

Event Report

Transatlantic Initiative

Cities on the Front-lines

Tapping into the Potential of Mayors and Local Governments in Safeguarding Local Democracy and Maintaining Social Cohesion Amidst a Dynamic Hate and Extremist Threat Landscape

Berlin, Germany
15 – 16 June 2023



Summary

On 15-16 June 2023, the [Strong Cities Network](https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/) convened more than 50 representatives from German, Central and Eastern European and North American local governments, national governments and civil society to unleash the potential of mayors and local governments in safeguarding local democracy and maintaining social cohesion amidst a dynamic hate and extremist threat landscape. This included mayors and other officials from Berlin, Dortmund, Rostock and Weißenfels in Germany; Paris, France; Dąbrowa Górnicza, Lublin, the Pomorskie Region and Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship in Poland; Budavar and Budapest in Hungary; Edmonton,

Canada; and Aurora (Colorado), Highland Park (Illinois), Lexington (Virginia), Los Angeles (California), Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), Seattle (Washington), and Stamford (Connecticut) in the US. The workshop was held at Berlin City Hall, with support from the US Embassy, Berlin. It is one in a series of [transatlantic dialogues](#) Strong Cities is hosting to facilitate greater cooperation between European and North American cities, providing a platform through which they can discuss shared threats and city-led solutions to hate and extremism.

The workshop offered participants the opportunity to discuss emerging threats to their communities and to learn from inspiring city-led practices for and mayoral leadership in preventing hate, polarisation and extremism. The event also featured a range of keynote speeches: Clarence Anthony, Executive Director of the [National League of Cities](#), spoke about the evolving role of cities in stemming the rising tide of hate and related issues and how civility should be the foundation of prevention efforts, calling on cities to work together to address common challenges. Nancy Rotering, Mayor of Highland Park, Illinois, reflected on the impact of hate-motivated violence and the role of mayors and the governments they lead in supporting their communities in the aftermath of such tragedies. Márta Váradiné Naszályi, Mayor of Budavár, Hungary and Amarjeet Sohi, Mayor of Edmonton, Canada provided examples of how they, as city leaders, are building resilient cities through policies and programmes that celebrate inclusivity and are founded on community-based partnerships. Participants were also provided with broad overviews of the online threat landscape and the proven potential for this to escalate to violence offline, through keynote addresses by Huberta von Voss, Executive Director of [ISD Germany](#), and Josephine Ballon, Head of Legal at [HateAid](#), an organisation that provides support (financial, legal, emotional and otherwise) to victims of online violence, which increasingly includes city leaders.

The two-day conference concluded with keynote addresses by the State Secretaries of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI), and the City of Berlin's Senate of the Interior and Sport, which was followed by a final panel session on strengthening cooperation for prevention among national, regional/state and local governments.

Three key themes emerged out of these discussions:

- 1. Mayoral Leadership: mayors continue to show immense leadership in preventing hate and extremism despite the backlash that often results.** Through pushing for inclusive policies, speaking out against hate and related issues, a growing number of mayors are building cities that celebrate diversity, community togetherness and that promote civility. Unfortunately, in doing so, local leaders may be subject to threats and harassment on- and offline, with little to no support provided to help them respond appropriately.
- 2. Community Engagement and Partnerships: representatives from cities on both sides of the Atlantic stressed the importance of visible governance through collaborating with, investing in and otherwise actively engaging local communities, organisations and businesses.** Whether through community engagement forums, supporting local civil society organisations (CSOs), partnering with the local private sector, and/or hosting inter-community dialogues, cities need to invest in and sustain community-based partnerships and programmes.
- 3. National-Local Cooperation: participants urged better collaboration between national and local governments in order to effectively prevent hate and extremism at the local level.** In particular, participants stressed the need for better communication between the national government and local authorities, and a concerted effort to ensure rural towns are engaged in addition to urban centres.

Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants pointed to mis- and disinformation, right-wing extremism (e.g., neo-Nazism, white supremacy), and anti-migrant/anti-minority sentiment and violence as the most concerning threats to social cohesion. They voiced heightened concern about how to mitigate the latter in the context of ever-increasing numbers of displaced peoples, recognising that this will only continue amidst the worsening climate and other crises.

Representatives from cities shared they are also worried about a decline in public approval for supporting refugees, and that this will impede their ability to provide long-term aid and integration services to new arrivals. In Poland, for example, while much of the local populace was initially supportive of cities taking in Ukrainians following the Russian invasion, participants report that tensions between refugees and local communities are already growing, particularly around access to jobs and other resources. This is compounded by xenophobic disinformation that exaggerates the number of refugees in these contexts, and that accuses migrants of negatively impacting the social fabric of a city (e.g., accusing them of being inherently violent).

Participants also expressed concerns about the increase in death threats and harassment that mayors and other city leaders face from extremist and hate groups. For example, Polish mayors who have advocated for the country to open its borders to and support migrants and refugees have received fabricated death certificates in the mail, while in the US, mayors who call for greater LGBTQ+ rights are subject to online abuse and intimidation. Participants remarked on the long-term impact this will have on the political landscape, especially that it may cause good candidates to hesitate to run for elected office and withdraw from politics. This is compounded by the fact that there is little to no proactive support provided to city officials that face such threats. For example, after a presentation by HateAid, which supports victims of online violence in Germany – including city officials – with psychosocial, financial and legal aid, participants observed that counterpart organisations in the US, Poland, Hungary and other countries represented at the workshop generally do not proactively work with city officials.

“We must act quickly and decisively against these evolving threats and need to try to get ahead of them... The challenges may be transnational, but **the ramifications are always local.**”

Christian Hochgrebe, State Secretary, Senate of the Interior and Sport, City of Berlin, Germany

Key Themes

1. Mayoral Leadership

Mayors continue to show immense leadership in preventing hate and extremism despite the backlash that often results. Mayors and other local leaders shared examples of how they have taken an intentional and explicit stand against hate, extremism and polarisation. For example, under Mayor Sohi’s leadership, the **City of Edmonton** developed and is now implementing its new [Anti-](#)

[Racism Strategy](#) (see page 3). In **Gdańsk, Poland**, under the leadership of the Mayor, the City established an [Equal Treatment Council](#), which responds to hate and discrimination through creating safe spaces for those impacted (see *Key Theme 2* for more information).

Mayor Martin Papke of **Weißenfels, Germany** shared his commitment to ensuring the local government directs its resources – financial, human and otherwise – to community- and people-focused initiatives, to ensure all residents of the city feel heard and that their grievances can be addressed proactively. The local government has not previously focused on social and communal investments, instead prioritising the local economy and infrastructure. The new Mayor said he hopes to change this by ensuring the City embraces its role in promoting social cohesion *in addition* to its existing public service delivery related to the economy and local infrastructure.

Participants also pointed to how several mayors of Polish border towns have joined together to ensure Ukrainian refugees are welcomed and receive sufficient support upon their arrival in Poland. Participants from the **District of Budavar** in Budapest similarly shared that the Lord Mayor of **Budapest** rallied mayors from districts within the city to mobilise resources and coordinate community organisations to provide support and essentials to Ukrainian refugees.

Leadership messaging that promotes inclusivity is also vital in preventing and responding to hate and extremism. For example, Mayor Nancy Rotering of **Highland Park, Illinois** in the US shared that mayors “must call out bigotry and hate when it occurs.” She also shared that Highland Park has a values statement that welcomes everyone residing in the city, and that this shows the city is a place where “we celebrate people of every faith, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, migration status, etc for the richness they bring.” Similarly, in **Dortmund, Germany**, the Mayor made an explicit effort to call out antisemitic incidents that recently plagued the city, making it clear the city does not accept any form of hatred.

These examples of mayoral leadership continue despite the harassment mayors that speak out against hate and extremism are subject to. In this context, participants stressed the need for more accessible support and resources for local leaders. One participant from the US observed, for example, that after she received several death threats following her public advocacy for greater gun control, the federal government never reached out to offer support and/or guidance. Participants agreed that accessibility of support for local officials who endure such threats is lacking overall (to a lesser extent in Germany, where officials can tap into the work of organisations such as HateAid).

City of Edmonton, Canada

- **Challenge:** Following a string of anti-Muslim attacks in 2021 and other concerns around the safety of Edmonton's Black communities, the City organised a series of consultations to understand the needs of the city's people of colour. This revealed a number of concerns, including, for example, challenges with racist incidents and a lack of representation within the local government.
- **Approach:** Under the leadership of Mayor Sohi, the City developed and an Anti-Racism Strategy that is based around three pillars:
 - 1) To create a community-based organisation fully resourced and dedicated to leading anti -racism work;
 - 2) To lead by example by creating a high-level office within the City administration to address systemic racism; and
 - 3) To provide sustainable core and operational funding and capacity-building to community organisations that do anti-racism and anti-hate work, with dedicated funding provided especially to organisations led by people of colour.



Importantly, the Strategy was developed through regular community engagement, particularly with the city's indigenous and black communities. It is also complemented by the development of an Anti-Racism Advisory Committee of Council, which has a mandate to provide advice to City Council "regarding community perspectives on issues relating to racism", as well as an Anti-Black Racism Action Plan, which outlines the City's steps to implementing its new Strategy.

- **Impact:** The impact of the City's approach – steered by Mayor Sohi – is enhanced by its **intentionality**: it shows residents that the Mayor is actively committed to addressing racism both within society and institutionally. By virtue of the Strategy being borne out of consultations with those most impacted by racism, it is also reflective of reality on the ground and, through providing long-term core and programmatic support to community-based organisations, it facilitates sustainability of the anti-racist work these organisations provide.

www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/anti-racism-strategy

“To get something one, give it to a local leader and you will see results.”

Clarence Anthony, Executive Director, National League of Cities, US



Other city examples:

- New York City, US: [Mayor's Blueprint for Supporting Asylum Seekers](#)
- Polish “Rescue Cities”: <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/15541>
- Michałowo, Poland: [award for helping refugees](#) on the border with Belarus
- Záhony, Hungary: [mayoral commitment to supporting refugees](#)

2. Community Engagement and Partnerships

Representatives from cities on both sides of the Atlantic stressed the importance of visible governance through collaborating with, investing in and otherwise actively engaging local communities, organisations and businesses. Participants shared numerous examples of city-led investments in local actors, highlighting both the potential of community-based partnerships and how city-led support can and should go beyond funding, especially when many cities have limited budget to dedicate to prevention in the first place.

For example, to enhance trust and better coordinate local service delivery and community-based actors, the **City of Dortmund** has established a citywide network of businesses, civil society organisations and community leaders (e.g., faith leaders). The City convenes this network at minimum four times a year to talk about issues of hate and extremism, and how to collectively address these to build a resilient city.

In **Seattle**, the local government is committed to what it calls a “high visibility approach”, where Seattle officials are embedded within all parts of the community in designated roles such as “community support officers”: even fire stations have community liaisons dedicated specifically to building trust with residents. The intention is to remove barriers to reporting and build the trust needed to ensure residents feel comfortable to proactively raise their concerns with the City. As Amarah Khan, Executive Director of the City’s Office of the Employee Ombuds said, “we as a city are taking some of the barriers out ... through creating easy forums for residents to talk to us... **I am hopeful this intentional effort of being out in the community is going to bring a shift in our understanding of the threat**, with people being more comfortable to report to us.”

In **Gdańsk, Poland**, the City has partnered with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to facilitate the provision of free psychosocial and legal support to residents that have experienced bias, discrimination and other forms of hate. This has resulted in the creation of a dedicated [Gdańsk Centre for Equal Treatment](#), established under the leadership of the Mayor, that manages several “safe spaces” across the city where victims of hate and discrimination can seek security and support from the seven NGOs the City has partnered with to deliver this work. As one participant observed, this initiative has been highly successful not only in the vital provision of support it enables, but also in building trust between the City, NGOs and residents (particularly minorities). This, in turn, helps residents feel more comfortable to report incidents of hate and discrimination, thus giving the City a more accurate understanding of the scale of these issues. Reach metrics also reveal just how needed this initiative is: for example, between April and December 2019 alone, [800 hours](#) of one-to-one assistance were provided to victims. It also provides a profound example of local government-led innovation, with it being the first-of-its-kind initiative in Poland.

These are but a few examples of how local governments are investing in partnerships and community engagement to prevent and respond to hate- and extremist-motivated violence. The impacts of such partnerships are numerous: among others, they build trust amongst residents in and provide them with access to local institutions, thus removing barriers to reporting on hate and related incidents; they can allow for greater reach by involving actors with access to hard-to-reach communities, and ultimately foster a sustainable, grassroots and hyper-local response to the contextual drivers of issues of hate and extremism. Participants commented in particular on the impact of local governments serving as convenors and “organisers” of these different community-based actors. This helps ensure their efforts complement and learn from one another and provides the local government with a community-wide understanding of existing efforts and gaps in response.

Further, ISD Germany presented its [Business Council for Democracy](#) (BC4D) programme, which “gives the private sector a role in building resilience and promoting democracy” through providing digital literacy training to their employees. Participants then discussed the untapped hate prevention potential of public-private partnerships and partnerships between local governments and research organisations. For example, it was suggested that local businesses can serve as amplifiers of a City’s (and/or Mayor’s) positive messaging around inclusivity, while partnerships with research organisations can help ensure local government officials stay up to date about the broader threat landscape and trends in prevention practices. In the case of BC4D, for example, it was highlighted how the BC4D model could be leveraged by local governments to ensure trainings are delivered to local businesses (rather than just larger corporations).

Other city examples:

- Aurora (Denver), US: [Immigrant Integration Plan](#)
- Seattle (Washington), US: [Public Participation Programme](#)
- Eurocities: [Cities Rally Around Ukraine](#)
- Eurocities: [City-Led Community Resilience and Youth Engagement Efforts](#)

City of Berlin, Germany

The workshop was preceded with a day of field visits for participants from North America, where they had the opportunity to learn from the City of Berlin's various efforts to prevent hate and extremism, as well as to rehabilitate and reintegrate (R&R) returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families.



- **Challenge:** Over the past 10 years, the City faced significant challenges with Islamist extremism – including a number of individuals who travelled to ISIS-held territory as well as successful and foiled terrorist attacks. Although Islamist radicalisation to violence and the return of FTFs and their families remain of concern, the threat picture now prominently features right-wing extremism and anti-migrant/anti-refugee sentiment.
- **Approach:** The City has multiple initiatives it leads or supports to address the above challenges. Among those that North American participants were able to learn from include the City's **DeRadicalisation Network**, a local multi-actor prevention network that comprises civil society, subject-matter experts, city agencies and community leaders to jointly address Islamist extremism. The Network meets regularly to discuss concerns and brainstorm responses.

The City's **R&R strategy** also featured during the field visits, which offers a comprehensive approach to R&R overseen by a single point of contact embedded within the local government, who coordinates multiple actors – social workers, community-based organisations, police and others – to ensure the appropriate support is provided to returnees upon their arrival in Berlin. The strategy offers a long-term vision for R&R, recognising that the R&R process may take several years per individual.

Participants also learned from the City's "**Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods**" (BENN) initiative, which provides migrants and refugees with the skills, knowledge and confidence to become active members of society, while tackling anti-migrant sentiment through community trust-building activities. The Berlin Register also featured, an index that maps incidents of hate crime, hate speech, discrimination and more, which the City and organisations like Mobile Counselling Against Right-Wing Extremism and the Coordination Office to Promote Democracy, among other initiatives, can use to inform their work.

- **Impact:** The City ultimately supports both targeted efforts to provide support to specific individuals (e.g., through the DeRadicalisation Network and the R&R strategy) and community-wide prevention efforts to build social cohesion. This multi-pronged approach offers a model for a truly whole-of-society effort to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and related issues.

3. National-Local Cooperation (NLC)

Participants urged better collaboration between national and local governments in order to effectively prevent hate and extremism at the local level. Participants identified numerous strengths in NLC or prevention. They commented, for example, on the US federal government's provision of technical assistance and financial resources to local actors working on target violence and terrorism prevention, and the German federal government's investment in local *exit* work (e.g., through providing support to [EXIT DE](#), which gives assistance to individuals that want to leave right-wing extremist movements).

However, participants also identified several challenges and gaps in NLC. For example, much of this support skips local government and goes straight to civil society. Where local governments are supported, this is often limited to big cities. Participants observed that in Germany, for example, national support is often directed to the country's megacities, and that **rural towns are largely neglected**, even where they face significant and growing concerns with extremism.

In the US, participants commented on the **difference in understanding and framing of the threat landscape** among various federal government agencies. This makes prevention a more difficult space to navigate for local actors, who are unsure which agencies to reach out to for support. Participants also commented on the lengthy bureaucratic processes that often accompany national-level support for local efforts. In Hungary, for example, participants observed that national level support for refugee integration is minimal, and it is delayed where it is available as a result of burdensome administrative requirements.

Breakdowns in communication were also identified as a gap: in **Aurora, Colorado** for example, buses full of migrants and refugees have arrived in the city (under the directive of the federal government) without the local government being provided with much, if any, notice. This makes it more challenging for the City to prepare appropriately and can cause delays in the provision of support to new arrivals. Participants commented that **proactive and consistent** communication by national and local leaders may mitigate such delays (including around the above-mentioned bureaucratic processes) in the future.

In Poland, participants pointed to the added difficulties of having national legislation that is not conducive to addressing all forms of hate. Participants observed that only one article of the country's penal code mentions hate speech, for example, and this article makes no mention of anti-LGBTQ+ hate. Overall, there are little to no legal protections against anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination. Local governments thus get minimal national-level support to adequately safeguard their LGBTQ+ residents.

Across both sides of the Atlantic, participants expressed the need for more opportunities to directly engage their national government counterparts on emerging threats and their needs for response. Participants also shared that national governments should play a convening role, bringing different cities together for a national-local dialogue specifically on this topic. In contexts where the national government is not receptive to such efforts, participants urged cities to take ownership and host city-city convenings themselves.

Next Steps

This conference is part of a larger effort by Strong Cities to bring European and North American cities together to discuss shared threats and inspire one another with innovative city-led solutions. Findings from this conference will inform this ongoing transatlantic initiative. For example, Strong Cities will continue its concerted effort to ensure smaller cities are included, and that cities have the opportunity to discuss the threat areas they identified in this conference (e.g., anti-migrant sentiment).

In addition, findings from this workshop will inform two upcoming Strong Cities guides: one for mayors on mayoral leadership in prevention and response, the other for local government practitioners on how to enhance and sustain city-led prevention efforts. Both guides will launch at Strong Cities' fourth Global Summit, which takes place from 19-21 September 2023 on the margins of the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly. The Summit, which includes a Mayoral Summit hosted by New York City Mayor, Eric Adams, will convene mayors and local government practitioners from over 70 cities globally, including from Germany, Central and Eastern Europe, and North America, for an interactive and dynamic programme that puts the spotlight on city-led solutions to rising levels of hate, polarisation and extremism.

“True impact can only happen when we collaborate. That’s why it was so important for our city to join the Strong Cities Network, to learn from each other about how we challenge these issues. Together, we will eliminate hate and extremism, and create conditions for all our people to succeed.”

Amarjeet Sohi, Mayor, City of Edmonton, Canada

Additional Resources

- [A 10-Step Roadmap for Enhancing City-Led Support for Community-Based Programmes to Address Hate and Extremism](#), Strong Cities Network
- [Transatlantic Initiative: Ten Key Findings and Recommendations](#), Strong Cities Network

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Contact Information

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