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## Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15846](#), Reference 4776 of 22 January 2024.



## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. Violence against politicians is alarmingly on the rise in many Council of Europe member and observer States. The Parliamentary Assembly unequivocally condemns all forms of violence against politicians, and reaffirms that violence has no place in democracy.
2. Representative democracy can only be achieved if political candidates are allowed to campaign safely and peacefully, and if elected officials are free to carry out their duties, with integrity and based on a public conduct dedicated to the interest of the community they represent, protected from any kind of harm. Any violent attack on a politician, regardless of their political affiliation, should be considered as an attack on democracy itself.
3. Politicians at all levels of government, and from all political backgrounds, can be victims of violence: political candidates, party members, elected officials and policy-makers with an institutional role. Their relatives and associates are often affected, too.
4. Urgent action must be taken to prevent and counter violence against politicians, as it fosters an atmosphere of fear which has a chilling effect on democratic participation in political life.
5. Politicians who experience violence may feel compelled to alter their behaviour, limit their participation in public events, or reduce their engagement with constituents. They may also decide to self-censor, avoiding discussion of certain controversial issues or even changing their stance on certain policies. Eventually, they may decide to step back from their role or choose not to stand for re-election. Similarly, individuals who are considering entering politics may be deterred by violence: this reduces pluralism and representativeness, and affects the quality of democratic processes.
6. Intimidation, threats and other forms of verbal or physical attacks can also have a critical impact on the mental well-being of politicians, reducing their ability to work and serve the public.
7. Certain categories, including women politicians and representatives of minority groups, are disproportionately targeted, through gender-based violence, sexual threats, misogynist, homophobic or racist attacks. They therefore deserve particular attention, to ensure that they are not discouraged from participating in politics, and to safeguard the diversity and representativeness of elected officials.
8. The disenchantment of citizens with democratic processes and institutions has been exacerbated by populist movements. At the same time, fear-mongering, hate speech and dehumanising rhetoric have become normalised in public discourse. This is fuelling the political polarisation of democracies, characterised by heightened tension and animosity among groups with opposing political views. The deterioration of the political sphere creates fertile ground for violence against politicians, which could spiral out of control.
9. The Assembly notes that violence against politicians can occur in various forms, both online and offline. This violence can be economic, psychological, sexual or physical in nature, and it can range from verbal abuse and harassment to intimidation, physical threats and attacks, and even lethal violence.
10. Online abuse against politicians includes, *inter alia*: sustained harassment and co-ordinated attacks, such as the co-ordinated misuse of reporting mechanisms with the intent to silence or unjustifiably suspend their accounts; threats (including anonymous threats); doxxing and other forms of unlawful disclosure of personal data; cyberstalking; impersonation; and the dissemination of manipulated or deceptive content intended to intimidate, silence or discredit politicians, including through attacks targeting their relatives or associates.
11. The Assembly is also concerned about the increasing use of deepfakes against politicians: these are audio recordings, images or video generated or manipulated by artificial intelligence that realistically depict a person saying or doing something they did not say or do, including the fabrication or alteration of public statements and the impersonation of politicians.
12. Acts of violence against politicians are often committed with the ultimate goal of intimidating and silencing them, forcing them to change their views, actions, or policies; yet, in many cases, such violence is driven simply by disrespect and hatred, without any clear objective.

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2. Draft resolution unanimously adopted by the committee on 9 March 2026.

13. The Assembly reiterates that robust political debate, that includes sharp criticism and satire, forms part of democratic pluralism and is protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5). However, threats, incitement to violence, targeted harassment and dehumanising hate speech, whether online or offline, are incompatible with a democratic society and cannot be justified under the freedom of expression.

14. Choosing violence over dialogue is antithetical to all democratic principles. In a vicious circle, the increased number of episodes of violence against politicians is therefore a clear symptom that democracy in Europe is backsliding, and is also one of the causes of this backsliding, as violence undermines political participation, representation and institutions, and ultimately democratic resilience.

15. The Assembly recalls that the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe adopted in 2023 the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, through which they committed to “ensure full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground” (Principle 10).

16. Furthermore, the Assembly reiterates the conclusions of the Conference of Presidents of Parliament held in Strasbourg on 20-21 March 2025, which indicate that violence against politicians undermines democratic processes and erodes trust in institutions. The conclusions also underline the need to make the fight against this phenomenon a priority, to preserve democracy.

17. In this context, the Assembly welcomes the ongoing work of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe entitled “Preserving grassroots democracy – Tackling violence against local and regional elected representatives”.

18. Considering the Council of Europe's ongoing initiatives towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Assembly believes that Council of Europe member and observer States should renew their social contracts with citizens through whole-of-society initiatives involving all relevant stakeholders: national governments and parliaments, local authorities and councils, the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, academic institutions, media and businesses.

19. The objective should be to reinstate appreciation for those who decide to dedicate their time and efforts to public life, to uphold the bonds that keep democracies together, and to strengthen the boundaries of dialogue, respect, tolerance and mutual understanding that prevent violence, thus reinforcing democratic security.

20. In line with these considerations, the Assembly calls on member and observer States of the Council of Europe to:

20.1. adopt robust legislation that recognises the different forms of violence against politicians as specific criminal offences or aggravating circumstances, and imposes tougher penalties where appropriate, in accordance with the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality, to demonstrate zero tolerance of this phenomenon;

20.2. identify appropriate regulatory tools to prevent social and traditional media from disseminating incitement to violence, hate speech, dehumanising discourse or other inflammatory content, while safeguarding freedom of expression, ensuring transparency, due process and effective remedies and avoiding opaque delegations to private actors in defining lawful political opinion, as well as regulatory tools to observe if and how social media companies deal with shadow banning and organised blocking campaigns that hinder free speech of politicians;

20.3. promote safeguards against manipulated content (including deepfakes) used to threaten, impersonate or incite violence against politicians, focusing on authenticity and transparency measures such as clear labelling of synthetic content, provenance/traceability tools and effective and timely remedies (including notification and right of reply), under transparent procedures and independent oversight, without delegating to private actors the power to restrict lawful political opinion;

20.4. make human and financial resources available to law enforcement and the judiciary, to ensure that all forms of violence against politicians are investigated and prosecuted swiftly, properly and effectively, possibly through specialised units that can ensure appropriate levels of co-ordination among the relevant authorities;

20.5. ensure that public institutions protect all political voices equally when implementing anti-violence policies, avoiding any ideological bias, respecting freedom of speech and freedom of press;

- 20.6. protect the physical and psychological well-being of politicians at all levels, with a particular focus on women politicians and representatives of minority groups, without creating hierarchies of protection and ensuring equal safeguards for all political voices, ensuring their preparedness and safety by providing protection measures, such as regular risk assessments, the provision of emergency buttons, alarm systems, and enhanced democratic surveillance;
  - 20.7. combat the targeting of politicians' private lives and families, including doxxing and other unlawful disclosures of personal data, by strengthening rapid-response reporting channels, effective removal procedures for unlawfully disclosed personal data, and law-enforcement follow-up, coupled with risk assessment measures to prevent escalation into offline violence;
  - 20.8. provide politicians at all levels with capacity building on safety measures, guidelines on cybersecurity, legal and psychological support, and other resources where needed;
  - 20.9. strengthen debate spaces and opportunities for citizens to participate through participatory and deliberative democracy processes, including civil society organisations in them;
  - 20.10. conduct public campaigns and implement learning programmes for civic education and media literacy, to renew citizens' civic responsibility and trust in institutions, with a special focus on younger generations;
  - 20.11. promote cross-party dialogue and a political culture based on transparency, respect and responsibility, as well as rejection of violence and hate speech, across the entire political spectrum;
  - 20.12. improve the collection of data at all levels, to properly analyse the phenomenon; identify its underlying causes; categorise the different methods and means of violence, and how they target different groups, through an intersectional approach; assess how citizens respond to episodes of violence against politicians; and monitor the developments, to tailor relevant legislation and policies;
  - 20.13. consider establishing a mechanism to identify, track and raise awareness of specific threats or episodes of violence against politicians at local, regional, and national levels.
21. The Assembly notes that politicians have a primary responsibility to set an example of civic, tolerant and democratic conduct. It therefore calls on politicians at all levels to refrain from using inflammatory, dehumanising rhetoric and from inciting violence. The Assembly also invites politicians to condemn all acts of violence, in all their forms, especially when they are perpetrated against their peers from different parties.
22. Furthermore, the Assembly invites national parliaments and local councils, as well as political parties to:
- 22.1. adopt dedicated codes of conduct, to avoid that politicians target their peers from different parties with abusive behaviours;
  - 22.2. adopt security protocols and monitoring and alert mechanisms to provide adequate psychological and physical support to their members when they are the victims of verbal or physical attacks.

## **B. Draft recommendation<sup>3</sup>**

1. The Parliamentary Assembly draws the Committee of Ministers' attention to its Resolution...(2026) "Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy", in which it underlines that violence against politicians is on the rise in many Councils of Europe member and observer States.
2. The Assembly is concerned that violence against politicians at all levels can have a chilling effect on democratic participation in political life, thereby reducing pluralism, representativeness, and the quality of democratic processes and institutions. Intimidation, threats and other forms of verbal, physical or sexual attacks can also have a critical impact on the mental well-being of politicians, reducing their ability to work and serve the public. Urgent action is therefore needed to prevent and counter this phenomenon.
3. Certain categories, including women politicians and representatives of minority groups, are disproportionately targeted, including through gender-based violence, sexual threats, misogynist, homophobic or racist attacks. They therefore deserve particular attention, to ensure that they are not discouraged from participating in politics, and to safeguard the diversity and representativeness of elected officials.
4. The Assembly recalls that the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe adopted in 2023 the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy, through which they committed to "ensure full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground" (Principle 10).
5. The Assembly also refers to the ongoing work of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on "Preserving grassroots democracy – Tackling violence against local and regional elected representatives".
6. The Assembly believes that, in the framework of the New Democratic Pact for Europe, the Council of Europe could play a leading role in ensuring that violence against politicians at all levels is adequately tackled, thus strengthening democratic security across the continent.
7. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to consider establishing a mechanism, which could take the shape of a platform or an observatory of the Council of Europe, to identify and track specific threats or episodes of violence against politicians at the local, regional, and national levels.
8. The mechanism would help understand the phenomenon, and contribute to a better prevention and response by the competent authorities. It could also collect data to analyse trends, and be instrumental in raising awareness of the matter through dedicated Council of Europe public campaigns.
9. The Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to further develop early warning mechanisms to detect democratic backsliding.

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3. Draft recommendation unanimously adopted by the committee on 9 March 2026.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Elisabetta Gardini, rapporteur<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Introduction

1. Representation is one of the pillars of European democracy. Through free, fair and transparent elections, held at regular intervals, citizens can choose their representatives at all levels, from local to national, and in the European Union member States, even at the European Parliament.
2. Candidates should all be able to conduct their campaigns in a safe and peaceful way; once elected, officials should equally be allowed to perform their duties freely and protected from any kind of harm or discrimination. Genuine representative democracy can only be ensured if these two conditions are met. Choosing violence over dialogue is antithetical to all democratic principles.
3. In recent years, however, the rise in hate speech, threats, and even physical violence targeting politicians – be they political candidates, party members, elected officials or policy-makers with an institutional role – has become a matter of grave concern and a serious challenge to the proper functioning of democracies.
4. The surge of online and offline violence, ranging from verbal abuse, harassment and intimidation to physical threats, attacks and even lethal violence – sometimes also targeting politicians' relatives or associates – has underscored the need to reaffirm the importance of democratic principles, and the urgency to protect them.
5. The polarisation of the political debate and the dangerous normalisation of violence can seriously undermine the quality and pluralism of democratic processes. Ensuring that political spaces allow everyone to fully participate and engage in debate without fear of violence or harassment is essential to the very nature of democracy.
6. At the same time, a clear distinction must be drawn between legitimate political dissent and actual incitement to violence. Freedom of expression should allow for free and open debate, including when it is passionate – but it must not be an excuse for dehumanising rhetoric or hate speech. Likewise, certain political views should not be marginalised simply for challenging dominant cultural trends.
7. The safety and well-being of politicians is of paramount importance and cannot be sacrificed. It is urgent that action is taken to reverse the trend and ensure that politicians at all levels are protected, allowing them to focus solely on their work in the public interest.

### 2. Violence against politicians

8. Violence against politicians can occur both online and offline; it can be perpetrated by State actors, non-State actors, and individuals; and it can take different forms: economic, psychological, sexual or physical. According to the Better Politics Foundation, violence against politicians refers to “any physical, psychological, or symbolic act intended to harm, intimidate, silence, or coerce political actors because of their political role, views, or activities”.<sup>5</sup>
9. Hate speech, threats and intimidation, abuse and physical aggression have no place in a democracy. In fact, one of the key features of democracy is the absence of violence. People should be allowed to express their opinions freely, participate in political activities without fear of being attacked by those who have opposing views, and engage in political deliberations which are based on dialogue and mutual respect rather than on threats and the use of force.
10. Thus, the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, during their 4th Summit held in May 2023, committed to the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, and among these to “ensure full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground.”<sup>6</sup>
11. Nonetheless, the number of verbal and physical attacks against politicians has increased in several European countries. The victims are political candidates, party members, elected officials as well as policy-makers with an institutional role, at all levels of government.

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4. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.

5. [www.betterpolitics.foundation/copy-of-what-is-violence-against-poli](https://www.betterpolitics.foundation/copy-of-what-is-violence-against-poli).

6. Council of Europe, “Reykjavík Declaration – United around our values”, 16-17 May 2023.

12. Furthermore, the episodes of violence do not appear to target representatives of a single political group, but span the entire political spectrum. Some groups – including women and members of minorities – are more exposed, yet it is equally important to recognise that politicians defending traditional or conservative positions are often attacked or vilified, particularly online.

13. On many occasions, politicians are indeed the target of harsh verbal attacks that have little to do with a respectful and constructive debate, but instead amount to threats and harassment directed at the politicians themselves, their families or their associates.

14. Threats can also turn into vandalism targeting politicians' homes or offices, and in the worst cases, into physical aggression and even murder.

### **2.1. The most recent episodes of violence in Europe and beyond**

15. Two members of the British Parliament have been murdered in less than a decade. Jo Cox was stabbed 15 times and shot three times by a far-right extremist in her constituency on 16 June 2016, during the campaign leading to the European referendum (which took place 1 week after).<sup>7</sup> Sir David Amess was stabbed to death by an Islamic State fanatic on 15 October 2021, while he was meeting citizens from his constituency.<sup>8</sup>

16. In Poland, the mayor of the city of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, was killed on stage by a former convict who had been recently released, during a charity event on 14 January 2019.<sup>9</sup> In his memory, since 2021, the European Committee of the Regions, in partnership with the International Cities of Refuge Network and the City of Gdańsk, grants the Mayor Paweł Adamowicz Award, "for courage and excellence in the promotion of freedom, solidarity and equality".<sup>10</sup>

17. In Germany, the Regional Governor Walter Lübcke was killed with a shot in the head by a right-wing extremist on 2 June 2019, while he was sitting in the garden of his house.<sup>11</sup>

18. More recently, on 15 May 2024, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, was shot and wounded after a government meeting, and as a consequence had to undergo long and delicate surgeries.<sup>12</sup> This was the first major assassination attempt on a European leader since Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was shot to death on 12 March 2003 – over 20 years earlier.

19. In a less dramatic but still very worrying event, the Prime Minister of Denmark, Mette Frederiksen, was hit in the street on 7 June 2024, resulting in minor injuries.<sup>13</sup>

20. This is not an exclusive problem of European democracies, as it also affects Council of Europe observer States. Some recent examples include:

- on 6 January 2021, a large group of protesters assaulted the Capitol building, seat of the Congress of the United States, in an attempt to halt the tallying of electoral college votes to confirm former President Joe Biden's victory, which resulted, *inter alia*, in the death of 4 rioters and a number of injured persons;
- in 2024, Donald Trump, the current President of the United States, was the victim of two assassination attempts;
- on 14 June 2025, Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed, and State Senator John Hoffman and his wife were wounded in politically motivated shootings;<sup>14</sup>
- the former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe was assassinated on 8 July 2022, while he was speaking at a political event;<sup>15</sup>
- during the last electoral campaign in Mexico, a staggering average of one episode of violence targeting a politician per day was registered.<sup>16</sup>

7. [BBC, Jo Cox murder.](#)

8. [BBC, David Amess.](#)

9. [The Guardian, "The killing of Gdańsk's mayor is the tragic result of hate speech", 17 January 2019.](#)

10. <https://cor.europa.eu/en/plenaries-events/awards/mayor-pawel-adamowicz-award>.

11. [DW, "Remembering a political murder that shook Germany", 6 February 2024.](#)

12. [Reuters, "Slovak Prime Minister Fico released to home care, hospital says", 31 May 2024.](#)

13. [BBC, "Danish PM suffered whiplash in street attack", 8 June 2024.](#)

14. [CBS News, "Minnesota Rep. Hortman and husband killed, Sen. Hoffman and wife wounded in politically motivated shootings, Gov. Walz says", 16 June 2025.](#)

15. [BBC, "Shinzo Abe: Japan ex-leader assassinated while giving speech", 8 July 2022.](#)

These incidents show that violence against politicians is not limited to fragile democracies or a particular political ideology. In fact, it often targets those who challenge dominant narratives or propose political change, regardless of their position in the political spectrum.

21. In this respect, and although this report focuses on violence against politicians, it would be remiss not to mention two recent cases of political violence targeting activists, which occurred while this report was being drafted. These cases epitomise the extreme polarisation and the normalisation of violence in both Europe and the United States.

22. On 10 September 2025, the American conservative political activist Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while he was holding a public debate with students at the Utah Valley University. His death has sparked debate across the Atlantic about freedom of speech and political rhetoric.

23. On 14 February 2026, Quentin Deranque, a 23-year-old far-right activist, died from injuries sustained during an attack by a group of far-left activists. Among those arrested on suspicion of being involved in the attack were reportedly two aides of a French parliamentarian from the La France Insoumise (LFI) party. A few days later, the LFI headquarters had to be evacuated due to a bomb threat. The alarming fact that individuals with direct links to democratic institutions may have been involved in the attack has prompted French President Emmanuel Macron to call on the country's political extremes to "put their houses in order".<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2. A worrying phenomenon

24. Moving beyond the non-exhaustive, anecdotal collection of recent violent incidents presented above, and even though a comprehensive European dataset to monitor cases of verbal and physical violence against politicians does not exist, the information collected by some Council of Europe member States can at least offer a glimpse into the scale and severity of the problem across the continent.

25. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) recently published a study entitled "When the public turns hostile – Political violence against parliamentarians".<sup>18</sup> Drawing on five national case studies (in Argentina, Benin, Italy, Malaysia and the Netherlands) and a global survey, the study's findings reveal that the phenomenon has global reach. Notably, 71% of respondents reported experiencing violence by the public, both offline and online, with violence online being more prevalent. Most of them also considered the trend to have deteriorated over the past five years. Furthermore, it is worth noting that 44% of respondents considered violence to be part of political life.

26. According to data provided by the German authorities, incidents of verbal or physical violence against elected representatives have almost doubled in Germany in the last five years, and 2 790 incidents were recorded in 2023, whereas almost 5 000 cases of violence against politicians were reported by the Federal Criminal Police Office in 2024. Before the past federal election, several members of parliament decided not to run again, due to the number of threats received; among them, the Vice-President of the Bundestag, Ms Yvonne Magwas.<sup>19</sup>

27. Similarly, in France, incidents of this type increased by 32% in 2022 compared to the previous year, and the trend continued in 2023, with 2 380 attacks reported in the first three-quarters of that year.<sup>20</sup>

28. In the United Kingdom, in 2023, 43% of Welsh MPs and members of the Senedd (the Welsh Parliament) had received a death threat; 70% of the members of the Scottish Parliament reported fearing for their safety; and seven out of ten local councillors had experienced abuse and intimidation.<sup>21</sup>

29. In Sweden, one in three elected officials said they experienced one form of threat, violence or damage from ordinary citizens in 2023.<sup>22</sup>

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16. CNN, "Cada día una persona vinculada al ámbito político sufre una agresión en México, según una consultora" 18 March 2024.

17. *Politico*, "Macron begs France to reject political violence after killing of far-right activist", 19 February 2026.

18. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "When the public turns hostile: Political violence against parliamentarians", 11 February 2026.

19. *Speech* by Ms Bärbel Bas, President of the Bundestag, Germany, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, 21 March 2025.

20. *Euronews*, "Political violence is on the rise in EU, driven by extremism and disillusionment", 17 May 2024.

21. The Jo Cox Foundation – Civility Commission, "No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation", January 2024.

22. *Euractiv*, "One in three Swedish politicians targeted by violence, threats", 15 December 2023.

30. Members of the Austrian Government receive up to 500 hate messages per person every day; a large number of these messages also reach members of the Austrian Parliament, some including murder or rape threats.<sup>23</sup>

31. Local candidates and politicians are particularly targeted as well, especially as they are at the level of government that is closer to citizens and have therefore more opportunities of daily contact with them. Data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) show that between 2020 and 2022 events of violence targeting local politicians occurred in 16 out of 27 EU member States, among which Italy recorded the highest level, with a total of 238 episodes.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in recent years, one in four mayors in Germany has considered resigning because of the threats and verbal and physical violence they had suffered.<sup>25</sup> These figures highlight not only the vulnerability of local politicians, but also their proximity and commitment to the communities they serve – often under pressure, in complex social and territorial contexts.

32. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe adopted [Resolution 485\(2022\)](#) and [Recommendation 478\(2022\)](#) entitled “Hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives”, which contain relevant recommendations for the member States of the Council of Europe.<sup>26</sup> The Congress also devoted a debate to this issue in October 2023,<sup>27</sup> and is currently preparing a report entitled “Preserving grassroots democracy – Tackling violence against local and regional elected representatives”.

33. The phenomenon is gaining attention also for the possible consequences and impact it can have on business: as an example, Control Risks, a global specialist risk consultancy company, included political violence among the top risks for business in 2025.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the Allianz Risk Barometer ranks political risks and violence among its top 10 major business risks for 2026.<sup>29</sup> This also reinforces the idea that safeguarding democratic debate and pluralism is not only a matter of public safety, but of economic and institutional stability.

### **2.3. Unequal exposure to political violence**

34. Verbal and physical attacks are often disproportionately directed at certain categories of politicians. Among these, women and representatives of minority groups are frequently affected.

35. In the United Kingdom, black, Asian and minority female MPs face disproportionately more abuse online.<sup>30</sup> In Sweden, a large-scale survey found that politicians with immigrant backgrounds face significantly more physical and psychological violence than their counterparts.<sup>31</sup>

36. A study conducted in 2018 by the Assembly and the IPU, entitled “Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”, showed that psychological and verbal violence against female parliamentarians is widespread. The findings included the following:

- 85.2% of female MPs who took part in the study said that they had suffered psychological violence in the course of their term of office;
- 46.9% had received death threats or threats of rape or beating;
- 58.2% had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks;
- 67.9% had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes;
- 24.7% had suffered sexual violence;

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23. [Speech](#) of Ms Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler, President of the Bundesrat, Austria, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, 21 March 2025.

24. ACLED, “[Unidentified Violent Assailants Target Local Officials](#)”, 22 June 2023.

25. DW, “[More and more German mayors want to quit](#)”, 14 April 2024.

26. <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a8340b>.

27. [www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/violence-against-local-and-regional-elected-representatives-a-threat-to-our-democracies](http://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/violence-against-local-and-regional-elected-representatives-a-threat-to-our-democracies).

28. [www.controlrisks.com/riskmap/top-risks/rising-political-violence#](http://www.controlrisks.com/riskmap/top-risks/rising-political-violence#).

29. <https://commercial.allianz.com/news-and-insights/expert-risk-articles/allianz-risk-barometer-2026-political-risks-and-violence.html>.

30. Amnesty International UK, “[Black and Asian Women MPs abused more online](#)”, 20 April 2022.

31. S. Håkansson, N. Lajevardi, “[Representation at Risk: Evaluating Levels and Consequences of Violence against Immigrant-Background Politicians](#)”, *American Political Science Review* 119, no. 3 (2025): 1463–78.

– 14.8% had suffered physical violence.<sup>32</sup>

37. A 2024 study by the European Parliament also stressed that one reason for women's under representation at political level is fear of gender-based and political violence.<sup>33</sup> It is important, however, to address this without reinforcing the idea that women are inherently less able to endure political confrontation. Democracy benefits when all individuals – regardless of gender or background – are empowered to engage freely and without fear, based on merit and commitment.

38. A survey conducted among members of the Scottish Parliament has shown that almost all female members were targeted by online abuse, including rape threats, death threats and severe misogynistic abuse.<sup>34</sup> In this connection, 14 female members of the Scottish National Party (23% of the total) are stepping down before the May 2026 election, citing lack of support from the party but also tolerance of bullying and abuse in the chamber and online.<sup>35</sup>

39. Ms Urška Klakočar Zupančič, the first female President of the National Assembly of Slovenia, experienced backlash on social media immediately after her inaugural address, with comments dissecting her appearance rather than her speech. A study recently published in Slovenia indicates that politically active women are disproportionately targeted.<sup>36</sup>

40. Similarly, according to a study conducted in Germany in 2024, digital violence was affecting the majority of politically active people, and women were more affected than men – two-thirds of them reported gender-based violence, and a significant percentage (66%) decided to limit their use of social media.<sup>37</sup>

41. Such attacks are often based more on the political positions the individual defends, or the role they occupy, than their identity *per se*. In many cases, criticism or abuse is directed at politicians perceived as challenging dominant narratives – particularly when they express traditional or conservative values – and their cases often receive less institutional attention. Recognising this dimension is essential to avoid ideological simplifications and to ensure equal protection for all public figures.

42. Thus, violence against politicians represents a serious challenge to the quality of democratic representation. Abuse, harassment and violence can have deep emotional effects on victims, discouraging them from engaging in politics or even pushing them to step down. While it is true that certain groups – including women – are disproportionately affected, the real democratic loss lies in the silencing of all voices through fear, regardless of gender or background. Reducing political participation to demographic categories entails a risk of overlooking the importance of values, competence and courage – which are the true cornerstones of democratic engagement.

43. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities analysed this matter as well, with a debate entitled “Violence against women in politics” held in March 2025. During the debate, several locally elected representatives from different countries and political groups reported episodes of threats, online and in person harassment, verbal and physical abuse that they had personally experienced. These testimonies confirmed that the phenomenon affects political figures across the ideological spectrum and at every level of government. Protecting all elected officials – regardless of gender or political orientation – is essential to safeguarding pluralism and institutional legitimacy.

#### **2.4. The root causes**

44. There seem to be several reasons behind the increased numbers of violent attacks against politicians. The issue is directly linked to the backsliding of democracy, and it affects the very foundation of representative democracies.

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32. [www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe](http://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe).

33. European Parliamentary Research Service, “Violence against women active in politics in the EU: A serious obstacle to political participation”, 22 February 2024.

34. *Holyrood*, “Almost all female MSPs targeted by online abuse, survey finds”, 10 March 2025.

35. *The Guardian*, “‘Hostile environment’ drives many of SNP’s female MSPs to step down before 2026 vote”, 23 March 2025.

36. *Speech* by Ms Urška Klakočar Zupančič, President of the National Assembly, Slovenia, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, 21 March 2025.

37. HateAid, Koch, L., Voggenreiter, A., Steinert, J.I.: *Under attack & abandoned: How digital violence affects political engagement. A situation report* (2025).

45. Academic research on the topic is emerging, tackling the issue from different angles, such as the links between political and election violence and the attempts to influence both citizens' and politicians' behaviours; the gendered and intersectional perspective of political violence;<sup>38</sup> the association of political violence with criminal organisations;<sup>39</sup> and the impact that violence has on representation, elections and democracy on a more general level.<sup>40</sup>

46. However, it is important to avoid reading these phenomena only through the lens of identity politics. Broader cultural and institutional causes must be taken into account, including the delegitimisation of national identity, the erosion of authority, and the disconnect between institutions and citizens' real concerns.

47. The multiple challenges that European democracies have faced in the last years, including economic and financial crises, the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, climate change, and mass migrations, have negatively impacted European citizens' trust in public authorities and democratic institutions.<sup>41</sup>

48. More and more citizens are angry, disillusioned and fear being left behind and marginalised as a consequence of rising inequalities. Their sense of insecurity is amplified by the perception that decisions affecting their lives are taken by detached and corrupt elites, unaccountable bureaucrats or "hidden powers". Politicians are often considered as inadequate for the job, not reactive and incapable to respond to crises, and are ultimately perceived as being too distant from the reality of the daily lives of their constituents. The rise of populist movements adopting anti-establishment stances has fuelled distrust and hostility towards politicians among many citizens.

49. This gap is further exacerbated when political and cultural elites promote agendas perceived as alien or dismissive of national traditions, family values, or legitimate concerns about security and identity.

50. The political debate is becoming increasingly divisive, leading to the polarisation of citizens' opinions and therefore to the normalisation of hate speech and intolerance in the political discourse, and the acceptance of violence in the political competition to prevent opponents from reaching their objectives.

51. In some countries, "affective political polarisation" (i.e. the mutual dislike between different groups)<sup>42</sup> has escalated to a level of political hatred, where those holding different views are considered enemies to be defeated rather than opponents with whom dialogue and compromise should be sought.

52. Disillusioned citizens also start to consider that rather than through dialogue, participation and electoral competition, they are entitled to express their discontent through violence, to the point that some of them believe that only through violence they will achieve change.<sup>43</sup>

53. As an example, data collected by the Electoral Commission of the United Kingdom in 2023 shows that only 31% of younger UK citizens (18 to 24 years old) find "totally unacceptable" that people verbally threaten MPs in public.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, a study published in 2025 indicates that episodes of violence against politicians may increase the level of acceptance of political violence among certain groups of voters.<sup>45</sup>

54. The use of inflammatory rhetoric, fear-mongering and dehumanising language to depict people with different views – including by extremist factions or opportunistic politicians – contributes to the poisoning of the political space and impedes a fair discussion and the exchange of ideas. Furthermore, politicians themselves might use openly violent arguments in their speeches, and even be involved in fights with their opponents in parliaments or local councils, thus setting a poor example in terms of the proper respect that should be paid to political opponents and democratic institutions.

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38. <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PanelDetails/7673>.

39. [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272717301251](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272717301251).

40. <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PanelDetails/15072>.

41. Eurofound, "Trust in crisis: Europe's social contract under threat", 2 May 2024.

42. [www.eui.eu/news-hub?id=andres-reiljan-on-affective-polarisation-causes-impacts-and-solutions](http://www.eui.eu/news-hub?id=andres-reiljan-on-affective-polarisation-causes-impacts-and-solutions).

43. R. Kleinfeld, N. Bibbins Sedaca, "How to prevent political violence", *Journal of Democracy*, October 2024.

44. The Electoral Commission, *Public Attitudes 2023*.

45. A. Nai, P. F. A. van Erkel, Linda Bos, "Violence Against Politicians Drives Support for Political Violence Among (Some) Voters: Evidence from a Natural Experiment", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 89, Issue 2, 2025, Pages 310–334, 22 April 2025.

55. The rise of social media has provided new fora for political discussion, but at the same time it has also facilitated the dissemination of fake news (including deepfakes,<sup>46</sup> i.e. audio-visual material generated by artificial intelligence that can be used to depict individuals in inappropriate or unethical behaviours), conspiracy theories and hate speech, in some cases propagated by malign interference actors, including foreign ones.

56. The possibility of hiding behind fake accounts is an incentive for disgruntled citizens to abuse, harass and threaten politicians, often without effective filters. The dissemination of disruptive content through social (and traditional) media can fuel further aggressive behaviours, in particular among extremist groups.

57. Social media also allow, through filtering and algorithmic engineering, for the creation of so-called “eco chambers”, virtual environments where individuals are only faced with ideas and perspectives that reinforce their own beliefs, without offering alternative points of view nor the chance for a real and effective debate. To maximise the monetisation of engagement, social media, algorithms tend indeed to prioritise divisive, disruptive and even violent content, thereby exacerbating polarisation in public discourse.

58. Nevertheless, efforts to counter hate speech and disinformation must always respect freedom of expression and avoid delegating to private platforms the authority to define what constitutes acceptable opinion in a democratic society.

59. The concurrence of these factors has made it acceptable for many European citizens to think that politicians could be targeted with threats and verbal attacks without impunity, as if this was an intrinsic component of their jobs as public figures. According to this reasoning, politicians who made the decision to dedicate themselves to a public role should accept a certain degree of harassment, because it is simply part of the game.

60. In fact, it is exactly because of this phenomenon that an increasing number of local and national politicians in Europe are considering or deciding to step back, and certainly a large number of persons who would potentially be interested in becoming more engaged in political life are not doing so for fear of the impact that harassment and violence could have on themselves, their families and their colleagues.

61. In addition, politicians are pushed to reconsider how they communicate, by refraining from commenting on certain controversial topics, or how they engage with citizens, by reducing their public appearances or avoiding in-person meetings.<sup>47</sup> Self-censorship out of fear leads to lower-quality debates, and avoiding direct contact with constituents reinforces the perception of a political elite that is completely detached from citizens' lives.

62. This climate of intimidation ultimately has a chilling effect and reduces the space for political pluralism and diversity, discouraging the emergence of strong voices capable of proposing alternative visions, often needed in times of crisis.

### 3. Good practices

#### 3.1. *The Council of Europe and other international organisations*

63. The European Commission for Democracy through Law of the Council of Europe (Venice Commission) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) jointly produced in 2020 the second edition of the “Guidelines on Political Party Regulation”, where they indicate that “the state shall not only (passively) respect the exercise of the freedom of association, but shall also actively protect and facilitate this exercise. The state shall protect political parties and individuals in their freedom of association from interference by non-state actors, *inter alia* by legislative means. The state must ensure that there is adequate protection against violence for candidates and supporters of political parties. While other groups, associations or individuals must have the right to criticise political parties and/or their opinions and demonstrate against them, violence or threats of violence are not permissible”.<sup>48</sup>

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46. Politico, “Deepfakes, distrust and disinformation: Welcome to the AI election”, 16 April 2024.

47. Politico, “UK election candidates battle death threats and abuse”, 25 June 2024.

48. Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, “Guidelines on Political Party Regulation – Second Edition”, 14 December 2020.

64. The guidelines also quote a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which indicates that “it is incumbent upon public authorities to guarantee the proper functioning of an association or political party, even when they annoy or give offence to persons opposed to the lawful ideas or claims that they are seeking to promote. Their members must be able to hold meetings without having to fear that they will be subjected to physical violence by their opponents. Such a fear would be liable to deter other associations or political parties from openly expressing their opinions on highly controversial issues affecting the community.”<sup>49</sup>

65. Based on the above-mentioned study conducted with the IPU, the Assembly launched, in November 2018, the initiative #NotInMyParliament, aimed at countering sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments.<sup>50</sup>

66. There is a clear need to keep providing visibility to this matter. In March 2025, under the auspices of the Assembly, the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments held in Strasbourg tackled the issue of violence against politicians as one of its main themes.

67. The conclusions of the Conference indicate that combating violence against politicians is a priority to safeguard democracy and protect inclusive societies, as the phenomenon undermines democratic processes and erodes trust in institutions: legal and institutional frameworks must be strengthened to provide support and protection to politicians.

68. At the same time, the conclusions of the Conference also indicate that women politicians, minorities and LGBTI politicians are particularly targeted, and stress the need to tackle the underlying causes of violence: misogyny, racism, mistrust in political systems, economic inequalities, corruption scandals, disinformation and conspiracy theories. Emphasis is placed on the role of civic education, media literacy and culture to build an informed and engaged European citizenship, and on the critical responsibility that parliamentarians have in leading by example, condemning attacks on peers and refraining from inflammatory rhetoric.<sup>51</sup>

69. Nevertheless, protection policies must remain ideologically neutral and safeguard political pluralism in full. Counter-measures should not result in private or arbitrary restrictions on lawful democratic debate.

70. Finally, the OSCE has developed a toolkit entitled “Addressing Violence against Women in Politics In the OSCE Region”,<sup>52</sup> which contains a number of recommendations that could be useful in general, irrespective of gender.

### **3.2. Initiatives in Council of Europe member States**

71. In certain Council of Europe member States, central and local authorities as well as civil society are actively monitoring the phenomenon of violence against politicians, adopting prevention measures and proposing actions to be implemented.

72. In July 2023, the French Government adopted a Plan to prevent and combat violence against elected officials, which focuses on strengthening their legal, psychological and physical protection, their relationship with prosecutors, and the relevant legal measures. It also established a Centre of Analysis and Action Against Violence towards Elected Officials (CALAE), which aims at better protecting locally elected officials and piloting the implementation of a “security package”.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, since 2024, students in school are being taught about the role of media and the dangers of digital technology,<sup>54</sup> and a new law was adopted to further strengthen the security and protection of locally elected representatives and mayors.<sup>55</sup>

73. Since 2016, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, with funding by the central government, provides support to municipalities and regions to develop systematic structures and approaches to prevent and confront threats and other crimes directed against local politicians. In addition, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has since 2014 carried out the Politicians’ Safety Survey, which maps

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49. European Court of Human Rights, *Ouranio Toxo and Others v. Greece*, no. 74989/01, 20 October 2005, para. 37.

50. <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/not-in-my-parliament>.

51. <https://rm.coe.int/conclusions-of-the-conference-ecpp-2025/1680b4ec71>.

52. [www.osce.org/odihr/530272](http://www.osce.org/odihr/530272).

53. [www.info.gouv.fr/actualite/de-nouvelles-mesures-pour-protger-les-elus-locaux](http://www.info.gouv.fr/actualite/de-nouvelles-mesures-pour-protger-les-elus-locaux).

54. Speech of Mr Loïc Hervé, Vice-President of the Senate, France, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, 21 March 2025.

55. [www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000049309567](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000049309567).

the experiences among elected officials, at local and central levels, of harassment, threats and violence.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Criminal Code was amended in 2020, to increase penalties for crimes committed against elected representatives at local, national or European Parliament levels, or against their family members.<sup>57</sup>

74. In Finland, the focus for crisis resilience is based on the concept of comprehensive security, which relies on the co-operation between authorities, businesses, organisations and citizens. The same approach is applied to the Parliament of Finland, where everyone plays a role in maintaining and developing security. Finnish parliamentarians have access to general security services and, if necessary, individually tailored security measures, based on risk assessments, and which include personal protection and other measures provided by the police. Security training is also provided, covering preparedness and actions to take in exceptional circumstances, as well as cybersecurity. The parliament has security guidelines, which also cover online harassment situations, how to act safely digitally, and travel security.<sup>58</sup>

75. In Italy, the civil society organisation Avviso Pubblico produces since 2010 a yearly report on criminal threats and intimidation acts (including by the mafia) against local administrators and persons working in the public administration.<sup>59</sup>

76. In the United Kingdom, the Jo Cox Foundation presented to the parliament in January 2024 a report drafted by its Civility Commission, titled “No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation”. Based on consultations and discussions with a large number of stakeholders, it contains a set of 28 concrete recommendations on the following issues:

- co-ordination and behaviour;
- political literacy;
- social media;
- police and security;
- parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations);
- local government;
- elections;
- political parties.<sup>60</sup>

The recommendations were welcomed and praised by representatives of both major political groups in the United Kingdom, including the former Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Theresa May and David Cameron.<sup>61</sup>

77. On 9 September 2024, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a hearing with the participation of Ms Su Moore, the Chief Executive Officer of the Jo Cox Foundation. Ms Moore presented the work of the foundation, stressing how since the launch of its report, progress had been achieved on over half of its recommendations: dedicated police support was being extended to support local politicians; security costs during elections were being exempted from normal campaign spending limits; and police forces were receiving increased training and enhanced internal co-ordination.

78. Ms Moore also indicated that some politicians are reluctant to speak about the issue, because they do not want to be seen as demonising their constituents. On the other hand, according to the foundation’s experience, naming the problem is vital to build momentum and support.

79. While not all the recommendations of the Foundation would be applicable in other countries, there is a central core that could be applied in most circumstances.

80. The exchange also allowed members of the committee to share their personal experiences. Among the concerns voiced by the members, it is worth mentioning the need for governments to dedicate appropriate resources to investigating authorities, and to raise public concern about this problem.

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56. <https://skr.se/skr/englishpages/activitiespolicyareas/threatsandviolenceagainstelectedpoliticians.27022.html>.

57. European Parliamentary Research Service, “Violence and intimidation against politicians in the EU”, October 2025.

58. Speech of Ms Paula Risikko, Vice-Speaker of the Eduskunta, Finland, during the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, 21 March 2025.

59. <http://www.avvisopubblico.it/home/home/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/amministratori-sotto-tiro/>.

60. The Jo Cox Foundation – Civility Commission, “No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation”, op. cit.

61. BBC, “Jo Cox Foundation: Abuse of politicians is a threat to democracy, report says”, 24 January 2024.

### 3.3. The importance of addressing politicians' well-being

81. The increase in hate speech, threats and violence against politicians takes a toll on their mental well-being. This obviously affects the quality of the decisions they take and of the policies they design and implement, and therefore has an impact on the public life of all citizens and, ultimately, on democracy.

82. Some organisations are currently analysing this trend: as an example, the Better Politics Foundation (formerly called Apolitical Foundation) has published, in December 2023, a report on the state of politicians' well-being, finding that the participants in the survey had worse mental well-being than emergency-service employees.<sup>62</sup> Ms Kimberly McArthur, Chief Operating Officer of the foundation, presented this work to the members of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy during a hearing organised in April 2025.

83. The foundation provides politicians with capacity building and practical support to improve their performance and mental well-being. Furthermore, the foundation's website contains a useful list of organisations focusing on the mental well-being of politicians.<sup>63</sup>

## 4. Conclusions

84. Violence has no place in democracy. Individuals may have sophisticated opinions and disagree in complex ways: as long as this is done peacefully, it is actually one of the major strengths of democracy.

85. Violence against politicians reverberates far beyond its immediate victims. When threats, harassment, or attacks are normalised, politicians are driven to reduce their public commitments and appearances, or even to resign or not to run again for office. Even more troubling, citizens who might otherwise consider political participation are deterred by fear, for themselves and their families.

86. This chilling effect has an impact on political dialogue, perpetuates a sense of disconnection between voters and their representatives, and fuels a perception that politicians are distant and unapproachable. The quality of democratic processes and institutions is affected, and this contributes to the backsliding of democracy.

87. The Assembly should recognise the urgency of action. Inspired by the discussions held at the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments of March 2025, the Assembly should call on Council of Europe member and observer States to respond at all levels of government. This response should form a key part of the ongoing initiatives of the Council of Europe towards a New Democratic Pact.

88. The social contract between States and citizens must be renewed, through whole-of-society initiatives that involve all relevant stakeholders: national governments and parliaments, local authorities and councils, police forces, civil society organisations, media, academia and businesses. The aim should be to reinvigorate public appreciation for political engagement, and take an unequivocal stand against violence.

89. At the same time, laws must be strengthened and resources allocated to ensure that all forms of violence against politicians are investigated and prosecuted swiftly. It is also crucial to regulate the digital and media landscape, to counter the spread of hate speech, incitement to violence, and dehumanising or inflammatory rhetoric, while safeguarding freedom of expression.

90. Public institutions should guarantee the protection of all politicians at all levels, regardless of ideology. They should also extend special support to women and representatives of minority groups, who often face an increased risk.

91. Politicians must lead by example and refrain from abusive behaviour towards their peers. At the same time, political parties and parliaments should adopt codes of conduct that condemn violence and prevent it from becoming normalised or tolerated.

92. These initiatives should be accompanied by tailored civic education programmes and by mechanisms designed to encourage citizens, especially the younger generation, to participate in public life.

93. It will also be important to collect reliable data, in order to better understand the phenomenon, its causes and consequences, and to adopt countermeasures. This should be done alongside the establishment of a mechanism – which could be a platform or an observatory – to identify, track, and raise awareness of specific threats or episodes of violence against politicians.

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62. Apolitical Foundation, “*Mere mortals – The state of politicians' mental wellbeing and why it matters*”, December 2023.

63. [www.betterpolitics.foundation/lists-1](http://www.betterpolitics.foundation/lists-1).

94. To conclude, a decisive response is imperative: confidence in democratic processes and institutions must be restored, through a revitalised culture of dialogue, tolerance and respect.