



Violence against politicians

Background document

At the 4th Summit of the Council of Europe held in Reykjavík in 2023, Heads of State and Government of member States adopted the Principles for Democracy with which they committed to ensuring “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).

Introduction

Over the past decade, democracy has been backsliding all over the world. The gradual erosion of democratic norms, institutions and values goes hand in hand with the weakening of democratic safeguards, and the exercise of power within a weaker system of checks and balances. Europe is no exception to this dangerous trend. Societies are increasingly divided, and hatred, conspiracy theories and distrust of the political establishment are on the rise, amplified by social media and disinformation. Against this background, Council of Europe Member states have witnessed a surge in violence against politicians, characterised by a rise in physical attacks, threats and online hate against elected officials, at local and at national level. These phenomena have been accompanied by an increasing polarisation of political life, with a divisive rhetoric becoming increasingly prevalent in political discourse.

The risk of facing violence: a price to pay for political engagement?

The murders of Joe Cox and of Sir David Amess in the United Kingdom, the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico, the physical assault against the Prime Minister of Denmark Mette Frederiksen and the murder of the mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz are the most glaring examples of violence against politicians. These cases received a lot of media attention but they are just the tip of the iceberg: thousands of politicians are threatened, harassed and stalked, in person or online. Sometimes they are targeted personally; other times through their collaborators or family members.

Politics is also becoming more aggressive, with the red line of what is considered unacceptable in political discourse being constantly pushed further. In 2024, physical attacks by members of parliament against their colleagues took place in several parliaments in Council of Europe member States, damaging both the work and the credibility of national parliaments. Harassment against political opponents participating in demonstrations is another frequent form of violence against politicians.

Gender-based violence against politicians and violence against politicians with a minority background

Violence against politicians has a gender dimension. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, women politicians have started to speak out. In 2018, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) published a joint study on “Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”. The results showed that 85,2% of the women parliamentarians surveyed had suffered psychological violence, 46,9% had received death threats, 24,7% were survivors of sexual violence and 14,8% had suffered physical violence. Women engaged in politics are almost systematically harassed. Representatives from minority groups, including visible minorities and LGBTI politicians, are also more likely to be targeted by hate speech.

Identifying and tackling the root causes of violence against politicians

Misogyny, sexism, racism, hatred against LGBTI persons, hatred against an established “system”, mistrust, disappointment and disillusionment can all feed negative feelings against politicians which in turn fuels the hatred expressed in the different types of violence outlined above. Other root causes stem from growing inequalities and vulnerabilities, the fear of being left out or left behind, which engender frustrations leading to hostility against those perceived in positions of power and privilege.

Rising social tensions, polarised debates in the media, increasing hate speech and the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories via social media are changing the face of European societies. Politicians are sometimes scapegoated for what is not working well in society and accused of lack of foresight, responsiveness or outright inaction before or during crises, or of being out of touch with people’s realities. Hostility may also be fuelled by an increase in corruption cases involving politicians and the perception of their relative impunity.

The many negative effects of violence against politicians

Violence against politicians has many negative effects beyond the immediate and real dangers and risks involved to their physical and mental safety. The climate of violence damages the image of politicians and politics in general and can act as a deterrent to potential political candidates or activists. The multiplication of threats leads some politicians not to seek re-election. Violence against politicians affects the way in which political work is carried out and therefore constitutes a challenge to the functioning of democracy, and an obstacle to full and effective participation in political life. It affects the working conditions of politicians and the organisation of their activities, including election campaigns. Politicians are often forced to adapt their work to the risk of violence and to prepare for it. Violence against politicians also affects the staff of the victim and their families. There is an urgent need to study and assess the impact of violence against politicians on their physical and mental health.

Addressing violence against politicians and revitalising democracy

Violence against politicians is a threat to democratic stability and to democracy at large, impacting trust, engagement and participation. Investigation and condemnation of any forms of violence against politicians has to be systematic, and much more needs to be done to tackle hate speech, promote respect, protect political work and encourage participation. Politicians themselves can also contribute to the prevention of violence by leading responsibly, immediately and publicly condemning any such violence against any of their peers and refraining from the use of inflammatory rhetoric. The adoption or revision of parliamentary codes of conduct is a significant step which can help to influence the general climate and culture of political life. Campaigns, such as PACE’s #notinmyparliament initiative, can contribute to raising awareness of the issue and of the urgency of preventing and combating violence against politicians - in this case against women members of parliament. In Europe’s new political landscape, politicians must also, sadly, be given the knowledge and practical assistance to be prepared against the threat of violence and adapt their working methods and tools. Psychological and other forms of support and practical help should be readily available to those who have been targeted.

Resolute action to tackle violence against politicians is part and parcel of protecting our democratic systems and requires leadership and action at the highest level. It is an essential investment in the renewal and further development of representative democracy for the coming years.

Questions for discussion

- Is violence against politicians the reflection of an increasing level of violence in society and an ineluctable phenomenon?
- How does the risk of violence change political work? How can participation in political and public life be full, equal and meaningful in the face of risks of violence and threats?
- What can be done to rebuild trust in politicians and to ensure a respectful and open political climate both in parliaments and in the general public?
- What can be done specifically to combat the phenomenon of violence against women politicians?
- How can parliaments step up their efforts to prevent and combat violence against politicians?
- How can the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly contribute to preventing and combating violence against politicians?

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Appendix: key reference documents

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

[Resolution 2274 \(2019\)](#) and [Recommendation 2152 \(2019\)](#) on “Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment”

Report under preparation: Violence and hate speech against politicians: a threat to democracy
Rapporteur: Ms Elisabetta Gardini, Italy, European Conservatives, Patriots & Affiliates

IPU PACE study on [“Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”](#), 2018

[Code of conduct for members of the Parliamentary Assembly](#) (August 2024)

The code of conduct for members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe states that “while performing their mandate as members of the Parliamentary Assembly, members shall carry out their duties responsibly, with due respect to human dignity and with integrity and honesty; (...) not act in such a way as to bring the Assembly into disrepute or tarnish the Assembly's image (...) promote and support these principles by leadership and example”.

[Charter of Political Parties for a Non-Racist and Inclusive Society](#)

Council of Europe

4th Council of Europe Summit, [United around our values – Reykjavík Declaration](#), 2023

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, [Resolution 485\(2022\)](#) and [Recommendation 478\(2022\)](#) on “Hate speech and fake news: the impact on working conditions of local and regional elected representatives”

Inter-Parliamentary Union

[Violations of the human rights of MPs – 2023](#), IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians

House of Commons

Joint Committee on Human Rights

[Democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association: Threats to MPs](#), First Report of Session 2019–2020