

Event Report

Western Balkans Regional Hub City-led Approaches to Empower Youth to Address Extremism, Hate and Polarisation

Elbasan, Albania
3 June – 4 June 2023



Summary

On 3-4 June 2023, the Strong Cities Western Balkans Regional Hub and the Municipality of Elbasan, Albania, co-hosted a workshop on “City-led Approaches to Empower Youth to Address Extremism, Hate, and Polarisation”. Over 30 mayors, elected council members, local government civil servants, youth activists and representatives from national government and multilateral organisations across the Western Balkans convened to discuss the role of young people in local prevention efforts. Supported by the U.S. Department of State, the workshop allowed cities to exchange perspectives on key challenges to and opportunities for meaningful youth engagement on hate and extremism prevention and models for youth involvement in local decision-making and programmes. Discussions also centered on the need to create a platform for trust building between local governments and young people and different models for doing so. A particular focus was placed on how locally-led, multi-actor prevention networks can be leveraged to enable and support city-led approaches to empower youth to address hate, extremism and polarisation. City officials and youth participants shared that this was their first opportunity to collectively assess youth-city engagement in a regional context.

Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants discussed how the wars that engulfed the Western Balkans and the challenging democratic transition that ensued have left people in the region divided, distrustful of their governments and fearful for their future. As a result, irredentism continues to feed inter-ethnic tensions, while religiously motivated extremist groups are penetrating communities susceptible to recruitment and radicalisation to violence. These issues, combined with deficits in democratic governance, high rates of corruption and violence have had a negative impact on young people's resilience to hate and extremism. For example, a significant portion of the 1000+ citizens from the Western Balkans who left to support ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq were aged between 20-35. Young people who participate in the political system are exposed to high levels of political polarisation and, as a result, far-right ideologies make them less willing to interact with members of other cultural communities. Countless more have lost trust in government institutions and emigrated, resulting in high rates of brain drain.

The workshop sought to build upon Strong Cities' youth-focused work in the region – under its Young Cities programme – and relevant discussions from the Regional Hub's [Inaugural Regional Workshop](#) in February 2023 held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In line with the so-far identified needs of cities, the main objective of the Elbasan event was to enhance cities' youth engagement efforts and provide youth activists with direct insights into the work carried out by cities through multi-actor prevention frameworks. A particular focus in this regard was put on leveraging these existing local mechanisms across the Western Balkans to involve young people in decision-making bodies, policies, and programmes, as well as overcome common challenges such as youth trust deficit in engaging local governments and indifference to contribute to social impact efforts.

Key Themes

Local Multi-Actor Prevention Mechanisms and Young People

Gledijan Llatja, the Mayor of the **Municipality of Elbasan**, presented his local government's efforts to better understand the social dynamics among communities in his city, as well as the pivotal role of young people in building resilient communities and addressing hate, extremism and polarisation. Mayor Llatja pointed to the critical role that the city's multi-actor prevention network has played in incorporating youth perspectives. He stressed:



“The importance of prevention has not always been adequately recognised across all structures in our municipality. However, through a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach, we have invested significant time and effort to increase awareness and have successfully achieved our desired goal. These efforts were challenging and time-consuming, but they have yielded positive results. Youth are a key component of these efforts, and we work more intensely to elevate their voices in the decision-making process.”

Mayor Gledijan Llatja of the Municipality of Elbasan, reflecting on the role of youth in multi-actor prevention

Hajrudin Hajrović, the Head of the Local Safety Council (LSC) of the **City of Novi Pazar**, Serbia, highlighted the benefits of establishing a Youth Office within the local government. He noted how it offers a dedicated space for young people – providing access to city resources while at the same time enhancing the municipality’s understanding of youth concerns. Furthermore, he shared an example of how the Novi Pazar LSC prioritised youth engagement in its extremism prevention efforts: it organised a conference centred around formal education, with a focus on integrating prevention topics into the curriculum to raise students’ awareness of the detrimental impact hate, extremism and polarisation on livelihoods. This collaborative effort involved extensive consultations with civil society organisations (CSOs), the national government and local institutions, leading to a reduction in incidents of hate and violence within the city. Finally, he explained how the LSC analysed the security situation in the city and proposed a Security Action Plan for the **City of Novi Pazar** (adopted in 2016) which has a youth component as one of its pillars.

Brunilda Halili, National Community Safety Officer at **OSCE’s Presence in Albania**, shared her experience working with cities in Albania to establish local multi-stakeholder prevention mechanisms. She emphasised the importance of encouraging youth participation in LSCs and empowering them to actively participate in decision-making and programme conceptualisation. In addition, she underscored how the creation and effectiveness of LSCs depend on the political will of each city’s leadership, with some mayors being more engaged with youth than others.

Anja Madhi, a youth activist from **Elbasan**, similarly expressed the view that the mere presence of young people in city decision making is not enough; they must also be adequately trained and informed about how policymaking and programming works on a city level. However, she emphasised that this was not the case in her city because generally young people were neither aware of their rights, nor the roles and responsibilities of local governments in addressing their needs and priorities. For example, very few young people are aware of the role of the Human Rights Ombudsman which is one of the avenues available to youth to express their grievances. Therefore, she said it is essential to educate young people about these institutional roles and responsibilities, including that of local multi-actor prevention mechanisms, to better cater to their needs and ensure their well-being.

Municipality of Elbasan, Albania

- **Challenge:** Incorporating youth perspectives into the work of the LSC.
- **Approach:** The Municipality of Elbasan incorporated youth perspectives in the LSC by including representatives of several community-based organisations, which work directly with youth. It also regularly implements youth-oriented activities through the LSC at a dedicated city-run youth space. The city has also established a local youth council to better include the priorities and needs of young people, with the council providing input into overall municipal policymaking and informing the work of the LSC.
- **Impact:** Higher visibility of the LSC across the city and improved access to young people in the city.



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Other city examples:

- **Novi Pazar**, Serbia, established a youth council as early as 2008, and the city held a conference on including prevention into the school curriculum which contributed to a reduction in the number of violent incidents involving youth in the city.
- The Community Action Teams (CATs), which function as multi-agency prevention networks, in **Gostivar** and **Cair**, North Macedonia have a youth representative which provides youth perspectives to the CAT's work and engagement.

Local Policy and Programme Design that Corresponds with Youth Needs and Priorities

In addition to being included in decision-making processes, young people have clear expectations of tangible policies and programmes that address their needs and aspirations within cities. To address this, **Elbasan** officials highlighted the collaborative efforts among prosecutors, local policymakers and municipal authorities in the realm of prevention.



"Inclusive budgeting is crucial, and the municipality actively listens to its citizens during various open sessions where diverse groups, including minority communities like the Roma, voice their requests. When it comes to youth, the Youth Council in Elbasan can propose budget allocations. We recognise that without financial support, youth policies cannot be formulated and effectively implemented. The security triangle, consisting of the mayor, the head of police, and the prosecutor, regularly convenes to openly discuss pressing issues as well."

Gledijan Llatja, Mayor of Elbasan

Representatives from **Elbasan's** police and prosecution services similarly emphasised the priority they place on sensitising their staff to engage with young people and adopting a proactive approach to prevention rather than focusing solely on responding after an incident occurs.

Edina Elezi, a Young Cities Ambassador from **Čair**, North Macedonia, stressed the importance of empowering youth to translate ideas into actionable policies. This is crucial for young people to meaningfully engage local governments on social impact in their communities. She reflected on her experience at Young Cities' Youth Policy and Engagement Forum in North Macedonia in May 2022. This event facilitated a dialogue between Young Cities Ambassadors and national and local government representatives on enhanced cooperation around prevention. Ms. Elezi underscored that understanding of policymaking processes was key to her effectively offering solutions to municipal officials that address youth grievances.



“The Youth Policy and Engagement Forum experience helped me understand how to talk to decisionmakers, how institutions work, what are the jurisdictions of national and local authorities, and how to turn ideas into policy solutions. It is critical for young people to have those skills to make sustainable change in their communities possible.”

Young Cities Ambassador from Čair, North Macedonia, Edina Elezi
reflecting on the Youth Policy and Engagement Forum

Participants also emphasised the significance of youth spaces as a prerequisite for engaging young people. **Jasin Demiri**, a representative from the **Municipality of Gostivar**, North Macedonia, shared that his city has three municipal-funded youth spaces which are run in collaboration with local CSOs. These spaces play a crucial role in facilitating active youth participation within the community, allowing them to develop activities and programmes.

Enia Hoxha, a youth activist from **Elbasan**, underscored the importance of both young people having access to government institutions and the genuine intent of government officials to engage with youth. He argued that “through Local Youth Councils, which are mandated by Albanian law, young people can influence city policies. Meaningful progress can only be achieved if both young people and institutions possess the willingness to engage.” This points to the importance of legitimate representation and the need to consider seriously recommendations put forth by youth through these channels.

Skopje and Gostivar, North Macedonia

- **Challenge:** Active youth in North Macedonia were engaged in small scale community projects, but they wanted to systematise their solutions into something that transcends the project life-cycle.
- **Approach:** Strong Cities partnered with the Municipalities of Čair and Gostivar, City of Skopje, and National Government to host roundtables where Young Cities Ambassadors presented policy priorities aimed at addressing their core youth needs.
- **Impact:** Local and national authorities were able to have informed issue-based exchanges with youth about policy and programming ideas that stem from their needs and are in line with their jurisdictions and capacities.



Other city examples:

- Youth Council established in the **Municipality of Elbasan**.
- Youth Council established in the **City of Novi Pazar**.
- **The Municipalities of Gostivar and Čair** are in the process of electing members for their Youth Council in their municipalities.

Trust-building between Youth and Institutions

Trust serves as a fundamental prerequisite for establishing meaningful cooperation between local governments and young people in their communities. Participants from various parts of the region echoed the importance of building trust, while also acknowledging the significant obstacles that currently hinder progress.

Fari Ismaili, the Representative of the **Municipality of Čair**, argued for the protection of the legitimacy of Local Youth Councils, which are mandated by law in countries across the region. He stressed that it is essential for the councils to be apolitical and not another platform for party politics. Mr. Ismaili added that ensuring the transparency and openness of the selection process for seats on the councils should be prioritised. In short, he said that the integrity of Local Youth Councils is a crucial aspect of building trust between local governments and the young people they are meant to represent.

Kenan Alispahić, a Councillor from the **Municipality of Zenica**, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) added that although the legislative framework for youth inclusion in policymaking is already in place in the country, the implementation is delayed. He explained how "[s]ince 2010, Bosnia and Herzegovina has had a law on youth that prescribes concrete measures and entities to be established. However, apart from the Commission for Coordination on Youth Affairs at the national level, which still lacks members, no other youth entities have been created." Mr. Alispahić explained how delays in core processes for youth participation are detrimental to the confidence youth have in institutions and their ability to reflect their vision for their communities.

Participants emphasised that implementation and follow-up on promises is of paramount importance in fostering and upholding trust. **Alketa Binjaku**, the Chief of Staff of the **Municipality of Cerrik**, Albania, shared a positive example where the city had consulted young people on their pressing needs related to public spaces. The city government responded by making and following through with commitments which earned the trust of young individuals, thus creating an environment where young people perceive the municipality as an inclusive and receptive entity.



“Albanian law requires the local administration to establish Local Youth Council. Our Youth Council in Cerrik took proposals from the youth and invited them to speak with the mayor and local administration. Youth requested streetlights and an outside gym to be installed and replace the dilapidated infrastructure in an unsafe area. We delivered on this request and now this space is being used by youth continuously, but more importantly, youth view this as a fulfilled promise which encourages them to engage further with us.” ^[OBJ]

Chief of Staff of the Mayor of Cerrik, Albania, Alketa Binjaku

Jasin Demiri emphasised the importance of consensus on youth priorities. He revealed that in **Gostivar**, as part of a Strong Cities-supported youth-led initiative, young people engaged with all political parties prior to the local elections in the municipality. The aim was to agree on youth priorities across the political spectrum and commit to their implementation, regardless of the election outcomes. These efforts served to remove political bias from discussions surrounding youth matters and fostered trust among young people.

Connections & Next Steps

The Strong Cities Western Balkans Regional Hub is, *inter alia*, dedicated to facilitating peer-to-peer learning among cities in the region around youth engagement, as well and facilitating a dialogue between youth and local government representatives to build trust on a city, national and regional level. The Elbasan workshop is one in a series of steps the Regional Hub is taking to ensure the approaches local governments in the region are taking to engaging with their young residents are relevant and effective. Additionally, it will continue working with municipalities across the region to ensure their multi-actor prevention networks are fit for purpose while facilitating the strengthening of their mandates and capacities to address hate, extremism and polarisation.

The findings and good practices discussed at this workshop will be shared and discussed at its Second Regional Workshop which is scheduled for September 2023.

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Contact Information

For more information on this event and the Strong Cities' Western Balkans Regional Hub please contact wbrionalhub@strongcitiesnetwork.org.