

Managing Threats to Public Order



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

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[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

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Introduction

Public order disturbances are some of the most common expressions of far-right extremism across Europe, ranging from less organised activities like loitering and harassment of local communities by street gangs, to larger demonstrations. This includes English Defence League demonstrations which have at their largest brought out 3000 supporters in Luton or the 66,000 who took to the streets across Warsaw during the National Independence Day in Poland. But even the smallest of demonstrations can impact local communities, shutting down local businesses, instilling a sense of fear, or in the worst cases, leading to violence.

The context of public order management will differ from country to country, both in the nature of the protests and the legal and political context in which they take place. In some contexts, police may have strong penal codes they can make use of to limit the impact of far-right movements on communities. In countries like Sweden and the UK, large numbers of counter-activists organise demonstrations to counter the far right, and clashes between the far right and counter-demonstrators have descended into serious violence. In countries like Hungary, mobilisations of counter-activists rarely occur.

Key approaches

1. Diversion

Aim to divert supporters' attendance at far-right events. This includes raising awareness among protesters and those who are at risk of getting involved about the penal code and consequences of their actions; liaising with key influencers (e.g. social workers and teachers) to encourage them to discourage individuals from attending; and diversionary activities planned to coincide with the far-right event.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Choice Cards, Luton Borough Council, UK

Aims/Objectives:

To show young people the legal and personal ramifications of engaging in far-right extremist activity through user-friendly cards distributed at key events.

Description/Activities:

The Luton Borough Council has engaged in a number of innovative campaigns to reduce the impact of far-right activity in the Luton area. Among these are the distribution of “choice cards” to local schools and community centres.

These choice cards are the size of a business card, so are easy to transport and distribute. They contain information on the number of arrests for extremism, along with prison terms and personal consequences for convictions (for example, the end of studies and careers). The cards also contain information for Luton-affiliated organisations that deal with counter-extremism efforts, along with contact information for police and other reporting agencies. These cards have been distributed widely, hitting schools, colleges, youth centres and organisations, and youth offending services.

2. Reclaiming public spaces

Ensures that extremists have minimal impact on communities. This includes keeping demonstrations away from areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities and migrants, community businesses declaring themselves zones where extremists are not welcome, and rapid community responses to paint over graffiti or clean streets after protests.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Night Ravens Parents' Initiative, Norway

Aims/Objectives:

To involve community participation in night-time safety, with parental patrols of public spaces serving to counter hooliganism and violence.

Description/Activities:

The Night Ravens were founded in 1990 as a public engagement initiative to minimise street crime and violence at night in Norway's major cities. Beginning in communities with heightened neo-Nazi activity, the aim was to fill the evening streets with parents, and thus make the space less fun for youth gangs. Night Raven parents' groups simply stand on street corners providing a calm, parental presence in areas with higher levels of far-right hooliganism and violence. Though originally more closely connected with Norwegian police forces, it is now a fully private organisation that collaborates with police.

3. Smart demonstration management

Ensures that demonstrations don't inspire fear, inflame tensions or lead to violence within the community. This might involve tension monitoring, communication of the march route to the public, and real-time communications about the progress of the event as well as smart use of social media. It may also involve getting the community engaged in management of the demonstration.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Active Citizens Initiative, Greater Manchester Police, Rochdale Division, UK

Aims/Objectives:

To involve key members of the community in policing of far right demonstrations and act as a community liaison.

Description/Activities:

The Active Citizens Initiative began as a police-led effort to encourage communication and address misperceptions in the local Rochdale community about how public services respond to extremism. Rochdale police identified 30 key individuals from across the community in order to get a cross-section of views and perspectives and then brought them together to explain legislation and tactical strategies relating to the policing of EDL demonstrations and gather community feedback. This offered a space to break down misconceptions about what police are legally able to do during demonstrations, and allowed for dialogue with the community about their concerns. During demonstrations, each 'active citizen' was paired with a police officer or mediator to patrol the community and act as a communication link to those directly affected by the march. Active Citizens are trained alongside police officers before and during demonstrations.

Getting it right

Getting the trust of the community

Some communities lack trust in the police, and in some cases these are the very communities targeted by the far right. The reasons for this are varied, and may include experiences of police discrimination and racial profiling,

or even some local activists encouraging communities not to engage with the police. Re-building this trust is an important process.

On the one hand, it is vital that the police take seriously and show a willingness to respond to the fears of communities targeted by the far right. Police should invest the time and energy to learn about the society they are policing, and actively engage with community leaders and business owners, particularly those with a history of being targeted by the far right.

Building strong relationships with political activists in the community, across the spectrum, will also be helpful. Gaining the trust of the community will ensure that local leaders and citizens will come to the police when they see signs of unrest and violence. Police should also invest in specific roles responsible for dialogue and engagement with communities and targeted groups, as well as those responsible for engagement with extremist activists themselves (in some countries, this role is the function of preventative police officers).

Getting the community involved

Communities may feel fear, powerlessness and frustration surrounding far-right demonstrations. Communities may not know how to show that they stand against the far right. Counter-demonstrations are valuable in that, in the best scenarios, they are peaceful displays of communities uniting against hatred, demonstrating that the far right is unwelcome in a community. However the risks of counter-demonstrations are that, in the worst scenarios, they can inadvertently inflame the actions of the far right, and end in clashes between groups.

There are other ways that community members can take action, and some of the best initiatives get the community involved in more positive ways, whether it is involving community members in demonstration management, local businesses declaring themselves extremism-free or inclusive zones, or organising alternative community activities.

Police for their part, can encourage community members to come and see the far right if they are curious, rather than preventing people from viewing the group, or not allowing photography. Putting up these barriers between the community and the far right group can serve to stoke more fear than often deserved.

Limiting the far right's appeal

Far right groups often get boots on the ground through their social networks, with many turning up for demonstrations simply because it makes for an exciting afternoon with their friends. Local authorities and police can work with communities to make far right activities less appealing. This has been done successfully by working with local businesses and bars frequented by extremists closing or deciding not to sell alcohol at key moments during demonstrations. Some have experimented with clever methods like making toilet access difficult, or active construction sites next to the demonstration site. Engineering the area where the demonstration will take place to make it less exciting can be particularly effective and lead to fewer people willing to take to the streets.

Convincing people not to get involved

Indicating the possible consequences of their involvement can be a successful method of diverting vulnerable individuals away from demonstrations. This has been done through home visits by police, teachers delivering the message in schools, and through innovative methods employed by local authorities such as the 'consequence cards' used in Luton. Local authorities and police have also put on diversion activities, including free trips outside of the area, football tournaments, and action and adventure trips (e.g. snowboarding, rafting, and mountaineering).

Encouraging self-policing and change of behaviour

Minimising public disturbances can sometimes be achieved through interaction directly with far-right activists. Though in some cases far-right protesters may come from afar, in many cases, far-right demonstrators may be members of the community they are protesting in. Innovative techniques employed in Sweden by the Dialogue Police include getting to know far-right protesters personally; what their aims are and what methods they are prepared to use. De-anonymising protesters, seeing them as individuals and helping them to see the police as individuals too, can in some circumstances prevent people from carrying out particular actions.

Police can delicately balance enforcing the law with offering far-right activists opportunities to do things differently. Talking to the far right

rationally about the implications of their actions can have an impact. This has been done with groups as extreme as neo-Nazis in Germany, as done by Soko Rex, which communicated directly with potential offenders before events to highlight the consequences of additional criminal offences. It has also been done at the other end of the spectrum, with non-violent far-right groups in the UK. For example, in one instance when a wedding was set to take place at a local town hall at the very time the EDL was planning a demonstration there, the police simply explained the situation to the EDL activists; they agreed not to ruin a wedding day and cancelled the demonstration.

Police can also use the hierarchical structure of far right movements instrumentally; it is often clear who the leaders are and the responsibilities of different members of the group. By liaising directly with the leadership of these groups, they can encourage groups to police themselves, for example by serving as demonstration stewards.

Using the law

If police are aware of the legal frameworks surrounding protests and how to use them, they can actually take advantage of this knowledge and use it to their benefit. For example, in the UK, the Metropolitan Police make good use of Public Order Act 1986 to ensure far-right demonstrations have little impact on the communities they are targeting. The Swedish Dialogue Police make good use of the application process when individuals apply to local councils for a license to protest; they call up the demonstrators and begin getting to know them personally to facilitate policing.

Smart communications – accessibility, transparency, consistency

Good management of the far right should also aim to avoid misunderstandings and rumours, both about the far right and the policing of the far right, which can inflame tensions and make communities more fearful.

This can only be done through transparency and being prepared to answer key questions, such as why the far right is given the space to demonstrate, or why they cannot be banned. Police should be active in

uploading operational developments to their and partner Facebook and Twitter pages. They should keep track of what information the far right are disseminating on the day, and actively engage with and refute false claims.

Ensuring community members have access to the police and local authorities is also important, whether done via social media, offering mobile numbers to give community leaders direct access, or pairing community leaders with officers to patrol communities. It is also important to allow the community to view the demonstrations as they are taking place, and to take photos. This de-mystifies the groups themselves and helps communities become better informed about the problem.

Whether during a demonstration or simply managing a far-right group that is active in the area, a strong media strategy is key. The most important thing is to ensure consistent messaging. This can be done through local actors (including police, municipality, citizens groups, social workers and journalists) carrying out a joint mapping of the problem and developing a joint media strategy, so there is no risk of inconsistent stories emerging.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

