

## Event Report

### Building Community Cohesion & Strengthening Democracy in Cities: A Roundtable with European and U.S. Mayors

Washington, D.C., USA  
18 January 2024



## Summary

On 18 January 2024, the Strong Cities Network and the German Marshall Fund (GMF) hosted a transatlantic roundtable with European and U.S. mayors on building community cohesion and strengthening democracy in cities. Held in Washington, DC, on the margins of the 92nd Winter Meeting of the US Conference of Mayors, the roundtable convened more than 25 mayors and other senior city officials to delve deeper into what mayors and the cities they lead are doing to bridge divides, build common ground and strengthen democracy in contexts of increasing polarisation and hate, challenges which are being fueled or exacerbated by global crises. They explored how these efforts can be supported and scaled, including by leveraging existing tools such as Strong Cities guides for [mayors](#) and [cities](#), and through the work developed as part of [GMF's Cities Fortifying Democracy](#) project.

Participants included mayors and deputy mayors from Europe, including Greater Manchester (United Kingdom), Lviv (Ukraine) and Weisswasser and Weißenfels (Germany), and from the United States, Highland Park (Illinois), Kinston (North Carolina) and Los Angeles (California). Officials and experts from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), National League of Cities (NLC), US Agency for International Development (USAID), US Department for Homeland Security and US Department of State also participated.

## Framing Remarks

**Steven Bosacker, GMF Senior Vice Present for Innovation and Director of GMF Cities**, highlighted the timeliness of the roundtable, noting how cities and communities are at the front lines of the battle to stem the erosion of local democracy and maintain community cohesion in times of increasing polarisation and rising levels of hate.

**Strong Cities Executive Director Eric Rosand** added that a series of global crises, and the disinformation and conspiracy narratives often connected to them, have sparked protests and fueled or exacerbated different forms of hate and extremism in cities on both sides of the Atlantic, all of which threaten social cohesion. He shared how mayors and other city leaders have been pursuing or searching for approaches to mitigate the impact of these crises on their residents. He said that this roundtable was part of wider Strong Cities' efforts to help cities address these challenges, pointing to the Network's recent [policy brief](#).

**Daniel Ricchetti, US Deputy Special Representative for City and State Diplomacy**, emphasised the priority that the State Department is placing on ensuring local leaders are connected to national and international policy-making. He emphasised how mayors know the importance of engaging with local communities and are "often uniquely positioned to identify early signs of danger and recognise and accommodate the diverse cultures and sensitivities on communities, including refugees and other new arrivals". For local leaders, he underscored the importance of: 1) promoting kindness and democratic values; 2) destigmatising mental health and creating better access to psychosocial support; and 3) working harder to proactively counter hate speech and disinformation.

**Clarence Anthony, Executive Director of the National League of Cities**, shared how most local leaders run for office to make communities better and that mayors have a vision and goals they hope to actualise. They also need to recognise, however, that rising levels of hate and extremism present a real threat their ability to deliver on their promises and, more broadly, to social cohesion in their cities, and, thus, need to come up with solutions to these challenges. He emphasised that cities need resources and ideas, and to share with each other, adding that GMF, Strong Cities and NLC can provide local leaders with the tools and other resources needed to fight against hate, extremism, polarisation and disinformation. He encouraged these networks to work together to ensure these resources reach beyond this table so that others can build resilient communities and mitigate violent attacks.



## Key Themes

### 1. Prioritising engagement and inclusivity

Speakers emphasised how mayors need take steps to engage all parts of their city, “making space for the voices for all residents to be heard”, as they work to counter rising levels of hate and polarisation in their communities. For example, **Dontario Hardy, Mayor of Kinston (North Carolina)**, shared how he created a crime intervention task force that is talking to different communities across the small city about how to make it “better”.



**Martin Papke, Lord Mayor of Weibenfels, Germany**, has worked to make the city’s public spaces accessible to all residents by creating an office for “social spaces” and encouraging city officials and city residents “to know their neighbors and neighborhoods”. He underscored how mayors need to consistently communicate and be transparent with their residents, adding that he hosts a town hall meeting every three months to update residents on what the city is doing to address their concerns and advance their priorities. He said doing this can be “complicated” but “is necessary for public engagement” and maintaining social cohesion, particularly in times of crisis.

**Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, United Kingdom**, added that “mayors should be about place first, not party first”, giving all communities, regardless of their politics, visibility of the work of the mayor. **Nancy Rotering, Mayor of Highland Park (Illinois)**, spoke about the impact of the Israel-Gaza conflict continues to have on her city and the steps she has taken to maintain social cohesion. These include distributing “hate has no home here” signs in many languages to the community and mobilising fellow mayors across the region to issue a statement condemning the attack on 7 October and all actions that spark hate and urging people “to return to a place of love, compassion and humanity”.

**Erin Bromaghim, Los Angeles (LA) Deputy Mayor for International Affairs**, said LA has launched an [“LA for all campaign”](#), in more than 28 languages, to help promote inclusivity and tolerance. An initiative of LA’s new [Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department](#), with a mandate to investigate and prosecute discrimination, the campaign includes messaging on buses and buildings expressing the city’s commitment to stand against hate and encouraging residents to speak out to create a just and equitable city.



Participants also discussed another key aspect of inclusivity: ensuring communities have a strong voice in the development of public policies and programmes that impact on their lives, including public safety. An inclusive approach to governance becomes particularly important

in a society where divisions within and between communities continue to grow. **Deputy Mayor Bromaghim** also spoke about LA Mayor Karen Bass' efforts to reimagine public safety in the city and how it is being informed by a community safety survey, which asks residents how they define public safety and what types of services they want to see the city invest in. Survey results are expected by the end of 2024.



## 2. Promoting harmony and leading with love and by example

Participants agreed that mayors need to promote hope and harmony, particularly in times of crisis, as that is when most people feel isolated. Local leaders should be active listeners and then use what they have heard and learn to say, “let’s move away together”. Leaders need to look for opportunities to gather residents from different communities across the city, **Highland Park Mayor Rotering** shared that one of the lessons she had learned from the Independence Day (4 July) attack in her city in 2022 is for a mayor “to lead with love and your heart”. She regularly reminds her residents who are experiencing trauma from the crisis in the Middle East that “we are here to support and love each other”.



Echoing this sentiment, **Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham** emphasised that a mayor should “lead from the heart, speak truly and speak freely ... lead with authenticity and demonstrate everyone has a place [in their city] and is being heard”. Discussions also highlighted the importance of local leaders modelling the behaviour they want their residents to emulate, such as respect, civility and authenticity. **NLC Executive Director Clarence Anthony** said that this becomes particularly important given how residents often see mayors as role models. As an example of this, **Mayor Burnham** shared how he donated 15% of his salary to support efforts to end homelessness in city, a priority of his administration.

### 3. Prioritising resourcing, support for and networking of cities to maintain social cohesion and mitigate the impact of global crises on local communities



The 21st century, **Mayor Burnham** said, is about cities; this is where “real change happens” and countries need to devolve maximum power and agency to local governments and the mayors who are working to bring communities together. He added that “top-down” attempts to problem solve have not worked; “bottom-up” approaches have proven far more effective. Participants discussed how more power and resources are needed at the local level to scale up local efforts and allow mayors to do more.

**Marek Hudak, Member of Parliament from the Slovak Republic**, said that it was important not to overlook the important role that communities themselves play in managing the local impacts of global crises. As an example of this he pointed to how communities, rather than the government, were the first to host refugees from Ukraine. He emphasised the need for mayors to support civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their cities, given that it is these organisations that communities often turn to in times of crisis and need. More broadly, with so many elections taking place around the world in 2024, he said it would be short-sighted to neglect cities, CSOs and NGOs.

**Tortsten Potzsch, Lord Mayor of Weisswasser, Germany**, noted that it is important for central governments to not only provide resources to cities, but to give local leaders flexibility as to how such funds are spent. As an example, he pointed to Germany’s [“Live Democracy”](#) initiative, which provides project funds to cities but allows them to use the funds to develop their own programs to enhance democracy at the local level, based on the priorities and needs of the community. He said this helps strengthen community cohesion and harmony among his residents.



**LA Deputy Mayor Bromaghim** cautioned, however, that cities need to be aware that central governments, depending on the political environment, might limit the ability of cities to help their communities. This becomes particularly relevant in 2024, a year when so many

countries are holding elections. Given the precariousness of national-level support, she said cities should look to help each other, rather than simply wait for help from the central government. She emphasised that “right now is the time to learn from other cities and network” and that more attention should be given to scaling up city-to-city exchanges and networks. She pointed to the tremendous potential of exchanges like the one between Tokyo and Los Angeles, through which LA has embedded a city official in Tokyo until 2025. She cited the [City Hub And Network for Gender Equity](#) (CHANGE), a coalition of cities (including Los Angeles) committed to advancing gender equity in local governments and policies, as an example of such networking. Member cities are working together to promote gender equity initiatives and policies, exchanging best practices in tackling gender-based injustice and tracking their progress on eliminating disparities. She said it is about “cities cloning what works in one city in other cities”. She cited Los Angeles’ work with the City of Bogota, Colombia – supported by the Canadian government – to replicate in Bogota LA’s plan for redeveloping communities to support infrastructure for caregivers, a plan which is now also being used to support cities in Sierra Leone.

**Mayor Burnham** reflected that following the June 2017 terrorist attack in Greater Manchester, he received more help from people around the world than from his national government. During his time as mayor, he has come to realise that cities everywhere are dealing with similar issues. Mayors share a common language: cities need to learn from, help and support each other. It is for this reason he is involved in [Unbroken Cities](#) (see below) and encouraged other mayors to do the same.

**Andrii Sadovyi, Mayor of Lviv, Ukraine**, acknowledged the strong support his city has received from Manchester and Liverpool and other cities in Europe, as well as the United States, which is helping to address the significant mental health, rehabilitation and recovery needs of his residents. He introduced [Unbroken Cities](#), a network that will provide Ukrainian organisations with strategic, technical, and medical support from cities around the world that have experienced terror attacks and extremist violence. Emphasising the importance of cities becoming ever more networked, **Mayor Burnham** called for Strong Cities to expand and to keep elevating and amplifying the voices of mayors and cities to help reduce polarisation around the world.



## Conclusion

**Strong Cities Executive Director Eric Rosand** referred participants to the various tools and guides Strong Cities has developed to support enhanced city-led efforts to prevent hate and extremism in the face of an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. He also welcomed the growing recognition of the relevance of local leaders and governments to addressing these and other global challenges. He said that this has contributed to the growth of Strong Cities and emergence of other city networks and increased investments in city-focused capacity-building. However, to fully tap into the potential that cities offer in addressing hate, extremism and related threats that impact communities, something much more robust is needed. He asked participants to consider whether something akin to a “Marshall Plan for Cities” is needed: an initiative that draws in donors from all sectors and allows for the necessary long-term capacity-building support for mayors and local governments – similar to what national governments have historically benefited from in the counterterrorism sphere for the past 20 years – and scaling of networks like Strong Cities and Unbroken Cities and partnerships among cities and city networks.

**Deputy Special Representative Ricchetti** added that a key piece of this capacity-building effort should include better positioning cities to influence foreign policy-making that increasingly has local impacts. He said the US Department of State is launching the “Ret Jo Lewis Diplomat Program”, which will deploy US foreign service officers as foreign policy advisers in cities around the United States. The programme will start with five cities and expand gradually to other US cities. He called on other national governments who shared the US interest in promoting sub-national diplomacy to invest in similar programmes at home.



## Additional Resources

- [Cities Fortifying Democracy](#), GMF Cities
- [A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network
- [A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism and Polarisation](#), Strong Cities Network

- [Global Crises, Local Impacts: Threats to Social Cohesion & How Cities Can Respond](#), 19 December 2023 (webinar report), Strong Cities Network
- [Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities – Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis](#), 13 December 2023, Strong Cities Network

## Donors

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