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The Escalation And Inhibition Of Violence During Waves Of Far-Right Or Anti-Minority Protests

JOEL BUSHER AND HIS TEAM IDENTIFY THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THEIR RECENT STUDY LOOKING AT ROUTES TOWARDS AND AWAY FROM VIOLENCE DURING WAVES OF ANTI-MINORITY PROTESTS.

While many far-right or anti-minority protest events result in relatively little, or only low level, physical violence, in recent years, several countries across Europe and North America have seen protests by far-right or anti-minority groups that have resulted in extensive violence – causing significant security and public order concerns. So why do we see physical violence escalate well beyond 'normal' levels during some waves of far-right or anti-minority protest and not others? And what can policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders do to help inhibit instances of violent escalation?

In a recent study, we set out to address these questions by tracing the pathways towards and away from violence during four periods of intense far-right or anti-minority activism, focused around specific geographic locations: Dover, UK (September 2014 – April 2016), Sunderland, UK (September 2016 – December 2018), Chemnitz, Germany (August – December 2018) and Charlottesville, USA (February – July 2017). These cases had sufficient similarities to bear comparison: each comprised a period of intense anti-minority protest activity that captured national and international headlines and had clear potential for violence.

They were characterised by different levels and patterns of violence, however, thereby enabling within- and cross-case comparison.

For each case study, developed using a combination of documentary evidence, social media analysis and key informant interviews, we sought to identify 'mechanisms' leading towards and away from escalation of violence. We then undertook within- and across-case comparison to identify those mechanisms that were:

(a) observable at least at some point within more than one case.

(b) produced similar outcomes each time they occurred or for which there was a clear explanation as to why they had produced different outcomes.

Our analysis generated a set of 21 violence escalating and 17 violence inhibiting mechanisms. These are presented in the table (see below) and discussed in detail in the full report. What we do here, is reflect on three key takeaways from the research.

Relational	Violence enabling mechanisms	Violence inhibiting mechanisms
Within movement arena	A1.1. Intensification of threat narrative	B1.1. Campaign/issue deprioritisation or closure
	A1.2. Foregrounding of revolutionary goals	B1.2. Foregrounding non-revolutionary goals
	A1.3. Declining influence of moderates	B1.3. Persistent or expanding influence of moderates
	A1.4. Valorisation of violence	B1.4. Disassociation from (greater levels/certain forms of) violence and/or identification of violence as counter-productive
	A1.5. Identification of violence as a viable or necessary strategy	B1.5. Rules limiting the use of or opportunities for violence
	A1.6. Fear of missing out	B1.6. Within movement backlash against 'inappropriate' violence
	A1.7. Preparation for violence	
Movement – opposition arena	A2.1. Increasingly hostile emotional entrainment between activists and their opponents	B2.1. Tactical and/or emotional disentrainment
	A2.2. Increased mutual expectation of violence	B2.2. Limited expectations of violence
	A2.3. Increased availability of 'legitimate' targets	B2.3. Sustained balance of power within situational contexts
	A2.4. Sudden power imbalance between opposing groups	B2.4. Achievement of dominance without need for (further) violence
Movement – political environment arena	A3.1. Diminishing political opportunities	B3.1. Opportunities to pursue goals through less confrontational means
	A3.2. Growing identification of 'corrupt elites' as 'the enemy'	B3.2. Alliance formation between movement actors and political or cultural elites
	A3.3. Radical flank actors become focus of political and/or media attention	B3.3. Elite allies withdraw support in response to rising use or threats of violence by movement actors
	A3.4. Endorsement of polarising issue frame by members of political or cultural elites	
	A3.5. Legitimation of violence by members of political or cultural elites	
Movement – security forces arena	A4.1. Communication breakdown between activists and security forces	B4.1. Open channels of communication between security forces and activists
	A4.2. Loss of control by state security actors	B4.2. Security forces maintain control (without breaching societal norms of appropriate policing)
Movement – public arena	A5.1. Decoupling of the movement from the general public	B5.1. Activists emphasise the importance of broad public support
	A5.2. Endorsement of polarising issue frame by members of the public	B5.2. Criticism of 'inappropriate' violence from key constituencies
	A5.3. Legitimation of violence by members of the public	

Summary of violence enabling and violence inhibiting mechanisms

VIOLENCE IS RARELY, IF EVER, INEVITABLE, BUT IT USUALLY HAS A BACKSTORY

With hindsight, it might seem that some of the events that comprise our case studies were always likely to result in significant violence. Closer inspection reveals however that even during the most violent protests, violence is at most sporadic. And when violence does escalate it is usually the result of circumstances that disrupt the usual choreography of protests and counter-protests – a group of activists discover a route around or through a police line and find themselves face-to-face with opponents; a group of activists suddenly vastly outnumber an opponent and, emboldened, launch an attack, and so forth – forms of what the sociologist Anne Nassauer calls *'situational breakdowns'*. This highlights the difficulty of predicting violence. It also highlights the importance of effective event management based on a strong understanding of situational dynamics.

Yet it is also clear that the prospect of violent escalation was shaped by developments prior to the events in question – a decline in the influence of relative moderates within the movement that led to a decreased emphasis on public relations and movement discipline; the valorisation of violence by movement activists that transformed violence into a means for them to achieve status among their peers; prior humiliations at the hands of opponents, whether during previous protest events or in the form of online goading, that fuelled a desire for revenge; or pronouncements by members of the political or cultural elite that gave activists cause to believe that they enjoyed support among those quarters and fuelled a sense of operating with relative impunity.

As such, there is still much to be gained for policy planners, law enforcement communities and civil society groups by looking 'upstream'. The more we know about violence enabling and violence inhibiting mechanisms, the better placed we will be to assess whether there are developments within the wider campaigns, of which these events are a part, that

might increase or decrease the likelihood of a serious escalation of violence.

PATHWAYS TOWARDS AND AWAY FROM VIOLENCE ARE USUALLY SHAPED BY MULTIPLE ACTORS – IT PAYS TO THINK RELATIONALLY

Research on the evolving threat of far-right and anti-minority movements often focuses attention on the appetite of activists themselves to engage in violence, or on *'reciprocal radicalisation'* between anti-minority activists and any relevant counter-movements. Our research supports the importance of these elements, but also highlights the importance of a more holistic analysis. This would view violence escalation or inhibition as an outcome of interactions across multiple *'relational fields'* – among anti-minority activists themselves, and between activists and a) counter-movements, b) security forces, c) political and cultural elites, and d) the general public. We see for example that the changing relationship between movement actors and political and cultural elites, and between movement actors and the general public, can have an important bearing on their appetite for confrontation.

Such a relational approach can give us a more holistic understanding of violence escalation and inhibition. It can also help people, from law enforcement communities through to local authority staff and members of the public, think about and understand how their actions can, and do, shape these dynamics.

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE ESCALATION PATHWAY – KNOWING WHICH ONE WE ARE LOOKING AT CAN HELP US TO UNDERSTAND AND RESPOND TO THE THREAT

When we looked at the mechanisms we had identified, we were struck by the fact that some of them seemed to contradict one another. For example, we find that 'decoupling of the movement from the general public' (A5.1) and 'endorsement of polarising issue frame by members of the public' (A5.2) can both contribute towards escalation of violence. The explanation that we offer is that there is more than one pathway to violence.

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Within the report, we discuss two pathways in particular: a *'movement marginalised'* pathway and a *'movement emboldened'* pathway.

In the movement marginalised pathway, best typified by our Dover case, anti-minority activists become increasingly decoupled from wider political movements and from any form of popular support base. This made them more liable to spiral off towards greater levels of violence, unchecked by strategic concerns about maintaining alliances or public support.

By contrast, in the movement emboldened pathway, best typified by Chemnitz and, to a lesser extent, Charlottesville, anti-minority activists become and remain more violence-oriented. This is due, in part, to their belief that they enjoy the support of key political allies and those parts of the public about which they are concerned, even as they engage in violence.

Understanding which escalation pathway we are faced with can have significant implications for how we might interpret and respond to the threat.