

Article

Negotiating Organizational Identity in Polarized Times Migration, Representation, and the Future of Civil Society Organizations

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Abstract

This study examines the contested negotiation of organizational identity within the German trade union ver.di (“Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft”), focusing on internal debates around migration, representation, and belonging. Through empirical analysis, the paper shows how divergent interpretations of the union’s identity-texts—particularly its pro-migration stance—generate tensions between symbolic commitments and organizational practices. While some members frame migration-related diversity as central to the union’s organizational identity and call for formal representation mechanisms (e.g., a migration quota), others perceive such measures as threats to their own organizational belonging, expressing affective resistance rooted in anxiety and categorical skepticism. The study highlights how these conflicts reflect broader micro-political struggles, in which power asymmetries and emotional investments shape competing visions of the union’s future. By situating these dynamics within Germany’s polarized political climate, the paper argues that civil society organizations face a critical challenge: reconciling their democratic function of representing marginalized voices with internal heterogeneity and resistance to structural change. The findings underscore organizational identity as an ongoing process of negotiation, requiring deliberate identity work to address incongruences between rhetoric and practice. This research contributes to debates on diversity governance, the affective dimensions of organizations, and the role of civil society in advancing inclusive democracy amid rising right-wing ideologies. In doing so, the study addresses a gap in the existing literature by shedding light on internal representational struggles and their implications for organizational identity.

Keywords: civil society organizations; trade unions; migration; diversity; organizational identity**JEL:** A3, D21, D80

1. Introduction: Diversity and Unity in Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in the public spheres of democratic societies. As intermediaries between individual lives and the *volonté générale* organized by the state, they fulfill various social functions: they act as service providers, represent special interest groups, and create opportunities for social participation (Priller and Zimmer, 2003, p. 105).

Within the framework of deliberative democratic theory, civil society and its organizations are considered central to the process of discursive opinion formation and the equal inclusion of all perspectives in democratic discourse. Habermas defines civil society as:

non-governmental and non-economic associations and organizations on a voluntary basis that embed the communication structures of the public sphere in the [...] living world. Civil society is made up of those more or less spontaneously formed associations, organizations and movements which take up the resonance that social problems find in the private spheres of life, condense it and pass it on to the political public sphere, amplifying it (Habermas, 1992: 443).

Civil society and its organizations are therefore particularly important in articulating the interests of minorities, for example, in the context of anti-discrimination practices and policies (Andrews and Edwards, 2004; Lenhart et al., 2017; Weiberg et al., 2023). By advocating for so-called “special interests”, such as those of workers or the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, CSOs play a vital role in democratic societies as a whole: they amplify the voices of marginalized groups, making them heard in public discourse.

However, CSOs do not merely represent the interests of their members—they also aggregate, channel, and shape these interests. In doing so, they emphasize certain aspects while omitting or downplaying others. The diversity of opinions among their members—some of which is transmitted to the public sphere and thereby becomes part of general public discourse—does not necessarily reflect the internal diversity of the organization itself. This is because organizations cannot be conceptualized as homogeneous entities; rather, they encompass various internal groups, such as individuals with a migration biography and their descendants, women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities.



For this reason, friction and conflict are inherent in organizations, particularly among members or groups of members. On the one hand, decision-making is expected to focus on the organization's specific agenda; on the other hand, the intersectionality of lived experiences complicates such a narrow focus. This raises the question of how the social reality of multidimensional existence—or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989)—is inscribed within an organization (see also about the dilemma of special and equal treatment in unions Marino et al., 2015).

How can organizations—particularly CSOs, which define themselves as representatives of “special interests”—adequately reflect the diversity of their members and accommodate various modes of articulation? Moreover, how do they navigate the fact that dimensions such as gender, race, and other social categories permeate all individuals? How do these organizations manage internal discourse in light of these intersecting identities, and what conflicts emerge when members seek to expand or redefine the organization's identity narratives in this contested process?

This paper explores these broader questions with reference to data collected in the context of the civil society organization Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver.di), a trade union representing workers in Germany's service sector (see Chapter 2 for further details). In trade unions, the principle of unity is particularly significant. For unions like ver.di, which underwent complex unification processes in the past to strengthen their bargaining power and effectiveness in labour disputes, there remains a persistent concern that so-called particular interests could threaten this collective strength. In 2001, ver.di was formed through the merger of five labour organizations from the service sector, creating a “Union of Five”. This fusion was driven by the need to respond to a steady decline in membership (see Kempe, 2011; on the crisis of trade union representation, see Brinkmann et al., 2008). However, the process of integrating these five diverse unions—each with its own distinct interests—was described by ver.di members as so challenging that maintaining unity remains a priority to be safeguarded at all costs (see also about merger of organizations Langley et al., 2012).

This means that while the trade union ver.di emphasizes the importance of diversity, promotes a diverse organizational image, and actively engages in anti-racist work, there is also an internal concern—expressed in the data—that differentiation along group identities and interests may pose a risk by weakening the organization as a whole.

This ambivalence—the tension between the perceived necessity of preserving organizational unity and the imperative to integrate diversity into structures and internal discourse—leads to the central research questions of this paper: How can the relationship between different groups within a civil society organization that defines itself as a “special interest” organization, such as ver.di, be described?

How are organizational belonging and non-belonging discursively constructed? And what strategies for constructing organizational identity emerge in processes of internal group differentiation?

In this way, the findings of this paper highlight a fundamental paradox: organizations that advocate for social change externally may simultaneously struggle with similar challenges internally. In doing so, this study responds to an existing research desideratum: Previous studies have focused for example on the impact of external advocacy in creating changes or on symbolic diversity policies without real effects (Ahmed, 2012). For example, the study of Dobbin et al. (2011) investigates the organizational factors that determine the adoption of diversity programs in U.S. workplaces. Drawing on a national panel of corporations, the authors investigate empirically and with reference to institutional theory the interplay of four determinants and their relevance for implementing diversity programs: external pressure, internal advocacy, functional needs, and the corporate culture. Their relevant findings show that external pressure and internal advocacy serve as alternatives, and that a pro-diversity-corporate culture is more important for successfully implementing diversity programs than functional needs. Also in their mixed-methods study “Getting to diversity” Dobbin and Kalev (2022) critically examine the effectiveness of conventional diversity policies. In doing so, they challenge widely used approaches such as bias training and sanctions, and demonstrate their limited impact when applied in isolation. Instead, the authors highlight structural and managerial approaches that foster meaningful and sustainable change. Nevertheless, the primarily quantitative induced studies of Dobbin et al. (2011) and Dobbin and Kalev (2022) did not focus the internal representational struggles of different groups in organizations – especially not in civil society organizations – and their impact on organizational identity. This is the gap where this study sheds light on.

Ahmed (2012) chooses another focus of research: the author examines how diversity is practiced, narrated, and institutionalized within universities. Drawing on interviews with diversity practitioners and her own experiences in academic institutions, Ahmed argues that diversity often becomes a bureaucratic object—something institutions claim to “do” without really changing existing power structures. Diversity work, she shows, frequently involves confronting institutional resistance and symbolic gestures. Central to Ahmed's analysis is the concept of non-performativity: the idea that simply stating a commitment to diversity can function as a substitute for action, effectively preventing real change. She highlights the emotional and political labour involved in doing diversity work, especially for those who embody the categories institutions seek to include. Although Ahmed is also interested in internal dynamics in institutions while implementing – or not implementing – diversity, she focuses especially on institutions like univer-

sities and does not analyze the internal representation struggles of different groups and their impact on organizational identities on which this study is focusing.

The group differentiation examined in this paper primarily concerns the so-called group of migrants within the organization (officially named “Personengruppe der Migrantinnen und Migranten”). Specifically, the paper explores the relationship between this migrant group and other groups within ver.di, analyzing how belonging and non-belonging are discursively constructed in organization-public debates. Furthermore, it investigates how these negotiations of belonging influence broader processes related to the union’s organizational identity.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the objectives of the broader research project and introduces the sub-project on the representation of employees’ interests, focusing on how the organization addresses migration within its internal structures and positions itself in relation to migration-related diversity (Chapter 2). This is followed by a theoretical discussion of the concept of organizational identity (Chapter 3). The research design of the study is then outlined (Chapter 4), leading to the presentation of the main findings (Chapter 5) and their further discussion (Chapter 6). The paper concludes with a summary of key insights (Chapter 7).

2. Civil Society Organizations and Their Challenges of Dealing With Migration-Related Diversity

The general research project *Civil Society Organizations and Their Challenges in Dealing with Migration and Diversity – Agents of Change* aimed to compare four German civil society organizations and examine the challenges they face in integrating migration and diversity into their internal structures (see [von Unger et al., 2022](#), for general findings). The project focused on organizations in which organizational identity, difference, and social justice play a central role, particularly those representing specific, potentially disadvantaged population groups—such as trade unions, self-organizations of people with disabilities and their relatives, and advocacy organizations in the fields of LGBTIQ/sexual identity and health/human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Furthermore, the project examined civil society organizations which explicitly position themselves as supportive of migration and diversity in public discourse and actively engage in related advocacy—such as the trade union ver.di, which is involved in external anti-racist work. This paper focuses primarily on the data concerning ver.di and its migration-related structures.

The Representation of Interests of Employees and Structures of Migrant Self-Organization

The German trade union ver.di is a so-called “Einheitsgewerkschaft” (unified trade union), formally known

as the United Services Union. It was founded in 2001 through the merger of five trade unions from the German service sector in response to a decline in membership ([Kempe, 2011](#)). The primary goal of this merger was to consolidate efforts in collective bargaining disputes amid decreasing trade union membership and to adapt to the broader societal shift toward a service-based economy ([Albrecht and Karakayali, 2021](#)).

Today, ver.di has around two million members—at least one million fewer than at the time of its founding in 2001. This decline is particularly significant given to the fact that the union’s financial structure relies entirely on membership fees. Currently, approximately 3000 full-time officers are employed by the organization. ver.di operates as a democratically structured union, with decision-making processes characterized by a bottom-up approach.

This is ver.di’s self-definition:

Founded as self-help, educational and fighting organization in the conflict between labour and capital, the trade unions are committed to decent living and working conditions, material security and social participation. For achieving these goals, we act in solidarity and develop our resistance and our creative power in this spirit of solidarity. Together, we confront the power of the employers with the power of the people organised in ver.di. The collective agreements administered by ver.di regulate the working and wage conditions in various sectors. It is for these collective agreements that ver.di negotiates and – if necessary – fights and strikes. ([Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft ver.di, 2010](#), p. 1).

The main features of the defined identity-text or self-definition of the union as an organization consist of being active in conflicts between labour and capital. Additionally, solidarity is also noted as a key characteristic of the organization. Already in the founding papers of the union in 2001, ver.di positions itself positively to migration:

ver.di advocates for equal participation of migrants in all areas of life in the society and at the workplace. Pre-conditions for this participation are generated and saved. ver.di will fight against discrimination of any kind. Towards migrants the protective and integrative functions of ver.di are especially demanded ([DAG et al., 2000](#), p. 71).

Based on this positive framing of migration, there are structures for individuals with migration biographies and their descendants since the union’s founding: the so-called migration committees. These committees exist at the federal, state, and district levels. Additionally, a group referred to as “Personengruppe der Migrantinnen und Migranten” (group of migrants) and a secretary for migration policy have been established. The federal migration committee

together with the migration committees in the districts and federal states – represents the special interests of migrant ver.di members. This means that migrants are involved in ver.di’s decisions and we contribute to the

process of general organizational opinion-forming (...) ([Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft ver.di, 2020](#)).

The members of the migration committee label their interests as special interests within the organization, emphasizing that the committee's task is to integrate migrant interests in the general procedures of ver.di's decision-making.

At the time of this research, the most pressing issue for the migration committees was the continued lack of representation of migrant members in full-time officer positions and voluntary committees within the trade union. This concern led to a proposal for a so-called migration quota at the union's federal congress in 2019 in Leipzig, Germany. Prior to 2019, similar proposals had been unsuccessful. However, at the Leipzig congress, the migration committees achieved at least a partial success: while the demand for a quota was not immediately adopted, it was referred to the union's council for further deliberation.

The proposal, S 045: Promoting and Safeguarding Diversity and Participation in ver.di – Proposal for Amending the Statutes and Implementing a 'Migration Quota', called for a statutory amendment to ensure that members with a migration biography and their descendants would be proportionally represented in full-time and voluntary leadership and decision-making bodies, reflecting their share of the membership.

This illustrates that the presence, participation and representation of people with migration biography and their descendants is still a contested field in civil society organizations like unions. In the analysis of the empirical data, it became obvious that those negotiation processes are also linked to questions of organizational identity and organizational belonging.

3. Organizational Identity as Contested Feedback Process

To theoretically frame the contested negotiation processes within the organization, we apply the concept of organizational identity, as defined by Kirchner (2015). Kirchner conceptualizes organizational identity as a whole as a communicative process between an organization's operative and integrative function. From this perspective, organizational identity can be understood as the dynamic interplay between an organization's self-interpretation (identity-text) and its actual activities. The integrative function of the organizational identity is in Kirchner's definition fulfilled by identity-texts while the operative function is exercised by actual organizational practices. That means: From an organizational-sociological point-of-view, identity-texts are defined according to Kirchner (2015) as essential parts of the organizational identity as a whole – also organizational practices are part of the organizational identity. Identity-texts frame organizational practices. The term "inclusive organizational identity" defines the "how" of this interplay between identity-texts and organizational practices. It answers the question: is the result of this process between

framing and action inclusive or not? Inclusive organizational identity means that inclusivity is one of the defining characteristics of an organization and that the organization intentionally incorporates diverse individuals—including those with historically marginalized social identities—into its governance, operations, and outputs. That means, defining an organizational identity as inclusive must concern identity-texts and organizational practices. According to Freeman and Koçak (2023, p. 177f.) inclusive organizational identities help facilitating feelings of belonging. Organizational belonging has to be situated on a microsociological level and concerns the individual member of an organization: A sense of organizational belonging includes (Herbert, 2022) having a connection to the organization and its members, feeling like a valued team member, a perception of being "oneself" at work (also Blau et al., 2023, p. 227).

According to Kirchner, self-interpretations or identity-texts – which are essential parts of the organization as a whole – are necessary for framing, situations, events and structures within the organization. They serve as "frames", a term

"borrowed from Goffman to denote the 'schemata of interpretation' that enable individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experiences and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992, p. 557, also Goffman, 1977).

This means that the process of framing can be understood as the act of labeling occurrences as meaningful. In doing so, frames influence actions—both those of individuals and of collective actors such as organizations.

But when can a specific frame be considered an organizational identity-text – which means an important part of the organizational identity because it guides the actions of organizations? Drawing on Gioia et al. (2000), organizational identity as a whole – the author does not differentiate in integrative and operative function – can be defined as an interpretative frame shared by the majority of an organization's members. However, this interpretative frame is not static but dynamic. Thus, organizational identity is not a fixed entity; rather, identity frames in general are fluid and subject to continuous processes of negotiation (see also Kirchner, 2015, p. 72).

In the context of identity-texts and an organization's self-interpretations, these frames are particularly significant because they guide actual practices. In other words, identity-texts and activities are always interwoven—an organization acts in reference to its self-definitions. Organizational identity thus serves both an integrative (identity-texts) and an operative function (actions) (see also Luhmann, 2000).

According to this model, the operative function is subdivided into two key aspects (Kirchner, 2015, p. 74). First, it serves as an observation lens (Ashforth and Mael, 1996), providing the foundation for processes of meaning attribution as the organization engages with itself and its broader organizational environment or field (Wooten and Hoffman, 2008). Second, it establishes general frameworks for interpreting situations, events, and structures within the organization, thereby ensuring that organizational activities remain consistent and verifiable (Fiol and Huff, 1992). Through this structuring function, organizational identity effectively contains and directs organizational activities, acting as a fundamental premise for decision-making (Luhmann, 2000). The integrative function of organizational identity establishes a cohesive relationship between an organization and its overall self-conception.

For answering the question when a specific frame can be considered an organizational identity-text the conceptualization of organizational identity by Seidl (2005) is revealing: Seidl (2005), drawing on systems theory, defines organizational identity in another way as a self-descriptive text that pertains to the organization as a whole. The notion of “as a whole” implies in that case that such descriptions do not refer to isolated aspects of the organization but rather to its fundamental characteristics. Kirchner (2015, p. 72) adopts this for defining an identity-text in his conceptualization and illustrates this distinction with the following examples: the statement “We are a bank” constitutes an identity-defining text, whereas “We use Microsoft Office software in our agency” does not carry identity-related significance.

Organizational identity thus serves as a representation of the unity of an organization’s diverse structures, integrating its various components into a coherent whole. The identity-text that emerges from this process constitutes an amplified depiction of the organization’s complex structures and operations (Ashforth and Mael, 1996).

In this conceptualization, organizational identity, as defined by Kirchner (2015, p. 74), functions as a continuous feedback loop between an organization’s operative and integrative functions. This process entails the repeated recursive linking of identity-texts—such as members’ statements and interpretative schemes—with the organization’s activities. Importantly, empirically observable identity claims made by members do not, in themselves, constitute the organizational identity; rather, they form part of the broader process through which identity is constructed and maintained. It is not merely the statements that are significant, but their impact on the organization—specifically, the extent to which they influence both the operative and integrative functions of its identity.

This dynamic process also allows for contradictions between an identity-text and specific organizational activities. Non-compliant or deviant actions may challenge established identity frames, potentially calling into question certain aspects of the organization’s identity. These consid-

erations are particularly relevant in relation to the empirical findings of this study.

4. Methodology

The study employed a multi-sited, multi-perspective, and comparative qualitative research design. Data collection was conducted using a combination of methods, integrating different qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Specifically, the research design incorporated document analysis, guided interviews, group discussions, and mapping workshops, the latter drawing on Adele Clarke’s situational analysis (2012). Workshops and interviews were conducted with both full-time and voluntary organizational actors. Additionally, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out at meetings and conferences of the organization, complemented by an extensive analysis of conference minutes, position papers, statutes, member periodicals, and other relevant documents.

A total of 21 interviews was conducted with full-time and voluntary actors within the organization. One person was already retired and one person worked meanwhile at another workplace. The majority of interviewees were involved in ver.di’s internal migration work, migration committees at the federal, state, or district levels (Table 1, Table 2).

Furthermore, two group discussions and mapping workshops were conducted with full-time employees engaged in migration- and diversity-related work. In these workshops, the organizational field (Wooten and Hoffman, 2008)—that is, the broader institutional environment of the trade union—was visualized, discussed, and analyzed, partially in collaboration with participants. Adopting a circular process in line with the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2008/1967; Strauss, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 2010), preliminary observations, findings, and hypotheses derived from the data were presented to participants in a follow-up workshop, where they were critically examined and further refined.

Another significant source of data was ethnographic fieldwork, conducted primarily with various migration committees at the federal, regional, and local levels. This included participation in meetings, workshops, and informal gatherings. Additionally, ethnographic observations were undertaken at the federal congress of the organization in Leipzig. Methodological Reflexivity: In complex, interpretative research contexts, the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active participant in the construction of knowledge. The positionality of the researcher inevitably shapes how research questions are shaped and how data are interpreted. But rather than viewing this positionality as something which should be eliminated, from the perspective of this study, researchers should critically reflect on their own positionality in processes of methodological reflexivity. In the context of this study, it was realized through continuously writing research diaries and memos

Table 1. Composition of respondents.

Function/Role in ver.di	Number of interviews	Gender	Migration biography
Full time officers on federal or district level (work with references to migration and diversity)	12	3 woman 9 men	1 woman 1 man
Volunteers – active in migration committees on federal or district level	9	2 woman 7 men	2 woman 5 men

With one full time officer two qualitative interviews were realized.

Table 2. Composition of respondents-differentiation of full-time-officers.

Full time officers on federal level	Full time officers on district level
5	6

while realizing ethnographic fieldwork, through interpretative work in groups and through mirroring back central research assumptions and parts of the findings in collaborative mapping workshops within the trade union.

Additionally, the analysis of the data was realised with a MaxQDA-assisted procedure of Grounded Theory Method. In coding processes relevant categories were created inductively and interpreted by the researchers. In this procedure, the category of organizational belonging and its different interpretations by different speakers occurred as relevant. Also according to several studies in corporations and firms, the importance of creating employee feelings of organizational belonging was emphasized (Blau et al., 2023). Fostering a sense of organizational belonging – this includes according to Herbert (2022) to have a connection, feel like a valued team member, a perception they can be themselves at work (also Blau et al., 2023, p. 227). Knapp et al. (2014, p. 274) define organizational belonging as the “perception of an intimate association with the organization as demonstrated by a sense of: perceived insider status, psychological ownership, and organizational identification”.

In the further process of analysis the sequences with references to the categories of organizational belonging were selected for further interpretation and linked to the concept of organizational identity as described above.

The selected sequences which are presented in the next chapter are results from the ethnographic fieldwork at the federal congress of the organization ver.di in Leipzig, Germany, in 2019. They were selected because they illustrate the inductively generated category of organizational belonging linked to the theme of “migration quota”. The category of organizational belonging was conceptually linked to the theoretically gained concept of organizational identity and its internal differentiation in identity-texts which have integrative functions and the actual practices/actions of an organization as operative function which are always interwoven with the action-guiding identity-texts. The following chapter deals with these categories and concepts from a qualitative empirical point of view.

5. Results: Negotiations About Organizational Belonging and Organizational Identity-Texts

The empirical data was interpreted—with reference to the theoretical frameworks outlined above—as reflecting a contested process of defining and redefining the union’s organizational identity. In this process, members draw upon their full micro-political repertoire (Crozier and Friedberg, 1979), which is marked by significant power asymmetries. Simultaneously, this negotiation process transcends the direct control of any single member, rendering individual agency circumscribed. In such contexts, members’ actions constitute a form of organizational identity work (Kirchner, 2012), one that is inherently tied to questions of organizational belonging.

The data reveal a perceived contradiction, from the perspective of migration committee members, between certain identity-texts of the organization—which migrant members regard as central—and the union’s actual (primarily internal) practices. A key issue is the underrepresentation of migrant members within the union’s structures. These identity-texts—such as the organization’s positive framing of migration and diversity (DAG et al., 2000, p. 71)—are viewed by migrant members as fundamental to their sense of organizational belonging. This can be seen as congruent with the definition of an “inclusive organizational identity” which implies “(...) that inclusivity is one of the defining characteristics of an organization; that the organization intentionally incorporates diverse individuals—including those with historically marginalized social identities—into its governance, operations, and outputs” (Freeman and Koçak, 2023, p. 177). According to Freeman and Koçak (2023, p. 178) inclusive organizational identities help facilitating feelings of belonging. Our data illustrates: that depends on the positioning of the individual members within the organization.

The following translated excerpts from protocols and ethnographic fieldwork (the original debate was conducted in German) capture discussions surrounding the proposed implementation of a so-called “migration quota” within the organization. The first quotations were of officials with migration biography who support the implementation of the quota: Speaker 1 argues that within the organization

I am an exception. When I was elected to the (XX) commission, I was the only one with a migration back-

ground. I always, always dreamed that this union was the right one for me. And it was right. It was exactly right and it is still the right union for me. And I'm in the right union because everyone, and the federal executive board does the same, talks about diversity, anti-discrimination, anti-fascism and colourfulness. That's why I'm in the right place. But we still have a need for change in the committees and also in the functions. (Applause)

Speaker 2: Our new chairman also said in his speech that he wants to make his squad (...) more colourful. And he wants to and will promote people with a migration background (...). But will and would... (...) That's not enough, we need figures, we simply need facts, a quota. (Protocol)

Proponents of a migration quota highlight aspects of the union's identity-texts that align with its positive stance toward migration-related diversity. The first speaker explicitly connects this positioning to the organization's diversity as a key resource for their own sense of organizational belonging which can be described with reference to Knapp et al. (2014) as having an intimate association or in other words, having an emotional connection to the own organization (see continuative about emotions/affects in organizations Warstat and Dilger, 2021; Fineman, 2010; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). However, both speakers stress that 'real' diversity remains an unfulfilled promise within the union's structural framework. From their perspective, a disconnect exists between the organization's professed identity and its internal practices.

Drawing on Ahmed (2012), this tension can be interpreted as an instance of "talking is not doing". It remains unclear whether discussions about diversity are confined to internal negotiations and opinion-forming or whether they extend to the union's external discourse—potentially shaping its organizational image (Kirchner, 2015). The explicit mention of the federal executive board suggests these debates are part of broader internal struggles about the union's identity.

In the following excerpt, the speaker directly addresses concerns about undermining the union's historical unity while simultaneously advocating for migrant members' inclusion in collective decision-making processes—including those shaping the organization's identity. Notably, the speaker argues that implementing a migration quota would not threaten the union's cohesion. On the contrary, greater representation of migrant members would strengthen the organization by making it more inclusive and robust.

Speaker 3: We don't want migrants to be given a special status. We don't want that. Instead, we want to strengthen the unity and the fighting power and make our organization active and interesting for many people and migrants. Furthermore, an effective fight against racism can only be achieved if the people who are pri-

marily affected by racism are actively involved in taking responsibility. That is important. (...) (Protocol)

The fight against racism—a central pillar of ver.di's self-positioning—is explicitly invoked in these debates. From this perspective, anti-racism can only be effective when it actively includes those most directly affected by racial discrimination.

However, other union members reject the notion of any discrepancy between the organization's identity-texts and its current practices. These members oppose the implementation of a migration quota and frame the migrant members' critique of this incongruence as personally injurious. In doing so, they construct the debate itself as a threat to their own sense of organizational belonging, thereby deflecting attention from structural inequities to questions of individual inclusion.

Speaker 4: (...) this is now my third congress. And in the last three hours I had the feeling of being in a completely different organization, in the XXX district many of the things that have been discussed here in the last three hours are actually a matter of course. Whether it's young people, pensioners or migrants. Those who want to get involved, wherever they are, in the district, in the local association, in the specialist groups, everyone is invited, warmly invited, the doors are open. (Applause) And on the issue of migration. These things come up in the workplace, in the city, in daily conversations with citizens and not in some statute. You have to live it, you can't write it down in some law. (...) (Loud applause) (Protocol)

The debate surrounding the migration quota reveals complex dynamics of organizational belonging and estrangement. One speaker articulates this tension vividly: I had the feeling of being in a completely different organization. This sense of estrangement emerges in response to migrant members' demands for formalized representation through a quota system, which leads the speaker to feel like "a stranger in [his] own organization" (cf. Hochschild, 2016 on strangers in their own land). From his perspective, congruity already exists between the organization's pro-migration rhetoric and its actual practices, rendering additional formalization unnecessary. This stance exemplifies what might be termed the "writing is not doing" paradox—where official commitments are assumed to automatically translate into lived reality. This position stands in stark contrast to migrant members' experiences, raising questions about whether the organization's positive framing of migration is universally recognized as core to its identity. These commitments are in fact operationalized as organizational identity-texts in practice.

Elias and Scotson's (2002) established-outsider framework provides crucial insights here. Their research demonstrates how:

- Power imbalances between established groups and newcomers shape community – and here needs to be added also organizational – dynamics.

- Established groups benefit from longer-standing cohesion and institutional memory.
- Outsider groups face structural disadvantages due to their relative newness and heterogeneity.
- Established members often unconsciously perceive newcomers as disruptive to normative expectations.

While Elias and Scotson examined these dynamics in community settings, their framework proves equally relevant for understanding organizational resistance to structural changes like migration quotas. Additional factors motivating opposition may include:

Speaker 5: I have a big problem with this demand, because I don't think we can directly implement something like this. First of all, we have no definition of how we want to count people with a migration background. Who has a migration background? Am I a migrant because my father is Turkish? Am I not having a migration background? Will my children still have a migration background? And most important: I have the biggest problem with the question of how do we want to list this? Do we intend to write lists of who is a migrant here and who is not a migrant? If we start doing that, this is no longer my union. (Strong applause) (Protocol)

The quota opponent's resistance reveals how bureaucratic measurement practices become entangled with subjective experiences of organizational membership. His declaration—*if we start doing that, this is no longer my union*—exemplifies what Bourdieu (1986) might term the “biographical illusion” confronting institutional change, where quantification disrupts taken-for-granted understandings of collective identity. The proposed enumeration of members with migration biographies (and their descendants) may evoke identity threats in organizations, understood as situations in which individuals perceive that aspects of their identities are devalued, questioned, or destabilized within the organizational context (Petriglieri, 2011). It operates through affective resistance: The framing of counting procedures as existentially threatening (rather than democratizing) mobilizes what Ahmed (2013) calls the “cultural politics of emotion”, where fear and nostalgia serve as defensive organizational affects and through categorical contestation. His skepticism toward the “migration background” classification reflects what Jenkins (2014) observes as the inherent instability of administrative categories when applied to lived identities. The case demonstrates how apparently neutral bureaucratic instruments become sites of struggle over an organization's symbolic boundaries and the emotional economies that sustain them.

6. Discussion: Different Interpretations of the Definition and Centrality of Organizational Identity-Texts

The findings of this study demonstrate that ver.di's organizational identity is a contested terrain shaped by diver-

gent interpretations among its members – reflecting broader struggles over who gets to narrate an organization's story and on what terms.

(1) For proponents of the migration quota, the union's positive framing of migration constitutes – according to approaches of inclusive organizational identity – a core element of its identity and a foundation for their own sense of organizational belonging. These members critique the persistent gap between the organization's pro-migration rhetoric and its failure to substantively represent individuals with migration biographies and their descendants in its structures. Drawing on Kirchner's (2015) framework, this discrepancy can be understood as an experiential incongruence between identity-texts and organizational practices—a paradox wherein the union's public commitment to diversity remains unrealized in its own structures.

(2) Opponents of the quota, however, interpret these same identity-texts differently. Their resistance to formal counting mechanisms reveals a deeper anxiety about the reconfiguration of the organizational identity. When confronted with demands for a migration quota, some express visceral reactions—framing quantification for implementing a quota as an existential threat to their own membership. This response underscores how institutional change is mediated through affective registers of anxiety and loss. The very act of categorizing members by “migration background” is itself contested, exposing tensions between administrative classification and lived identity.

(3) A third perspective completes this binary: some members acknowledge the union's pro-migration stance but reject its centrality to the organizational identity. For them, ver.di's core mission remains rooted in labour conflicts, and they perceive no contradiction between its symbolic inclusivity and its internal practices. When this view is challenged, however, they articulate a sense of estrangement (this is no longer my union), echoing Hochschild's (2016) “strangers in their own land” dynamic—a sentiment that their historical claim to the organization is being undermined.

Collectively, these positions illustrate that organizational identity is not a fixed text but an ongoing negotiation, shaped by power asymmetries, affective registers, and competing visions of the main organizational purpose or the centrality of specific identity-texts. Freeman and Koçak (2023, p. 178) emphasize that an organizational identity is a key design instrument in the pursuit of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Because the identity of an organization refers to beliefs about an organization's core characteristics. That is why the question “Who we are as an organization” (Albert and Whetten, 1985) is an important reference for evaluating and expressing belongingness. But the central question—which identity-texts should define the core of the organizational identity and the union's future—remains unresolved.

7. Conclusion: Organizational Identity Work in the Future

Civil society organizations like the trade union *ver.di*, which advocate for specific interests such as workers' rights in labour conflicts, play vital democratic functions: They serve as crucial arenas for discursive opinion-formation and the equitable inclusion of diverse voices in democratic processes, particularly in articulating minority interests. However, these organizations in general cannot themselves be conceptualized as homogeneous entities. Rather, they encompass multiple internal groups with competing perspectives, creating inherent tensions even within organizations that publicly champion diversity and anti-racism, as *ver.di*'s case demonstrates.

The study's findings reveal fundamental divergences in how different organizational groups interpret identity-texts as relevant part of the organizational identity as a whole: While some members view the union's pro-migration stance – evident in its founding documents, position papers, and anti-racist work – as central to both the organization's identity and their personal sense of organizational belonging, others either marginalize this aspect. These contested interpretations transform organizational identity into an ongoing micro-political process (Crozier and Friedberg, 1979), where members deploy various strategies to advance their visions of the union's core identity. The emotional investments and definitions of organizational belonging held by these different groups will crucially shape future identity negotiations. In a superdiverse society (Vertovec, 2023) – if politically wanted or not – organizations are already diverse and will diversify in the future. Although forces of inertia (Stainback et al., 2010) are still powerful. From that point of view and with reference to the middle range findings of the study, questions of the representation of different groups within organizations, power struggles and the necessity for reflecting upon or even newly framing organizational identities will concern civil society organizations as well as all organizations of a special size in the future.

Empirical findings about civil society organizations (von Unger et al., 2022) illustrate: Organizational change is observable, yet often delayed and selective: A growing number of civil society organizations have initiated processes of organizational opening towards migrants and migration-related concerns, for instance by implementing targeted programs, adopting strategic decisions, or modifying internal structures. Nevertheless, the extent and depth of such changes vary considerably across different domains of organizational activity—such as membership, leadership, staff composition, and mechanisms of self-representation.

In many cases, migrant participation remains largely symbolic, and efforts toward inclusion are frequently hindered by delays, inertia, or structural resistance. These findings point out: Organizational change is rarely a lin-

ear process: Setbacks, resistance, ambiguous responsibilities, and symbolic rather than substantive forms of inclusion are common. And the extent to which migration and diversity are integrated into an organization varies significantly. Some organizations respond defensively, particularly when there is a perceived threat to their core identity (von Unger et al., 2022).

The findings of this study are transferrable on trade unions: The case of the German trade union *IG Metall* shows for example both historical and structural parallels to the dynamics analyzed in *ver.di*. From the late 1970s onward, *IG Metall* developed strategies and organizational practices to address the realities of migrant membership by formally recognizing migrant workers as a constituency, establishing multilingual structures, and convening “Ausländerkonferenzen”. Migrant activists repeatedly highlighted the gap between resolutions passed at constituent assemblies and their practical implementation, as illustrated by one migrant union member at an *Ausländerkonferenz* in 1986: “Papier ist geduldig...wir wollen endlich Taten sehen!” (Paper is patient...we want to see action) (Carstensen et al., 2022, p. 249). These conferences became arenas where strategic disagreements about institutionalizing representation emerged, closely mirroring the rhetorical-practical tension and internal contestation which was observed within *ver.di*. In contemporary *IG Metall*, quantitative data indicate a high proportion of migrant members (ca. 22%), overrepresentation in workplace representation structures, but underrepresentation in higher union offices, shaped by recruitment chains and labour market segmentation (Karakayali and Bouali, 2021). While there is little current qualitative research on identity discourses or quota-like debates comparable to *ver.di*'s 2019 congress, these structural patterns echo the *ver.di* findings, suggesting that similar underlying dynamics may be present, though less publicly articulated today.

The findings of this study about the trade union *ver.di* illustrate: Organizational identity must be understood as a dynamic process, continually evolving amid broader social transformations. In an increasingly polarized society, these meso-level identity struggles within organizations demand sustained attention and institutional support. As Kirchner (2012) argues, such situations call for mediated processes of organizational identity work – structured dialogues that explicitly address the fundamental question: “Who are we as an organization?”

In *ver.di*'s case, the data suggest urgent need for deliberate discussions about migration's role in the union's future identity. Key questions include:

- Should pro-migration positioning become more central to the union's identity?
- How should representation mechanisms be structured?
- What institutional changes would make diversity meaningful rather than symbolic?

These negotiations take on heightened significance in Germany's current political climate, where right-wing movements challenge basic premises of diversity and inclusion. The union's ability to navigate these internal conflicts while maintaining its democratic functions may serve as a bellwether for broader civil society's capacity to reconcile particularistic demands with universalistic commitments in polarized times.

In matters of representation of migrants it is also recommended that trainee-programs are established and especially in job advertisements migration and diversity should remain mentioned as important topics – arrangements which the trade union is already practicing. Dobbin and Kalev (2022) especially recommend structural and managerial approaches that foster meaningful and sustainable changes. Also Creary et al. (2021) emphasize “that managerial involvement had the highest influence on improving affective commitment, helping behaviors, belonging, and felt respect and the second highest influence (after mentoring and sponsorship) on perceptions of having an inclusive climate” (Freeman and Koçak, 2023, p. 186).

In addition, other procedures could consist in establishing continuous informal and formal dialogue panels within the organization for debating matters of organizational identity while it is proceeding and additionally to reflect on creating a new role like an “organizational identity manager” whose task is to company and to evaluate these processes around the organizational identity. Freeman and Koçak (2023, p. 186) frame the roles of those persons as “identity stewards”. In general, critical self-reflection on organizational structures and practices is necessary in order to identify and dismantle embedded forms of exclusion and structural barriers. Civil society organizations should approach organizational change with reference to their organizational identity as a learning process—one that involves not only the implementation of discrete measures, but also the possibility of deeper cultural and structural transformation (von Unger et al., 2022).

Availability of Data and Materials

All data reported in this paper will be shared by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

YA and SK designed the research study and performed the research. Both authors contributed to editorial changes in the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. Both authors have participated sufficiently in the work and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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