

Event Report

Western Balkans Regional Hub

Strengthening the Role of Cities to Address Hate, Extremism and Polarisation Through Enhanced National-Local Cooperation

Budva, Montenegro
5 – 6 September 2023



Summary

On 5-6 September 2023, the Strong Cities Western Balkans Regional Hub convened more than 50 mayors and other local government officials, as well as national government, civil society and multilateral stakeholders across the region for a workshop focused on strengthening the role of cities in addressing hate, extremism and polarisation through enhanced national-local cooperation (NLC).

Supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) and the US Department of State, the workshop enabled local, national and international stakeholders to reflect on the existing barriers to effective prevention-related NLC while discussing ways to improve collaboration. Participants generally agreed that Western Balkans states still see most security issues as the responsibility of national governments and security agencies, with cities feeling left out despite their deep understanding of community-level vulnerabilities to hate and extremism. As a result, participants welcomed Strong Cities efforts to bring local governments to the table with their national counterparts.

Key themes highlighted during the workshop included:

- The role of mayors as elected leaders in facilitating NLC and addressing some of the obstacles their cities face, such as navigating the complex jurisdictional issues between local and national governments, particularly in the field of security or public safety; and
- The role of locally-led, multi-actor prevention mechanisms in supporting national-local trust-building efforts.

Threats, Key Challenges & City Needs

Participants recognised that local authorities and their role in prevention are gaining prominence in national strategies across the region. However, the consensus was that there is still a long way to go in moving from paper to practice by seeing effective NLC materialise in the day-to-day delivery of prevention initiatives at the community-level.

The gap is perhaps most evident in the sensitive process of rehabilitating and reintegrating (R&R) foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, which requires strong and consistent mechanisms for NLC if efforts are to be coordinated, whole-of-society and sustainable. Participants shared that local governments are often informed only a few days before their former residents return from conflict zones, forcing them to make last-minute preparations and arrangements for a complicated process which requires substantial resources and involves many stakeholders. Central government representatives acknowledged that this was a challenge, explaining how administrative and legal requirements limit their ability to share all the necessary information with cities in a timely manner.

Strong Cities representatives explained how the Strong Cities Management Unit aims to address such challenges, and the wider obstacles to prevention-related NLC, partly with the support of a [toolkit](#), developed by Strong Cities to facilitate the implementation of the 13 NLC [good practices](#) elaborated by the [Global Counterterrorism Forum \(GCTF\)](#). The toolkit is grounded in 6 pillars for strengthening NLC:

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Communication | 4. Trust |
| 2. Inclusivity | 5. Capacity Building |
| 3. Coordination | 6. Sustainability |

The workshop's working sessions focused on these pillars, allowing participants to identify key hurdles as well as good practices from the region, before applying them to the scenario-based tabletop exercises in which different stakeholders worked through potential solutions.

Key Themes

The Role of Mayors: Local Ownership of Prevention and Navigating Complex Jurisdictions

Mayors across the region shared that, as elected officials, their campaign promises typically focus on developing local infrastructure and improving key local services considered the core function of municipalities. Amid a climate of heightened polarisation across the Western Balkans, many expressed that prioritising hate and extremism prevention when seeking office, let alone if elected, can come at a political cost. Moreover, the point was made that there are few incentives for mayors to elevate promoting social cohesion – a long-term endeavour – as a priority given their limited terms in office.

However, **Olivera Injac, the Mayor of Podgorica, Montenegro** underlined the need for mayors to recognise that their responsibilities go beyond the issues they campaign on, focusing on social cohesion and public safety for the duration of their term even if the results are not so easily visible to

voters. She shared that focusing on youth is particularly critical, and highlighted recent learnings from **Danilovgrad**, a new Strong Cities member, which is in the process of developing a local safety council (LSC). As mayor of a capital city, she noted that she is fortunate to have personal relationships with key individuals in the Ministry of Interior, but that there is ample space to build institutional coordination channels that do not depend on individuals.

Nevertheless, **Kostadin Kostadinov, the Mayor of Strumica, North Macedonia**, shared that even though his city formed a [local prevention council](#) in 2008, the most difficult part of his chairing of the council remains getting everyone to the table. Moreover, he is personally responsible in managing complex relations between different stakeholders who often do not see eye to eye for many reasons including political partisanship, as well as public perceptions of council's work. Putting the political challenge bluntly, Mayor Kostadinov shared that *“prevention is an unattractive field and as such it is unappealing for politicians who seek to be in the public eye with their work in a positive way.”*

On the other hand, the Deputy Mayor of **Prizren, Kosovo** said that there were immediate gains from prioritising prevention, provided that cities have municipal staff assigned to work on prevention as part of their core responsibilities. He stressed that political will from mayors remains a driving force in prevention because of the lack of dedicated resources from the already modest municipal budgets, low capacities among staff, and changing political circumstances at the national level.

“Prizren is interesting because of the diversity of ethnic groups in the community which brings an increased risk of challenges to stability and cohesion. Prizren became a member of the Strong Cities in a very difficult period for the city when many citizens were joining the foreign fronts, and with the help of the Strong Cities quick steps and measures were taken and the situation was put under control. Now we have and established local safety council, mainly focused on working with youth in schools.”

Kujtim Gashi, Deputy Mayor of Prizren, Kosovo



The Mayor of Danilovgrad, Montenegro, Aleksandar Grgurović shared learnings from the recent [Strong Cities workshop held in Danilovgrad](#) aimed at assisting his municipality in establishing an LSC through regional peer learning and sharing of technical expertise. He called for improved communication between mayors and local practitioners on prevention issues and encouraged for more work on sensitising mayors on this topic.

City of Danilovgrad, Montenegro

- **Challenge:** Like the rest of Montenegro, Danilovgrad is facing rising polarisation. The Mayor felt that not only was the relationship between polarisation and extremism poorly understood but municipalities like his were ill-equipped to address it. Budgetary constraints and a general lack of new resources further exacerbated the challenges he faces.
- **Approach:** Danilovgrad, facing budget constraints and limited subject matter understanding, reached out to Strong Cities to seek assistance in setting up an LSC. Strong Cities responded by partnering with Danilovgrad to host a workshop in July 2023 that gathered regional practitioners who shared their experiences in developing similar structures, laying the groundwork for Danilovgrad's own efforts.
- **Impact:** Under the Mayor's leadership, Danilovgrad is set to launch an LSC able to identify local challenges in a timely manner, share them with all relevant local stakeholders, and develop responses tailored to the needs to local communities.



www.danilovgrad.me

Effective NLC: Navigating Complex Jurisdictions

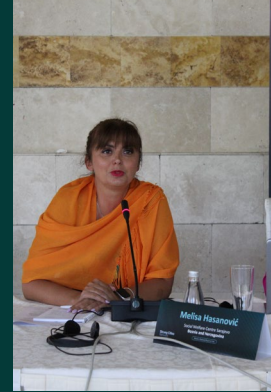
Scenarios on communication in NLC prompted participants to consider ways to strengthen coordination between national and local authorities on hate, polarisation, and extremism challenges. For example, a scenario which revolved around R&R of returnees in their communities showed that despite awareness of the measures practitioners need to take in accordance with good practice, they experience various challenges on the ground. Participants explained the obstacles in coordination between local and national government authorities caused by legal constraints. Classification of information, for instance, prevents national authorities from sharing information in a timely manner. This limits the ability of their local government counterparts to adequately prepare for accepting returnees and coordinate R&R efforts, forcing them carry out these complex and sensitive processes under a lot of time pressure.

Further to this point, some pointed to the tendency of national governments, and security services in particular, to “overclassify” documents and said more information needs to be shared with local institutions to help prepare for returnees, while respecting the need for truly sensitive case details to remain confidential. Participants shared that this is especially important for cities because they coordinate many of the services on the ground related to R&R and they are expected to manage the community reactions to new returnees.

Positive examples of NLC on such issues were highlighted where personal relationships were seen as a critical enabler for coordination. For example, **Melisa Hasanović, Head of the Municipality Welfare Centre in Hadžići, Social Welfare Centre Sarajevo Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)** emphasised that trusted relationships among specific individuals in key roles had been important for reintegration efforts in her city. Building on these instances, participants discussed the need for institutionalised NLC mechanisms that take learnings from these examples but are less reliant on existing personal relationships and better able to create long-term, systemic communication and coordination.

Social Services in Sarajevo Canton, BiH

- **Challenge:** BiH has a uniquely complex governance and constitutional system which makes vertical coordination extremely challenging. Navigating the multiple administrative layers is cumbersome, especially in situations where a rapid response is needed.
- **Approach:** Professionals working across all institutions involved have built trust among each other due to a unanimous consensus on the public interest, despite legal, administrative, and institutional hurdles. They continuously share information, coordinate, and communicate with each other to deliver rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, especially for vulnerable groups such as women and children.
- **Impact:** Successful and effective rehabilitation and reintegration of vulnerable groups in the Sarajevo Canton with relevant input and contributions from all levels of government in BiH.



www.vlada.ks.ba

The Role of City-Led Multi-Actor Prevention Mechanisms in NLC

Existing locally-led multi-actor models developed for addressing hate, extremism and polarisation vary greatly across the region depending on both local needs as well as the legal frameworks of each country. In recent years, such models have been included in national strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism across the region. Workshop participants shared some recent positive developments, both in terms of recognising the need for multi-actor coordination and the role of cities in localising, operationalising and leading such efforts.

State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior of Montenegro and National Coordinator for Countering Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism, Slobodan Kovačević, emphasised that local communities and municipalities are an important pillar of Montenegro's approach to prevention. The State Secretary elaborated that they are shifting focus from raising awareness about extremism to organising trainings in cooperation with municipalities to address capacity gaps of different local stakeholders. **Fatilda Smajlaj, Head of Research and Education Unit at the Coordination Centre for Countering Violent Extremism, Albania** underscored that capacity building for municipalities on prevention is similarly a priority for the national government in Albania.

Ervin Muco, General Director at the Municipality of Elbasan said that there is also an observed change of mindset among local political leaders in Albania who are willing to engage in local prevention, as well as invest efforts in engaging with national level decision makers for more effective results on the ground. National authorities also recognise the importance of city-led multi-actor prevention mechanisms, he shared.

“City-led multi-actor prevention mechanisms have been established in all municipalities but are not operational everywhere, which brings problems for our everyday work. We use them to organise forums to address issues with the public and can contrast results with those who have not and have failed to break culture of silence about extremism, hate, and polarisation.”

Ervin Muco, General Director, Municipality of Elbasan



Luka Semizović from the Brčko District, BiH, also underscored the role cities and sub-national entities can play in de-securitising prevention. He noted that social welfare centres had been followed by schools and the education sector and local businesses in earning a seat at the “prevention table”, with such partners now demonstrating a strong degree of coordination. Such cooperation in the Brčko District was highlighted as a key good practice in BiH, underlining the relevance of cities and the institutions within them that have critical reach into and trust with local communities.

Ministry of Interior, Montenegro

- **Challenge:** Although the Government of Montenegro recognises the importance of cities as prevention partners that possess valuable insight, access, and trust, they are cognisant of the capacity gaps among local practitioners when it comes to engaging in such efforts.
- **Approach:** The Ministry of Interior has devoted significant efforts in developing manuals for city leaders and practitioners which will help in raising awareness and fundamental knowledge about counterterrorism and the prevention and countering of violent extremism. They now seek to engage more deeply with specific practitioners by providing specific sectors with capacity building support.
- **Impact:** The Ministry of Interiors’ efforts resulted in higher awareness among local practitioners about preventing and responding to hate and extremism while creating a vault of resources for elected leaders and practitioners to refer to on the subject. The Ministry is set to build on these efforts and address capacity gaps through concrete, need-based engagement with municipalities.



<https://www.gov.me/en/mup>

Next Steps

Following this workshop, Strong Cities will continue to provide dedicated support for mayors and city officials in consultation with national and international partners across the Western Balkans. This includes by leveraging three new Strong Cities tools: the [NLC Implementation Toolkit](#) produced under the auspices of the [GCTF Countering Violent Extremism Working Group](#) and new Strong Cities guides for [mayors](#) and [city officials](#), resources based on input from cities across the world, including several from the Western Balkans. These resources are now available on Strong Cities' online [Resource Hub](#) and will be disseminated to mayors and local administrations throughout the region. They will also be used as resource material in further trainings and workshops, and conversely, they will be regularly updated with data and other information collected in the field. The Western Balkans Regional Hub will continue to serve as a focal point for cities regarding all their prevention needs, offering a "help desk" and tailored technical support to individual cities, as appropriate. The cities of Sarajevo, BiH, and Kumanovo, North Macedonia, will also serve on the International Steering Committee and they were joined by a number of mayors and city leaders from across the region for the [Fourth Strong Cities Global Summit](#), which took place in New York City on 19-21 September.

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Contact Information

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