



Fourth Global Summit Event Report

Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative Working Lunch

New York City, USA
20 September 2023



Summary

On 19 – 21 September 2023, Strong Cities Network held its [Fourth Global Summit](#) in New York City, which brought together over 240 participants, including city leaders and practitioners representing more than 115 cities from 50 countries globally. The Summit featured 11 events and provided city officials from diverse contexts with the opportunity to share and learn from promising practices for city-led prevention of hate, extremism and polarisation. **Read the event report [here](#).**

The programme included a **20 September** working lunch to reflect on Strong Cities Network's [Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative](#). The Initiative was launched in October 2021 in [Brussels](#) (Belgium) to strengthen transatlantic cooperation between mayors, local governments and practitioners in preventing hate, extremism and polarisation, and safeguarding local democracy. The Initiative, which has benefited from support from the US Department of State, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the cities of Denver, London and Oslo, among others, recognises that threats of hate and extremism are increasingly transnational, with extremist groups and hate-based narratives in North America inspiring European hate movements and vice versa. It therefore brings North American and European city officials together to discuss key challenges and practices for mitigating these threats from escalating further.

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Background

Events so far have included the inaugural convening in Brussels, two US-Nordic focused events in [Helsinki](#) (Finland) and [Denver](#) (Colorado, USA), mayoral dialogues in [The Hague](#) (The Netherlands) and [Washington DC](#) (USA), a workshop on city-led support for community-based prevention programmes in [London](#) (UK), a three-day programme on the role of mayors and local governments in responding to hate- or extremist-motivated violence in [Oslo](#) (Norway), and a two-day event in [Berlin](#) (Germany), which focused on introducing smaller cities and cities from Central and Eastern Europe to the Initiative. These events have also resulted in the elaboration of [The Hague Mayoral Declaration on Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation, and Safeguarding Local Democracy](#), which has been endorsed by 40+ mayors, [ten preliminary findings and recommendations](#) from the Initiative, a [roadmap](#) to enhance city-led support for community-based programmes, and a [guide](#) on the role of cities in rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals repatriated from conflict zones. **The working lunch presented an opportunity for participants to reflect on this progress, and to inform the Initiative's forward agenda.**

Importance of Transatlantic Cooperation

Participants agreed that efforts to enhance transatlantic cooperation on threats of hate and extremism must be continued. In her opening remarks, **Nancy Rotering, Mayor of Highland Park (Illinois, USA)**, shared how the Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative has helped her learn from what other mayors are doing both to prevent hate and extremism and in the aftermath of escalations to violence. She noted that opportunities to learn from other city leaders, including how the City of Oslo responded following the [22 July 2011 terrorist attack](#) that killed over 70 people, many of whom were young people, have been particularly helpful as she steers the City's long-term response to a [4 July 2022 mass shooting](#) that killed seven and injured countless more.

State Secretary Christian Hochgrebe of Berlin's Senate Department of the Interior and Sport echoed the need for transatlantic cooperation and learning, especially in light of the ever-changing threat landscape. He emphasised the need to understand online dynamics of the threat in particular, noting how disinformation and conspiracy narratives are fuelling extremism and hate and successfully mobilising individuals to violence. He further observed that social media and digital technologies more broadly have enabled extremist groups to "collaborate internationally and influence each other", and that this is one of the reasons platforms such as that which Strong Cities provides "are crucial in developing a joint response". **Eric Poinsoot, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) Consultant for the City of Strasbourg (France)** further pointed out the clear evidence that individuals in North America and Europe are influencing one another, particularly as this relates to far-right extremism. He shared, for example, that a far-right extremist in

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the USA published an [accelerationist](#)¹ manifesto that has since been translated into French and distributed amongst far-right extremist actors across France.

The importance of continued transatlantic engagement on these issues – particularly between mayors and local governments more broadly - was reiterated by other participants in the room. **Melissa Blaustein, Mayor of Sausalito (California)** pointed out, for example, that although contexts in North American and European cities may differ, the drivers of hate and extremism, including rising levels of polarisation and hate speech, are similar. In both settings, she said, individuals are grappling with and/or drawing selectively from a variety of motivations and ideologies rather than being motivated by a single and distinct ideology. Mayor Blaustein expressed concerns in particular about the proliferation of anti-LGBTQI+ hate and emphasised the importance of mayors across the Atlantic working together “to fight for our common values and protect the notion of democracy”.

Key Concerns: Hate Speech & Impacts of Migration on Social Cohesion

Amongst the issues participants shared they are most concerned about are the proliferation of hate speech online and the impacts of migration (whether climate-induced, related to the war in Ukraine or otherwise) on the social cohesion of their cities. **Sandra Masters, Mayor of Regina (Canada)** commented, for example, on the role of social media in amplifying conflict, and that mayors and local governments need tools and resources to be able to prevent hateful content online from escalating or manifesting into violence offline, stressing the need in particular for a strategic communications toolkit that might support local governments with responding to hate speech productively and effectively. She observed that **it would be beneficial for small cities to be brought together with larger cities where these issues are more prevalent, so that smaller and often under-resourced local governments can learn from their bigger counterparts’ successes and challenges with addressing hate and extremism**, especially its online manifestations. **Thomas Zencker, Mayor of Zittau (Germany)** commented on the added challenge of the “normalising” of hate speech as a result of national governments (e.g., in Hungary and Poland) amplifying hateful narratives, and noted how this has an impact on cities, where such narratives fuel polarisation.

Migration was raised as another challenge, particularly in the context of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and Ukraine and the surge in migration that is expected to continue as a result of climate change. Participants noted concerns about the ability of local governments to maintain social cohesion amidst the influx of migrants, particularly in the context of rising [anti-migrant narratives](#) fuelled by disinformation campaigns that claim migrants of seeking to replace long-term residents, among other accusations. Concerns were also raised about a lack of support for local

¹ As noted by the [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), accelerationism “is a term used by white supremacists and other extremist groups [to refer to](#) “their desire to hasten the collapse of society as we know it”. It generally justifies and even encourages violence as a means to achieve this desired collapse.

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governments to adequately accommodate migrant inflows, including to ensure basic public service delivery reaches all its new (and old) citizens.

Key Practices: Community Engagement, Information-Sharing & National-Local Cooperation (NLC)

The working lunch also invited participants to share their perspectives on areas of practice that should feature in the forward agenda of the Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative.

Community Engagement:

Participants agreed that local governments must invest in long-term relationships with civil society and community-based organisations as a means to build strong and resilient communities where extremist ideologies can't take root. **Mayor Masters** shared, for example, that as part of her city's new multi-year [Community Safety & Well-Being Plan](#), the City will establish a community action team that brings together relevant community-based partners and City agencies to "provide accountability for anti-racism, discrimination and oppression work in Regina", including through public education campaigns and community-based programmes. **Salima Ebrahim, Chief of Staff for the City of Edmonton (Canada)** similarly shared that community engagement is a pivotal component of the City's new [anti-racism strategy](#), which includes a pillar dedicated specifically to supporting the operational and other capacities of community-based anti-racism organisations. The City additionally operates with a participatory budget development process, where communities (including youth) are invited to share where and on what issues they feel the City needs to invest its resources. **State Secretary Hochgrebe** additionally emphasised the need for local governments to invest in "strengthening civil society", including as a means to overcome historically securitised approaches to preventing extremism. He noted that the City of Berlin, as one of the many endorsing cities, has made commitments to work on this through The Hague Mayoral Declaration and looks forward to sharing with Strong Cities its progress in implementing them.

With community engagement identified as an area where mayors and local governments play a particularly important role in the prevention of extremism, participants agreed that related city-led practices should continue to feature heavily in the Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative.

Information-Sharing:

Participants also said that more attention should be given to enhancing information-sharing within city agencies, the lack thereof can hinder effective local government-led prevention. Navigating complex data protection legislation and the continued exclusion of local governments in national and international prevention approaches were provided as examples of why this remains a challenge in city-led efforts to address hate and extremism. **Alexander Ojanne, Vice Mayor of Stockholm (Sweden)** pointed to data-sharing in city-led multi-actor approaches to prevention (e.g., local multi-disciplinary prevention networks) in particular as an area that should continue to be explored in the Transatlantic Dialogue Initiative.

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NLC:

Information-sharing was also identified as a challenge in the context of NLC. Participants urged better collaboration between national and local governments in order to effectively prevent hate, extremism and polarisation, stressing the need for better communication between the national government and local authorities, as well as more proactive inclusion of local governments in national prevention frameworks. In this context, **Dr. Georgios Sotiridias, P/CVE Consultant for the City of Berlin** advised that monitoring and evaluation can serve as a means to enhance NLC on prevention. He noted that an untapped strategy for engaging national governments is to better evaluate existing local government-led prevention efforts. By presenting evidence of the positive impact of city-led and other local projects, national governments will feel more comfortable to support such efforts, whether through funding or otherwise.

What's Next?

Participants agreed that mayors and local governments on both sides of the Atlantic should intensify their cooperation to counter hate, extremism and polarisation, and safeguard local democracy. Strong Cities Network will use the findings from this working lunch to inform its forthcoming Transatlantic Dialogues. This includes three events currently in the pipeline: Strasbourg and Bratislava (Slovakia) in early 2024, with the former aimed at involving more French cities in hate and extremism prevention work and the latter focusing on the continued inclusion of Central and Eastern European cities in this initiative; and Stockholm in mid-2024 in partnership with the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism.

In addition to the above thematic and practice areas, the new Strong Cities guides for [mayors](#), [local governments](#) and on NLC will feature in the Initiative's activities going forward. As part of its commitment to showcase city-led prevention efforts and mayoral leadership against hate and extremism, the Initiative will also inform the ongoing roll-out of a City Practices Library that the Strong Cities Network is developing as part of its [Resource Hub](#).

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The views expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of all workshop participants, Strong Cities, all its members or the Summit sponsors.

Contact Us

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