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Journal of Civil Society

ISSN: 1744-8689 (Print) 1744-8697 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcis20

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To cite this article: Erik Lundberg (22 Sep 2026): Organizational identity and civil society's responses against the far right, Journal of Civil Society, DOI: 10.1080/17448689.2026.2735837

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2026.2735837

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Published online: 22 Sep 2026.

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JOURNAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2026.2735837

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Organizational identity and civil society's responses against the far right

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ABSTRACT

This article examines why civil society organizations operating within the same local political context respond differently to far-right extremism. Existing research explains civil society mobilization through external factors, political opportunities, institutional environments, and resources, while paying less attention to organizational dynamics. Drawing on theories of organizational identity and social movements, the article argues that understandings of "who we are" and "what we do" shape perceptions of legitimate action and the interpretation of opportunities and resources. The study uses a comparative case design focusing on three civil society organizations in Ludvika, Sweden, responding to the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). The findings reveal differences in tactical repertoires despite similar conditions. Clowns Against Nazism emphasized satire and symbolic confrontation; the Church of Sweden prioritized dialogue and inclusion; and the Swedish Red Cross stressed cooperation, education, and humanitarian engagement. Resources, positions, and networks influenced organizations' capacities for action but did not fully explain their divergent responses. Organizational identity shaped how opportunities, constraints, and resources were interpreted and translated into tactical choices. The article shifts attention from whether and how civil society responds to far-right extremism toward why organizations facing similar conditions adopt different counter-strategies, highlighting implications for democratic resilience and civil society diversity.

KEYWORDS

Civil society organizations; organizational identity; far-right extremism; counter-strategies; tactical repertoires; democratic resilience

Introduction

Across many democracies, the growing visibility and political influence of far-right actors have intensified concerns about democratic erosion, polarization, and challenges to pluralist norms (Heinze, 2022; Mudde, 2016, 2019). As state institutions have struggled to address these developments, attention has increasingly turned toward civil society organizations as key actors in defending democratic values, mobilizing opposition, and responding to political extremism (Bolleyer, 2021; Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023; Jänicke et al., 2025; Lundberg, 2021; Nettelbladt, 2023; Schroeder et al., 2023; Tuovinen, 2023; Zeller, 2026).

Existing scholarship shows that the rise of populism and right-wing extremism can reshape civil society itself, altering organizational priorities, alliances, and repertoires of action (Arato & Cohen, 2021; Ruzza et al., 2021). Research has identified a range of counter-strategies adopted by civil society organizations including protest, dialogue, education, and community-building (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016; Bourne, 2024; Dannemann, 2026; Jänicke et al., 2025; Lundberg, 2021; McSwiney et al., 2024; Santilli & Scaramuzzino, 2025) while some studies examine their effectiveness in constraining the legitimacy or electoral success of far-right actors (Colombo et al., 2024; Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2024).

While this literature provides important insights, a central question remains underexplored, namely why civil society organizations facing similar extremist threats within the same political context adopt markedly different tactical responses toward the far right. Civil society is not a unified actor, but a heterogeneous arena composed of movements and organizations with different missions, values, and forms of legitimacy. Consequently, organizations confronting the same extremist threat may adopt divergent, and at times

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contradictory, forms of action (Grande, 2023; Gunzelmann & Jänicke, 2025; Lundberg, 2023; Schroeder et al., 2023).

Explanations of civil society responses to the far right have largely focused on external factors such as political opportunities, institutional contexts, and resource environments (cf. Colombo et al., 2024; Gerő et al., 2023). Although recent social movement scholarship has highlighted the limits of purely external explanations (Jasper, 2021; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015), internal organizational dynamics remain comparatively underexplored in studies of civil society counter-strategies to the far right. As a result, important variation in how organizations interpret threats and define legitimate forms of action risks remaining unexplained.

To address this gap, the article argues that organizational identity constitutes an important but overlooked mechanism shaping how civil society organizations interpret extremist threats and define legitimate responses toward the far right. Drawing on social movement theory, organizational identity is understood as shared understandings of 'who we are' and 'what we do,' shaping both motivations for action and perceptions of legitimate tactical repertoires.

Empirically, the article draws on a comparative case study of three local civil society organizations in Ludvika, Sweden, that actively responded to the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) during the late 2010s. By examining organizations operating within the same local political environment and confronting the same far-right actor, the study reduces variation in external political opportunities and enables closer exploration of how internal organizational dynamics shape tactical choices. In doing so, the article contributes to research on civil society and social movement by showing how organizational identities are related to tactical repertoires even when organizations confront the same political environment and extremist actor.

Civil society responses against the far right

The far right refers to political actors and movements characterized by exclusionary nationalism, authoritarianism, and hostility toward pluralism and liberal democracy (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023). While the far right includes both populist radical-right and extreme-right actors, this article focuses specifically on the extreme right, represented by the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Extreme-right actors openly reject democracy and may endorse violence or revolutionary change in pursuit of an ethnically homogeneous nation (Mudde, 2019).

The literature offers various examples of how civil society organizations respond to the far right (Fallend & Heinisch, 2016; Lundberg, 2021, 2023; Pedahzur, 2003). Building on the dynamics of collective action, this research demonstrates how social movements mobilize against far-right threats in different political contexts (2023Ellinas & Lamprianou, 2021; Meyer & Tarrow, 2018). Similarly, Schroeder et al. (2023) analyze how right-wing populist movements in Germany attempt to infiltrate civil society spaces such as work, religion, and sports to gain legitimacy, while civil society actors respond with a mixture of confrontation and demarcation. Trade unions, for example, emphasized democratic norms and workers' rights, whereas churches and religious groups have participated in public demonstrations opposing radical right ideologies. Recent evidence further suggests that civil society organizations rely on a relatively broad but recurrent repertoire of responses to far-right actors. Based on a systematic analysis of organizational guidelines and research literature, Jänicke et al. (2025) identify five overarching strategy types commonly used across civil society sectors: organizational strategies, network-building, educational and cultural practices, confrontational strategies, and public communication.

Beyond documenting the forms of mobilization adopted by civil society actors, research has also examined the effectiveness and consequences of such counter-strategies. Findings show that civil society responses may raise public awareness, supporting victims of far-right extremism (Pedahzur, 2003), discouraging affiliation with far-right movements (Art, 2007), and encouraging government vigilance (Michael, 2003). Studying civil society responses to the German Pegida movement, Vüllers and Hellmeier (2022), however, found no evidence for a preventive effect of counter-demonstrations; in fact, larger counter-protests sometimes correlated with higher subsequent turnout at Pegida events, and violence against Pegida supporters reduced the likelihood that the movement would cease mobilizing. Similarly, Nettelbladt (2023) highlights how the effectiveness of civil society's response to the far right depends on the relationship between state and civil society actors. Using the city of Cottbus as a case study, she shows that contested and

shifting alliances among civil society organizations and state institutions produced varied success in resisting far-right contestations.

The limits of existing explanations

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that civil society organizations adopt varied counter-strategies toward far-right actors, ranging from confrontation and protest to dialogue, inclusion, and public education. Yet despite these insights, existing research offers limited explanation for why civil society organizations operating within similar political contexts adopt divergent tactical repertoires toward the far right.

Some of the research reviewed above relates to the importance of external factors in the political environment, such as perceived opportunities, networks, coalition-building, and resource mobilization. Although not always explicitly framed through political opportunity structure approaches, such studies often portray civil society organizations as rational actors responding strategically to external opportunities and constraints, thereby downplaying the internal organizational dynamics through which actors interpret opportunities and define legitimate forms of action (Jasper, 2021; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015).

Another important observation is that, with some exceptions, literature tends to treat civil society and social movements as relatively unified actors (Della Porta, 2020). However, civil society is highly diverse. Counter-movements can be deeply divided internally, with factions holding conflicting views on whether and how to respond to far-right threats. Addressing this gap, the following section develops a theoretical framework centred on organizational identity to explain variation in civil society responses to the far right.

Organizational identity

Research on social movements has long emphasized the relationship between political opportunity structures and tactical repertoires. Classic accounts stress that the openness of political institutions, the presence of allies, and levels of repression shape when and how movements mobilize (Kitschelt, 1986; McAdam et al., 1996). While such factors are important, they do not fully explain why organizations operating within similar political contexts adopt different strategies toward the same political threat.

To understand such variation, scholars have pointed to organizational identity as an important explanatory mechanism (Jasper, 2021; Meyer, 2004; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Organizational identity refers here to shared understandings within an organization concerning 'who we are' and 'what we do.' Meyer (2004) argues that identity is not merely symbolic but shapes how organizations define legitimate goals and acceptable means of action. Identity emerges through members' values, experiences, social positions, and political connections, creating an 'inner logic' (Ennis, 1987) that influences tactical repertoires. Social movement research similarly suggests that movements and organizations tend to adopt strategies consistent with their identities, values, and interpretative frames (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford, 1993).

Organizational identity plays a dual role: it motivates collective action by providing a coherent narrative of purpose while simultaneously constraining the range of tactics perceived as legitimate or authentic (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Tactics incongruent with organizational identity risk undermining internal cohesion and external legitimacy (Snow & Benford, 1992). Besides, over time, organizations often develop recurrent or 'signature' tactics that become recognizable expressions of who they are, reinforcing both internal solidarity and public credibility (Meyer, 2004; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). Consequently, organizations may avoid tactics perceived as incompatible with their values or institutional roles. For example, organizations rooted in religious or humanitarian traditions may be inclined to emphasize dialogue, inclusion, or preventive approaches, whereas confrontational strategies may conflict with their normative foundations and self-understandings (Lundberg, 2023; Schroeder et al., 2023).

Organizational identity can therefore function as a boundary-setting mechanism defining what counts as legitimate action. Organizations with similar goals or access to resources may nonetheless adopt different tactical repertoires because opportunities and constraints are filtered through distinct values, missions, and understandings of appropriate action (Meyer, 2004). In this sense, identity translates external opportunities into concrete strategies by shaping how organizations interpret available options for action.

Resources, networks and opportunity structures

Organizational identity should, however, not be understood as the sole factor shaping tactical choices. Previous research highlights the importance of resources, institutional access, and political opportunity structures in influencing how organizations mobilize and engage politically (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Resources shape organizational capacities for mobilization and access to decision-makers, while institutional embeddedness may influence whether organizations rely on insider strategies, cooperation, or public protest (Binderkrantz, 2005). Organizations excluded from institutional networks may instead depend more heavily on symbolic action, grassroots mobilization, or alternative channels of influence.

In addition to formal political opportunities and organizational resources, local social contexts may shape how organizations perceive legitimate forms of action (Jasper, 2021). In smaller and socially interconnected communities, where actors often maintain overlapping personal and civic relationships, open confrontation may entail higher social costs than in more anonymous settings. Such local embeddedness may influence how organizations interpret opportunities, risks, and acceptable repertoires of action, even when facing similar political threats.

Taking it together, political opportunities, institutional access, and resources shape the conditions under which organizations operate but do not determine tactical choices mechanically. Organizations facing similar external conditions may still interpret opportunities and constraints differently. This article therefore treats organizational identity not as an alternative to external explanations, but as a mechanism through which actors define what forms of action are considered legitimate, appropriate, and consistent with 'who we are.' Consequently, organizations with different identities are expected to adopt different counter-strategies even when operating within similar political contexts.

Case selection and method

This study relies on a comparative interpretive design to explore how organizational identity shapes civil society responses to far-right challenges. By examining three organizations operating within the same local political and temporal context, the study holds many external contextual factors relatively constant, making it possible to analyze how internal organizational dynamics contributed to divergent tactical responses.

The article draws on evidence from the town of Ludvika, located in the province of Dalarna (Dalecarlia) in Sweden. The case of Ludvika is particularly suitable because it was one of the key municipalities where the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) was highly active and where local civil society organizations mobilized in response. The three organizations selected for analysis are Clowns Against Nazism, the Ludvika Parish of the Church of Sweden and The Swedish Red Cross. The cases were selected based on their documented engagement with the NRM during the 2018 election and their variation in tactical responses. They represent different sectors of civil society, activist, religious and humanitarian, and offer a meaningful contrast in how organizations operating under similar external conditions adopted different counter-strategies toward the same far-right actor. The cases constitute a form of theoretically informed variation sampling, selected to maximize differences in organizational identity while holding local political context relatively constant. The cases are not intended to represent the full spectrum of civil society responses, but rather to provide analytical leverage for exploring how organizational identity shapes tactical repertoires. In Ludvika, these organizations were among the most visible and active civil society actors in terms of both public activities and media attention.

The NRM has its roots in the Swedish Nazi and neo-Nazi movements of the 1980s and 1990s and constitutes the leading neo-Nazi movement in the Nordic countries. The movement's overarching aim is to replace Sweden's democratic system with a unified National Socialist state. Its ideology is infused with racism, Nazism, antisemitism, and xenophobia, positioning it as a civil society organization founded on an openly anti-democratic agenda. Up until the 2018 election, the group even held representation in Ludvika's municipal assembly, making the town a focal point for debates about the far right and democracy in Sweden.

The choice of Ludvika was not accidental. The town is a small industrial community with a strong local identity, shaped by major employers such as ABB. Like many smaller municipalities, Ludvika has faced

challenges connected to economic restructuring, depopulation in rural areas, and strains on local welfare services. Such conditions provided the NRM with opportunities to frame itself as a defender of 'ordinary people' and local interests while embedding its presence in everyday civic and political debates. By focusing on practical local issues, such as school closures and rural development, the NRM was able to temporarily push its extremist ideological foundations into the background, further reinforcing its foothold in the community.

At the time of the 2018 election, the NRM pursued dual strategies: as a social movement mobilizing on the streets and as a political party seeking electoral legitimacy. Ludvika is one of the few municipalities where these ambitions translated into formal political representation. During the 2014–2018 mandate period, one representative entered the municipal council on a Sweden Democrats ballot after 18 individuals wrote his name on the party's open voting slips. Ahead of the 2018 general election, the NRM ran a local campaign in Ludvika to maintain its seat but ultimately failed to secure continued representation. Its visibility and public activity in Ludvika triggered civil society mobilization, making the municipality a relevant setting for studying why organizations within the same political context responded differently to the far right. Importantly, the responses examined in this study took place in a politically charged local context marked by the NRM's visibility and public activity. This environment likely reinforced civil society organizations' sense of urgency and responsibility to act, influencing both whether organizations responded and how they did so. The findings should therefore be interpreted with contextual sensitivity.

The empirical material consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews with organizational leaders from the three organizations, conducted shortly after the 2018 election. These interviews were supplemented by media reports, public statements, organizational documents, and survey-based contextual material from previous research on civil society responses in Ludvika (Lundberg, 2021; 2023). The interview guide included open-ended questions covering several thematic areas. Respondents were asked to describe their organization's purpose, core values, and typical activities, as well as how they perceived their role in relation to the NRM and other civil society actors. Additional questions focused on how strategic and tactical choices were made within the organization and what opportunities or constraints they encountered in their work.

The interview material was analyzed thematically with particular attention to how respondents described organizational purpose, values, self-understanding, and legitimate forms of action. The analysis focused on comparing how the three organizations linked organizational self-definitions ('who we are') to tactical repertoires ('what we do'). Particular attention was paid to how respondents justified certain forms of action as legitimate, appropriate, or incompatible with the organization's identity.

Organizational identity was operationalized through recurring narratives concerning organizational purpose, perceived societal role, boundaries of legitimate action, and distinctions between 'us' and other actors. Identity was inferred from how respondents consistently described the organization's mission, moral commitments, preferred ways of acting, and boundaries regarding legitimate and illegitimate tactics. The analysis also considered alternative explanations related to organizational resources, institutional position, and external political conditions in order to assess whether differences in tactical repertoires could be attributed solely to contextual or structural factors.

While the number of cases and interviews is limited, the aim of the study is not statistical representativeness but theoretical and interpretive depth (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The comparison between organizations enables analytical comparison and theoretical elaboration regarding how organizational identity shapes tactical responses to the far right. Triangulation with survey data, media reports, and contextual sources further strengthens the validity of the findings in line with established qualitative practice in social movement studies.

Results

Previous research has emphasized that civil society is not a monolithic actor but rather a heterogeneous arena in which organizations adopt varied responses to extremism. The case of Ludvika confirms this diversity. Survey data show that 41 percent of democratically oriented civil society organizations in the municipality (N = 325) reported some form of active engagement against the NRM, while a majority (58 percent) remained inactive (Lundberg, 2021). Among the organizations that responded actively, tactical repertoires

varied considerably, ranging from confrontational counter-mobilization to dialogue-oriented and inclusive forms of engagement. The findings below show that these differences reflected divergent organizational identities and understandings of legitimate action.

Clowns against Nazism

Clowns Against Nazism describes itself as a network rather than a traditional association. Its self-image is built on humanism, openness, and the principle of equal worth of all people. Rather than primarily presenting itself as a 'counterforce' to the NRM, the movement describes itself as a popular movement aiming to create safety and inclusion in the local community. As one leader explained:

> We always try to be as public as we can to show that we dare, we dare to stand up. Because that makes more people dare to join in. It's not just about us protesting for our own sake, but about people who pass by or who see us in the media feeling that they can stand there too, that it's possible to speak up.

This self-understanding is both activist and inclusive. It translates into tactics emphasizing visibility, public presence, and symbolic action rather than closed organizational work or institutional lobbying. The movement's identity was also shaped by the founders' previous experiences of anti-fascist activism. One respondent described how earlier experiences of violent confrontation contributed to the decision to pursue a different path:

> He had been part of the old antifa circles, where it was often about fights. And he said that wasn't the right way to go. It only led to more violence, more hate. So, we decided early on that we wouldn't be like that, we would be different. We would be open, humorous, show something else.

The organization's identity is therefore both confrontational and humanist, designed as an alternative to more militant anti-fascist strategies. Humour was not simply adopted because it was considered effective, but because it aligned with the organization's self-understanding as open, creative, and explicitly non-violent. This identity shaped not only what the movement opposed, but also which forms of resistance were perceived as legitimate and authentic.

Clowns Against Nazism employs a repertoire consisting of street presence, symbolic action, and civil disobedience. A central strategy is to remove NRM propaganda and replace it with their own symbols. One respondent explained:

> It's about removing the propaganda as quickly as possible. Partly because you take away their propaganda, but also because we always do it during the daytime. Then you also get the opportunity to talk to the public, to explain why we do it. We usually spray over their tags and spray a heart.

At the same time, violent or threatening methods are explicitly excluded:

> We are very careful to remain non-violent. It's one of our core principles, we never want to threaten or fight. That would destroy our whole idea, our whole way of being. Because then we would become just like them, and that's exactly what we want to show that you don't have to be.

This illustrates how organizational identity functions as a boundary-setting mechanism. Violent confrontation is rejected not primarily because it is ineffective, but because it contradicts the movement's humanist and non-violent self-image.

The movement has also used more controversial forms of civil disobedience, such as publicly exposing NRM leaders. This was described as a way of challenging the anonymity and authority created by the NRM's uniforms and disciplined appearance:

> We have exposed the leaders, shown their names and pictures publicly. It's a way of showing that they can't hide behind the uniform, that people see who they are and what they stand for.

This strategy was framed not as hate or revenge, but as a form of democratic accountability. Civil disobedience was thus legitimized through the movement's humanist identity: it was not understood as physical confrontation, but as a morally justified defense of democratic openness.

The movement's hallmark tactic, however, is its clown actions: humorous and satirical interventions aimed at undermining the NRM's attempts to appear disciplined and threatening. One respondent described the logic behind this tactic:

> When we started in 2016 … we've almost always been clowns against Nazis when the NRM is out. And that method, we've noticed, works perfectly … it's very hard to mock someone who mocks themselves. When we show up as clowns, their seriousness, their discipline, and their threatfulness become something that looks ridiculous.

The clown actions work by reducing fear and making the NRM's symbolic authority appear absurd. At the same time, they signal to the public that resistance can be non-violent, creative, and accessible: 'Of course it's fun, but it's also very political. We show that you can resist without using violence. That you can laugh at them instead of being afraid.'

In this sense, the clown actions function as a practice of identity. They embody the movement's values of creativity, openness, and non-violence, while also prefiguring the kind of democratic culture the organization seeks to promote: one in which Nazism and hate do not intimidate but are reduced to something laughable. Clowns Against Nazism thus combines a confrontational stance toward the NRM as an organization with a humanist approach to individuals. As one respondent explained:

> When it comes to those who lead, the ones who are really leaders in the NRM, we've noticed it's very hard to debate with them. There's simply no common ground. But with sympathizers, we do talk. We always try to see that there is a person behind there, someone who might be on their way in, whom we can save before it's too late.

Taken together, the case shows how an activist-humanist identity translated into a tactical repertoire centred on visibility, satire, symbolic confrontation, and non-violent civil disobedience. It also reveals tensions within this identity, particularly when openness and inclusion are balanced against confrontational anti-fascist action.

The Church of Sweden

The Church of Sweden in Ludvika describes itself as an institutional and diaconal actor, deeply rooted in the locality and responsible for protecting human dignity and social cohesion. Its self-image is to be an open and inclusive force, a meeting place where everyone is welcome. One of the respondents, the vicar of the parish, makes this clear when emphasizing that the church's diaconal mission means not discriminating between people:

> We have a deacon, and the diaconal mission speaks of the equal worth of all people, and we introduce to the churchwardens that we do not make distinctions between people and people. This is very important – the elderly lady is just as welcome as the alcoholic. From that perspective, these ideas [that the NRM stands for] are also very provocative; it is provocative because it is completely contrary to the kind of society we want to live in.

Here an identity emerges that is both theological and social and where the Church of Sweden seeks to act as a guarantor of dignity and inclusion at a time when extremist ideas threaten to undermine these principles. This institutional and diaconal self-understanding is translated into tactics centred on dialogue, inclusion, and community-building rather than confrontation. The church's identity shaped not only its motivation to respond to the NRM, but also what forms of action were perceived as legitimate and compatible with its role in the local community.

This identity is strongly influenced by those who lead and run the activities locally. The priest repeatedly stresses that the engagement to respond to the NRM stems from a deep love for the place and a desire to preserve Ludvika as a safe community. He describes the threat from the NRM not only as a theological challenge, but also as an existential threat to the locality:

> From the fact that we are a Christian church … it is important … to keep watch … And it is … provocative [with the NRM's ideas] … There is also something frightening … you cannot live in such a society. Otherwise we'll have to move. It becomes a threat situation … this area that I love … Here I have found my home … I want to live and die here.

The priest stresses the importance of maintaining these values in a polarized society: 'There is no softness in society … the diaconal work is also about sometimes being strong and sometimes being weak … We must talk to each other.' This illustrates how the church's identity is doubly rooted: partly in the diaconal mission to see the person, and partly in a local social responsibility. Together, these elements contributed to a tactical repertoire emphasizing dialogue and inclusion rather than antagonistic confrontation.

The Church of Sweden emphasizes responses and strategies that focus on inclusion, dialogue, and positive manifestations rather than direct confrontation. Central are participation in demonstrations 'for' something (such as Pride), organizing alternative family-friendly events, and offering forums for conversation. One of the deacons explains:

> What we have done that is a clear demonstration … we marched second from the front in the Pride parade … it was still for something. So, more demonstrations that are for, more manifestations.

On May Day, the same day as the NRM marched, the church arranged alternative activities together with other actors:

> We try to bring several other actors with us … we had … the Uniting Church … the Red Cross, Save the Children, RIA … Norrbärke parish and Sensus … Together we can work for this … otherwise we would not have been able to carry off what we did on May Day.

At the same time, the church deliberately chose not to participate in counter-demonstrations organized by other groups: 'We have chosen not to take part [in] Clowns Against Nazism or those who have had counter-demonstrations. Because we are to be for … we are for the equal worth of all people.'

This illustrates how organizational identity functioned as a boundary-setting mechanism defining which tactics were considered appropriate. Counter-demonstrations and mocking actions were not rejected because they were necessarily viewed as ineffective, but because they conflicted with the church's self-understanding as an inclusive and compassionate institution. Tactics emphasizing fellowship, dignity, and dialogue were instead regarded as legitimate expressions of the church's role and mission.

The church was especially known for arranging inclusive alternatives and for acting as a facilitator of dialogue. This includes inviting all political parties, even the NRM, to discussions about human dignity:

> We talked about the equal worth of all people … then we must also deal with everyone … And that meant that we invited everyone to dialogue … Everyone received an invitation … even those who had been granted a demonstration permit.

These initiatives highlight the church's identity as an institutional actor seeking to address extremism not through confrontation, but by reaffirming fundamental values of inclusion and respect. One example of engagement is the Church of Sweden's initiative 'Kyrksnack'. Kyrksnack was conceived as an interview series between the parish and political parties represented in the municipal council, focusing on issues related to humanity, diaconal work, and mutual care.

The aim was to make visible the political parties' positions on questions of human dignity and equal worth. Given the principle of treating all parties in the municipality equally, the parish decided that the NRM representative in the local parliament should also be invited to the conversation. One respondent explained the background to the initiative:

> Yes, the idea was to highlight this among all the parties. To raise the perspective a bit and see, what do they really stand for when it comes to humanity? Do the Social Democrats believe that all people are equally valuable? Do the Moderates? And to bring that out. And the same with NRM and the communist parties.

The initiative, however, faced strong criticism, including in the media, which led the parish to discontinue it, citing concern for individuals personally affected by extremist and anti-democratic groups (Church of Sweden, 2018-06-12). Another reason was that the initiative risked offering NRM an opportunity to present its message through the church's channels (Dagen, 2018-06-13).

Interviews with leading parish representatives, however, shed further light on the motivation behind the initiative. They emphasized that questions of humanity, diaconal work, and care are rarely discussed in political debate. At the same time, NRM had been active in local issues such as school policy and rural development. According to the respondents, this tended to push NRM's ideological foundations into the background. One respondent described this in relation to the local political debate:

> The focus is on village schools, keeping the villages alive, more practical issues than these questions of humanity, ideological issues, like that women should stay at home and give birth to the white race. Here [in Ludvika's political debate] it's more about concrete issues, which also makes it easy to forget the real ideological positions that this group [NRM] stands for.

Against this background, the parish's Kyrksnack initiative can be interpreted as an attempt to break – or prevent – the normalization of NRM. By inviting the movement's representative and asking them to articulate their views on humanity and the equal worth of all, the parish hoped to make NRM's ideological foundations more visible to the public. The initiative also illustrates how the church's identity translated into a preference for dialogue-oriented and pedagogical strategies rather than exclusion or confrontation. Even controversial engagement with the NRM was framed through the church's broader mission of fostering reflection, conversation, and moral responsibility in the local community.

Taken together, the church's institutional and diaconal identity functions as a boundary-setter for what is considered legitimate action. Confrontational or mocking tactics are excluded because they would undermine the church's credibility as an inclusive and compassionate institution. At the same time, initiatives that build fellowship, dialogue, and public reflection are legitimized as consistent with the church's understanding of its social and moral role.

The Swedish Red Cross

The Swedish Red Cross in Ludvika adopted a strategy centred on humanitarianism, neutrality, and community support in response to the growing presence of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Similar to the Church of Sweden, the organization emphasized inclusion, dialogue, and public manifestations of solidarity rather than direct confrontation. At the same time, the Red Cross differed from the church by more explicitly grounding its actions in the organization's humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and humanity.

The chairperson of the local branch described the NRM as fundamentally incompatible with democratic values and expressed strong personal concern regarding the organization's anti-democratic agenda:

> We have a system of government resting on democracy, and they [the NRM] clearly say that they do not want democracy. So why should they be allowed to spread hateful messages when they are actually opposed to our constitutional order?

At the same time, the respondent repeatedly distinguished between personal opinions and the organization's institutional role. The Red Cross's identity as a neutral humanitarian actor shaped what forms of action were considered legitimate. Rather than organizing activities directly against the NRM, the organization framed its engagement positively, as promoting humanity and equal worth:

> We have not acted directly against the NRM. Instead, we act for humanity, for the equal worth of all people.

This humanitarian self-understanding translated into tactics focused on creating inclusive public spaces and strengthening social cohesion. Together with the Church of Sweden and other local actors, the Red Cross organized a large family-oriented event on May Day, the same day the NRM demonstrated in Ludvika. The event included children's activities, food, music, and social gatherings intended to create an alternative civic space centred on solidarity and community: 'It was for humanity. Everything was free that day … there were activities for children, coffee, performances, and opportunities for people to meet.'

The respondent explicitly described these activities as an attempt to create meeting places, demonstrate civic responsibility, and function as a 'counterforce' to exclusionary politics: 'To create meeting places, to show that the Red Cross is present when needed … to be a counterforce in some way, to show that there is another force in society.'

Importantly, however, this counterforce was not framed through antagonistic confrontation. Similar to the Church of Sweden, the Red Cross deliberately avoided counter-demonstrations and confrontational tactics. The organization instead emphasized positive manifestations, cooperation, and public visibility. The respondent stressed that collaboration with the Church of Sweden was carefully managed so that the Red Cross would not compromise its own principles of neutrality and independence:

> We are very careful not to violate our fundamental principles. We are independent. We must never be associated with religious doctrine. What we share with the church is humanity and the equal worth of all people.

The organization's identity also shaped how it approached dialogue with extremists. The respondent described uncertainty regarding whether direct ideological confrontation with NRM supporters was

effective or even appropriate. Referring to guidance from the national Red Cross leadership and experts on extremism, she emphasized that poorly managed debates could risk strengthening extremist beliefs rather than weakening them: 'We are not missionaries who are supposed to go out and convert them.'

This illustrates how the organization's humanitarian identity functioned as a boundary-setting mechanism. Heated public debates, ridicule, or aggressive confrontation were considered incompatible with the Red Cross's self-understanding as a neutral humanitarian organization. At the same time, the organization did not advocate passivity. Instead, it sought to counter extremism indirectly through education, visibility, cooperation, and support for democratic values.

The respondent repeatedly emphasized knowledge and cooperation as central responses to extremism. Civil society was described as an important democratic force, but one requiring long-term collaboration and civic education rather than short-term confrontation: 'Knowledge and cooperation are key words … and that you do not stick your head in the sand, but actually see what is happening.'

The interview also revealed tensions within the organization's identity. While neutrality was central, the respondent simultaneously described the need to 'take a stand' for democracy and human dignity. The Red Cross therefore navigated a difficult balance between humanitarian impartiality and active resistance to anti-democratic ideologies. This tension became particularly visible in discussions about dialogue with NRM members. While the respondent rejected excluding individuals completely from public life, she also stressed that dialogue required caution, knowledge, and appropriate circumstances: 'It is easy to be naive … you think that if I just talk to him, he will start thinking differently. But it is much more complicated than that.'

Taken together, the Swedish Red Cross case demonstrates how organizational identity shaped tactical repertoires by defining which forms of action were viewed as legitimate, appropriate, and consistent with humanitarian principles. The organization rejected confrontational and polarizing tactics while legitimizing inclusive manifestations, civic cooperation, and educational efforts aimed at strengthening democratic resilience.

Comparing organizational identities and tactical responses

The three cases show that organizations operating within the same local political context adopted markedly different counter-strategies toward the NRM. As summarized in Table 1, Clowns Against Nazism translated an activist-humanist identity into satire, visibility, and non-violent civil disobedience. The Church of Sweden translated its institutional and diaconal identity into dialogue, inclusion, and community-building. The Swedish Red Cross, in turn, translated its humanitarian and neutral identity into cooperation, education, and inclusive public manifestations.

The findings also highlight the importance of considering alternative explanations related to organizational resources, institutional access, and networks. The Church of Sweden and the Red Cross possessed considerably greater organizational resources than Clowns Against Nazism, including staff, premises, volunteers, institutional legitimacy, and broad local networks. These resources clearly shaped their capacity to

Table 1. Organizational identities and tactical responses across cases.

Dimension	Clowns Against Nazism	Church of Sweden	Swedish Red Cross
Organizational identity	Activist-humanist	Institutional-diaconal	Humanitarian-neutral
Core self-understanding	Grassroots movement promoting courage, inclusion, and anti-fascist visibility	Local moral and community actor rooted in diaconal responsibility	Neutral humanitarian actor promoting humanity, impartiality, and social cohesion
Main tactical repertoire	Satire, street presence, symbolic confrontation, civil disobedience	Dialogue, inclusive manifestations, community-building, public reflection	Cooperation, education, inclusive public activities, civic support
Rejected tactics	Violence and militant anti-fascism	Mockery and antagonistic counter-demonstrations	Polarizing confrontation and direct ideological campaigning
Key resources and networks	Activist networks, symbolic power, social media visibility	Staff, premises, institutional legitimacy, broad local networks	Volunteers, humanitarian legitimacy, national support, cooperation with local actors
How identity shaped tactics	Humour and non-violence were viewed as authentic forms of resistance	Dialogue and inclusion were viewed as consistent with the church's mission	Neutrality and humanity defined acceptable forms of engagement
Main internal tension	Openness and inclusion vs exposing NRM leaders	Dialogue vs risk of normalizing the NRM	Neutrality vs taking a democratic stand

organize large public events, collaborate with other actors, and maintain a visible presence in the local community. Clowns Against Nazism, by contrast, relied more heavily on symbolic action, activist networks, and social media visibility.

At the same time, resources and networks alone cannot fully explain the tactical differences observed between the organizations. The Church of Sweden and the Red Cross operated under relatively similar institutional conditions and possessed comparable organizational capacities yet adopted partly different strategies toward the NRM. While both organizations had the practical capacity to engage in more confrontational forms of action, they deliberately refrained from doing so because such tactics were perceived as inconsistent with their institutional and humanitarian identities. Conversely, Clowns Against Nazism lacked many of the institutional resources available to the other organizations, but transformed symbolic creativity, humour, and public visibility into legitimate forms of resistance consistent with its activist-humanist identity.

The comparison therefore suggests that structural resources, networks, and institutional embeddedness shaped organizations' capacities for action but were insufficient to explain tactical variation on their own. Rather, organizational identity contributed to shaping how available capacities, opportunities, and constraints are interpreted and translated into legitimate forms of action.

Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to address a central but underexplored question in the literature: why civil society organizations operating within the same local political context adopt different counter-strategies toward the far right. Existing scholarship has primarily explained civil society mobilization through external opportunity structures, political alliances, and resource configurations. While such explanations are important, they cannot fully account for why organizations facing the same extremist threat adopt divergent tactical repertoires.

The findings from Ludvika suggest that organizational identity provides an important part of the answer. The comparison between Clowns Against Nazism, the Church of Sweden, and the Swedish Red Cross demonstrates how organizations committed to democratic values nonetheless translated these commitments into different forms of action. Clowns Against Nazism, shaped by an activist-humanist identity, relied on satire, visibility, symbolic confrontation, and non-violent civil disobedience aimed at undermining the NRM's symbolic authority and reducing fear in the local community. The Church of Sweden, rooted in an institutional and diaconal identity, instead emphasized dialogue, inclusion, and community-building, while the Swedish Red Cross translated its humanitarian and neutral identity into cooperation, education, and inclusive public manifestations. Across the cases, organizational identities shaped not only motivations for action but also understandings of which tactics were considered legitimate, appropriate, and consistent with 'who we are.'

The findings support Meyer's (2004) argument that organizations develop core tactics closely tied to their identities. They also reinforce Polletta and Jasper's (2001) insight that identity is simultaneously enabling and constraining: it motivates participation while also defining the boundaries of acceptable action. Importantly, the study does not suggest that organizational identity alone explains civil society responses to the far right. Resources, institutional position, and organizational networks clearly shaped the organizations' capacities for action. The Church of Sweden and the Red Cross possessed considerably greater institutional resources and broader local networks than Clowns Against Nazism, enabling large-scale public activities and extensive local cooperation. However, these factors alone cannot explain why organizations with relatively similar institutional capacities adopted different strategies. The findings instead suggest that organizational identity contributed to shaping how resources, networks, and political opportunities were interpreted and translated into tactical repertoires.

More specifically, the article contributes to existing research by shifting attention from whether civil society organizations respond to far-right extremism toward explaining why organizations operating under similar conditions adopt different responses. In doing so, the study highlights organizational identity as a mechanism through which external opportunities and constraints are interpreted and translated into tactical choices.

More broadly, the study demonstrates that civil society should not be understood as a unified democratic 'bulwark' against political extremism. Rather, it consists of organizations with different identities, values,

and internal logics that shape distinct forms of democratic engagement. From a democratic resilience perspective, this diversity of responses may constitute a strength rather than a weakness. Institutional actors such as the Church of Sweden and the Red Cross contributed through inclusion, dialogue, and long-term social cohesion, while Clowns Against Nazism mobilized visible, creative, and symbolic forms of resistance that challenged extremist legitimacy in the public sphere. Strategies aimed at supporting democratic resilience may therefore need to recognize that organizations differ not only in resources and capacities, but also in identities, values, and understandings of legitimate action (cf., Aly et al., 2015; Sivenbring & Malmros, 2023).

An additional finding concerns the relatively restrained character of civil society responses in Ludvika. Although the NRM represented an openly extremist and historically violent movement, the organizations examined here largely avoided direct and aggressive confrontation. Even Clowns Against Nazism, the most confrontational actor in the study, and in Ludvika at that time, emphasized humour, non-violence, and symbolic disruption rather than physical antagonism. Several factors may help explain this pattern. First, the NRM's reputation for violence and intimidation may have contributed to caution among local actors and discouraged escalation. Second, Swedish political culture, often associated with consensus-oriented norms, high social trust, and preferences for dialogue and inclusion (Petersson, 2016), may have shaped which forms of contention were viewed as legitimate.

A third important factor concerns the local social context of Ludvika itself. In relatively small and socially interconnected communities, political conflict is often embedded within dense networks of everyday social relations (Jasper, 2021). Political opponents may simultaneously be neighbours, colleagues, classmates, customers, relatives, or parents at local schools. Such social proximity can increase the social costs of open confrontation and polarization. Unlike in larger urban contexts, where political activism may remain socially compartmentalized, contentious politics in smaller localities risks spilling over into everyday community life and long-term interpersonal relations.

This social embeddedness may help explain why organizations in Ludvika emphasized indirect, symbolic, or inclusive forms of resistance rather than openly antagonistic confrontation. Dialogue-oriented and community-based strategies may not only reflect organizational values but also constitute ways of managing conflict in a socially cohesive environment where maintaining everyday coexistence remains important. Even organizations strongly opposed to the NRM appeared concerned about avoiding further polarization within the local community. In this sense, civil society responses were shaped not only by organizational identities and political opportunities, but potentially also by the relational dynamics of local community life. Thus, local social relations and community structures may play a role in shaping how civil society organizations define legitimate and effective responses to political extremism.

Finally, it is important to note that the findings derive from a small number of organizations embedded in one local setting and responding to a specific far-right actor, limiting broader empirical generalization. More research is needed on how organizational identities interact with local political cultures, community structures, and political opportunity contexts in shaping civil society responses to extremism.

Future research could also examine the reverse relationship, namely whether prolonged exposure to political extremism influences organizational identities themselves. Persistent extremist threats may encourage organizations to adopt new roles, priorities, or tactical repertoires that gradually shift organizational self-understandings and potentially create tensions with established missions, values, or institutional purposes. Such dynamics resonate with broader discussions of organizational adaptation and mission drift (Suykens et al., 2025).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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