

### **Civil Disorder in Pandemic-ridden European Union**

The need to understand the emergence and dynamics of civil disorder grows with the increasing use of street protests to manifest views. 2019 is called “the year of the street protest” due to the large number, scale, brutality, and diversity of demonstrations held worldwide. At the beginning of 2020, more than 100 governments imposed a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, restricted civil rights and movement for some or all their citizens. By April 2020, the number and size of demonstrations decreased by 50% compared to 2019 levels. However, it was only a temporary decline noted at the beginning of the year. Finally, in 2020, the rates increased by 7% compared to 2019. Unexpectedly to the ruling, the turnout during public gatherings was bigger than before the pandemic. People took to the streets despite the threat to their lives and health and restrictions of civil freedoms. Protesters opposed precautions introduced to limit virus transmission, failed and inadequate governmental responses to the pandemic, and unwieldy health systems. Moreover, the protests that had started before the pandemic re-emerged. They were aimed at, e.g., a gradual decline in the quality of democracy, public sector mismanagement, corruption, electoral manipulation, unemployment, and police brutality. The wave of protests challenged the stability and legitimacy of governments and political systems across the globe once again. Despite those similarities, some protests turned violent, whereas others did not. This puzzle has inspired the research project.

Accordingly, the research problem concerns the possible causes of the transformation of the collective action into civil disorder and the dynamics of this phenomenon across the EU during the coronavirus pandemic. The cause-seeking problem is theory-informed and thus inquires the relationships between civil disorder and public order policing. The major scientific goal of the project is to advance a middle-range theory that would explain the sources of civil disorder in pandemic-ridden EU. Growing out of the scholarship on the backfire consequences of police’s control behaviour, the proposed theory would account for why collective action transformed into civil disorder in some cases, while in others not, what was behind differences in the range of civil disorder and the losses it involved.

Under what conditions does collective action transform into civil disorder, the latter continues, discontinues, and changes over time? The study addresses these questions by testing hypotheses based on the theories indicating that collective action transforms into civil disorder, and the latter continues and changes over time under two conditions, i.e., the model of protest policing or the selected dimensions of protest policing and the level of police’s partisanship when securing public gatherings. The project assumes the use of the qualitative method of intertextual source analysis to address the research questions. The sources include the Global Protest Tracker, Covid-19 Disorder Tracker, the GDELT database, and police-produced materials. The source analysis draws upon the qualitative techniques of conceptual content analysis and thematic analysis. At the stage of interim data analysis, project participants will use multi-value qualitative content analysis to provide a deep understanding of qualitative differences across cases in individual states and generalise empirical observations to regions of the EU if possible. At the stage of holistic data analysis, linear regression analysis will be used to infer causal relationships between the explaining and explained factors, which will allow for the development of the middle-range theory.

This project is expected to offer an innovative contribution to the studies on the dynamics of contention by explaining how different variants of protest policing lead to the unforeseen and unpredictable consequences that influence how and in which direction contention unfolds. It also will contribute to the studies on public order policing by explaining the short-term consequences of protest policing, its variants ranging from escalated force to negotiated management, and its individual dimensions. The study will refine the existing theories treating, first, generalised models of protest policing, and second, individual dimensions of protest policing as explaining factors of civil disorder occurrence, range, and the resulting losses.

Understanding the dynamics of collective action and its transformation into civil disorder is important to plan how to establish relationships between public gatherings participants and police, secure assemblies, and maintain public order. The greater knowledge of the civil disorder and the role of social control agents in its dynamics could help reduce the number of victims on both sides of the conflict. Police could apply such knowledge to understand the consequences of public order policing. It can also be applied by the state crisis management centres, security centres, and their decision-making subjects to increase the efficiency of crisis management plans and programs to protect critical facilities. Critical facilities require appropriate protections because they are vulnerable to civil disorders and may become focal points during protests.