

Event Report

Western Balkans Regional Hub Local Multi-Stakeholder Prevention Models: National Exchange Of Experiences And Good Practices Between Community Action Teams In North Macedonia

Kumanovo, North Macedonia
13 – 14 June 2023



Summary

On 13-14 June, 2023, the Strong Cities Network Western Balkans Regional Hub, in partnership with the Municipality of Kumanovo, North Macedonia and with support from the U.S. Department of State, convened over 20 mayors and other city leaders, local government practitioners, and civil society experts from six municipalities across North Macedonia, as well as national government and international community representatives to exchange experiences, challenges, lessons learned and good practices on multi-stakeholder models for preventing hate, extremism and polarisation. Particular attention was placed on the Community Action Teams (CATs) that have emerged in different municipalities across the country.

The discussions explored how best to sustain these local structures, given the human and financial resource constraints under which they often operate. For example, professionals involved in them typically participate on a voluntary basis (in addition to their regular jobs) and the structures often lack dedicated funding for programme delivery. With the updated National Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategy soon to be released, participants also highlighted the importance of sustained national-local cooperation (NLC) in prevention and response. This involves, *inter alia*,

enhancing trust between local government institutions and law enforcement, for which the Ministry of Interior bears responsibility.

Throughout the discussions, participants pointed to the unique role of mayors and other city leaders, as well as city practitioners, in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation and respond to community needs and grievances. Local government representatives also expressed that national exchanges such as this one helps draw attention to this role and how best to enable more local leaders to fulfil it on a consistent basis. They also shared how valuable these exchanges are in ensuring that national government representatives hear directly from their local counterparts about the threats they are facing and how best to prevent and respond to them through a comprehensive 'whole-of-society' approach.



Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants highlighted how violent extremist organisations and ethnic tensions remain a threat to social cohesion and community resilience. This includes threats related to Islamist and far-right extremism. Participants also referred to the May 2023 school shooting in Belgrade, Serbia, as a potential risk for youth and schools in the country. They underscored how this reinforces the need for more investments in prevention, particularly those targeting schools and youth, to address different forms of hate and extremism.

Participants agreed that cities have an important role in addressing these localised threats, whether through strengthening capacities of teachers or facilitating rehabilitation and reintegration of those returning from conflict zones. However, they recognised that their impact often depends on strong cooperation with community-based organisations and national government authorities, especially with the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism (NCCVECT), which coordinates violent extremism and hate prevention efforts at the country level.

Local leaders and practitioners agreed that the development of local multi-stakeholder prevention mechanisms is crucial to strengthening these partnerships and launching a coordinated response. However, they highlighted how these bodies are often under resourced, and their appointed

members are often expected to contribute to this work in addition to their existing responsibilities. The latter constraint limits the incentives for already busy professionals to want to engage in this prevention work. The point was made that, although the international donor community has extended support to local prevention bodies across the country, ensuring their sustainable operation necessitates following through on national and local commitments to institutionalise these structures, which has yet to materialise.

Key Themes

Sustainability and Funding for Local Multi-stakeholder Prevention Mechanisms

Community Action Teams (CATs), such as the [one](#) in the Municipality of Kumanovo, are mandated by the National CVE Strategy of North Macedonia to catalyse city-led efforts to strengthen social cohesion and build community resilience. Over the past four years, six municipalities, including Strong Cities members Čair, Gostivar, Kičevo and Struga, have launched these bodies. In addition, the municipalities of Strumica and Tetovo have developed multi-stakeholder Local Prevention Councils (LPCs) which have integrated hate and extremism prevention into their efforts to address a wider set of local concerns such as human trafficking, child delinquency, and drug abuse. Discussions highlighted how, while CATs and LPCs have emerged based on local needs in each municipality, the different types of local prevention mechanisms – and their different framings – can cause confusion among practitioners and community members as to their purpose. Without clear guidance, participants cautioned, there is a continued risk that municipalities develop both an LPC and CAT, despite the redundancy this can create and the reality that either structure could effectively address hate and extremism-related threats.

Participants highlighted the challenges municipalities face in properly resourcing these bodies given their competing funding priorities and limited budgets. **Municipality of Kumanovo Mayor, Maksim Dimitrievski** also reflected on the importance of political will, especially at the mayoral level, in securing the necessary financial support for local prevention networks. He shared how his city allocates funds for its CAT and he commended the work and commitment of the CAT members. He underscored that they took on these responsibilities on top of their daily tasks without additional compensation. He added, however, that this presents a challenge for long-term sustainability and strategic engagement on prevention at a local. As this example highlights, even in cases where political will exists, lack of resources remains a key factor in turning will into sustainable concrete action.

“It is essential to establish a prevention system at the local level. Mayors should recognise that their mandate extends beyond infrastructure and core municipal services; prioritising prevention is crucial as it is the bedrock of social cohesion and the prosperity of a community.”

Mayor Maksim Dimitrievski of the Municipality of Kumanovo, stressing the importance of mayoral leadership in prioritising city-led prevention

Gostivar Mayor, Arben Taravari emphasised the importance of the support they've received from international partners and non-governmental organisations in operationalising their CAT to deliver local prevention activities. While this aid will continue to be important, the local government is looking for opportunities to co-finance and contribute in kind to this work. For example, it runs a local Youth and Community Centre where staff and other operating costs are financed by the Municipality of Gostivar, while its programming is covered by grants.

Vilma Venkovska from the Centre for Common Ground emphasised the need for more cities across the country to launch multi-stakeholder prevention platforms and develop local prevention plans and for enhanced NLC.

National CVE/CT Coordinator, Zlatko Apostoloski, acknowledged the limitations on central level support for local prevention work, while ensuring participants that progress is being made on securing funding to support it. He added that one of the priorities for the NCCVECT is to ensure impact of the activities and allocate funding and other support in a targeted, need-based way.

City of Kumanovo, North Macedonia

- **Challenge:** Sustainability of the Community Action Team (CAT)
- **Approach:** The Municipality of Kumanovo presented the CAT's work and its Local Action Plan on preventing violent extremism to the Municipal Council and secured a modest annual budget for CAT-led local activities.
- **Impact:** Higher visibility of the CAT and a modicum of flexibility to address local prevention needs

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National-Local Cooperation

Participants stressed that NLC remains a contentious topic in North Macedonia, particularly on security matters, which directly affects local prevention efforts led by multi-stakeholder mechanisms. Political polarisation often creates rifts between representatives of institutions coming from different political parties, especially between central and local authorities. A number of the mayors present at the workshop said that this has undermined efforts to create reliable channels of communication and cooperation between the national government and municipalities; this, despite a national consensus that local prevention is a priority.

Dejan Prodanovski, President of the Municipal Council of the Municipality of Prilep, echoed concerns expressed around the negative impact that political differences among national and local government actors, in particular, have on prevention efforts. He stressed, however, that "[w]hen it comes to addressing CVE issues, it is crucial for us to put aside our political affiliations. The safety of our community ought to be our utmost priority." Mr. Prodanovski emphasised the importance of leadership and encouraged bipartisanship to address matters that serve the collective welfare.

National CVE/CT Coordinator, Mr. Apostoloski, emphasised how the NCCVECT is seeking to overcome the challenges presented by political polarisation and makes consistent efforts to bring all relevant stakeholders to the table. He added that enhanced NLC is a priority for his office and this is reflected in the government's new National CVE Strategy which aims to provide a framework for NLC and prevention efforts more broadly in North Macedonia.

“One of the biggest challenges and priorities in the implementation of the National CVE Strategy is building the relationship between cities and the NCCVECT. We need to speak openly about the challenges despite their complexity and ethnic, religious or political affiliation. Extremism is not tied to one religion, political option, or ethnic background, it can occur everywhere.”

National CVE/CT Coordinator Zlatko Apostoloski on National-Local Cooperation

Zoran Arizanov, a Local Prevention Council member from the Municipality Strumica, shared encouraging examples of collaboration with different authorities in the city, particularly the police and prosecution service, although he acknowledged that there is still room for improvement. He shared that the LPC in his city, which was established in 2008, has also consistently facilitated engagement with civil society and community-based organisations, as well as maintained strong connections with central authorities. According to Mr. Arizanov, one of the key reasons for the effective functioning of the body for 15+ years under different administrations is the understanding and joint commitment of local actors, particularly the local government and law enforcement, to prioritise prevention efforts in the municipality.

Mayor Dimitrievski from the Municipality of Kumanovo emphasised the need for mayors to be a catalyst for trust-building between national and local authorities on issues related to prevention. As Mayor of Kumanovo he has consistently responded to NCCVECT and other national government requests and ensured that his city's prevention approaches are in line with national frameworks, but at the same time stressed that mayor's voices need to resonate more in national policy making.

Municipality of Strumica, North Macedonia

- **Challenge:** National-local Cooperation and Trust between National and Local Authorities
- **Approach:** Acting in accordance with the prescribed mandate of the Local Prevention Council and maintaining inclusive and transparent communication with national and local stakeholders in relation to the security priorities in the community
- **Impact:** Improved trust between the prosecution, police, and city authorities

Conclusions & Next Steps

The Strong Cities Western Balkans Regional Hub is committed to facilitating peer-to-peer learning among mayors and the local governments they lead on operationalising and sustaining multi-stakeholder prevention frameworks in their cities. The Kumanovo workshop was designed to contribute to a national-level dialogue and an exchange of good practices among members of local

prevention networks to strengthen ‘whole-of-society’ approaches at the local level. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to map challenges and opportunities to strengthen NLC at a time when the national government is in the process of updating its National CVE Strategy. The Regional Hub will continue to facilitate this dialogue in North Macedonia, replicate a similar platform in other countries in region and connect and consolidate learnings on multi-stakeholder prevention models in the Western Balkans. This work will be coordinated with non-governmental organisations working on this issue in each country and with relevant international and regional partners, including OSCE Missions.

Key takeaways:

- Multi-stakeholder prevention mechanisms need a clear mandate at the local level. In North Macedonia, while local prevention networks have emerged based on city and community needs, there is a risk of overlap of responsibilities between CATs and LPCs if there is no national or other guidance on how these bodies work and interact with each other.
- To ensure sustainability and effectiveness of multi-actor prevention networks, national and local governments need to follow through with commitments of institutionalisation and multi-year funding for programmes.
- Cooperation and coordination on prevention cannot continue to be undermined by political differences between national and local leaders, in particular. There needs to be bipartisan support for prevention at and between national and local government levels to ensure each stakeholder can perform its roles and responsibilities effectively.

The good practices shared and the findings from this workshop will inform the Hub’s 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.