

## Harassment and Threats, Concern and Fear: the Experiences of Local Politicians in Ludvika, Sweden

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### Abstract

Sweden has a history of a stable party system, democracy, consensus, welfare and few labour market conflicts. But after the election in 2014, the Ludvika municipality in Sweden found itself in an unusual situation: a representative from a neo-Nazi party – the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) – held a seat in its local political council. The party, and its movement, are the most prominent representative of violent white supremacy in Sweden, known not least for its fear-mongering tactics. Between November 1, 2017 and August 31, 2018, Dalarna University conducted a study using questionnaires and interviews within the Ludvika municipality to investigate the sense of safety felt by elected representatives of both the political council and the municipal boards. An anticipated result might have been that the NRM presence in the municipal assembly has strongly impacted on the politicians' sense of safety – and also has increased political tensions. To a certain extent, this proved to be the case. However, Ludvika politicians must also contend with other sources of and reasons for mockery, harassment and threats: predominantly “angry citizens” due to controversial decisions, personal conflicts within established parties relating to the choice of personnel, and a contempt for in particular some extreme right wing political opinions. The results regarding the sense of safety and vulnerability are very much in line with national figures. Even overall, Swedish politicians at the national, regional and local levels are aware of pressure from right-wing extremists, who distribute propaganda that often incorporates blame, an exposing of individuals and violent language. The result from Ludvika should therefore be seen as one of degree rather than of type, as the situation is worse here than in other municipal councils in Sweden. A conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that the political debate is heading in an increasingly antagonistic direction, where ideological adversaries are regarded more as enemies than as legitimate opponents. While in the long term this can pose a threat to democracy, positive counter-responses were found in Ludvika that can serve to support the democratic position.

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### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

#### *The Context – Right-Wing Extremism in Ludvika*

The municipality of Ludvika, with over 25 000 residents, is located in the county of Dalarna, 200 km northwest of Stockholm. In the middle of the industrial belt in the

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<sup>2</sup> The empirical results in this article are based on the report (Frisk et al. 2018): *Förtroendevaldas trygghet i Ludvika kommun (The Safety of Elected Representatives in the Municipality of Ludvika)*.

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countryside of mid-Sweden, Ludvika hosts a global company ABB, which works in the electrification, industrial automation, motion and robotics businesses. The company accommodates an international workforce reaching out to the whole world. It is one of Sweden's more international communities and one fifth of the population was born abroad (Statistics Sweden 2020) with a mixture of highly educated specialists and migrant groups looking for refuge and settlement in Sweden.<sup>3</sup> Harboring this successful, technological export industry with its international influx to the community, it seems surprising that the municipality of Ludvika also faces the establishment of the xenophobic Nazi organization, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM).

Within Ludvika, the organization NRM has set up its firmest stronghold in Sweden, and activists have gradually been moving into the region. The local radio station reports that 44 national socialists now live in Dalarna County, about half of them in Ludvika and its surrounding area (P4 2018). In the 2014 municipal election, an NRM candidate took a seat in the local council as a result of the contrivance of others. 18 individuals wrote the NRM candidates' name on the ballot ticket of the Sweden Democrats (Gasslander 2017). In the 2018 election, NRM failed to reach 2 percent of the votes to gain a seat on their own merit, and the leading NRM representatives were forced to vacate their seats in the political council.<sup>4</sup>

Politicians, civil servants, industrial leaders and scholars alike try to understand why Ludvika has become such a stronghold for right-wing extremism and what consequences there are for the community and local politics. In the early 1990s, there was an upswing in right-wing extremist activities in Ludvika, with the emergence of groups, such as Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (White Arian Resistance) and Riksfronten (The National Front). Many activists and leading figures chose to remain in Ludvika, with the revival of neo-Nazi organizations after the year 2000. As of the present day, it is the NRM that has the greatest support among right-wing extremist groups. Dalarna University historian Lars Båtefalk contends that in the mid-Sweden region, many industrial towns have faced closure of industries, unemployment, economic issues and a sense of dying rural communities since the 1990's. This has led to a

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<sup>3</sup> The five biggest ethnic minorities being from Somalia, Syria, Finland, Eritrea and Iraq.

<sup>4</sup> They received just over 200 of the votes cast (1.3 percent) (Fäldt 2018).

sense of vulnerability and hopelessness (Blomberg, Båtefalk & Stier 2018). Such conditions seem to provide a breeding-ground for pessimism and resentment (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018). Support for NRM is also found in other middle-sized Swedish towns, such as Borlänge, Kungälv and Boden.

This article presents a Swedish case study where elected politicians in a local municipality have been subject to threats, harassment, violence and damage to property. This is a result of their political work and a sharp struggle between right-wing political activists and counter-activities from established local political parties and left-wing activists.

### *Threats, Violence and Fear*

Sweden has the highest number of right-wing related homicides in Western Europe in terms of population over the last 25 years (Due Enstad & Aasland Ravndal 2015). In this research, homicide is defined as an event when one or more people are killed in the same deed. Sixteen people have been killed because of right-wing motives since 1990 and the last homicide deed was in 2015. The number of homicides is changing over time, but the people in the right-wing extremist environment are statistically reported for many crimes, not only politically motivated ones (Brå/ Swedish Security Service 2009).

Right-wing organisations are difficult to describe and cover because they are often split up into new organisations, but for the moment NRM is the leading body. Some NRM sympathisers and members are not opposed to politically motivated violence – which, according to the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen), involves attempts to influence democracy by way of actions and elements that feed on fear (Swedish Security Service 2017, p. 29):

These include, for example, threats of violence (either expressed or by way of fearmongering), arson attacks on public buildings and the homes of party members, violent protests to prevent authorised demonstrations and the planning of terrorist attacks.

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The Swedish Security Service points to “threats of violence (either expressed or by way of fear-mongering)” which is a problem since it is not always a clearly expressed threat (cf. Frisk et al. 2017). Because extremist environments have resources in terms of a reputation for violence and fear, they can influence others simply by way of sound and gesture – or by making themselves visible. They are often aware of where the boundary to a criminal act lies in terms of harassment and threats. In other words, they are able to make use of the sense of fear that their presence can instill in others without actually breaking the law, despite the fact that their actions may appear to cross the lines of what is legal.

The presence of the NRM has been tangible in Ludvika. On May 1 (International Labour Day) in 2018 and 2019, a large number of NRM supporters marched on its streets. They made themselves known by placing stickers in public places and by distributing pamphlets. The media described the situation with headlines, such as “Nazi recruitment in school grounds in Ludvika” (DN 2018). From their platform in the political council, the NRM representative engaged in heated local issues, for example, the closure of village schools (that they wanted to remain open). Further, the NRM has had political council meetings filmed, and then put these films, with a commentary, on their Nordfront website. In principle, there is no prohibition to filming and making public the meetings in the way that the NRM does; however, it was decided in the local council not to be put in practice in Ludvika. It is clear from our study that members of the political council find the NRM’s practices disturbing and coercive. NRM supporters have also attended these political council meetings as members of the public, and from their seats, sighs and comments are audible.

The descriptions above provide a glimpse into the Ludvika situation and led to the municipality-launched project *Våldsbejakande extremism – lägesbild och handlingsplan för Ludvika kommun* (*Violent Extremism – the Situation and Action Plan for the Municipality of Ludvika*). Its purpose was to help the municipality to establish a firm foundation on which to tackle violent extremism. The municipality, Dalarna’s County Administrative Board and Dalarna University have been collaborating in the project. As commissioned by the municipality, Dalarna University has examined the safety of local politicians. It is this part of the project that forms the basis of this article.

*A Wider Context of Extremism in the Nordic Countries*

To delve deep into Ludvika in the heart of the Dalarna is to study the broader currents of nationalistic and right-wing populist and extremist movements around the globe. Of course, we cannot make generalizations, because these movements are highly diverse. Some have a firm position within the population and a large electoral base, while others, such as the NRM, are more closed and hierarchical. Nonetheless, one feature of these movements is their desire to close national borders, restrictive views on immigration and, at times, xenophobia. Especially strong is the anti-Muslim and counter-Jihad sentiment, depicting a demographic threat where Muslims are claimed to have more children than “the native population” and therefore are slowly taking over the country (Hannus et al. 2012, Bangstad 2014). NRM and other white supremacist groups describe immigration as an “invasion”. War metaphors from the American White Power Movement are used, and the world is claimed to be in the midst of a global race war (Brå 2009). Contemporary white supremacy movements root themselves firmly in 1930’s Nazism through their use of propaganda, historical references, symbols and uniforms.

Against this backdrop, this article also touches on the larger question of the vulnerability of democracy in terms of threats and unpermitted influence directed at its elected politicians, public officials and journalists (Brå 2016:13, Brå 2017:9, Löfgren Nilsson 2017). Individuals behind such influences are diverse in their background: from angry citizens subjecting others to harassment, to those with interests in or who are involved in organized crime.

Moreover, a number of definitions of the concept “organized crime” exist, and many stress its capacity to effect change on the structure of society (Fijnaut et al. 1998). In established democracies, such as Sweden’s, which has low levels of corruption, what is notable are foremost harassment, threats and violence (Brå 2005:18, Brå 2016:13). Also as with social media, elected representatives have become more exposed to harassment, threats and hate-filled messages (Fischer Bjelland & Bjørge 2014).

Political and religious extremism/activism underlies much of the unauthorized influence, as are harassments and threats targeting elected representatives. According to

Norwegian sources, religious extremism/activism accounted for 11.5 percent of the perceived motives behind unauthorized influence, whereas right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism accounted for 6.5 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively (Fischer Bjelland & Bjørge 2014). A Swedish study showed that 30 percent of elected politicians believed that influencers belonged to an extremist political group (Brå 2017:9). Influencers are dominated by those who are perceived to belong to right-wing extremist or racist groups (43 percent) compared with a mere 2 percent from left-wing extremist groups (Löfgren Nilsson 2017). Civil servants are also subject to influence motivated by extremism, but to a much lesser degree than politically elected individuals and in arenas where opinions are shaped (Brå 2017:9). In short, right-wing extremists are active influencers.

## Methods and Theoretical Perspectives

### *Aims and Purpose of the Study*

This study on politicians' sense of safety involved both a questionnaire and interviews. Its purpose was to investigate the sense of safety and vulnerability of elected representatives in the municipality of Ludvika using the following questions:

- To what extent have elected representatives in Ludvika been subject to violence, damage to property, threats and harassment as a result of their political work?
- In what situations and contexts do the above occur?
- What consequences do violence, damage to property, threats and harassment – and concerns related to these – have at a personal level?
- In what way can these – and concerns related to these – threaten democracy?

### *Methods and Data*

The questionnaire included questions from national surveys on the safety of politicians by Sweden's National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå 2017). In addition, a question intended to pinpoint more subtle forms of threat and harassment was formulated – “any other unpleasant situation” – where respondents could indicate lesser forms of such behaviour, such

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as mockery and ridicule. There was also a question about the implementation of positive counter-responses.

The time span examined in the Ludvika questionnaire was the politicians' experiences during their entire term of office from 2014 to 2018. The national Brå survey was for the year 2016 only.

The study was conducted between November 1, 2017 and August 31, 2018. Questionnaires were distributed to municipal political councils in conjunction with visits and a presentation of the project. Questionnaires were also sent to all municipal boards. The number of possible respondents was 136. In total, 77 individuals completed the questionnaire, of whom 49 were members/replacements in the municipal political council, the remaining 28 being members of the municipal boards. The response rate was thus 57 percent. In the questionnaire, the respondents could state if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and, if so, provided their contact details and also indicated what of threats they had experienced.

Next, semi-structured interviews – conversational in character (Burgess 1984) – were conducted with all politicians willing to take part. The interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and revolved around the experiences that respondents had indicated in the questionnaire. Twelve people were interviewed: all had experienced threats, violence and/or harassment (1 M, 1 Mp, 1 NRM, 4 S, 3 SD, 2 V). Five informants were thus from right-wing parties, and seven from left-wing parties. As some of the informants were afraid of further threats, we have deliberately not been precise about relating information to specific informants. Mostly, however, their party affiliation is stated, except when this has made the informants too easy to identify and they have asked for specific precautions regarding their identity.

The study followed the research ethics principles in humanist-social science research of the Swedish Research Council ([www.codex.vr.se](http://www.codex.vr.se)): prior to their interviews, interviewees were informed about the purpose and design of the study. Since all informants took part as representatives for their respective party, oral consent only was obtained.



### *Limitations*

In focus for this study are Swedish local politicians' experiences of threats, harassment and violence - as they have been conveyed to us in the survey and in interviews. This said, this study cannot determine either the prevalence or specifics of such occurrences, nor the authenticity or truthfulness of such accounts. Reasons for this are that people may not be willing to share their experiences or be completely honest or they may experience threats, harassment and violence differently. Nonetheless, such experiences affect the way people act or do not act – for instance, in political situations.

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

The democratic debate in Ludvika, as in the case with Sweden as a whole, seems to be moving from respect for a plurality of opinions in the direction of hate and threat, where violence can be used against political opponents. Theoretically, this article aims to highlight how levels of hate and threat among opponents within society can affect democratic debate.

Political scientists refer to the foundations of democratic societies: different (party-)political interests are articulated by way of the formulation of ideas by different interest groups following a central democratic principle of political tolerance and the importance of accepting one's political adversaries (Lundberg 2018). Currently, there is a theoretical discussion on how conflicts are to be understood in a pluralistic democratic society (Tambakaki 2014). During the last decade, it seems that the debate has been polarised and has adopted a particularly brutal tone. The Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe develops the view of democracy as being an arena for settling conflicts by distinguishing between 'antagonism' and 'agonism'. "*Antagonism* is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is struggle between adversaries" (Mouffe 2000, pp. 102f). Is the view of "the other" dominant according to the principle of a legitimate 'adversary' to fight with or against, or an 'enemy' that must be eliminated? This distinction has commonalities with the situation in Ludvika, where hate and threats against adversaries have gained a foothold. Further, the debate increasingly takes place on social media (Blomberg & Stier 2019). Generally speaking, social



media enable the wider sharing of opinion, as well as more access to these arenas; it also enables debate forums to serve as arenas for the like-minded.

The notion that consensus can be achieved in a pluralistic democracy is one that is foreign to Chantal Mouffe. The sharp division of opinion should have a place, just like passionate stances. She terms this ideal ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe 2000, p. 103).

[T]he aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary.

A vision is defined in the above quotation of a democratic model where a plurality of opinion is respected while passions deriving from political standpoints are given place, albeit within the framework of respect for democratic rules of play.

As a result of the increased presence of violent extremism, Sweden’s democracy faces challenges nationally and locally (Frisk et al. 2017). In these environments, violence is seen as a legitimate form of influence on democratic processes. With Chantal Mouffe in mind, this can be considered a failure of democracy. “The result can be the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility” (Mouffe 2000 p. 104). Conflicts have by this point reached a level at which the basic democratic rules of discussion and debate (yet never violence) are absent. This touches on what political scientists term ‘democratic education’ and ‘tolerance’ (Abdelzadeh & Lundberg 2017) and the way such terms take form in society (SOU 2017:110). In recent years, the term ‘tolerance’ has faced strong criticism (Axelson, Hansson & Sedelius 2018). Religious philosopher Johan von Essen (2016) argues for a ‘conflict-oriented tolerance’ as the political and normative ideal. “Tolerance can be described as the tension that arises when people accept a coexistence with those points of view or practices that they reject” (von Essen 2016 p. 21). The above theoretical perspectives on ‘agonistic pluralism’ and ‘conflict-oriented tolerance’ can all be applied in an analysis of

the everyday state of play for Ludvika's elected representatives in their political life in the year 2018.

## Findings

### *The Political Parties*

An analysis of the results of the study was conducted, and included a categorisation of responses by political party. On the left in Ludvika, you find Socialdemokraterna (S) (social democratic) and Vänsterpartiet (V) (left-wing). Miljöpartiet (Mp) is a green party. Bopartiet is a political party local to Ludvika. On the right, you find Moderaterna (M) (conservative-liberal), Centerpartiet (C) (centre-right) and Liberalerna (L) (liberal). Sverigedemokraterna is a national-conservative populist party. Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) is labelled a neo-Nazi national socialist party that was represented in Ludvika's political council in the last term of office.

### *Threats, Violence and Harassment – an Overview*

Table 1 below shows the number of positive and negative responses in relation to the different parties in Ludvika – that is to say, how many respondents in the various parties either experienced or did not experience threats, violence and harassment.

Table 1. Experiences of threats, violence and harassment based on responses to the questionnaire (n=77)

Party in the political council	No to all questions	Yes to at least one question	Number of answers by respective party
Socialdemokraterna (S), (Social democratic)	14	22	36
Moderaterna (M), (Conservative-liberal)	7	6	13
Miljöpartiet (Mp), (Green-environmentalist)	4	3	7
Sverigedemokraterna (SD), (National-conservative)	2	5	7
Vänsterpartiet (V), (Left-wing)	1	4	5
Centerpartiet (C), (Centre-right)	1	2	3
Liberalerna (L), (Liberal)	3	0	3
Bopartiet, (Local party)	2	0	2
NRM, (neo-Nazi national socialistic)	0	1	1
<b>Total number of answers</b>	<b>34 (44%)</b>	<b>43 (56%)</b>	<b>77 (100%)</b>

Of 77 respondents, 34 responded no to all questions and had no experiences of being victimised, i.e. 44 percent of the respondents. A majority of 43 of 77 respondents (56 percent) put a cross beside yes to at least one question.

One conclusion is that politicians from all political parties have experienced victimisation. Over half – 43 of 77 respondents (56 percent) – responded yes to at least one question about victimisation. In comparison with the Brå surveys – where between one fifth and just less than one third of respondents indicated experiences of threats, violence and harassment depending on the year in which the survey was conducted – the figures in Ludvika are higher. The Ludvika study, meanwhile, included other questions, and the time period was the whole term of office, four years, whereas the national Brå survey concerned the last year only. As such, the figures are not completely comparable.

Slightly more political council members than in those in municipal boards responded yes in terms of having experienced threats, violence and harassment. As members in the political council, they are likely to be more active and more visible, making them more exposed than members of the municipal boards.

#### *Personal Experiences: Violence and Damage to Property*

The national Brå survey showed that 4 percent of elected representatives nationally had experienced violence or damage to property in their last year in political office. Among

Ludvika politicians, 14 percent indicated such experiences, which is a significantly higher figure than the one in the national Brå survey.

The interviews include more information about specific events. One informant talked about being punched in the stomach by an NRM member while distributing pamphlets that had anti-Nazi content. This informant indicated several incidents of victimisation in the questionnaire.

In the questionnaire, another informant (SD) put a cross beside “Another form of violence”. In the interview, the respondent talked about an incident after an SD training meeting:

When we returned, a few people came out of a hamburger place [...] He looked over at us and noticed the SD emblem that we were all wearing. He turned around and threw his hamburger at me. Then he ran off.

A representative for an alliance party (that is to say, the liberal-conservative collaboration) explained how she, a few years back, ran a personal campaign to get herself elected, and that during that time, somebody broke the glass in her greenhouse using an umbrella:

It would be extremely odd. You can't imagine somebody just being out on a drunken night and doing this. [...] But I can't prove it. [...] The campaign to get myself elected, nobody else other than [party representatives] knew that I had initiated it.

The latter two incidents demonstrate another problem than that of the distinctive polarization that resulted from the NRM presence. Violence and damage to property experienced by right-wing and left-wing extremist parties are mostly directed at each other, and as such frequently occur outside of established parties in political assemblies (SOU 2012, Korsell et al. 2009, Korsell 2020, Korsell, forthcoming).

*Threats in Virtual and Public Spaces*

In total, 39 percent of respondents had selected one or more answer including, “Threatening words, face-to-face”, “Threatening emails”, “Threats/attacks on social media”, “Exposed on the Internet” and “Photographed/recorded without consent”. This is a larger proportion than the 25 percent in the national Brå survey. Representatives from all parties had such experiences, as Table 2 shows.

Of the 30 in Ludvika who had answered this question, 22 had (in total, 29 percent of the total 77 respondents) selected “Photographed/recorded without consent”. This is a higher percentage compared to the national Brå survey, in which 2.7 percent stated that they had been photographed/recorded without their consent. Some Ludvika respondents were more detailed in other parts of the questionnaire or in the interviews, and described how the NRM filmed the council meetings and put them on its website, Nordfront, with a commentary. Several politicians indicated that this is a control strategy and that they find it unpleasant to be exposed in a context of right-wing extremism.

Table 2. Questionnaire question 4. Have you, as a result of your political work during this term of office, been a victim of the following? Question 4 b: Threats and harassment (n =77).

Party and number of respondents from resp. party of  
totally 30 individual answers.

Kind of threats and harassments	C	M	Mp	NRM	S	SD	V	Tot
	2	3	2	1	17	2	3	30
<b>Photographed without consent</b>	1	2	2	1	14		2	22
<b>Threats/attacks on social media</b>		1	2	1	8	1	1	14
<b>Exposed/named on the Internet</b>			2	1	8		1	12
<b>Threatening words, face to face</b>	1	1			6	2		10
<b>Threatening emails</b>			1	1	3			5
<b>Unpleasant visit/Intimidation/Personal info. collected (address, children’s school, car plate number, etc.)</b>				1	3			4
<b>Threatening text message (sms/mms)</b>					3			3
<b>Threatening letter/postcard</b>					3			3
<b>Threatening phone call</b>					2			2
<b>False accusations</b>		2						2
<b>Exposed/named on a poster/in a pamphlet</b>				1				1

The following sub-questions were not selected by the respondents: “Hacked Internet account (or created falsely in your name)”; “Unsolicited item ordered in your name”; and “Menacing ‘gift’”.

In total, 14 respondents in Ludvika, or about 18 percent, selected “Threats/attacks on social media”: in the Brå survey, the national figure for this was about 13 percent. In other words, there were slightly more experiences of this in Ludvika. As for being “Exposed/named on the Internet”, somewhat fewer – 12 of 77, or about 16 percent in Ludvika – indicated that this had happened, which is significantly higher than in the Brå survey (6.4 percent). In Ludvika, 10 of the 77 respondents, about 13 percent, indicated they had experienced “Threatening words, face to face” during their term in office, a figure that stood at 6.1 percent at a national level.

One interviewee (SD) selected “Threatening words, face to face” and “Threats/attacks on social media”. She spoke of threats from the general public:

You meet people at town square meetings who spit on you and say that you should go crawl under a rock, that sort of thing. [...] At least once every time there is a meeting on the square, somebody comes up and spews hostility at one of us. It’s the same on

Facebook. There, people write a whole lot more than they would dare say to you face to face. [...] Many have removed me as their friend. [...]

Another interviewee (V), who selected “Threats/attacks on social media” in the questionnaire, spoke about snide comments from the NRM at political council meetings:

... comments like, now it’s a communist heading the meeting today – you know how it goes.

The respondent stated that the NRM included, for example, films that glorified Nazism in their recordings from the municipal political council meetings, and manipulated them so it looked like as if these nazi-clips were screened during the meetings.

The interviewee from the NRM explained that the Afa (Antifascistisk aktion) and similar groups often name NRM members on the Internet as well as on posters:

Here in Dalarna, we have “We are Dalarna”<sup>5</sup> that is determined to intimidate us. [...] It’s a form of political stalking. They’re, like, obsessed with going after us, and what’s driving them is the fact they get attention in the media. [...] They have a theme called *Dagens nazist* (Today’s Nazi), and they focus on an individual, where that person works and where they live. Anything they can and they name them – expose them. [...] He lives here, he’s your next-door neighbour. They put information in the neighbours’ postboxes – that sort of thing.

Another interviewee received threatening emails from a fellow citizen:

We were forced into making rather uncomfortable decisions. We had to close schools. [...] The mood became very heated. [...] We tried to hold a civil dialogue, to talk with people, have discussions on the Internet so we could explain why we did what we did. And there were times when you were just a bit tired and wrote in a way that wasn’t quite right, words got twisted unintentionally. [...] They got really angry. There was one

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<sup>5</sup> An anti-racist and leftist activist network.



quote [something I had said] that got taken out of context that spread throughout the community.

One interviewee from an alliance party marked both ‘threatening words’ and ‘false accusations’ and described how members in his party had said “Be damn careful about what you do. There are lots of people out there who bloody well don’t like you.” The respondent believed that this reaction had to do with a campaign to get himself elected that he had run a few years prior, the consequence of which was that he moved ahead of certain people on the list of candidates on the ballot paper. As a result of this, he lost several political duties.

The NRM presence in Ludvika has been followed by an increase in threats and harassment, along with a heightened political temperature, something which mobilises left-wing extremist forces. More often than not, left-wing extremists conduct their attacks in response to the right-wing extremist presence. At the same time, the field of tension is significantly wider and includes threats and harassment from the general public and established parties.

#### *Other Forms of Harassment; Mockery, ridicule and insinuations*

Of the 77 respondents, 13 – or 17 percent – marked “Mockery/ridicule”. Half as many – or seven respondents – indicated “Vague insinuations”, while two responded “Other”. Of these, four indicated both “Mockery/ridicule” as well as “Vague insinuations”. These responses were spread throughout the parties, albeit less prevalent among the non-socialist parties. Three interviewees shed light on this issue. One interviewee (SD) selected “Mockery/ridicule”. She talked about being ostracized:

I was a sports coach at a club for a group of children – young people aged 7 to 15. When their parents heard that I was their teacher, they stopped letting their children come to practice, so we had to close the club. Because they didn’t like my political stance. But it’s not exactly like that has anything to do with the 100-metre hurdle – there’s no politics involved with that. But there was no explaining this. Instead they said their children were to stay at home.

One interviewee (V) selected “Other” under “Other unpleasant situation”. In the interview, he clarified how he himself had not been the victim but referred to an occasion when the NRM had hung dolls on lampposts on which the names of politicians had been written.

The above results answer the two first questions in the case study about to what extent and in which context elected representatives experienced threats, violence, harassment and damage to property as a result of their political work. Below are the answers to the third question that investigated the effects of threats, etc. on a personal level.

#### *Effect on the Private Lives of Politicians: Fear for Themselves and Family Members*

Of the 77 respondents in Ludvika, 19 (about 25 percent) indicated a concern for themselves and 20 indicated a concern for their family members. Of these, 11 responded “yes” to both. Respondents who indicated “yes” to these questions represented the entire spectrum of parties, albeit fewer from the liberal, centre-right parties. Of the total 77 elected representatives, 28 (36 percent) responded “yes” to one of the questions about having a sense of concern. This was relatively consistent with the Brå survey. It is clear, though, that in many cases concern permeated the person’s life entirely: a fear of being at home alone and of something happening to their children, and concern that resulted in various protective measures.

#### *Effects on Political Matters and Decisions*

The questionnaire included a question about whether the respondent had “Considered switching from or ceasing to work on a specific political assignment”; been “Influenced into making a decision that differed from the one originally intended”; or similar.

Table 4. Questionnaire question 9. Have you during this term of office because of victimization and/or concern... (n=77).

Party	Considered switching from or ceasing to work on a specific political assignment	Switched or ceased working on a political assignment	Considered switching from or ceasing to work on all political assignments	Hesitated ahead of a measure or decision	Been influenced into making a decision that differed from the one originally intended	Avoided getting involved or speaking out on an issue
C			yes			
M						yes
M				yes		
M					yes	
Mp						yes
Mp				yes		yes
Mp						yes
S				yes		
S	yes	yes	yes			
S			yes			yes
S	yes		yes			yes
S	yes		yes	yes		yes
S	yes	yes	yes			yes
S		yes				
S					yes	
S				yes		
S			yes	yes		
SD	yes		yes			
V	yes		yes	yes		yes
V	yes		yes	yes		yes
<b>Total/20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>

Of the 77 Ludvika politicians, seven – or 9 percent – had considered switching from or ceasing to work on a specific political assignment during their term of office: this compares with 7.4 percent in the 2016 Brå survey. Further, ten elected representatives – or 13 percent – had considered switching from or ceasing to work politically: this compares with 7.1 percent in the Brå survey. These figures show this to be, possibly, more often the case in Ludvika. However, these figures are low, and as such it is difficult to draw any general conclusions.

In Ludvika, three respondents (4 percent) did switch from or ceased working on a political assignment, which compares with 1.6 percent on a national scale. Other answers were more or less as per national figures.

The Ludvika questionnaire also contained an open question about what type of issue they were referring to if they answered yes to the final question about avoiding involvement in or discussion about a specific issue. Most responses were either about the NRM, about issues related to integration, or about the closure of schools.

Avoided agreeing to interviews about the NRM due to the risk of being exposed.  
Avoided agreeing to attend meetings due to the risk of being exposed with regards to a certain issue.

Further information was provided by six interviewees how victimization affected their political positioning in Ludvika. Three themes became apparent as to why interviewees had either considered switching from or ceasing to work on a political assignment; had actually done so; or had hesitated or been influenced ahead of a decision. (1) SD politicians feeling a sense of vulnerability as a result of their political opinions; (2) problems with the NRM presence in the political council; and (3) politicians having a different opinion from the rest of the party and being hesitant in vocalising this.

One SD interviewee described how she avoided saying too much at the political council meetings:

I don't much like talking in front of people. Instead, I keep myself in the background. I can do research and find out facts, and put things together in writing. [...] If somebody had told me what it would be like before I stood for election, I would probably have thought twice and said no. Because I didn't think there would be so much – that there would be so much chaos just because you wanted to change things. [...] At the same time, there is a sense that you might be able to change something – influence something and maybe some day they'll see that I'm not as dangerous as they think I am. [...]

Another respondent marked “Considered switching from or ceasing to work on all political assignments” and “Hesitated ahead of a measure or decision”. She explained further in her interview:

Of course, when you find yourself in such a situation, you put your family's safety first [...] that's what they want to achieve perhaps too – create a sense of fear and uncertainty ... I've even considered leaving Ludvika, moving away despite the fact I've lived here for so many years. [...] But then it dawns on me – am I really going to let that happen? Am I really going to run and hide? [...] Let them scare people into silence?

The interviewee explained how it is not a case of making decisions other than those that might normally have been made; rather, it is more a case of finding new strategies: several people, not just one individual, stepping forward together to talk about a given issue. One interviewee (V) stated:

The fact that we have them [NRM] here, within our municipal political council, sort of leaves its mark on the political council in a way [that results in] an oppressive atmosphere. [...] I know how it was before they got in. Then you were able to speak out more in debates .... Some are hesitant about ... encouraging the Nazi to speak in the council because of what he might say.

One interviewee from V stated that she considered changing or ceasing to be involved in specific political assignments – indeed, all political assignments. Further, the respondent avoided speaking at the political council meetings:

We submitted an LGBT motion, which I really wanted to be involved in when it came to the debate, but ...well ... after what [they] said about pedophiles and the like, well I just thought I couldn't be part of the debate.

One interviewee avoided getting involved in interviews about the NRM:

In recent years, I've kept a low profile. That's because if you google my name, a whole load of news items appears about Nazism and xenophobia related to Nazism. [...] That's why I've been a bit restrictive when it comes to agreeing to interviews. I haven't had the energy as of late. [...] On the other hand, it would be nice not to need to feel limited in the fight against xenophobic movements.

Another interviewee polemised with the NRM in the political council, but not the issues they wanted to discuss. She also maintained that far too few chose to debate against the NRM, partly out of fear.

In summary, several interviewees talked about fear and uncertainty as a result of the NRM political council presence, causing some to stay silent, to abstain from debating certain issues and to think twice before making decisions. People aired their political opinions in small groups rather than doing so publicly to reduce the risk of individual victimisation. Many interviewees claimed they would not allow themselves to be frightened enough to flee, at the same time as the issue of their family's safety took precedence.

Yet, the NRM was not felt to be the sole problem. Another theme was the difficulty that came from being an SD politician. They have felt threatened enough to remain silent and are forced to find other strategies so as to be seen and heard within the political council. Lastly comes the third theme, which is about hesitancy when it comes to toeing the party line, and in this case the consequences in the form of being exposed in the media, also a form of victimisation.

### *Positive Responses*

Another questionnaire question was about whether the respondents, during their term of office, had set into motion positive counter-responses, either individually or in a group. Of the politicians, 14 (18 percent) responded that they mobilized positive counter-responses individually and just as many did so in a group. Of these, seven indicated both: that is to say, both individually and in a group. The answers were distributed evenly among parties.

Five interviews provided more detailed information. Positive counter-responses might include ensuring you were not alone in certain situations that were considered risky. Within the political council, positive counter-responses might mean talking about an issue ahead of time so that support would be forthcoming during debates. This could also apply to debates on social media. As far as demonstrators are concerned, a positive counter-measure might be to

happily wave to them. In other cases, it is stated as a positive counter-measure to report to the security manager or to the police.

Examples of positive counter-responses were provided by 14 respondents in the questionnaire, such as “Filling the room/premises with ‘good’ people; ensuring that several people filmed those/the person filming me”; “Commenting positively on posts in social media where others had begun ‘trolling’”; “Supporting individuals who felt uneasy”; “Clowns against Nazis”<sup>6</sup>; “Implementing safety and security measures”; “Dared to disagree in relation to decisions and demonstrations”; “External activities, various, May 1”; and “Party gave its support”.

There are thus positive counter-measures that have been mobilized, ranging from increasing security by having company in risk situations, to joining in debates and opposing themselves through, for example, demonstrations, or simply supporting those who experience problems.

## Discussion

The results from the questionnaire study are essentially consistent with those from the national Brå survey from 2016 on the safety of politicians. Yet, several points differ notably in the Ludvika study. Of respondents in Ludvika,

- 39 percent indicated that they had been the victim of threats and harassment: this compares with 25 percent in the national Brå survey.
- 29 percent indicated that they had been photographed/filmed without their consent. This differs greatly from the national Brå survey in which 2.7 percent stated that they had been photographed/filmed without their consent.

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<sup>6</sup> Clowns against Nazis is a movement in which members dress up as clowns in response to the hate-filled rhetoric of white supremacists. They use humour, satire and love in their street demonstrations in opposition to the NRM.



- 16 percent stated that they had been exposed/named on the Internet, which is significantly more than was the case in the national Brå survey, where 6.4 percent put a cross beside this answer.
- 13 percent indicated that they had been victims of “Threatening words, face to face”, a figure that nationally stood at 6.1 percent.
- 13 percent considered switching from or ceasing to work on all their political assignments: this compares with 7.1 percent in the national Brå survey.

As pointed out, the questions in the Ludvika questionnaire were in reference to the whole term of office and not only one year which was the case with the survey by Brå.

It is conceivable that the NRM filming of the political council meetings for their Nordfront webpage has been the most disruptive factor for elected representatives. Many found it to be unpleasant and/or intimidating; nor was it simply something that happened just the once, which most likely led to it affecting the putting forth of political proposals, and the forwarding and debating of issues.

When the national surveys – including the one from Norway – are considered, it is clear that attempts to influence came to a large extent from right-wing extremists: they represent an active and highly visible group that readily employs threatening and abusive language. Considering the presence of the NRM in both Ludvika’s political council and the municipality itself, it might have been expected – initially at least – that this would have been more evident in this study. A further interpretation is that the high level of activity on the part of right-wing extremism would be clearly evident in many other places in Sweden, not just Ludvika. As such, the situation in Ludvika, when compared with the rest of the country, is more about a difference in degree than in kind.

Ludvika politicians have talked about threats and harassment from a number of directions and not only from the NRM; however, most commonly, threats they did experience were made by the NRM. It is clear that palpable tensions exist at the political margins. Politicians from the left, the green party and the Social democrats reported having experienced situations of threat, violence and harassment. As well, the NRM representative

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talked about other such experiences, in this person's case from the left-wing. One trend is that those who experienced lower levels of threats had ties to the liberal-conservative parties. A reasonable conclusion here is that the liberal-conservative parties are seen to sit at the centre in the political cross-breeze and as such are less clearly the target of strong ideological forces.

Yet threats and harassment are felt not to derive solely from political sources. Interviewees talk about threats from "angry citizens". Here, the SD representatives seem particularly vulnerable. Both SD representatives and NRM representatives talked about their sense of stigmatization resulting from the views they stand for. Simply showing one's party allegiance can lead to consequences in the form of threats, violence and harassment. However, elected representatives from other parties have also talked about experiencing threats and harassment from angry citizens when unpopular decisions are made. Other types of threats and harassment that came to light in the Ludvika study related to threats from members of the same party that resulted from personal conflicts and mandates, as well as exposure in established media as well as in new media forums.

Threats and harassment have consequences at several levels, not least at the personal one. Several stories related by Ludvika politicians were about their sense of not being safe – feeling uneasy being alone at home, taking different routes to work, avoiding spending time in town without company and, foremostly, being concerned for their children. Ludvika is a small community where everybody knows everybody. It is common knowledge where politicians live, who their children are, and which schools they attend. S, V and NRM politicians talked about threatening graffiti and posters close to their homes. Politicians from different political sides share concerns for their children and the risk that they might be harmed as a result of their parents' political work. In particular, SD representatives talked about the fact their children had not been able to play with other children or had not been invited to parties, or about children being kept at home because the sports coach was SD.

A particular focus of this study has been the consequences for democracy. Many of the elected representatives talked about a spreading silence, about hesitating when it came to debates and certain decisions where there was a caution in terms of the potential consequences at the personal level. Political parties have a key role in conveying and

formulating ideas and interests, as well as filling elected posts in the political assemblies (Epstein 1967, Hagevi 2015, Karlsson and Lundberg 2011). The fact that elected representatives, as a result of threats, violence and harassment, have been hesitant when making necessary decisions – or, indeed, have chosen not to make decisions – and have also avoided involving themselves in certain issues indicates that such behaviour has limited the function of the parties to state their position on political matters. This is a problem that does not just apply to Ludvika alone, a fact that references to the national Brå survey also demonstrates.

The emergence of the NRM has affected elected representatives in one particular way: they have developed an increased sense of unease as a consequence of the NRM presence in both the political council and the municipality. Members have found it disruptive that the NRM has filmed political council meetings and published them on a website that in both content and form is used as propaganda for Nazi ideas. The consequence of this has been that members have exercised restraint when it comes to making proposals, pushing certain issues and taking up the debate.

## Conclusion

In terms of the fourth and more overriding theoretical question about the threat against democracy, one conclusion is that mockery, harassment and threats in everyday political life in Ludvika has affected the constructive potential of political debate. It appears the political climate has reduced the scope for debate and democratically regulated differences in opinion. Rather than opinions put forward in a democratic manner, with respect for the political positioning of others in what philosopher Johan von Essen views as foundational in a living democracy, personal attacks, mockery, harassment and threats have crept in, undermining the basic principle of political debate (von Essen 2016).

A further conclusion is that conflict-filled democratic positionings are charged with negative emotions, which in turn is reflected in forms of victimization involving factors of violence and fear. A vicious circle develops, one where society becomes increasingly

characterized by a view of political adversaries as antagonists and *enemies* to be attacked and eliminated rather than an agonistic position (Mouffe 2000), where groups with conflicting political visions for the future are able to meet as legitimate opponents, without resorting to threats of violence or personal attacks.

Another conclusion is that a constructive resistance exists in the ideas and initiatives of the elected representatives that serve to counteract threats, violence and harassment. Several politicians articulated ideas for collaboration, collective strategies and mutual support in debates. These are measures that support a democratic approach. For Ludvika politicians, our study can serve as a basis for discussion. It makes evident the danger of victimisation of political engaged people as well as a clear will not to give in when faced with threats but rather to continue political work. This resistance can also be channeled in such a way that it improves the political climate, since it serves as an important and necessary basis for development within the local political community.

Finally, since the NRM no longer has a representation in the political council, political council members should feel less vulnerable, at least during council meetings. Yet, there is still a risk of being subject to threats and harassment outside such meetings. If the study were to be conducted once more, elected officials would likely demonstrate a lower level of vulnerability, albeit still far from a desirable situation.

Compared with their counterparts in the Swedish parliament – Riksdagen – it can be presumed that local politicians find themselves in closer proximity to both those who share the same opinion and those who are their antagonists. Uncertainty and fear of mockery, harassment and threats are tangible in the local supermarket, at the local sports club and in the schools of children: it is here that personal opinions can have a high social cost.

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