

The Dynamics Of Violence Escalation And Inhibition During 'Hot Periods' Of Anti-Minority And Far-Right Activism: Towards An Assessment Framework

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INTRODUCTION

There is growing international recognition of the need to enhance understanding about the dynamics of political violence associated with far right¹ and broader anti-minority² movements. This report focuses specifically on escalation dynamics during waves of intense protest activity – what we refer to as ‘hot periods’ of anti-minority activism – and how these play out in the localities that find themselves at the centre of such ‘hot periods’.

Many anti-minority protests do not result in direct physical violence, or only in low levels of violence (e.g. minor scuffling between anti-minority activists and their opponents). In recent years, however, several countries across Europe and North America have seen protests that have resulted in significant violence. Such events leave a heavy footprint. In addition to the immediate social, political and economic costs associated with the public disorder, such incidents generate fear, particularly among those who perceive themselves to be the targets of such protests; enable anti-minority groups to connect with wider audiences; accelerate social and political polarisation; and can stimulate tactical and ideological radicalisation within anti-minority groups and their opponents.

There is as such a clear and pressing requirement for research that advances our understanding of why some



anti-minority protest events result in significant violence, while many others result in only low-level violence or no physical violence at all. This study responds to this requirement in two ways. Firstly, it addresses three core questions:

1. What are the pathways towards violent escalation during periods of intense anti-minority mobilisation?
2. What inhibits (further) escalation of violence during periods of intense anti-minority mobilisation?
3. How, and under what conditions, do instances of escalation beyond established action repertoires give rise to or inhibit further violence?

Secondly, drawing upon this analysis, it develops a framework that can be deployed by state and civil society actors to generate a more informed understanding about

1 For the purpose of this report, we use this as an umbrella term to encompass both the extreme right-wing and groups that embrace some form of racial nationalism but predominantly pursue their objectives through constitutional means

2 We use ‘anti-minority protest’ and ‘anti-minority activism’ as hypernyms to include all forms of activism explicitly targeting minority groups. We use the term to encompass a broad range of activism, from that which is mobilised around the racial nationalism of conventional extreme right formations, through to groups that eschew such ideological frames, but still mobilise against, often specific, ethnic or religious minority groups e.g. in the form of anti-Muslim or anti-migrant mobilisations.

emergent threats of violence relating to anti-minority protest activity. In doing so, the project provides a basis for the development of more informed, effective, and sustainable strategies for responding to and managing anti-minority activism.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND METHODS

The report adopts a 'processual approach'³ to the dynamics of political violence, identifying a series of violence enabling and violence inhibiting mechanisms⁴ within the contexts of hot periods of anti-minority activism. Following advances within the wider literature on the dynamics of political violence, the report locates these mechanisms within five key relational arenas:⁵

- *The within-movement arena*, comprising interactions between activists within the broadly conceived movement.
- *The movement – countermovement arena*, comprising interactions between movement and countermovement actors.
- *The movement – political environment arena*, comprising interactions between movement actors and political and cultural elites.
- *The movement – security forces arena*, comprising the interactions between movement actors and the state security forces.
- *The movement – public arena*, comprising the relations between movement actors and different segments of the public.

The analysis is based on four cases studies: Dover (UK), from October 2014 to April 2016; Sunderland (UK), from September 2016 to December 2018; Chemnitz (Germany), from August to December 2018; and Charlottesville (USA), from February to October 2017. The cases were selected because they were assessed to have sufficient similarities to

bear comparison: each case comprised a period of significant anti-minority protest activity that captured national and international headlines and clearly had significant potential for violence. All four cases were characterised by different levels of violence and escalation dynamics, however, thereby enabling within- and cross-case comparison conducive to theory building.

The case studies were developed using a combination of documentary evidence, key informant interviews and social media analysis. The documentary evidence comprised public reports, eye-witness reports, news media, publicly available video footage, memoirs, and online publications from anti-minority movements and some of their opponents. Interviews were conducted with a total of 61 key informants across the four case studies, comprising a combination of academics, non-academic expert observers, local authority workers, police officers, anti-minority activists and counter-movement activists. For the social media analysis, Crimson Hexagon, a social media monitoring tool, was used to trace the mobilisation timeline for each case study on Twitter and other publicly accessible platforms. Method52, an AI-based natural language processing tool, was used to extract, clear and analyse public messages from the encrypted messaging application Telegram. In addition, digital ethnographic research was conducted in the relevant social media channels and other online fora.

The data were integrated through detailed case descriptions. These were then examined for sequences of developments that appeared to comprise potential violence escalating or inhibiting mechanisms.

Within and cross-case comparison, as well as the wider academic literature, were used to interrogate the emergent analysis of these potential mechanisms and iteratively refine the mechanism definitions.

The analysis operated at three levels:

3 See for an overview: Malthaner (2017).

4 We understand 'mechanisms' as the pathways or processes by which a particular effect is produced, following the minimum definition provided by Gerring (2008, p. 178).

5 Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi (2015).

- Micro-situational dynamics – understood as the interactions between different actors during the protest events.
- Event preparation, understood as the actions and interactions of relevant actors as they prepare for a specific event.
- Wider conflict dynamics – understood both as changes in the operating environment and the broader set of actions and interactions through which different actors identify and pursue their goals and adjust to the evolving social and political environment, but that do not comprise preparation for a specific protest event.

Once the descriptions of these mechanisms had been refined, they were re-applied to the case studies to create ‘storyboards’ (see Annex 2) for each case. This provided an opportunity to further refine and critically interrogate the framework, and to begin tracing sequences and clusters of mechanisms germane to the analysis.

FINDINGS: VIOLENCE ENABLING AND VIOLENCE INHIBITING MECHANISMS

For mechanisms to be included in the analysis, they did not need to appear in each case. It was, however, required (a) that they were observable at least at some point within more than one case, and (b) that they produced similar outcomes each time they occurred or there was a clear explanation as to why they had produced different outcomes.

In total, the report identifies 21 violence enabling and 17 violence inhibiting mechanisms, organised by the five relational arenas. These mechanisms are summarised in the table below. A more detailed description of these mechanisms and initial observations about how they relate to one another within the cases can be found in Chapter 7.

No assessment has been made at this stage of the relative weight of importance of each mechanism. Each of the mechanisms is conceived of as enabling escalation of violence, but no mechanism is conceived of, in and of itself, as being necessary or sufficient for the escalation of violence.

Within each relational arena, the mechanisms are ordered in terms of whether they are most apparent at greater or lesser proximity to instances of violent escalation, going from more distant mechanisms (‘macro’) to more proximal (‘micro’) mechanisms. It should be noted, however, that several of the mechanisms operate across macro, meso, and micro levels.

THE STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FRAMEWORK

There are several challenges with the framework. One of these concerns the fuzziness of the arena boundaries, particularly regarding the *within movement* and *movement – political environment arenas* and the *movement – countermovement* and *movement – public arenas*. Another challenge concerns possible analytical blind spots: in some of the cases, a more effective analysis could have been achieved by adding further relational arenas into the analysis, such as the *within countermovement arena* or the *countermovement – security forces arena*. A further challenge concerns balancing the need for sufficiently detailed mechanism descriptors to enable analytical precision, with the need to manage the growing complexity of the framework.

These challenges are not insurmountable, however, and are to be expected given the messy and often complex reality of contentious politics. We propose that the first issue can be best addressed by ongoing awareness and discussion of this issue within project teams that deploy the framework. The second of these issues can be addressed through the analysis, where appropriate, of an expanded set of relational arenas – a matrix for which can be found in Chapter 8. We propose that the third of these issues can be addressed through leveraging more effectively the

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE ESCALATION & INHIBITION DURING 'HOT PERIODS' OF ANTI-MINORITY & FAR-RIGHT ACTIVISM

Relational arena	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 the 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	

Table 1: Summary of violence enabling and violence inhibiting mechanisms

micro, meso, and macro-levels of analysis to structure the framework: a challenge to which the project team intend to turn their attention over the coming months.

The report also argues that the framework has a number of important strengths:

- First, by encompassing the five relational arenas, the framework provides a fuller explanation of the escalation and inhibition of violence than is provided by approaches that focus overwhelmingly on developments within the group(s) in question or the movement – counter-movement dynamic, and offers potentially valuable insight as to how the actions of one actor or group of actors, within any of relational arena, can affect the wider escalation or inhibition dynamic.⁶
- Second, because the framework focuses analytical attention on the evolving relationships between different actors, it provides a more dynamic understanding of escalation and inhibition pathways than analyses that focus attention on so-called root causes. This means that it is well-suited to revealing how opportunities for violence, or for pivoting away from violence, open and close over time.
- Third, the integration of both violence enabling and inhibiting mechanisms within the framework helps to ensure a balanced assessment of emergent threats, and provide insight into how and why similar developments sometimes have very different outcomes.
- Fourth, while the framework is rooted in detailed empirical case study analysis, it operates at a sufficient level of abstraction to provide a common analytical language that can work across and facilitate effective comparison of a diverse range of cases.

A TALE OF TWO ESCALATION

PATHWAYS

One of the most striking findings is that some of the escalation mechanisms appear to contradict one another (especially A3.1 vs A3.4 and A3.5, and A5.1 vs A5.2). There are several possible explanations for this. The explanation that the report leans towards however is that these apparent contradictions reflect the fact that there are at least two different, although not necessarily mutually exclusive, escalation pathways.

In the *movement marginalised pathway*, anti-minority activists become increasingly decoupled from wider political movements and any form of popular support base. In doing so they become more liable to spiral off towards greater levels of violence, unchecked by strategic concerns about maintaining alliances or public support. In the *movement emboldened pathway*, anti-minority activists become and remain violence-oriented because they believe 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. This represents an important step forward in understanding the apparently ambiguous effects of some mechanisms.

The report argues that assessing which type of escalation pathway is, or is most likely, to emerge, might provide an important step towards ensuring effective threat assessment and identifying effective response strategies to emergent waves of anti-minority activism.

POTENTIAL USES OF THE FRAMEWORK

The report proposes that the framework has the potential to be used to enhance the timely analysis of emergent threats associated with anti-minority protest activity, both shorter and longer-term, and to support multi-agency planning around management and intervention strategies, both at the level of specific events and broader

⁶ Often discussed in terms of ‘cumulative extremism’ or ‘reciprocal radicalisation’: see Busher and Macklin (2015); Carter (2019); Eatwell (2006); Ebner (2017); Knott, Lee and Copeland (2018).

assessments of the emergent threat posed by different groups or sets of actors.

The framework does not work as and is not intended to be a predictive model. What it can do, however, is structure the analysis and train the attention of analysts and policymakers on aspects of these protest dynamics that the evidence suggests are particularly relevant to escalation and inhibition of violence.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the research team will explore with policy and practitioner communities how this research can most effectively be used to inform policy and practice, with a particular focus on the development of user-friendly analytical tools based on the research that can then be integrated into practice.

The research provides strong support for the idea that adoption of a multi-level approach to understanding emergent threats of violence – one that encompasses analysis of micro-situational dynamics, processes of event preparation and wider conflict dynamics – would likely aid effective utilisation of the framework for analysis and planning at operational and strategic levels. As such, the research team will also examine how to effectively integrate the relational framework with the analysis of macro-, meso-, and micro-level dynamics.

Finally, the research team will also seek opportunities to test the framework in other settings. Here, a particular focus of interest is to assess whether this framework can be used to effectively analyse other forms of confrontational protests beyond far-right and anti-minority protests.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary taken from the Full Report which will be available soon here: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/the-dynamics-of-violence-escalation-and-inhibition-during-hot-periods-of-anti-minority-and-far-right-activism/>

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