key decision points to messaging, challenges faced, and the relationships and partners that can play key roles in maintaining social cohesion as communities grieve and heal, the sharing of mayoral experiences can ensure other mayors and cities are well prepared.
5. Effective prevention requires the active and sustained engagement of youth. This entails not only providing youth with a forum for sharing their perspectives and experiences, but meaningfully and consistently engaging them in policymaking, implementation and oversight. Therefore, municipalities should ensure the structures are in place to capture the voices of young people and enable them to be reflected in local policies.
6. The voices, perspectives and experiences of mayors and municipalities are essential for effective policymaking at the national, regional and international levels.

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7. The endorsement of The Hague Mayoral Declaration by 40 cities from both sides of the Atlantic demonstrates not only a significant commitment to the principles and actions articulated therein, but a unified call to empower cities to respond to rising threats, and a unified, transatlantic front in the face of rising extremism, hate and polarisation.
8. The mission of the Strong Cities Network, and the facilitation of dialogues such as this one, remains pressing and urgent, and there are many topics on which there is much interest and need for sharing in future transatlantic mayoral and city exchanges, including *inter alia* on safeguarding freedom of expression while ensuring public safety, digital and media literacy (and education more broadly), the role of police in prevention and preventing and addressing hate and polarisation in the workplace.

Opening Session

SCN Executive Director, Eric Rosand, [opened the meeting](#) by emphasising that effective prevention and response to these threats must include the voices of mayors and the perspectives of local governments. He underscored how the Mayoral Dialogue and SCN's transatlantic city-to-city cooperation initiative aimed at providing local leaders and officials a platform to share and elevate their concerns, needs and priorities. Jan van Zanen, the Mayor of The Hague (Netherlands), spoke of how SCN is uniquely placed to facilitate such a dialogue among cities, local policymakers and practitioners, ensuring that no city faces these challenges alone. He encouraged more cities in Europe and North America to leverage the network and announced that The Hague will serve as a Co-Chair of the SCN's International Steering Committee (ISC) starting in 2023. The U.S Ambassador to The Netherlands, Shefali Razdan Duggal, placed the United States' support for the Mayoral Dialogue in the context of the Biden Administration's wider efforts to promote democracy. She pointed to how local leaders are responding to anti-government sentiments with creative solutions to protect their citizens, highlighting the importance of including historically excluded communities in the policy making process, including at the local level.

The Integrated Threat Environment: The Perspectives of Cities

Participants exchanged views on the integrated threat environment, which includes the mainstreaming of disinformation, conspiracy and extremism, and the threats posed to democratic values and institutions. They noted how far-right groups are using anti-migrant misinformation around the Ukrainian refugee crisis to recruit and radicalise; and how anti-government sentiments and lingering tensions surrounding COVID-19 restrictions, and increasing financial instability, are further exacerbating local challenges.

Jacob Davey, Head of Research on Far-Right Extremism at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) pointed to "an increasingly opportunistic set of actors online: groups not aligned to a specific ideology coming together to make their presence felt". He noted the role that social media, where popular youth culture is being leveraged, has played in catalysing online hate, and the extremist trends – including racism, anti-

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vaccination ideologies and conspiracy theories – driving a significant rise in far-right extremist violence. Bibi van Ginkel, the founder of The Glocal Connection, shared findings from a quick scan that was conducted with local policy makers from different Dutch and other European municipalities on their perceptions of the threat and local policy responses to right-wing extremism, mis/disinformation, hate speech, polarisation and anti-establishment sentiment. Among the findings were that polarisation between the political elite and local populations in society is perceived to be a rising problem, with anti-establishment sentiments – linked in particular to COVID-19 restrictions – viewed with particular concern. Additionally, several barriers to city-led, multi-stakeholder prevention were highlighted. These include a lack of mandate for local action, time constraints of individual practitioners, the absence of a national framework for national-local cooperation, a lack of training or knowledge, and a lack of political will amongst other partners to cooperate.

Keynote Addresses from Mayors and other Local Leaders

Mayors and other local officials were given the opportunity to address participants through a series of keynote addresses. The Mayor of Los Angeles (USA), Eric Garcetti, spoke of the challenges and opportunities facing cities in the United States, including in the context of the recent midterm elections. He underscored how “cities of diversity and free of hate are our greatest strength” and that by gathering in The Hague, “we’re making it known today: hate will not be tolerated. It will not take hold in dark corners, and we are ensuring extremism can never find homes in our cities or in our hearts.” Joumana Silyan-Saba, Director of Policy & Discrimination Enforcement, Civil, Human Rights and Equity Department, for the City of Los Angeles briefed participants on the outcomes of a June 2022 side-event during the Summit of the Americas, convened in coordination with SCN and other partners. The event, [Promoting an Integrated City-Led Approach to Violence Prevention: Sharing Lessons and Good Practices](#), focused on the need to pursue integrated city-led approaches to violence prevention; approaches that are evidence-based, address inter-generational trauma and integrate mental health support.

The Mayor of Poznań (Poland), Jacek Jaśkowiak, shared how his city has responded to the Ukraine refugee crisis, including how to balance existing needs of long-time city residents with the needs of those seeking shelter. He emphasised the need to confront the language that fuels polarisation and division as part of a wider effort to “build social cohesion in our cities and in our nations”.

Femke Halsema, the Mayor of Amsterdam (Netherlands), spoke about how “the people attacking democracy have changed”, with distrust and fear of the government on the rise and far-right extremists believing in conspiracy theories, targeting minorities, and behaving violently. She said that these groups play on rising anti-establishment sentiments to attack democracy. She shared that due to these anti-establishment sentiments, it is difficult for municipalities to develop a compelling narrative and response, since they are part of the establishment. Addressing this challenge requires a nuanced response that includes: 1) abiding by democratic norms, including viewing demonstrations and protests as a democratic

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right rather than a security threat; 2) protecting minorities and groups that are often the target of extremist groups, including women journalists and LGBTQI+; and 3) engaging less in legal processes and investing more in dialogue and relationship building.

The Mayor of Highland Park (USA), Nancy Rotering, shared her experience responding to the 4 July attack in her city, in which one gunman injured over 40 and killed seven, describing gun violence as “a uniquely American problem”. She called on mayors to share and learn from each other so they are prepared should their city suffer a violent extremist attack.

Hassan Naveed, Executive Director of the Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes in New York City (USA), spoke about how the city is working to prevent hate (mainly anti-Semitic, anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-Asian in nature) in a city with a population of almost 9 million residents. He shared how language barriers and strained relationships between law enforcement and local communities had contributed to underreporting of hate crimes. The city’s three pillar approach to hate crime prevention emphasises “better community relations; better education; and better laws and law enforcement”.

Amarah Khan, Employee Ombud in Seattle (USA), focused on recognising and responding to extremism and hate in the workplace. She said that “being biased is natural to human beings and fighting that bias is learned experience”. She shared how the city has developed an anti-polarisation curriculum that focuses on preventing discrimination and harassment, delivering trauma-informed care, and ensuring gender justice in the workplace, while promoting “ethical intelligence”.

Sasha Larkin, Deputy Chief of Homeland Security for the Metropolitan Police of Las Vegas (USA), highlighted the important role of law enforcement in preventing hate- and extremist-motivated violence and in building social cohesion. She said that the police have a unique responsibility and power to make prevention happen. By talking to community members and getting to know the neighborhoods, local police can start to develop the trust that is foundational for prevention.

Leendert Verbeek, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Council of Europe, emphasised that mayors and local governments are the first to feel and deal with tensions in the community, whether fueled by hate speech, anti-government, anti-Semitic, anti-migrant, or anti-women sentiments. He said that while cities cannot always influence these trends, “it is still our responsibility to build strong, resilient communities where hate and extremism can’t take root”.

The Mayor of Florence (Italy), Dario Nardella, explained how his city – “the smallest global city in the world” – is investing in building urban spaces to support social cohesion and how cities, working together, “can make the voices of our community louder on the global stage”. A crucial reminder of the importance of and connection between investing in urban spaces and encouraging positive social interactions to further cultivate social cohesion.

Mayoral/Local Leader Conversation

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Safeguarding Local Democracy and Building Resilience

During the panel on the role of local leaders in safeguarding local democracy and building resilience against extremism, mayors and other local leaders shared both the challenges they face in the current threat environment and positive experiences with addressing them.

Andrew Ginther, the Mayor of Columbus (USA), emphasised the importance of “building strong cities into our muscle memory,” underscoring that mayors, as leaders of cities, have incredible power to leave that memory for future generations to overcome challenges of hate and protect our democracy”.

The Mayor of Budavar (Budapest I, Hungary), Márta Váradiné Naszályi, spoke of the power and potential of cities uniting to face these challenges, in comparison to cities acting in isolation: mayors must cooperate with their neighbors to address common challenges, “regardless of conflicts happening at national or international levels”. Faced with the erosion of democratic principles at the national level, Mayor Naszályi has founded a local citizens’ council in Budavar to facilitate greater participation of citizens in local decision-making.

Allison Silverberg, former Mayor of Alexandria (USA), said that among the key lessons she would share with other mayors in terms of the prevention of and response to a violent extremist attack was the importance of having in place a multi-stakeholder approach *before* an attack occurs. She also emphasised the importance of articulating a clear and positive mayoral vision for the city, with inclusivity being at the core of this vision. She underscored how “the time to build resilience is before an attack, not during and after”. Following any hate- or extremist-motivated violence, the mayor should speak publicly and often about how any such “attacks will not change who we are”.

Bartłomiej Ciążyński, Vice-Chairman of the Wrocław City Council (Poland) and Special Advisor to the Mayor on Combatting Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia, said that mayors and other local leaders “need to believe in what they are doing ... to be brave, to have courage ... to teach that values standards of human rights, equality and combatting hate speech are non-negotiable”.

Prevention in an Evolving and Inter-Connected Threat Environment

During a panel discussion on prevention in an evolving and inter-connected threat environment, Hans Bonte, Mayor of Vilvoorde (Belgium), emphasised that the key to prevention is for cities to work closely with local communities so that local leaders can understand and best address their needs. The Mayor of Stamford (USA), Caroline Simmons, said that domestic terrorism and mass shootings are the biggest threats facing American cities. Addressing these threats, and rising levels of hate crimes and mistrust of government, requires local level action. She shared how her city, faced with an increase in hate crimes, hired a diversity, equity and inclusion officer and adopted a “zero tolerance” for hateful behavior.

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Henri Lenferink, Mayor of Leiden (Netherlands), spoke about the importance of local governments building and maintaining close relationships with all communities and promoting the concept of “active citizenship” to ensure that citizens are participating in the policy debates that affect their city; a policy which he said had ensured a unified response (and lack of citizen protests) to the arrivals of Syrian refugees in Leiden.

The Deputy Mayor of Education for the City of Helsinki (Finland), Nasima Razmyar, described Helsinki’s approach to effective prevention, which she said starts with accessibility to municipal services and early education. The municipality ensures that basic care and support is provided to all residents, regardless of background, and concerted efforts are being made to ensure that young people trust and are not afraid of interactions with law enforcement. Moreover, in Helsinki, all children from the age of four are engaged around issues of tolerance, democracy and respect for others. Nasima noted that “the most important thing is our youth and we teach children conflict resolution, how to agree to disagree and find connection, as well as media literacy”.

Maintaining Social Cohesion in the Context of Rising Disinformation and anti-Government/anti-Establishment Sentiment: The Role of Cities

Michael Signer, the former Mayor of Charlottesville (USA), led an important panel discussion on how cities can maintain social cohesion amid rising disinformation and anti-government sentiment. He spoke of the conspiracies and disinformation he had to confront while in office and the challenges of managing these in real time, particularly in the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally in August 2017.

The Mayor of Bodegraven-Reeuwijk (Netherlands), Erik van Heijningen, shared how close cooperation among the police, the city and the public prosecutor has proved important in confronting conspiracies and misinformation in his city. He emphasised the importance of local leaders connecting with community members to try to understand why they might be drawn to propaganda and lies, rather than condemning and dismissing those individuals outright.

Miila Lukkarinen, from the City of Helsinki’s Safety and Preparedness Unit, noted that anti-establishment sentiment is on the rise in Helsinki, with signs that social cohesion is beginning to fray. The city’s response is centred on good public service provision – healthcare, education and social care – and mainstreaming discussions around extremism, hate and polarisation into wider educational programmes, including ones focused on media literacy and critical thinking. She also pointed out that young people are often better at identifying and interpreting disinformation than adults; the latter are more difficult to reach with media literacy programmes, which are typically offered through schools, and may be less digitally literate.

Commenting on the current online threat landscape, Mirko Shaefer, the Head of the Utrecht Data School, said that “we are seeing an anti-establishment cocktail of ideologies and groups”, with fragmented online debates potentially having offline consequences at the local level, such as protests or violent attacks.

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Different Forms of Extremism: An Integrated Approach to Prevention

The next panel discussion focused on how best to tackle different forms of hate and extremism in a complex threat environment in light of resource constraints and competing priorities, and whether a stand-alone programme to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) or the integration of P/CVE into wider crime or violence prevention or community safeguarding efforts is appropriate.

Director of Research at Sweden's CVE Center, Edvin Sandstrom, shared his centre's new local prevention model that "fits both security logic and social logic", and which Swedish cities can fit within their existing, wider social policy framework. Oliver Levinson, CVE lead in the City of London, said that creating a welcoming city is the best way to inoculate its residents against hate and extremism. London first developed a distinct strategy and programme to address Islamist extremism, which once developed and funded, was then integrated into wider city-level approaches to addressing other forms of hate and extremism.

Joumana Silyan-Saba, from the City of Los Angeles, further underscored the need to address the social underpinnings of extremism, which are local issues that cities are well-positioned to tackle. She emphasised the need to distinguish between political violence, which is wholly unacceptable, and anti-government protests and demonstrations, which are inherently democratic. Moreover, she encouraged cities to recognise where their policies and programmes have failed, "because that's where we learn".

Kostas Brejaart, a policy advisor in the City of Rotterdam (Netherlands), spoke about a learning network on polarisation that the city has developed, where the city's role in strengthening social cohesion and its approach to proactive communication with local communities on sensitive topics are often discussed. The network focuses on parts of the city that should be mobilised and engaged *before* protests or other demonstrations escalate to violence.

Tarja Mankinen from the European Commission said she adopts an "onion model" when looking at the variety of inter-related threats. Violent extremism is at the centre, with hate, racism, anti-Semitism and anti-government sentiments etc. making up the outer layers. Although tools for addressing each layer of the threat should be in place, governments should not try to use them all at the same time. Instead, more disciplined preventative approaches should be deployed, e.g., preventing anti-establishment or other extremist sentiments from escalating to violent attacks.

Engaging Youth for Sustainable Prevention

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In a panel facilitated by SCN’s Head of Practice, Kelsey Bjornsgaard, three young people engaged in prevention work in Belgium and The Netherlands shared their views on the importance of local governments engaging youth in prevention policymaking, implementation and oversight.

A central theme of this important panel was ensuring that city-led approaches are informed by meaningful (not token) youth engagement. Mohsinne Ben Messaoud from Antwerp, and a participant in SCN’s ongoing [Young Cities](#) programme in that city, said that young people are the future and governments need to accord them space to speak up and contribute to conversations about policies that affect them. He also emphasised the importance of diversity in both youth organisations and in the representatives that local governments choose to engage from such organisations. Ikbal Aktan, from The Hague, emphasised the importance of building and strengthening trust between youth and local governments, and that young people from different backgrounds need to be included in and heard at government-organised meetings and other events where issues of concern to youth are being addressed. Jackie Kostic, also a participant of the Young Cities programme in Antwerp, agreed, noting that any youth council needs to have a diverse membership that reflects the range of young people it is supposed to represent.

Interactive Breakout Sessions

Sharing Practices on Multi-Stakeholder Prevention

In the first of the event’s two interactive breakout sessions, participants engaged in small-group conversations around three themes: 1) balancing coercive and preventative approaches at a city-level; 2) developing and sustaining local prevention networks and engaging with the “unusual” suspects; and 3) identifying and overcoming barriers to national-local cooperation.

Several crosscutting themes were identified in the breakout discussions, including:

1. the need for municipal government agencies to recognise and value the various areas of expertise that different agencies bring to the prevention table and to ensure that networks are sufficiently flexible to allow for the integration of new members, new perspectives and “fresh” approaches and take into account the evolving threat;
2. the importance of information sharing among different agencies – particularly between law enforcement and non-law enforcement actors – and the need to identify and share trends and patterns for effective, evidence-based early interventions;
3. the challenge of clearly identifying roles and responsibilities of those involved in a multidisciplinary team;
4. the potential sensitivities of involving law enforcement in prevention work (e.g., with some cities choosing to shift some police responsibilities to psychosocial workers and others emphasising collaboration between law enforcement and mental health professionals);

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5. the challenge of only recognizing the specific incidents, and not seeing the how they connect with earlier incidents, that together contribute to a bigger trend, and thus require more urgency in response;
6. the challenges around bridging the divide between the police and the community through trust-building approaches;
7. identifying when freedom of speech crosses into hate speech, and having contingency plans in place when that threshold is breached;
8. ensuring the allocation of resources aligns with the threat picture;
9. recognising that administrative structures need to be more flexible to adapt to the changed threat environment for example, the national framework and structures developed to deal with the Jihadist terrorist threat are often being relied upon, without the necessary adaptation, to address the changed threat landscape where extremism rather than terrorist violence is the main concern;
10. the tendency of national governments to exceptionalise extremism and silo P/CVE work, and the challenges this presents to city governments for which mainstreaming these issues into wider crime prevention or community safeguarding frameworks and programmes is often the more likely scenario to gain traction at a local level; and
11. the lack of city-level involvement in the development of national prevention frameworks, which then fail to reflect the diverse needs and priorities of cities in both their design and implementation.

Local Prevention Framework Good Practices; Refugee Integration Approaches; Topic Areas for Future Transatlantic Dialogues

In the second breakout session, participants were asked to dig deeper into three thematic areas, and identified a number of important takeaways, including:

1. the importance of ensuring that a local prevention framework adopts a holistic approach to needs' assessment, which is connected to the individuals they are trying to help, and with the work preferably performed by community members themselves to ensure contextualised assessments;
2. the importance for cities to have a refugee integration plan, developed through a consultative process informed by local businesses, community leaders and other existing immigrant/refugee communities; and
3. that there are several topics ripe for addressing in future trans-Atlantic mayoral and city exchanges on prevention given their salience to a range of local governments in both Europe and North America: these include ones related to:
 - understanding local online threat environment,

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- digital and media literacy and education more broadly,
- city engagement with young people, the private sector and/or NGOs in prevention,
- community-police relations, e) the role of law enforcement in prevention,
- preventing and addressing hate and polarization in the workplace, and
- safeguarding freedom of expression while ensuring public safety.