

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF SOFT REPRESSION\*

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*This article examines the consequences of soft repression on social movement activists. By drawing on activists' perceptions, we develop a multilayered analytical framework that captures the experienced effects of soft repression at the individual, organizational, and movement levels. Our results show that soft repression—in particular, labeling, and stigmatization—primarily affect the individual level by triggering self-policing and self-control. By introducing a model that incorporates several radical social movement organizations, we also show how labeling and stigmatization affect different radical groups in different ways. These measures sometimes fail to demobilize the primary targets of the repressive actions, the most militant and clandestine groups. Instead, the demobilizing effects seem most evident in organizations that mobilize openly and inclusively. Our analysis is based on in-depth interviews with activists from the radical left-libertarian movement (RLLM) in Sweden, most of which have been active in organizations labeled as “violence-affirming extremists” by the Swedish government.*

As social movement activists challenge existing relations of power, they often enter into conflict. Based on their opponents' reactions, certain groups of activists risk becoming the subject of repression, that is, external efforts to prevent, control, and/or constrain their protests (Earl 2011). Research on social movements has mainly focused on hard repression, such as coercive attempts by state actors to quell activism by violence, harassment, and surveillance (Davenport 2015; Davenport, Johnston, and Mueller 2005; Earl 2003, 2006, 2013). Since the early 2000s, however, the forms of repressive measures being used have grown increasingly complex. After the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, and the bombings in Madrid and London in the mid-2000s, governments in many Western democracies have introduced policies to prevent “radicalization and violent extremism.” Initially developed to counteract Islamist terrorist groups, these policies and their associated practices now affect a range of activists and social movements (see Joyce 2016 for examples). Current measures not only involve the police, secret services, and the judiciary, but to an increasing extent also other professions, such as teachers, social workers, and actors within civil society who are tasked with new responsibilities to prevent radicalization and to counter extremism. The increased use of multiagency measures to counter extremism has broadened the repertoires of repression and involves a stronger emphasis on soft methods of repression (Mattsson 2019). Increasingly, measures are being used to channel protests in new directions, to affect public opinion of protestors, and to hinder mobilization through discursive forms of soft repression, such as labeling and stigmatization (Ferree 2004).

In line with this development, this article addresses two main research questions. First, how do targeted activists perceive and experience soft repressive measures that are meant to prevent radicalization and extremism? Second, what are the effects of these measures, and how do activists

\* The study was supported by funds from The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency to the project “Radicalization and De-radicalization”, 2016–2019 (project no. 2016-489). Parts of the protest event data set were constructed during the research project “Anarchists in Eastern and Western Europe: A Comparative Study,” funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, 2012–2016 (project no. A068-2011). The authors would like to thank all researchers involved in these projects, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and suggestions, which contributed greatly to improve our article.

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respond to them? The article explores the consequences of soft repression among what we define as the radical left-libertarian movement (RLLM) in Sweden. Previous research has paid little attention to deradicalization and disengagement efforts vis-à-vis the contemporary radical left in Western democracies (Bjørge and Gjelsvik 2015; della Porta 1995). We use the case of the RLLM as an example of the soft measures used to govern dissent in contemporary Western democracies. Since 2011, the Swedish government has intensified its efforts to counteract “violence-affirming (*våldsbejakande*) extremism,”<sup>1</sup> emphasizing preventive work at the local level that involves a range of professions. Among those targeted are groups in the RLLM, namely the “autonomous milieu” including four radical left organizations that have been singled out by government agencies as “violence-affirming extremists.” We focus on these four organizations, but also include movement actors affiliated with these groups by their ideology or practices. By drawing on the activists’ perceptions and experiences of soft repression, we develop a multilayered analytical framework that resonates with the different levels activists talked about in interviews: the individual, organizational, and movement levels. As outlined in the research questions, our aim is to capture activists’ perceptions of governmental measures to prevent radicalization as well as the effects of this type of soft repression, both of which influence the mobilization patterns of movements.

Our study contributes to existing research on protest repression in three ways. First, by analyzing activists’ perceptions and experiences, we show how soft repression, in the form of labeling and stigmatization, affects different radical groups in different ways; relatedly, we show why it sometimes fails to demobilize the primary targets of the repressive actions, that is, the most militant and clandestine groups.<sup>2</sup> Second, we show the different effects of soft repression on different levels of the movement, as well as the relationship between these levels. Based on our findings, we argue that soft repression has the most evident effect on the individual level by triggering self-policing and imposition of self-control among activists, which in turn hinders group and movement mobilization. Third, our analysis indicates two main lines of responses to soft repression. On the one hand, some activists turn outward; they try to engage in the public sphere and remain open and transparent as a way to counter the stigma of the extremist label. On the other, some turn inward, becoming more exclusive and clandestine in their forms of organizing. From this we highlight potential “backfire effects” (della Porta 2013), as the most militant activists and groups might be further radicalized by these forms of soft repression.

### HARD AND SOFT REPRESSION OF PROTEST

How state and nonstate actors control protest, and the consequences of such control, are key concerns for research on social movements (Peterson and Wahlström 2015). Existing research on repression has generated two primary lines of inquiry: investigation of repression as the dependent variable and as a key independent variable in explanations of such things as movement mobilization (Earl 2003). We take the latter approach. There is extensive research that investigates repression as a decisive factor impacting movement mobilization (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). This strand of research has, for example, provided valuable contributions by showing how repression plays a key role in the dynamic and relational structuring of repertoires of collective action (Combes and Filieule 2011; McAdam 1983; Meyer and Staggenborg 2008). Scholars have shown how repression increases the cost of protesting (Tilly 1978) and also how it reduces protestors’ opportunities to achieve their goals (Barkan 1984; Ellefsen 2016). Years of scholarship on repression has, however, produced contradictory findings and explanations of how and why repression leads to demobilization or deradicalization in some cases and mobilization or radicalization in others (della Porta 2013; Earl and Soule 2010; Ellefsen Forthcoming). One reason for this might be an insufficient acknowledgment of the interactive, dynamic, and multilayered nature of the relationship of protest and repression (Koopmans 1993). Our study seeks to address this gap by employing a multilayered analytical approach that examines the consequences of repression on the individual, group, and movement levels, as well as emphasizing how these

various levels interact vis-à-vis repression. By doing this we hope to better capture the multifaceted nature of how repression plays out and impacts protest in the context of a Western liberal democracy.

We argue that the protest–repression relationship is far more complex than many scholars have assumed, as repression is a multidimensional phenomenon that has numerous and varied effects on the different levels of social movement activity (Linden and Klandermans 2006). Therefore, as Jennifer Earl and Sarah Soule (2010) emphasize, the effects of repression cannot be broadly theorized without specification of the actors involved, the repressive methods used, and other key contextual factors. Studies of repression should, therefore, focus on particular instances of repressive strategies, actions, and events, or repression during specific episodes or waves of protest. Taking this approach, we investigate the consequences of a specific shift in Swedish government policy and practice that involve an increased use of soft repression, designed to hinder recruitment and mobilization among radical movements.

### *Soft versus Hard Repression*

There is a crucial distinction to be drawn between hard repression, which is exerted through coercion and the threat or use of violence, and soft repression, which is exerted through subtler techniques (Earl 2006). While hard repression involves the mobilization of force to control or crush oppositional action, Myra Marx Ferree (2004) argues that soft repression involves the mobilization of nonviolent means, for example, silencing activists or marginalizing oppositional ideas. Ferree (2004: 142) distinguishes three loose and possibly overlapping categories of soft repression: ridicule, stigma, and silencing.

Ferree (2004) derives her analytical categories from the view that civil society, including institutionalized media practice, is the locus of soft repression. In many cases, however, soft repression also involves state actors (García 2014; Lindekilde 2010). In our case, it is the Swedish government that initiated policies and practices aimed at counteracting “violence-affirming extremism.” The state-initiated depictions of the “problem” of extremism have influenced local municipal actors and media, as well as what is actually being done to address it. These acts have helped establish violence-affirming extremism as a social problem and a stigmatizing label in the Swedish public debate (Wahlström 2018). It is clear that this stigmatization originates from state-initiated, counterframing techniques (Fallon, Aunio, and Kim 2018: 941).

Using labels to stigmatize is, according to Ferree (2004), intended to damage a group by discrediting its collective identity and devaluing how the public views the group as a whole, in order to prevent it from mobilizing (see Boykoff 2007 on the mechanism of stigmatization). Soft repression, by way of stigmatization, enables government authorities in domestic contexts to label, silence, and negatively stereotype activists to delegitimize and derail their mobilization (Fallon, Aunio, and Kim 2018: 940). Stigmatization can also be used by civil society actors (e.g., counter-movements) as a cultural strategy to prevent collective action by discouraging identification with a group, something both right- and left-wing organizations use to discredit their counterparts (Jämte 2013; Linden and Klandermans 2006). Approaching soft repression as an independent variable means we direct our attention to the potential impact of this specific form of repression on the groups that are labeled, the individual activists, and the wider movement they are part of. Previous research on the consequences of repression focuses on the impact either on the level of social movement activity or on the tactics deployed by social movements (Earl 2013: 4–5; Earl and Soule 2010). We support Hélène Combes and Olivier Fillieule’s (2011: 24) argument that in order to understand the effects of repression, “we need to consider the contextual, organizational and individual levels together.” While such multilevel analysis has been employed in existing movement research, for example, in studies of processes of disengagement from political violence and radical organizations (Bosi and della Porta 2015; Fillieule 2015), there is a lack of multilevel analysis of the diverse and interacting effects of repression across the individual, organizational, and movement levels. This article hopes to help fill this gap.

Recent research has emphasized that we also need to understand how protestors perceive and respond to repression, in order to understand how activists are affected by it (Honari 2018; Koopmans 1993). For example, how activists view the opportunities and threats in their environment is decisive for how they act. Examining protestors' perceptions of repression can thus help us understand the subtler ways in which soft repression impacts activists' cognition and practices (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Kurzman 1996). In this article, we emphasize the consequences of being labeled (or associated with a labeled group) and the activists' perceptions of how labeling has impacted the opportunities and threats they face.

### THE SWEDISH RADICAL LEFT LIBERTARIAN MOVEMENT AND ITS FOUR TARGETED GROUPS

The designation "radical left libertarian movement" (RLLM) encompasses organizations, informal groups, and networks that base their activism on libertarian socialist thought. Within this movement, one finds anarchist and anarchosyndicalist activists, together with autonomists, council communists, and other forms of libertarian Marxists. Actors within the RLLM are connected through an ideological commitment to antiauthoritarianism, anticapitalism, and anti-statism, as well to a vision of society based on voluntary forms of cooperation. The activists also criticize other forms of power relations, for instance racism, sexism, homophobia, and speciesism. This makes them potential allies with a wide range of other movements, and in practice they have often functioned as a "radical flank" to these movements (Haines 2013). The RLLM primarily seeks social and political change outside of institutional politics. Within the movement, different actors prefer different repertoires of protest. These range from conventional forms of protest, to transgressive and violent protest tactics (Bosi and Malthaner 2015; Jämte and Wennerhag 2019; Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2020; Tilly and Tarrow 2007).<sup>3</sup>

Since the late 1980s, parts of the RLLM have become the focus of attention of government efforts in Sweden to counteract extremism within the left. Among governmental agencies, the targeted movement is often referred to as the "autonomous milieu," an umbrella concept used to describe and label extraparlimentary, leftwing organizations and activists expressing or sympathizing with what is referred to as an "anarchist political stance" (SOU 2002: 91). During the last decade, a string of reports have been released by governmental agencies on the autonomous milieu, linking it to political violence or leftwing extremism (BRÅ and Säpo 2009; FOI 2018; SOU 2013, 2016).

In 2011, the government launched a national action plan against violence-affirming extremism. The plan was preceded by an increased focus on how to prevent radicalization and extremism in political and public debate in Sweden, beginning in the late 2000s. Initially, the term "violence-affirming extremism" was primarily used to describe Islamist terrorism (Säkerhetspolisen 2010), but with the national action plan of 2011, the definition was broadened to include "the autonomous left" and the "white supremacist milieu" (Skr. 2011: 44). The use of the term "violence-affirming extremism" signaled a broader target group, encompassing not only those involved in politically motivated violence, but also those who approved or expressed positive attitudes about the use of violent tactics to reach political goals.<sup>4</sup>

As an outgrowth of the action plan, the Swedish government appointed a "national coordinator to safeguard democracy against violent extremism" in 2014 (Dir. 2014: 103). The national coordinator (NC) was tasked with the responsibility of preventing individuals from becoming "radicalized," counteracting different forms of "extremism," and offering disengagement programs for those involved. Since its initiation in 2014, the main activities of the NC have been to produce informative material on violence-affirming extremism, and to develop and coordinate preventive work at the local level. All of Sweden's 290 municipalities have been encouraged to develop local action plans, in which they specify organizational structures and practices to recognize and deter radicalization, to counteract different forms of extremism, and to encourage disengagement from extremist milieus (Andersson Malmros and Mattson 2017).

These new practices and policies have involved an outsourcing of repression; formerly a matter primarily for the police and security services, they now involve a number of professions that are instructed to work and cooperate in new ways. In practice, the local work involves members of occupational groups, such as police, teachers, social workers, and youth recreation leaders, that meet people at risk of radicalization (Skr. 2014: 144). The new efforts to prevent radicalization appear to signal a change in state efforts to counteract extremism, with more resources being spent, more actors mobilized, and responsibilities diffused to include the local level, in order to reach a wider target group than before (Wahlström 2018). In January 2018, the task of coordinating these efforts nationally was overtaken by The Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE).

In material developed by the NC, specific organizations and activist networks are publicly labeled as “violence-affirming extremists,” so that local actors know who they should direct their attention to. Four RLLM groups are labeled and targeted: Antifascistisk aktion, (Anti-Fascist Action, AFA), Syndikalistiska Ungdomsförbundet (Anarchosyndicalist Youth Federation, SUF), Revolutionära Fronten (Revolutionary Front, RF) and Förbundet Allt åt Alla (Association Everything to Everyone, AåA). Although all part of the same movement, these groups are dissimilar in terms of both the issues and goals they prioritize and the protest tactics they employ. Tables 1 and 2 (below) introduce the key differences of the four groups, using

**Table 1.** Protest Events (PEs), Issues, and Tactics (Self-Reported by RLLM Groups)

<i>Organization (operating dates)</i>	<i>Number of PEs (% of all RLLM PEs)</i>	<i>Main Protest Issues</i>	<i>Main Protest Tactics</i>
SUF (1993-present)	939 (24.5%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May Day marches (18.5%)</li> <li>• Racism/fascism (17.8%)</li> <li>• Workers’ rights (16.2%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstration (43.8%)</li> <li>• Rally (16.9%)</li> <li>• Information (15.5%)</li> </ul>
AFA (1993-present)	501 (13.1%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racism/fascism (75.8%)</li> <li>• Women’s rights (6.6%)</li> <li>• Migration/immigration (3.6%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Property damage (27.7%)</li> <li>• Violent confrontation with individuals/groups (25.5%)</li> <li>• Demonstration and information (14.0% each)</li> </ul>
RF (2002-2015)	241 (6.3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racism/fascism (63.1%)</li> <li>• Workers’ rights (12.9%)</li> <li>• Public welfare (9.1%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent confrontation with individuals/groups (39.0%)</li> <li>• Property damage (28.6%)</li> <li>• Information (18.3%)</li> </ul>
AåA (2009-present)	218 (5.7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing/urban planning (21.6%)</li> <li>• Racism/fascism (18.3%)</li> <li>• Public welfare (11.5%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstration (26.1%)</li> <li>• Rally (17.0%)</li> <li>• Information (14.2%)</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Types of Tactics Used by the Four RLLM Groups

	<i>AåA</i>	<i>AFA</i>	<i>RF</i>	<i>SUF</i>
Conventional protests	75.2%	34.1%	27.8%	82.9%
Transgressive protests	24.3%	12.6%	4.6%	16.2%
Violent protests (against property or persons)	0.5% <sup>7</sup>	53.3%	67.6%	1.0% <sup>8</sup>
<i>Total</i>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

aggregated protest event data for the years 1997–2016, or whatever years they were in operation. The tables cover the entire period, and they do not capture how each organization might have changed their main protest issues and tactics over time, or differences between different local groups within the same organization.<sup>5</sup> More on the protest event data in the methods section (see also note 12).

Taken together, the four groups have been part of almost half of the total number of protest events the RLLM staged in the period 1997–2016, which makes them among the most active actors within the movement. The actors are linked through collective identities, ideological affinities, joint mobilizations, solidarity campaigns, and movement infrastructures such as social centers and online networks (Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2020). The volume of activity within each organization has, however, shifted over time, with SUF reaching its peak at the turn of the millennium, AFA in the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, RF in the mid-2000s and by the turn of 2010s, and AåA the mid-2010s. While all four groups mobilize against racism and fascism, SUF and AåA engage in a wider variety of issues than RF and AFA (see table 1). The latter are almost entirely focused on antifascism. Table 2 summarizes the key differences in repertoires of action among the four RLLM groups, distinguishing between conventional, transgressive, and violent protest tactics.<sup>6</sup>

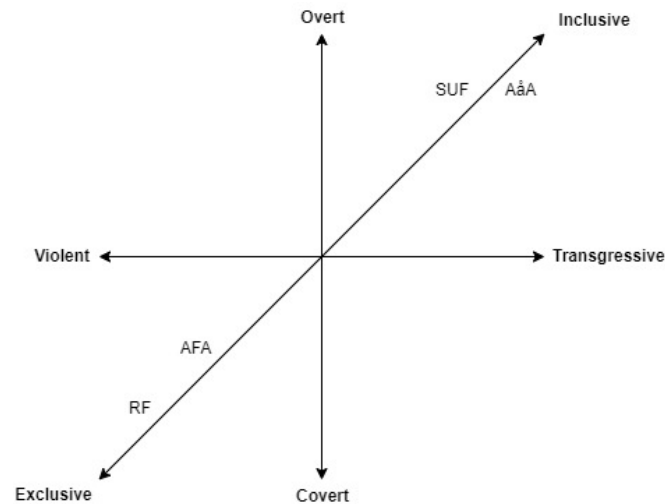
Table 2 reveals a striking difference in protest tactics: while AåA and SUF almost exclusively use conventional or transgressive forms of protest, the activities of RF and AFA more often include violent protest tactics. Previous research on the RLLM in Sweden has shown how some fields of contention, revolving around a certain issue or set of issues, are associated with certain protest tactics (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019). The use of conventional and nonviolent tactics dominates issues such as public welfare, migration, and protests against repression, while militant tactics are more common in antifascist work. For instance, the protest tactic “violent confrontation with individuals/groups” is almost exclusively (96%) connected to anti-fascist work. This type of violence is most often directed against a specific adversary, with activists engaging in violent encounters or attacks on individuals or groups connected to the far right (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019; Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2018, see also note 6).

### *Specifying Radicalness*

Previous research has stressed the need to analytically differentiate between radical and moderate social movement organizations (SMOs) (Fitzgerald and Rodgers 2000; Haines 2013), but we argue for the importance of also highlighting distinctions among radical SMOs. All four groups presented above can be considered radical in the sense that they strive for a profound structural change of the political and economic order (Jämte 2013, 2017). They define themselves as revolutionary organizations that do not limit themselves by existing laws. However, as seen in tables 1 and 2, the ways in which the organizations translate these stances into protest practices varies considerably.

Figure 1 on the next page captures key differences among these organizations by positioning them along three axes that differentiate radical SMOs. The horizontal axis captures the differences in protest tactics, understood as a distinction between violent and transgressive forms of protest (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Because all four groups use conventional tactics, the dividing line among radical groups runs between their use of violent and transgressive forms of contention.

The lateral axis captures the mobilizing ambition of the organization, understood as a distinction between efforts to mobilize a broader social movement (inclusiveness) versus seeking out a specific subset of activists (exclusiveness). Similar divisions have been made in previous research, for instance, by delineating between “inward-” and “outward-oriented” movements, with the former seeking more limited mobilization (“qualitative”) and the latter attempting to reach as many as possible (“quantitative”) (Lang and Lang 1961; Rucht 1988). In relation to the four groups we study, some organizations readily invite new members and seek to include and mobilize a broad constituency, while others require a specific invitation/ recommendation or even a probationary period where new activists must prove their abilities before being allowed into the

**Figure 1:** Differentiating radical SMOs

group. The vertical axis captures the organizational form of the actor, conceptualized as the degree of openness (overt organizing) or closure (covert organizing) of an organization. Overt forms of organizations are characterized by accessible and transparent structures, while covert organizations are anonymous, use strict security precautions, and emphasize internal loyalty. The three axes often intersect, but not always. Using illegal or violent tactics frequently leads to exclusive recruitment, as not all activists are ready to carry out these types of actions. Organizations that engage in high-risk activism also often use more covert ways of organizing, as they impose stricter security precautions and emphasize internal loyalty for their participants. On the other hand, efforts to mass mobilize are likely to presuppose increased openness and overt forms of organizing, as well as the use of conventional and transgressive protest tactics. This said, there are historical examples of organizations that do not follow this logic, for instance by seeking to mass mobilize, while still using violent tactics or closed organizational structures. In these cases, the polarity of one or two of the axes needs to be reversed to highlight this complexity.

In figure 1, the four RLLM organizations are placed along the continuums of each of the three axes. The placement of each group is a simplification of a more complex reality, in which different local groups within the same organization/network can differ considerably. We argue later that the impact of soft repression differs across the groups, depending on their placement along the axes.

## METHODS AND DATA

Our analysis is based on semistructured interviews with thirty-one RLLM activists, conducted between 2017 and 2018, and a quantitative dataset detailing protest events by RLLM groups.<sup>9</sup> The interview guide centered on the perceptions, experiences, and responses to repression among activists. An absolute majority were still active or closely connected to the movement, while two had left by the time we interviewed them. Activists were approached in relation to their main or current commitments in the groups and movement of interest. The interviewees were primarily engaged in organizations or networks labeled as “violence-affirmative extremists” (N = 20). Eleven have been active in organizations within the broader RLLM milieu or other radical left organizations, but not explicitly identified as “violent extremists” by state agencies. The reason for including nontargeted groups is to address potential spillover effects, as well as to examine how repressive practices affect wider mobilization patterns and intra-movement dynamics.

We carried out interviews in four larger cities in Sweden, which all have active movements (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019) and used several strategies to identify interviewees. The activists were approached through formal contacts through the organizations they were involved in (e.g., by email), via gatekeepers and chain sampling technique. Some interviewees were also identified and approached in relation to ethnographic fieldwork of another research project.<sup>10</sup> Important to note is that some activists were harder to access than others. This was particularly true of the most clandestine and militant parts of the movement. We interviewed activists from all four organizations, but proportionally more were, or had been, active in the relatively open AåA and SUF than in the closed AFA and the now disbanded RF. Some of the activists had participated in several of these groups but usually during different parts of their life. Other organizations from which we drew participants were The Syndicalist Union (SAC), Anarchist Black Cross, Gothenburg Antifascist Front (GAF), The Socialist Party, Revolutionary Communist Youth, Young Left, Linje 17 against Racism, and two activists from unnamed grassroots animal rights groups. Several interviewees had been active in several organizations. All the names used are pseudonyms. We complimented the interviews with analysis of textual material about the NC and repression, published by organizations within the movement (e.g., op-eds and articles on the homepages of activist groups).

We analyzed interviews with NVivo software and a coding scheme that we developed. Core themes were created to identify forms of, experiences of, outcomes of, and responses to perceived repression. Subcodes were derived abductively, moving between initial codes generated from previous research and complementary codes generated from our analysis of interviews.<sup>11</sup> Coding made clear that interviewees talked about experienced and potential consequences for themselves, the group(s) they were part of, and the overall RLLM. Our analysis was thus organized to capture this threefold distinction.

The descriptive quantitative data was derived from a protest event dataset, comprising 3,836 protests reported by RLLM groups in Sweden between the years 1997 and 2016 (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019). The data have been obtained from the movements' own media, such as websites and other publications, that contain information about demonstrations and mobilizations.<sup>12</sup> The dataset contains information about protest issues, tactics, targets, main organizers, coalition partners, confrontations etc., which we used to contextualize and triangulate the information gathered from activist interviews. The protest data only include protest events that were announced or those reported on to the public, not those held in secret, events internal to the movement (meetings, study circles, etc.) or public events that were not staged as protests (public debates, concerts, lectures, etc.).

### *Consequences of Soft Repression*

Our three-fold analysis provides an aggregated picture of the experienced effects and the perceived consequences of the soft repressive practices of labeling and stigmatization. We first address the organizational level, then the individual level, and lastly the movement level. The first (organizational level) and second (individual level) sections are based on data from the four targeted groups. The last section (movement level) draws on a wider scope of material, which also includes nontargeted RLLM groups.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL**

By labeling groups as violence-affirming extremists, the NC and other state agencies target the organizational level of the RLLM. On the organizational level we found four distinct experienced or possible effects of labeling: administrative sanctions, silencing, confirmation, and radicalization. While the first two hinder mobilization, the latter two seem to encourage or radicalize activists.



*Administrative Sanctions*

In order to mobilize, SMOs need material and immaterial resources, as well as access to venues where potential adherents gather. According to some activists we interviewed, being labeled a violence-affirming extremist organization has led to obstacles in accessing material resources, such as venues or funding, as well as restrictions on entering arenas where youth gather, such as schools and recreational centers. For several RLLM groups, this meant that mobilizing activities they used during the 1990s, such as books stalls and school talks, were now experienced as closed off to their organization. This was particularly an issue for organizations that sought to mobilize a broad constituency. We refer to these types of responses to the labelled groups as administrative sanctions (see García 2014 on “state administrative sanctions” as soft repression). Carl (SUF/SAC) reflected on this development:

In many ways it is regrettable to be singled out. It causes difficulties, maybe now the SUF club can't come out to schools with for example bookstands or to distribute material and so on. It becomes a huge difficulty for them. It's putting severe sticks in the wheels. It makes things very difficult for the organizations, to reach out to a broader crowd.

Martin (SUF/SAC) also commented on the risks of being excluded from important mobilizing arenas, and noted that the labeling could be used by actors within institutional politics to hinder their mobilizing efforts.

I think that it will be much easier for the municipality to say, “we don't want anything to do with you.” [...] If there are public spaces that can be used for organizations, it can be that they say you don't fulfill their “criteria for democracy,” or something like that. That you are labeled for something that potentially can happen even though they wouldn't have any problem at all.

This said, not all interviewees had experienced administrative sanctions, and some organizations found ways to get around them. This involved renting or borrowing a venue or mobilizing for events and accessing schools under different organizational names or through broader network structures. For other organizations, being labeled has not had any practical consequences for the way they use venues or mobilize support and resources. This is particularly evident for those that have worked to become autonomous of public institutions and support, which limits their contact with institutional politics and therefore limits the effect of administrative sanctions.

*Silencing*

Given that the RLLM challenges relations of power, ideologically as well as through movement practices, they enter into conflicts with other actors. These conflicts are filtered and mirrored through mass media, which produces the public information by which most people become aware of the RLLM. If movements receive little media attention, groups and events are known mostly to participants, bystanders, and those seeking out specific information, and not the general public. If activists do get media coverage, the question remains whether the coverage is positive or negative in relation to movement goals and activities (Rucht 2004). While none of the interviewees had been directly censored, some activists described how being labeled made it more difficult for them to have a voice in mass media, which scholars refer to as “silencing” (Ferree 2004; Linden and Klandermans 2006). Nicolai (antifascist activist) described how the media excludes actors within the RLLM from giving their perspective, and often lumps different “extremist groups” together in a shallow description of protest events.

I mean, the largest repression is by the media, I would say. Media's determination to not describe things as what they are. To not allow a more profound analysis than to just look at the fact that “there are 200 persons there [antifascists], and 200 persons there [neo-Nazis], and the police

was there,” and so they describe what has happened, in some way. But there is no background information about what either of these groups want. That I think has done the most damage.

Instead of being able to give their own perspectives, activists described how their actions were often interpreted and mediated by police or actors within institutional politics. As Ferree (2004: 149) argues, mass media coverage of a protest event is not equivalent to providing a voice in the media for protesters, and soft repression may involve excluding the perspectives and frames that make sense of the movement’s actions. Peter (antifascist activist) talked about how the media often use the police as “truth tellers,” and how difficult it is to create a counter narrative from a marginalized and stigmatized position:

Mass media are pursuing what police researchers sometimes talk about as “messenger journalism.” There is a low level of source criticism when it comes to the relationship to the police. Media often report what the police says, not like they were one interest group, but like if they were the objective representatives of what has actually happened. And it’s happening routinely. When criminalized persons, persons who are “on the other side,” enter discussions and come from below they are made suspects from the beginning. So it’s not likely, almost not... it’s not possible to get a neutral picture of what happened.

That said, the RLLM seems to do little to develop and deploy counter narratives through media or the internet. With the exception of a few local groups and activists that openly debate or challenge dominant perspectives by writing opinion pieces or publishing counter narratives, most remain silent or rely on the alternative, leftwing press to write on their behalf. Previous research has shown how the online presence of the contemporary RLLM is limited, and that activists do not prioritize the use of the internet (e.g., web 2.0 and social media) for recruitment or spreading alternative views or visions (Andersson 2018). Taken as a whole, the activists we interviewed often found that their ideas and actions were described and interpreted negatively by others, which presumably hindered their mobilization.

### *Confirmation*

While some activists questioned the basis and criteria of the labeling, others saw it as a confirmation that the state took their organization seriously. The latter expressed a sense of pride that their group was assessed as a threat; they have an actual impact and are worthy of attention. They saw it as positive because it acknowledged their group as a political actor, independently of whether they saw the labeling as fair or not. Yet others saw the labeling as expected given their actual violent practices. Taken together, activists use words or phrases such as “a feather in [their] cap,” “motivating,” a “confirmation of [their] self-image” and to wear the label “like a crown,” to describe their perception of being labeled. For Ivan (RF), labeling was to be expected, given the organization’s practices:

I don’t think it was strange [that RF was listed]. I mean, we were the most violent group. So that we would end up on that list, it was nothing odd. However, I think it was SUF [that was also listed]. I thought that was very odd... it became... I don’t know... almost like they were making fun of us. We [RF] didn’t have the same respect for them. AFA was ok. It’s obvious that they were there, but why the others?

Sid (A&A), on the other side, saw the labeling as an acknowledgment of the group’s importance and that the state recognized them as a political threat:

I think they are just telling us that they are watching us. I think that is the reason why they put us in there. I don’t know... maybe this means that they actually see us as a potential threat, and that is kind of what we want to be. I mean... they should take us seriously, because we are serious, at least some parts of the movement are serious.

For some activists, the labeling contributed to molding and upholding what we refer to as an aura of radicalness, that is, a self-image constituting a type of uncompromising and radical challenger to the existing order. According to interviewees, this made it easier for the labeled actors to link and communicate with other radical groups. In this way, the labeling facilitated contacts and collaboration among radicals. The labeling also confirmed and strengthened some of the activists' notions of distrust and hostility towards institutional politics, reinforcing their view that the state saw them as an enemy.

### *Radicalization*

A recurring theme in the interviews was the potential radicalizing effects of labeling and the stigma associated with that. For some activists, the labeling encouraged them to become more radical, while others focused on the potential consequences of the marginalization and isolation of certain organizations within a larger movement. Johan (SUF) described how the labeling triggered him and his friends to be more radical in their politics:

If the ulterior motive is to deradicalize the group, I think it is a huge mistake. I don't think a decision by the state to portray us as radical or violence-affirming will affect anyone who is already in an organization to become more tame and accepting of the state. I rather think it's the exact opposite. . . . If you were already critical of the state, I don't know why an action where the state gives you the middle finger would motivate you to just lie down and accept that "it is like it is." Like I said before, for me personally, if anything, it is motivating.

Activists also spoke of how their organizations had been assessed as something bigger and more threatening than they actually were. Some described how such an image helped to attract a specific type of preferred members (e.g. those most eager to take part in clandestine and violent actions), while for others it forced them to deal with activists that did not align with their organization's repertoires of actions. The former type of reasoning was most evident amongst activists within the covert, exclusive, and militant groups. The latter was more evident among activists who used conventional and transgressive protest tactics and who mobilized in a more overt and inclusive manner. Liza (SUF) elaborated:

For us it's also, and that is once again this indirect problem that, when we are positioned as a violence-affirming organization, as violent troublemakers who just go around and destroy things all the time, then there's a risk that the kind of people who like that, are the ones who become attracted to us. And for all those who don't like violence that much, they might be thinking that . . . well SUF is nothing for them

Several activists elaborated on how labeling risks radicalizing those groups that are ostracized. Activists addressed how contacts and coalitions between radical and moderate organizations often have a moderating effect on the choice of protest tactics, and that the labeling isolated certain groups, pushing them in a more radical direction. Carl (SUF/SAC) reflected on how isolation can create a sense of urgency and an isolationist mentality:

Now, this might be an odd metaphor, but in school when you have students who are quite lively, rowdy and such—how do you work with that? [You] try to work inclusively and to strengthen the positive aspects there are. If I [as a teacher] would distance myself from that individual... that's not possible. It would create more distance, even more radical expressions from that student. [...] I can imagine that just the actual labeling does a lot for you to feel isolated and make you use more radical methods. The more you ostracize and label, the more water is flowing through one's mill.

Previous research on the effects of protest coalitions on the choice of protest tactics aligns with Carl's observation. Studies show how protests co-staged by moderate and radical RLLM groups rarely turn violent, and that violent protest tactics are more common when radical groups stage their own protests, particularly in relation to specific protest issues, such as antifascism (Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2018).

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The NC and other state agencies have primarily targeted organizations and movement milieus, but the effects of the soft repression techniques of labeling and stigmatization are clearly noticeable on the individual level as well. It is on this level we find the most dire consequences for movement mobilization. We have distinguished two effects of labeling and stigmatization described by activists: fear of social sanctions and self-policing. For many activists, the fear of being labeled a violence-affirming extremist results in increased self-control and decreased openness about one's political engagement, which hinders movement mobilization. Some activists, however, stated they were not concerned about being labeled, while others acknowledged the risks but decided to not let their actions be affected by external actors.

### *Fear of Social Sanction*

A recurring theme in the interviews was that labeling and stigma spills over from the organization to the individual level. Activists described how the stigma associated with the labeled groups also affected individuals who were publicly associated with these groups, either voluntarily or involuntarily; for instance, they could be "outed" by countermovements, mass media, and state agencies. The concerns of interviewees centered around risks and experiences of being publicly discredited, or becoming the subject of social sanctions. These included being personally disadvantaged and having one's political engagement publicly ridiculed or delegitimized.

Activists described a lingering uncertainty about how the labeling would affect their future prospects. Activists who were publicly associated with a labeled organization feared that they would run a higher risk of being subjected to social sanction, for example, when applying for certain jobs, finding an apartment, pursuing academics, or by being called out and questioned in social situations. Lucas (A&A) thought the labeling would affect his life chances in the long run:

It is a repressive tool against us, it is going to create troubles for us you know, it is not fun. It is like... it is just like... you are looking forward to a time in like five years, and you are looking for a job in a school or something, and your CV or your application letter is going to be thrown into the garbage because: "oh, you were a part of this organization then." That is maybe what is going to happen, right.

Activists also described how labeling was used by media and countermovements to discredit and delegitimize their political engagement and opinions. Branding certain activists as extremists or associated with extremism devalued their ideas and actions, while also exposing them to the risk of social sanction. For instance, Fredrik (A&A) described how countermovements used labeling to publicly discredit him in relation to his activist work:

Like when we were working with the Roma migrants, there were some of us who were outed on different racist blogs and so on. I mean, there is.... It brings more ammunition for outing people, because then they [the countermovement] can say, "Ah, this is a leftist person, but it's also a leftist person who's in a violence-affirming group."

Activists further described how being individually associated with extremism led to increased risks and concerns of being a target of state repression and attacks from counter movements. In this respect, activists feared that soft repression would pave the way for harder repression, such as judicial sanctions, harassment, surveillance or violence from either the police or neo-Nazi groups. Nicolai (antifascist activist) described how many activists mocked labeling on an organizational or movement level but, nevertheless, felt its effect as individuals:

It is the individual forms of repression that make the difference, which make people scared to take that step. There, the structural, the organizational and the individual levels merge. Am I prepared to take those risks? That Nazis will come to my home, come at me and my children. Am I prepared to be surveilled by the police? That they know who I am. Am I prepared that at the next demonstration I might get sentenced for something, just because I am easy to recognize?

For some, the risk of being labeled created uncertainty and anxiety regarding how open they should be in social settings about their political engagement. The risk of being associated with violent extremism made some hesitant to act openly and in public, which the next section explicates further.

### *Self-Policing*

The fear of being associated with violent extremism as individuals caused many activist interviewees to be more cautious when doing politics in public. The risk of label association was also reported to affect their personal life and social activities. For some, there was a reduced willingness to talk about their political engagement in certain of their social spheres, such as at their workplace, in school, or within the family, even when their practices were nonviolent. The risks of social stigma and being individually discredited led to self-imposed restriction and a reduced willingness to be open about their political engagement. For instance, Stefan (A&A) elaborated how he was cautious when talking about his political engagement at his workplace:

[It is] a little more complex if you're working at a school that is supposed to counteract violence-affirming extremism, and then you—in a very odd way—have been classified as a violence-affirming extremist. I can't say to my headmaster that: "Well, I'm in here, on this list that we're supposed to educate against." However, I have always spoken openly about what I actually do. Like, now I am involved in this project with EU migrants, or now I'm involved in housing issues through this campaign. I can say that, and it always results in good discussions. But I notice that I am afraid to mention the name of the organization that actually stands behind it, and I think that is because I'm afraid that I could be fired from the school I'm working in. So, it's a form of internalized repression.

Damian (antifascist activist) described how he has become increasingly aware of what he says and does in particular environments so as not to trigger social sanction. This involves how he speaks about his activism to others, but also when doing politics in public. When involved in political actions together with a group that has been labeled, he is more reticent and cautious, and he avoids situations that could lead to public disclosure. He has seen a similar pattern among many older activist friends:

For instance, I was working in a state company for a few years. There I was very scared that it would become known what groups I was close to. Because then I know that I would never be able to keep my job. . . . I was extra cautious during those years. I didn't want to be noticed, acted more in the background, and was very careful to not situate myself where I would risk getting arrested or so. I know a lot of people who have been very militant, who don't dare anymore, who don't want to take those risks. They might have family and a lot more to lose.

The processes described above can be conceptualized as self-policing, which involves a form of self-silencing. Many of the activists we interviewed engaged in political debates on particular issues, but at times they were hesitant to connect their views to a specific organization or movement. This presumably obstructs mobilization. The movement organizations in which the activists participate thus remain unmentioned, and for potential adherents the connection between their ideas/practices and their organizational affiliation remains fraught.

## **MOVEMENT LEVEL**

Labeling certain organizations as violent extremists also has consequences for the larger social movement of which they are a part. In this section we highlight the effects of labeling and stigmatization on the movement level. We have found two distinct effects that seemingly hinder mobilization: splintering and blackening. The former creates obstacles for interplay between radical and moderate parts of the RLLM, and the latter reinforces the stigmatization of radical left-wing activism in the public discourse.

### *Splintering*

If some organizations within a broad social movement are labeled violent extremists, this can affect intramovement dynamics. The possibilities for contact, collaboration, and coalitions are altered, as activists in nonlabeled organizations might become hesitant to engage with the ones that are labeled. Interviewees described this as one of the goals of labeling—the state was attempting to cause internal divisions and fractures within the broad extraparliamentary left. Lena (AFA/AåA) elaborated:

For sure, it is a way to try to divide. They have always tried to separate the “good” from the “bad” demonstrators; those who just want to protest a bit and have their political say and that stupid little group who is trying to destroy for everybody else. And that is a strategy both media and the police has pursued, something they have been pushing for quite a long time.

This said, the actual effects of splintering seemed quite marginal for most interviewees. Existing research on the RLLM also shows that the number of protests staged by coalitions and collaborations has increased since 2010, and that central actors within the movement strive for more inclusive and open forms of organizing (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019; Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2018, 2020). This is not to say that splintering has not occurred and that the interplay has always been unproblematic. In interviews, activists described how institutional actors, such as political parties, were hesitant to participate in mobilizations together with the labeled groups. Activists described how it often became complicated when labeled organizations were present at larger mobilizations, because it made political parties and their youth associations shy away.

Activists from nonlabeled RLLM organizations also described experiences of being questioned about their association with extremist groups. As other scholars have noted, making public an activist’s association with a stigmatized group is a common strategy used to discredit their political work (Linden and Klandermans 2006). Activists from nonlabeled groups described being questioned by media or discredited by political opponents, forcing them into a defensive position where the main question was whether they were against what the state defined as violence and the leftwing groups who were associated with it. This can be understood as a logic of distancing, in which actors are pressured to categorically and publicly disassociate from other groups within the same movement, something most interviewees refused to do. Peter (antifascist activist) described this reality:

It becomes a tool they can use against any group they want. In practice it means that they must get one group to disassociate from others, and in that way they can isolate the elements they think are the most problematic.

Our data also contain examples of how fear of being associated with discredited organizations and extremism caused internal splintering within organizations that were not targeted. Some interviewees from nonlabeled groups described internal disputes regarding how their organizations should relate to labeled groups, with some advocating public disassociation and others refusing to do so. This has led to factions within the nonlabeled groups. In order to avoid splintering within the movement, interviewees from labeled groups described the importance of interpersonal connections. By being involved in several political groups and issues, activists often create larger network, structures in which personal relationships play an important role (Opp and Roehl 1990). These personal relationships, and the firsthand experiences they give rise to, seem to help create barriers against distancing, as well as to make labeling more difficult.

### *Blackening*

Several interviewees described the term “violence-affirming extremist” as an ideological concept or tool, without a precise meaning or boundary. According to activists, the tool was used by their opponents to ostracize, marginalize, and depoliticize them by creating a division between the “norm” and the “extreme.” The vagueness of the concept and concerns about its application

on radical left groups resulted in an experience of a generalized blackening of the entire radical left. Many RLLM activists did not see the labeling as a response to actual acts of political violence, but rather to what the RLLM represented in terms of ideas and practices that challenged the political and economic order. According to activists, the labeled groups were just “the most well-known ones,” while the real purpose was to discredit radical leftwing activism in general. Elvira (GAF) reflected on this:

The purpose, out of the repressors’ point of view, is to depoliticize political movements. A label such as “extremist” or “violence affirming,” moves the focus away from . . . the fact that these groups are political forces that want something political, saying they are both “extremists.” Extremists are something outside of yourself, it is something very alien, like a weird sect. It is nothing ordinary people can relate to.

As Elvira said in the quote above, a reoccurring experience of blackening is the clustering of left-wing radical groups together with their ideological adversaries, such as religious fundamentalists and neo-Nazis. The clustering puts the leftist groups in the same camp as terrorist organizations like al-Qaida and militant far-right groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement. According to activists, the labeling does not recognize ideational differences, such as motivation for actions and political purposes. Instead, the label is seen to equate a broad set of actions that involve or support some kind of violence, ranging from terrorist bombings, political assassinations, and arson, to property damage and self-defense against neo-Nazis. To illustrate the constructed nature of the concept, several activists used the “horseshoe theory” (Mayer 2011) to explain their interpretation of labeling: a depiction of extreme right and extreme left groups as resembling each other rather than being at opposite ends of a linear left–right political continuum. Several activists described this construct as “absurd” or “bizarre,” and they were unable to take it seriously. Ivan (RF) and Anita (A&A) both joked about it:

It became a “kålsupar-teori” [horseshoe theory], relevant in the light of this extremism talk; the idea that “all are equally evil,” just because you . . . I don’t know. It is difficult to relate to. If someone robs a store, and I hit the thief, am I then equally bad?

This report [Samtalskompassen] was the first time Allt åt alla was mentioned as a violent extremist leftist group, and we were like ha ha ha [laughter], this is ridiculous! Seriously, this isn’t real . . . this isn’t researched. The report sort of describes Allt åt Alla, as well as Daesh, ISIS and like the Nazi movement, and says like, “this is extremism.” “This is what it looks like.” And we are like, but . . . can’t you see the difference here? We are not a group that actually does like violent attacks.

Several of the activists had also noticed a gradual change in public discourse, in that radical leftwing engagement was being broadly discredited. They said that the depiction of some groups as violent extremists was having a spillover effect on the radical left in general, creating an undefined picture of left-wing activism and antifascist work as something extreme or violent. Interviewees also described how more and more movement practices were being associated with extremism. Repertoires of actions previously seen as challenging or provocative by actors within institutional politics, such as civil disobedience and other forms of protest that challenge or transgress laws, were now considered extreme. Nicolai (antifascist activist) described this change:

The entire antifascist work and the militant work have been stigmatized and blackened by media, the state repression and the official discourse. It is to the extent that no one wants to be associated with it. [...] You don’t want to protest the Nazis because you don’t want to be dragged into the dirt. That is what the term “violence-affirming extremism” has done. I mean . . . it becomes a question you don’t want to get close to, it is too loaded. There is too much negative energy there.

Experiences such as these can have a demobilizing effect on a social movement. The quotation illustrates the effect of being forced into a defensive posture and a general sense that tailwind has now turned to a headwind, which is likely to hinder mobilization.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article we have addressed two main research questions: (1) How do targeted activists perceive and experience soft repressive measures against radicalization and extremism? and (2) What are the effects of these measures, and how do activists respond to them? While the empirical section has mainly been devoted to describing perceptions and experiences, the concluding section highlights the complex and diverging effects and responses to these measures. Figure 2 below summarizes the most prevalent effects of labeling and stigmatization as perceived and experienced by RLLM activists, demonstrating how the consequences of soft repression differ at the organizational, individual, and movement levels.

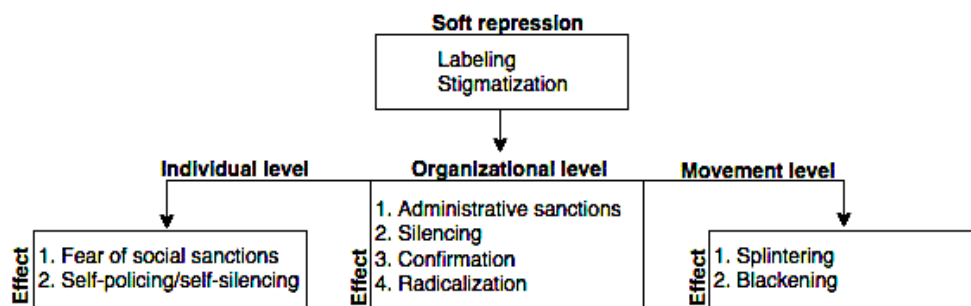
The labeling of certain groups as “violence-affirming extremists” primarily targets the organizational level of the RLLM. The labeling has increased the stigma of the four RLLM groups examined, with splintering and blackening being spillover effects on the larger movement they are part of. The labeling and establishment of “violence-affirming extremism” as a social problem also seems to have provided a framework through which adversaries of the RLLM, as well as mass media and civil society, can evaluate and discredit the RLLM.

We found the most marked consequences of soft repression at the individual level, where the risks of being associated with the extremist label seem greatest. The labeling of certain RLLM groups as extremist seem to have triggered security precautions and increased the fear of social sanction among some of the activists. The self-policing that follows shows that these activists have become more hesitant to be open about their political engagement, both in private and public settings. In turn, the accumulated processes of individual self-policing and self-silencing are likely to have negative effects on the potential to mobilize new adherents. As fewer people speak for and represent these organizations in public, their visibility decreases, which is likely to hinder their mobilization. Because these organizations have been among the most active in the RLLM movement, it is also likely that these obstacles to mobilization have affected the overall movement.

While the fear of social sanction at the individual level can be seen as an indirect effect of the labeling, the experiences of administrative sanctions and silencing at the organizational level are more direct. According to the interviewees, however, these latter effects are marginal and tied to specific local contexts. Also, few of the labeled organizations seek a voice in mass media or enter into situations where they risk becoming the subject of administrative sanctions (e.g., by seeking funding or access to public venues). Those that have done so either experienced few problems or found ways to get around the sanctions, such as using other organizational names.

In tandem with the demobilizing effects described above, our analysis also shows that “backfiring” can take place; that is, repression can make the subjects of repression more radical or it triggers movement mobilization (della Porta 2013; Lindekilde 2014). In our case, back-firing sometimes takes the form of confirmation, where the labeling creates an aura of radicalness that facilitates contacts between radicals and increases distrust of institutional politics. Previous research has shown that when a belief that the state is acting against a partic-

**Figure 2:** Consequences of Soft Repression





ular movement is strengthened, militancy and clandestine activities can increase (Peterson and Wahlström 2015; Tilly 2005). Also, our analysis shows how labeling itself can result in activists and organizations becoming radicalized, as the organizations more readily attract, either voluntarily or involuntarily, activists who are seeking out militant, high-risk activism, a conclusion that aligns with Gitlin's (1980) work on antiwar activism.

The complexity of our findings reveals that activists, organizations, and movements are variously affected by labeling. When attempting to understand how labeling and stigmatization affect tactics, mobilizing patterns, and the potential to mobilize among the different RLLM groups, our analysis offers a multifaceted picture with partially contradictory results. The variation is due to differences in local contexts (e.g., local antiextremism efforts, infrastructure of local movements, and more), as well as the nature and mobilizing ambitions of the groups themselves. With regards to the latter, the three-dimensional figure of radicalness introduced above (figure 1) can help us elaborate the results. The figure schematically highlights internal differences among the organizations with regard to their choice of tactics (violent or transgressive), form of organizing (overt or covert) and level of openness in mobilization and recruitment (inclusive or exclusive) (see Zald and Ash Gardner 1987 on the inclusive-exclusive dimension). Based on the above analysis, we argue that these three dimensions are central for better understanding how different radical social movement organizations are impacted by soft repression.

The impact of labeling and stigmatization seems most prominent among those groups that seek to build a broad movement through open and inclusive organizing and that use conventional and transgressive forms of protests (in our case, SUF and AåA). For these groups, perceived consequences such as blackening, administrative sanctions, silencing, splintering, and risk of social sanction are seen as barriers to mobilizing a wide constituency. Among clandestine groups, who more often use violent protest tactics and mobilize covertly and exclusively, labeling seemingly has little effect and can even trigger backfire effects (RF and AFA). Since these groups are already closed and mobilize selectively, they are not likely to be affected by labeling and stigmatization in the same way as organizations that try to mass mobilize. In addition, the aura of radicalness described above might help to attract the type of members that seek out clandestine, high-risk activism. Based on our interview data and aggregated analysis, the labeling apparently fails to deradicalize the primary target of the repressive actions, that is, the most militant groups, and instead hinders mobilization in those groups that engage in conventional and transgressive forms of protest.

We also analyzed activists' responses to the repressive practices of labeling and stigmatization. Here one can discern two main lines of responses, following the logic of the three-dimensional figure presented above (figure 1): turning inwards and turning outwards. Turning outwards entails engaging in the public sphere and debate, remaining an open and transparent organization as a way to counter the stigma of the label and/or as a way to consciously mobilize a broad swath of the population. This line of reasoning is most common among activists in groups situated on the overt, inclusive, and transgressive ends of the three-axes continuum. However, previous research shows that this development need not be the case. When open and inclusive movements fail to gain visibility and mobilize, they sometimes become more sectarian or radicalize, increasing the risk of backfire effects described above (Rucht 2004). In relation to the responses described above, activists closer to the covert, exclusive, and violent ends more frequently spoke of changes in group practices that coincided with turning inwards. This meant adopting even more exclusive and clandestine forms of organizing and giving less consideration to activities related to public outreach and overt activism. If there is a need to mobilize broadly, this is considered to be best done through other organizations or under temporary names and structures. For these activists, the labeling confirmed their perception of what was to be expected from a "repressive state apparatus," raising their awareness of potential surveillance and targeted attacks from the police. As organizations, they also risked becoming more isolated within the RLLM, which several interviewed activists spoke of as having a potentially radicalizing effect. The tendency to either turn inwards or outwards is also mirrored at the individual level. Here, self-policing and self-silencing is situated at one end of the spectrum (turning inwards), while

increased reliance on interpersonal connections and conscious efforts to build collective awareness of and resilience to repression is situated at the other (turning outwards).

From the above distinction between those that turn inward and those that turn outward in response to soft repression, we assume that the groups that are most militant might become even more radical as a result of this form of repression. This points to another relevant aspect of repression: how hard and soft forms of repression interact. Existing research has pointed out what this study confirms: soft repression through the use of discursive strategies might discredit certain social movement groups and isolate them from a broader movement milieu by labeling them as “terrorists” or “violent extremists” (Zwerman, Steinhoff, and della Porta 2000). In this way, soft repression can lay the groundwork for hard repression and increase the likelihood that the employment of hard repression will not be seen as unjust or as a disproportionate overreaction by the general public (Linden and Klandermans 2006). This suggests that soft repression can be employed strategically as a tool to avoid or at least reduce backfire against hard repression (Fallon, Aunio, and Kim 2018). In the case of the RLLM, both RF and AFA have become the object of hard repression during the period of our study, with several of their activists arrested and sentenced following targeted police operations. According to interviewed activists, the hard repression (e.g., targeted police operations) affected these organizations negatively, contributing to the demobilization of AFA and to the dispersion of RF in 2015.

Further exploring the interaction between soft and hard repression during cycles of contention could be a valuable contribution to the research on repression and social control of protest because soft and hard repression are often combined and have a cumulative impact (Starr, Fernandez, Amster, Wood, and Caro 2008). For example, one could examine more closely the interplay between different forms of repression, if and how they are combined strategically, and with what consequences and which actors are involved. Research on soft forms of repression that involve local governmental actors, as well as private and civil society actors, would benefit from more attention (Earl 2006). Our study has contributed to this area of research by examining the consequences of labeling and stigmatization at various movement levels. We also illustrated the different roles that central government, local municipal, and civil society actors might play in this form of repression.

It would be of value to scrutinize how our results on soft repression of the RLLM transfers to other targeted movements, such as neo-Nazis or militant Islamists, as well as to other Western countries. While we would expect similar effects of labeling and stigmatization, research must take into account that these are different movements, with distinct ideological, tactical, and biographical characteristics. We expect that who the activists are, their aims, and how their movement is positioned in relation to mainstream society will impact the way they perceive and experience repression. For instance, in Sweden RLLM activists are seemingly better integrated into society and less socially marginalized than neo-Nazis and militant Islamists (Jämte and Wennerhag 2019). This being said, being linked to leftwing extremism might mean one thing in Sweden and another in Poland or Greece, given the variations across historical and current sociopolitical contexts. Examining the ways in which these biographical, movement-specific, and contextual variations condition the effect of soft repression on social movements is a task for future research.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is no consensus on how to translate the Swedish term “*våldsbejakande*” into English. Different actors use different translations: “proviolence” (The Swedish Media Council 2014), “violence-promoting extremism” (Swedish Security Services 2018), “violence approving extremism” (Wahlström 2018), and “violent extremism” (MUCF 2016). We find the word “affirming” to be more analytically precise, since it conveys the connotations of the Swedish word “*bejakande*” (being supportive/positive towards).

<sup>2</sup> In this text, “militancy” refers to using some form of violence to reach a political goal.

<sup>3</sup> Conventional tactics include actions that are confined to established institutional routines and norms (peaceful demonstrations and rallies, handing out leaflets, picketing, street performances, workplace strikes, etc.). Transgressive contention challenges established routines and balances on the borders of legitimacy/illegitimacy and legality/illegality (blockades,

squatting, counterdemonstrations, nonviolent confrontations, etc.). Violent tactics cross the border of legality and use some form of violence against objects (property damage) and/or people (violence against persons/groups). See table 2.

<sup>4</sup> In other countries, governments have used concepts that differ from the Swedish one. In Norway, for example, the term “violent extremism” is used.

<sup>5</sup> Research on the RLLM in Sweden has shown that the movement has changed its main protest issues and protest tactics since the late 1990s. From utilizing more disruptive forms of protest in the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a marked decline in the use of violent protest tactics since 2010. Instead, the movement use more conventional forms of protests (Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2020).

<sup>6</sup> There are some conventional and transgressive protests that have escalated into property damage or violence against individuals. Out of 2,403 conventional and 674 transgressive RLLM PEs (3,077 total), 86 conventional and 112 transgressive PEs (198 total) ended in some sort of violence. Often it is difficult to identify which activists or specific organizations took part in the escalation, which means these data are presented as activities at the movement level (see Jämte and Wennerhag 2019).

<sup>7</sup> 0.5% covers acts of property damage.

<sup>8</sup> 1.0% covers acts of property damage, and confrontations with adversaries.

<sup>9</sup> During the research process we also interviewed thirty government officials tasked with preventing radicalization and extremism, mainly teachers, police, social workers, and so-called local coordinators against violent extremism. Preliminary results from this research can be found in Jämte and Wennhag (2019).

<sup>10</sup> We are grateful for the collaboration with Ilaria Pitti, who conducted ten of the interviews during her ethnographic fieldwork on the radical left in Sweden.

<sup>11</sup> We are thankful to Gabriel Hällqvist and Sebastian Piepenburg for their assistance with transcribing the interviews, and also to the latter for assisting in the initial coding of the material. We would also like to thank Frida Dahlin for translation of quotations.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike most existing protest-event datasets, our data were obtained from the movements’ own media (cf., Hutter 2014). Research shows that only a small percentage of protest events are covered by conventional media and that movement-based reporting is less biased towards large and disruptive forms of protest than conventional media (Almeida and Lichbach 2003; Rucht 2004). A comparison between reports of RLLM protest events in Sweden’s biggest newspaper and movement media confirms these results (see Jämte and Wennerhag 2019). The main source for the 3,836 Swedish RLLM protest-event cases analyzed in this article was Motkraft.net (which provided information for 2,080 protest events), a website, and online newsletter publishing reports by RLLM groups from across the country. Additional information for protest events was found in other RLLM media, both printed material (periodicals, fanzines, and newsletters) and web-based material (including open Facebook group pages, YouTube videos, and RLLM group websites). All events were manually coded. The dataset was constructed during the research project Radicalization and Deradicalization, funded by The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), and the research project Anarchists in Eastern and Western Europe—a Comparative Study, funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. These projects also involved researchers Magnus Wennerhag, Måns Lundstedt, and Kalle Eriksson in coding and constructing the dataset. Thanks to all, and to Wennerhag for providing us with the requested data for this article. For more information on the dataset see Jämte and Wennerhag (2019) and Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag (2020).

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