

## Event Report

### Western Balkans Regional Hub Multiagency Coordination on Preventing Hate, Extremism & Polarisation: Founding the Local Safety Council of the Municipality of Danilovgrad

Podgorica, Montenegro  
25– 26 July 2023



## Summary

On 25 – 26 July 2023, the Strong Cities Network Western Balkans Regional Hub co-organised a workshop with the Municipality of Danilovgrad on multi-agency coordination to prevent and respond to hate, extremism and polarisation. The purpose of the event was to support the Mayor of Danilovgrad and the local government he leads in developing a Local Safety Council (LSC) dedicated to addressing threats to peace and security as well as safeguarding local democracy. The event brought together 20 municipal officials and civil society representatives from Danilovgrad as well as city practitioners from across the region to discuss the crucial components of operationalising an LSC.

Supported by the U.S. Department of State, the workshop drew insights from Strong Cities' experiences and four municipalities from the region - Brčko District (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Novi Pazar (Serbia), Podgorica (Montenegro) and Strumica (North Macedonia) - that have developed mechanism for multi-agency coordination. The goal was to aid Danilovgrad in establishing an LSC that is tailored to the city's needs and priorities. The Mayor of Danilovgrad emphasised how establishing an LSC was a demonstration of the vital role that cities can play in strengthening social cohesion and community resilience to extremist and hate-motivated violence through a human-rights compliant and whole-of-society approach.

Key workshop themes included mapping local threats and relevant stakeholders, considerations for operationalising an LSC, coordination among law enforcement, civil service, neighbouring municipalities and central authorities and identifying priority areas for the Council's work. A Strong Cities representative with experience in multi-agency coordination facilitated the working sessions and consolidated participants' feedback, which will inform the drafting of the LSC's Action Plan.

## Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Danilovgrad is a small municipality in central Montenegro with an ethnically diverse population. Participants from Danilovgrad emphasised that despite being traditionally considered safe, recent political shifts in Montenegro (and the wider region) have caused political and ethnic polarisation, which are often intertwined, across the country and in their city. This has manifested in an increased presence of hate speech and tension between ethnic and religious communities. This has become particularly prevalent, and hence concerning, on online social media networks. Participants stressed the need for heightened public awareness to address these issues effectively because while they may appear harmless initially, they can lead to more severe problems in the long run. The recent school shooting in Belgrade, Serbia and last year's shooting in Cetinje, Montenegro, served as a stark reminder of how unaddressed grievances can escalate in violence. To avoid this, participants stressed the importance of proactive measures to prevent problems before they reach a critical stage and require the intervention of the security services.

Participants from Danilovgrad shared how they see the establishment of an LSC as a key component of their preventative approach. The LSC will function as a local prevention coordination mechanism that facilitates the development of a strategic multi-disciplinary response as well as information sharing on addressing hate, extremism and polarisation.

Participants engaged in discussions with regional peers on various ways to establish and then operationalise multi-stakeholder prevention bodies. In addition to institutional set up, participants also discussed key thematic areas for LSC engagement. For instance, they agreed that youth engagement and awareness raising within local communities should be priorities for the LSC and, more broadly, the municipal agenda. This includes work in schools and through education and promotion of equality and inclusion and using arts and theatre to address sensitive topics such as dealing with the past atrocities, human rights abuses and war crimes.

Nonetheless, participants from Danilovgrad highlighted that their municipality needs support to be able to mobilise and sustain an effective response to the discussed threats and challenges. Namely, they stressed that capacity building of municipal practitioners on prevention as well as a comprehensive mapping of threats and effective response strategies was vital. On trainings, more thematic workshops that centre on mandates and jurisdiction, understanding the threat environment, and programming are especially needed.

Budgeting and sustainability, more broadly, also emerged as significant challenges, with both municipal funding and international support considered crucial for ensuring impactful LSC operations. Addressing these financial aspects was seen as a top priority to guarantee the Council's effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Furthermore, participants recognised the importance of coordination with neighbouring municipalities, law enforcement, and the national government to ensure the efficacy of local prevention efforts.

In seeking to learn from the good practices regionally and globally, the participants looked to Strong Cities as a crucial partner for connecting with relevant stakeholders from the region who could offer support to their efforts.

## Key Themes

### Operationalising the Local Safety Council: Mandate, Limitations, and Advantages

The Mayor of **Danilovgrad**, Aleksandar Grgurović, highlighted how his participation in the Western Balkans Regional Hub [Inaugural Workshop](#) in February has allowed him to better understand his role in prevention. After hearing from his peers about the whole-of-society work they are doing to address hate, extremism and polarisation he realised the need for the development of an LSC in his municipality to replicate this approach, especially with recent surges in polarisation and division in Danilovgrad.

“The Local Safety Council will tackle extremism, polarisation and hate and will be a pilot for all of Montenegro as we only have central government level efforts on prevention. This is an important step not only for Danilovgrad but for Montenegro at large.”

Aleksandar Grgurović, Mayor of the Municipality of Danilovgrad



Participants brainstormed two ways to establish an LSC in line with Montenegrin law: via a Municipal Council Resolution or a Mayoral Decision. The former would offer a broader political consensus and legitimacy but tie it to the Municipal Council sessions and its agenda. The latter would provide more independence and flexibility allowing the LSC to develop its own priorities and agenda. Gjorgi Arizanov, the Secretary of the Local Prevention Council from **Strumica**, North Macedonia and Hajrudin Hajrović, Head of the Local Safety Council in **Novi Pazar**, Serbia both shared the benefits of working independently of the Municipal Council which would obligate them to only discuss matters on the Municipal Council agenda. Working independently allows the LSC to contribute to the Municipal Council’s work as an advisory body which can put forward suggestions while maintaining a broad enough scope to keep up with both the threat environment and priorities of citizens in line with the LSC Action Plan they will adopt.

Attendees also reached a consensus that the LSC should include representatives from local schools, social services, law enforcement, youth, civil society, courts, prosecution, and other municipal departments and bodies on a need basis. The initial plan in Danilovgrad envisions the LSC convening fortnightly to discuss, update, and formulate concrete programming or responses, with the flexibility to convene more frequently when specific situations demand it.

Participants discussed how budgetary issues would be the biggest constraint to the impact of the LSC. Although all members would take part on a voluntary basis seconded from their institutions, programming would require funds that the municipality or international organisations need to allocate on regular basis. Mayor Grgurović considers the Western Balkans Regional Hub’s “help desk” function, including assistance through its Technical Support Fund and Expert Pool, as crucial for supporting the different phases of operationalising the LSC.

## City of Novi Pazar, Republic of Serbia

- **Challenge:** Establishing and operating a Local Safety Council to address widespread division on a political, religious and ethnic basis.
- **Approach:** The Local Safety Council was established in 2012, but its work gained impetus with the swift spread of violent extremism, radicalisation and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters in and around the city of Novi Pazar. The delicate nature of the subject matter required an apolitical inclusive approach which would bring all participants to the table in order to gain and strengthen the trust of the local community.
- **Impact:** The City of Novi Pazar managed to respond to the threat by allocating municipal funds for LSC activities, engaging at-risk youth and partnering with multilaterals such as the OSCE to deliver more comprehensive programmes.



[www.novipazar.rs](http://www.novipazar.rs)

## Coordination with Peers, Central Government and Law Enforcement

City practitioners from the region highlighted the importance of coordination with key stakeholders as a key component for any LSC. Discussions revolved around exchanging information among relevant stakeholders within the municipality, including law enforcement, practitioners from neighbouring municipalities and representatives from central government bodies. Luka Semizović, the representative from **Brčko District**, Bosnia and Herzegovina, stressed the importance of coordinating with peers from neighbouring municipalities because threats to peace and security transcend the borders of municipalities.



“An unintended consequence of adequately addressing challenges on a local level is – when you “solve” a problem in one municipality, the problem can move to another municipality. It is important to coordinate horizontally with neighbouring municipalities but also vertically, with central authorities, otherwise the buck is just being passed around.”

Luka Semizovic, Advisor on Prevention and Policy Development, Brcko District, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Participants agreed that more can be done to enhance coordination between local governments and law enforcement on prevention, which is largely symbolic. Gjorgji Arizanov from the Municipality of **Strumica**, North Macedonia, reflected on this complex relationship in the context of his municipality:





“The goal of the LSC in our city is to bring together local administration, public services, police and citizens to address threats to social cohesion and peace. When we established the LSC it was perceived that the police is responsible for all the security issues in the municipality. However, this understanding has evolved over time to include all relevant public bodies in the municipality.”

Gjorgi Arizanov, Secretary of Local Prevention Council,  
Municipality of Strumica

He further explained how this exchange of information contributed to the de-securitisation of prevention and building trust between different branches of government on a local level, which then transcends into better national-local coordination (NLC).

While there is an understanding of the importance of NLC, participants stressed that political differences constrain the building of strong relationships between national and local stakeholders. Engagements with central authorities should emphasise the need to build a consensus on the importance of prevention that transcends the different political parties.

## Municipality of Strumica, North Macedonia

- **Challenge:** Overcoming barriers in cooperation between local law-enforcement and local government authorities on prevention
- **Approach:** The Local Prevention Council (LPC) deals with issues which have traditionally been viewed within the law enforcement domain since it concerns security issues. The Council has been crucial in de-securitising prevention and incorporating the perspectives of local government departments and civil society stakeholders. Additionally, it has created a platform for smoother coordination and communication between law enforcement, local government and civil society that helps in streamlining activities and priorities while avoiding an overlap in efforts or confusing jurisdiction. Even though political alignment across the municipality and national government authorities that control the police has been helpful in facilitating this outcome, the need for local government-led prevention in the municipality was key in the successful operationalisation of the LPC.
- **Impact:** Local law-enforcement has understood the value of the LPC and how it helps with access in issues it has limited access and impact especially in prevention as opposed to penalisation.



## Key Priorities for the Local Safety Council

During the workshop Danilovgrad participants identified three priorities for the LSC to pursue after its formation.

1. **Prevention of hate-motivated violence and hate speech:** This pillar encompasses preventing extremism, bullying, domestic abuse and drug abuse. This includes collaborating with community actors as well as media outlets given that youth are particularly vulnerable to divisive rhetoric and hate speech online. Participants thus emphasised the need for collaboration between the LSC, the Local Youth Council and educational institutions in the municipality to raise awareness about the dangers of this threat to social cohesion.
2. **Psychosocial and legal assistance to vulnerable groups:** Participants defined vulnerable groups as persons with disabilities, senior citizens, returnee foreign terrorist fighters, women, and individuals living below the poverty line. They highlighted the underutilisation of existing resources, such as EU accession funds, that could assist these demographic groups and address their grievances, which, if ignored, could lead to violence.
3. **Inclusion and advancing citizen participation, especially young people, in local decision-making:** Participants stressed the significance of involving young people in local decision-making processes, particularly within the LSC, to ensure youth perspectives are integrated into the Council's work. They emphasised the importance of communicating prevention efforts in understandable terms – avoiding jargon – to make the topic more accessible and engaging for the youth.

## Next Steps

The next few months will see the establishment of the LSC in the Municipality of Danilovgrad, following a Mayoral Decision. The Mayor will play an integral role in this process, nominating members from various relevant local authorities and stakeholders to ensure broad representation and collaborative decision-making. Participants agreed that this approach offers greater flexibility in programming and coordination, as compared to waiting for a Municipal Council decision.

Building upon the fruitful collaboration thus far, Strong Cities will look to provide expert support in setting up the LSC. The Network will also contribute to the formulation of the LSC's Action Plan, aligning it with existing relevant Montenegrin strategies and legislation.

The good practices shared and the findings from this workshop will inform the Hub's Second Regional Workshop which is scheduled for September 2023.

## Donors & Partners



## Contact Information

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