

# SIX YEARS MONITORING MEDIA FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN EUROPE



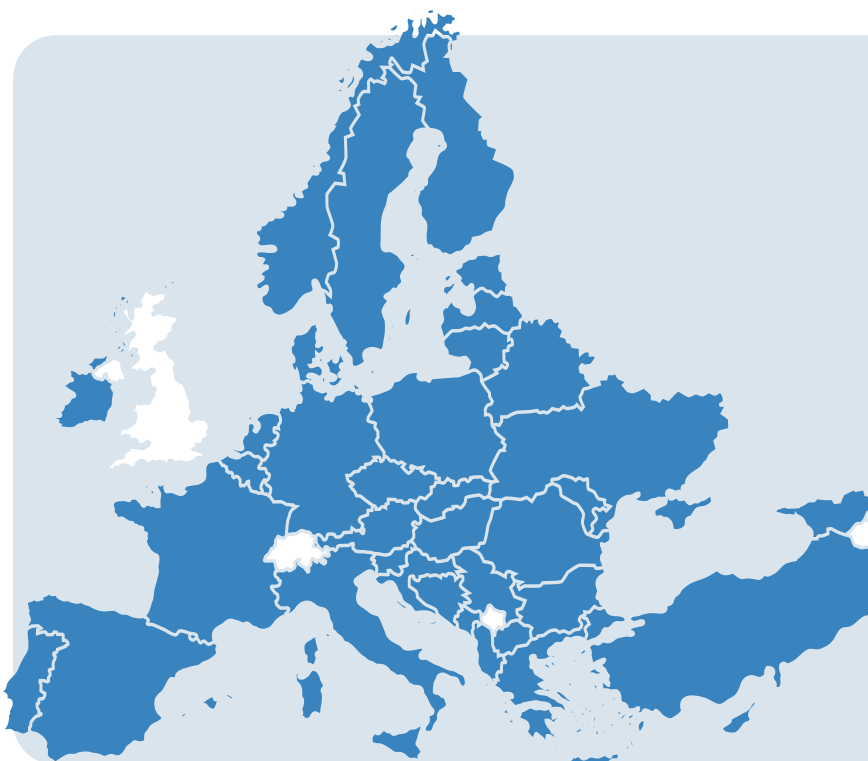
**6092**  
MEDIA FREEDOM VIOLATIONS

**10215**  
TARGETED MEDIA-RELATED ACTORS

In 2026, the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project turned six years old. During this time, more than [6000 media freedom violations](#) have been recorded on the Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF) platform, affecting more than 10,200 different journalists and media-related entities.

To mark **World Press Freedom Day 2026**, the MFRR is publishing an analysis of these six years of monitoring data, which reveals in detail the most serious challenges and trends facing the freedom of the press in Europe.

This data covers 27 European Union Member States and nine EU candidate countries over a period of six years, making it the largest public database of media freedom violations in Europe. This monitoring offers a detailed picture of the different threats to journalists and media, where these attacks are occurring and what new trends are emerging for the EU and national governments to respond to.



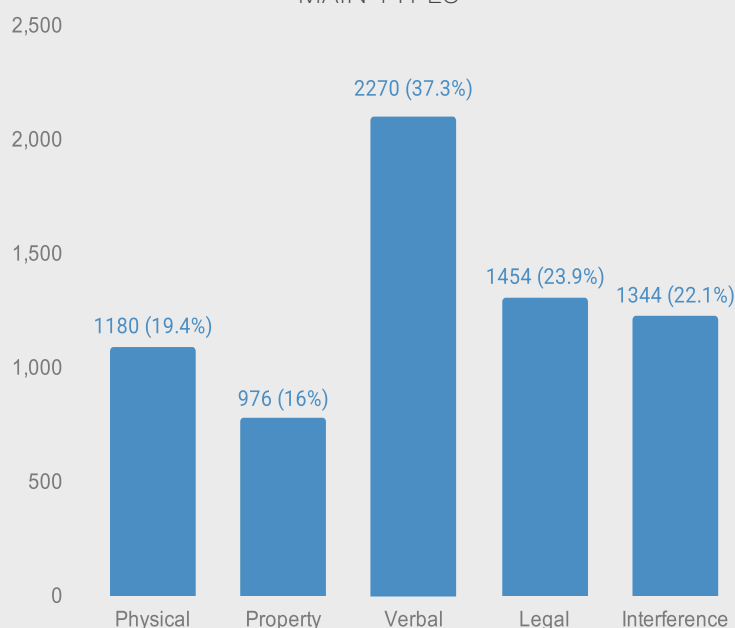
## MEDIA FREEDOM ISSUES AND TRENDS

During this time, media freedom in Europe has faced serious and sustained challenges from the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's full scale war in Ukraine, the continued rise of populism, the erosion of democratic norms worldwide and technological disruption from the emerging AI technology.

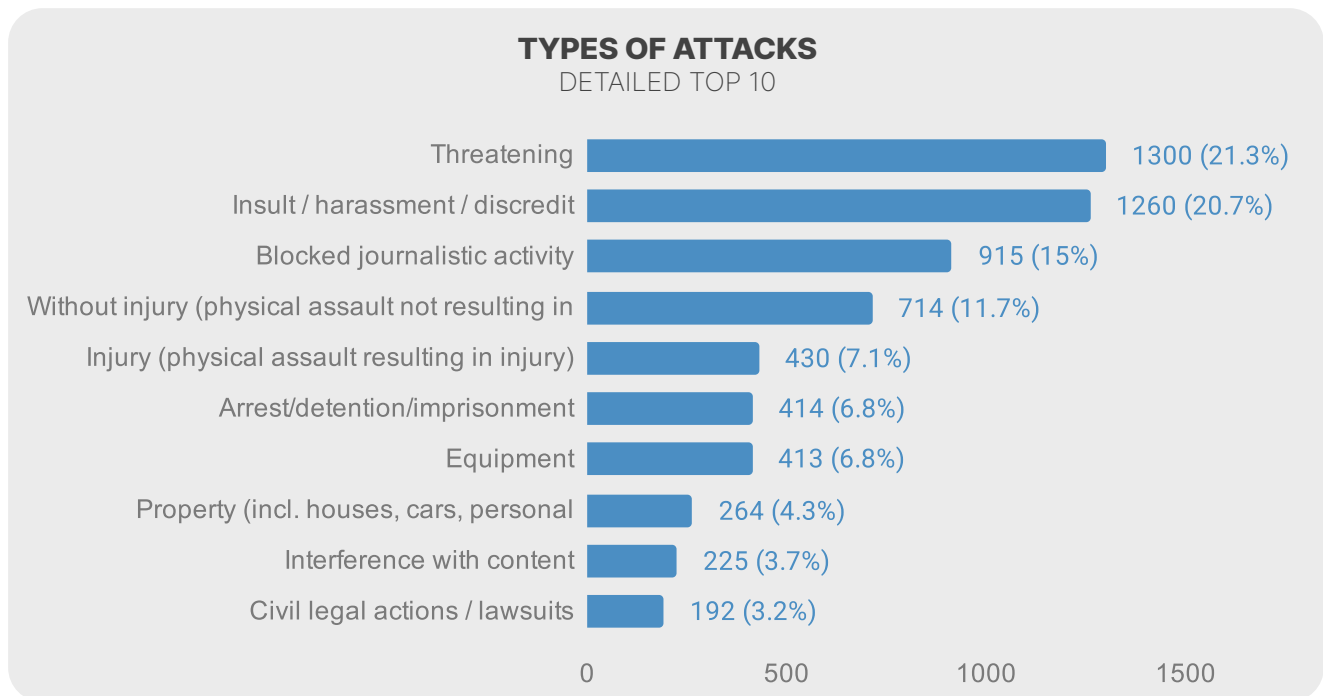
In the past six years, [27 journalists](#), media workers, media owners or staff guarding media offices have been killed in line of duty or because of their work in European countries monitored by the MFRR. The majority of these deaths (59%) have occurred in [Ukraine](#), with the Russian military as the major perpetrator. Impunity for crimes against journalists remains a [central concern](#) for press freedom in Europe.

Almost a fifth of all incidents (1180 cases) recorded by the MFRR were physical attacks (19%). This included 430 serious [physical attacks](#) on journalists which resulted in injuries or required medical attention. Most physical attacks were perpetrated by private individuals (59%), while police accounted for 23%.

**TYPES OF ATTACKS**  
MAIN TYPES



MapMF also documented more than 2200 [verbal attacks](#), including intimidation, sexual harassment and smear campaigns against journalists and media. [Threats](#) against media workers, their families, or media companies were overall the most common attack with 21%, closely followed by insults, harassment, and discrediting (20%). Especially worrying is the number of [death threats](#) recorded with 349 incidents targeting 652 media-related actors.



Six years of data also points to sustained challenges in the legal climate for media freedom, where the platform recorded [414 cases](#) of journalists or media workers being arrested, detained or imprisoned, involving 753 media workers. The project also documented [142 problematic legislative initiatives](#), including drafts proposals and laws, targeting press freedom in 30 different European countries.

- 27 journalists, media workers and media owners killed
- 1180 physical attacks
- 430 injuries
- 349 death threats
- 414 arrests / detention / imprisonment

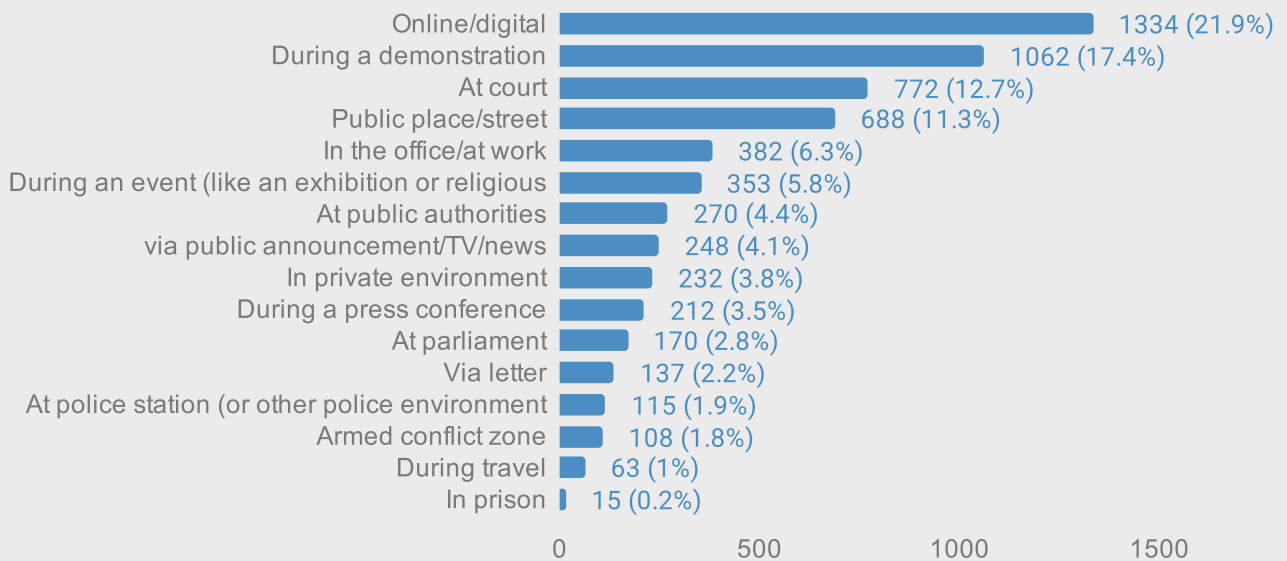
Further concerning issues are data attacks like [hacking and DDoS attacks](#) (188 cases) and [spyware](#) (22 cases). [Spoofing](#) including fake websites and AI generated deep fakes was an emerging and increasing trend journalists and media faced with a total of 109 cases. Furthermore, MapMF recorded an increase for [editorial interference](#) (191 cases) and journalists being [blocked or obstructed from their reporting locations](#) (523 cases).

## Context

While [protests](#) were the most common setting for media freedom violations in 2020 and 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this picture changed from 2022 onwards, with [online and digital attacks](#) becoming the most prevalent and continuing to rise in subsequent years. Incidents occurring in the [private](#) lives of journalists are especially worrying.

The topic of [Covid-19](#) decreased after 2022, and [elections](#) took over as a major topic in the super election year 2024, spilling over to 2025. MapMF recorded an increase of cases related to [foreign agent laws](#), [Artificial intelligence](#), and [environmental reporting](#).

## CONTEXT

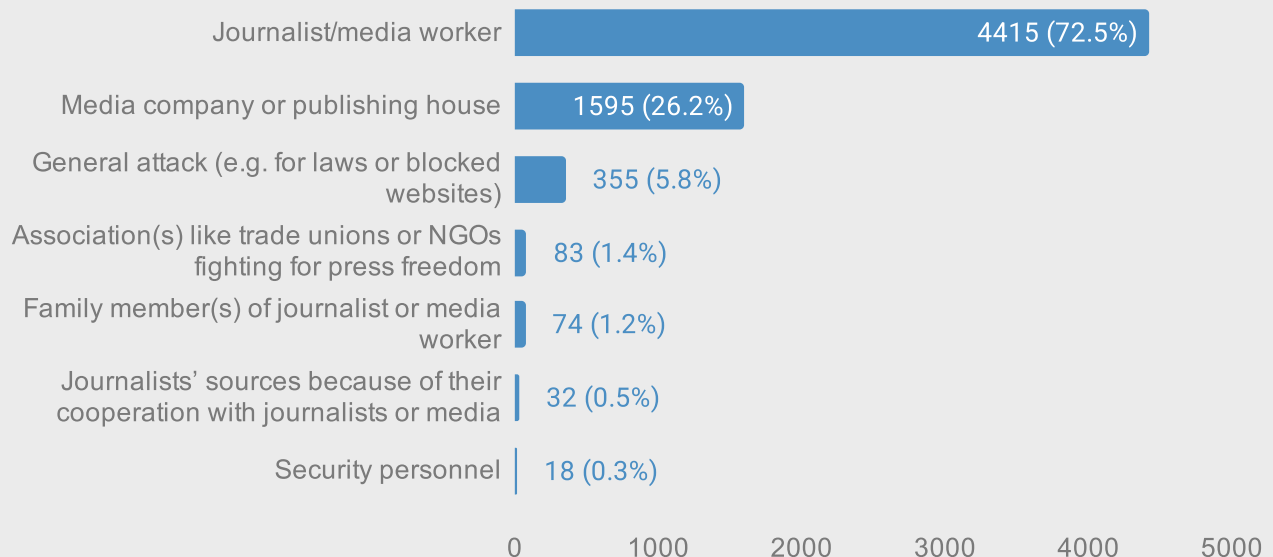


## Main targets and perpetrators

While [journalists and media workers](#) were the main targets of the recorded attacks with 4415 alerts (72.5%), MapMF also documented incidents against [media outlets](#) (1595 cases, 26%), associations like [trade unions or NGOs](#) fighting for press freedom (83), [family members](#) (74), journalists' sources (32) because of their cooperation with media, as well as [security personnel](#) (18).

Although raw data shows [private individuals](#) as the main perpetrators over the past six years of monitoring (29% of total alerts), aggregated data illustrate a different picture. Once combined, the data on [political actors](#), [police](#), and the [judiciary](#) show that [political and administrative power-holders](#) are the main culprits of violations against journalists and other media professionals, with a total of 40% of attacks. This refers to 2451 alerts, affecting 4302 media-related persons or entities.

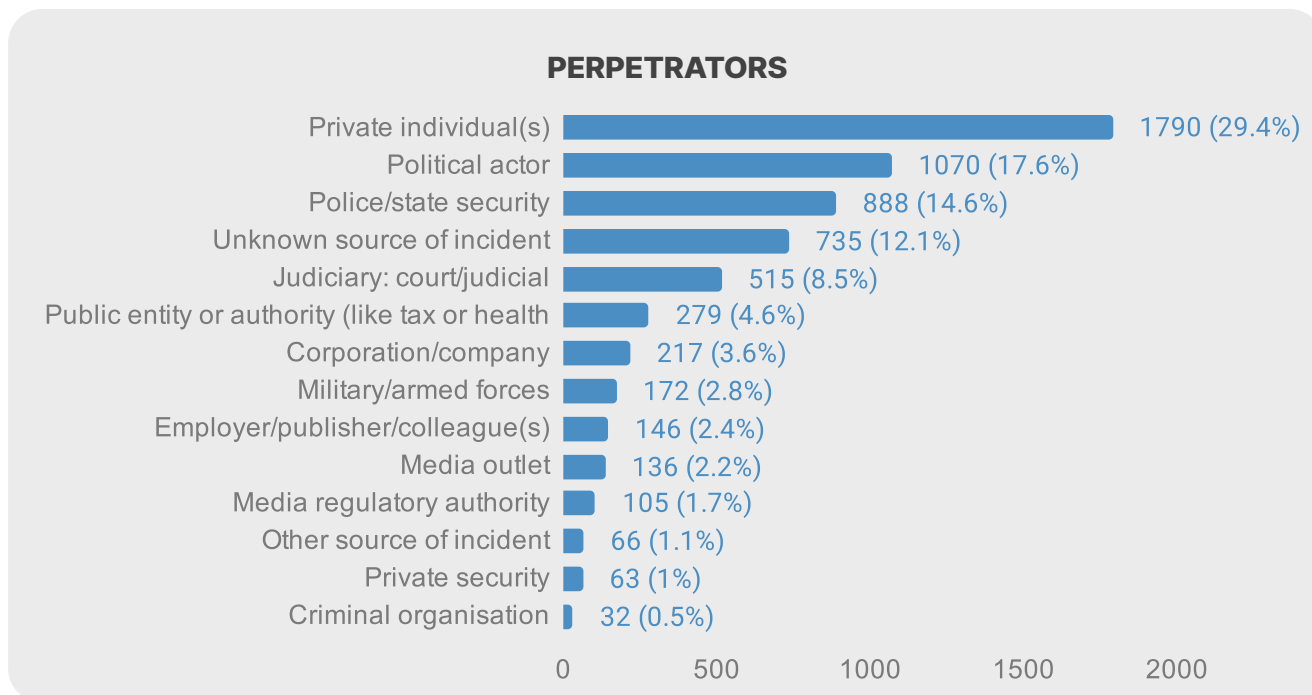
## MAIN TARGETS



# Highlighted developments

## State and political actors as main perpetrator

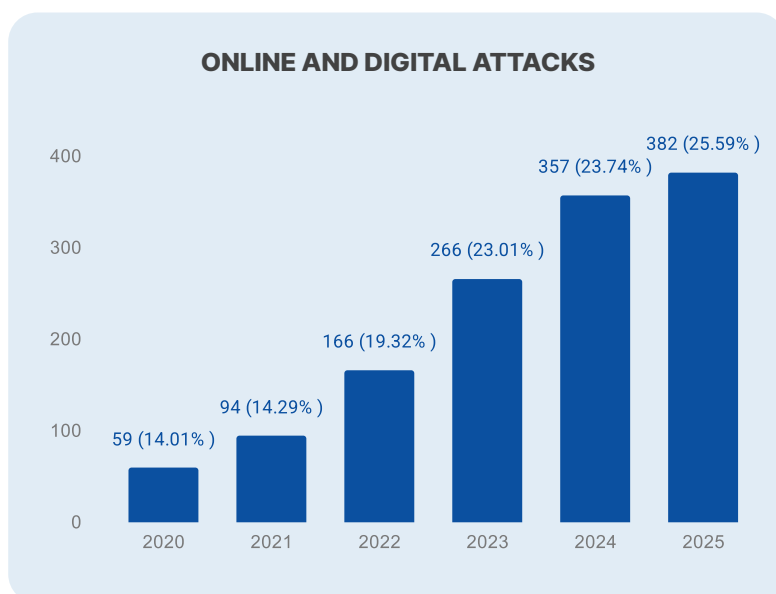
The aforementioned data show that state and political actors are the main culprits of violations against journalists in Europe. The leading perpetrators among these are political actors with a total of 1070 alerts. This is an alarming trend, as the share of media freedom violations per year in which political actors were responsible has increased from 12% in 2020 to 21% in 2025. More than half of these cases (54%) were verbal in nature, indicating a growing use of hostile rhetoric against the press.



This picture was especially worrying in EU Member States where political actors perpetrated 26% of the recorded attacks in 2025, compared to 16% in candidate countries. With the rise of populism, such attacks are all but expected. Furthermore, they reflect the MFRR advocacy concerns over the increased level of autocratic tendencies across Europe.

## Digital attacks

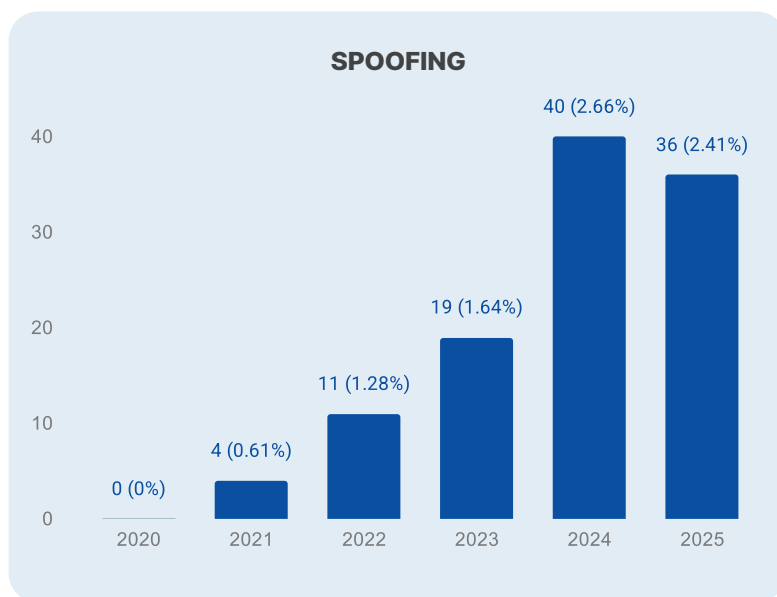
Over the last few years, the [online/digital](#) space has become the environment in which the media freedom violations that MFRR documented most frequently took place, translating to 1334 recorded cases between 2020 and 2025. Online attacks have seen a rapid growth over the past years. In 2025, one fourth (26%) of all recorded incidents happened online and digitally compared to only one out of seven (14%) in 2020. While this increase can be partially explained by the general trend of digitalisation and normalisation of social media use for official and unofficial communication, it



is also the result of the rapid development of increasingly smart digital technologies used to repress media freedom through spoofing, hacking or DDoS attacks.

The large majority of the reported cases concern [verbal online violence and harassment](#) against journalists (68%), including [232 death threats](#), which have a very severe impact on journalists. Most of the cases of verbal online violence and harassment against journalists are committed by [private individuals](#), but it is concerning that one fourth of the perpetrators are [political actors](#).

Proliferation of [spyware](#) surveillance technologies has remained a major concern for MFRR. The [examples](#) of its unchecked use against journalists makes this one of the most sweeping threats to media freedom. Since 2020, MapMF has documented 22 alerts affecting 48 journalists and other media actors. This reflects the worrying use of advanced surveillance tools to break into journalists' mobile devices, jeopardising digital security and source confidentiality.



Another concerning form of digital repression are [DDoS and hacking attacks](#) targeting websites, social media accounts, and journalistic data. The amount of [spoofing attacks](#) – including through AI – has grown significantly over the last six years (see chart on the left). These cases concerned the identity disguise or impersonation of a journalist or media company with fake websites, AI-generated deep fake videos and manipulated photos for propaganda purposes, to damage reputation, as well as to promote commercial products with fraudulent advertising and scams.

In general, women journalists face higher risk of online attacks, as nearly every fourth of the recorded violations against women journalists happened online (as opposed to 15% of the recorded violations against men). This involves higher shares for women journalists considering online harassment as well as for spoofing. The increasing usage and availability of AI poses a threat to journalists online, with gender-based spoofing attacks like sexualised manipulation of images and videos being a particular concern.

Four years into the implementation of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), the large scale and increasing reports of online threats, harassment and violence against journalists do not only concern harmful and illegal content that needs to be promptly removed by Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), but also indicate potential systemic risks to media freedom and pluralism.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the DSA does not cover all types of digital repression. For example, it does not regulate the use of deepfakes for smearing and disinformation.

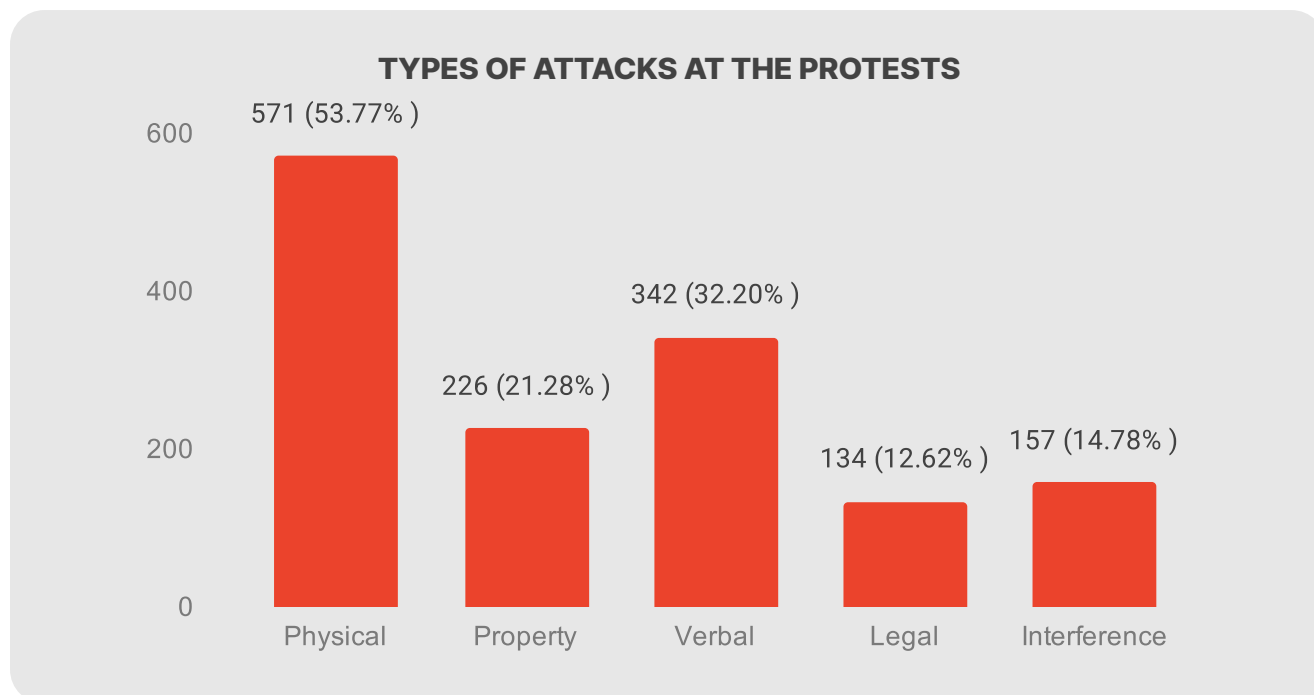
## Types of attacks at protests

Six years of monitoring have registered 1062 violations, affecting 1820 journalists and other media professionals during [protests and demonstrations](#) across EU Member States and candidate countries. This makes the context of demonstrations the second largest setting where violations against the media took place, closely following digital attacks, underscoring the importance of protection mechanisms for journalists and media workers covering these events.

<sup>1</sup> EU Digital Services Act under (81).

The severity of attacks is portrayed by the fact that more than half of the incidents (54%) during protests were [physical attacks](#). Nearly one third (32%) of them were [verbal](#), while [property](#) attacks constituted 24%. [Legal attacks](#) made up 13%, with about 81% relating to the [arrests/detention/imprisonment](#).

Data shows some divergence between EU [Member States](#) and [candidate countries](#). In EU Member States private individuals are the main perpetrators during protests (69%), with a concerning amount of police being involved in more than every fourth incident (28%). Nearly half (47%) of these police attacks during protests in EU Member States included physical attacks, 21% resulted in injuries. It also involved 20% cases of arrests, detention and imprisonment or blocked journalistic activity.



At the same time, the nine candidate countries have seen more state-related violations, with the majority of recorded incidents perpetrated by the [police](#) (178 out of a total of 287).

The context of protests was most contested for journalists and media workers during Covid-19, with protests around [Covid-19 measures](#), as the main setting for violations against journalists and other media workers. Data also shows that EU Member States have recorded violations around [Palestine-related protests](#). Germany stands out among Member States for the number of violations in these contexts. Finally, some incidents have been recorded around [farmer-related protests](#) across the EU.

[Elections](#) were one of the major contexts for attacks, namely in 2024, the super-election year, affecting 215 media professionals in 75 incidents, with examples of cases in Georgia and Türkiye, among other countries. Police were the main perpetrator in this context (52 out of 75 recorded incidents).

From candidate countries, specifically many cases during protests have been recorded in [Serbia](#), [Georgia](#), and [Türkiye](#). In Türkiye and Georgia the share of incidents perpetrated by police was particularly high including physical assaults and arrest, detention and/or imprisonment, while in Serbia incidents perpetrated by police during protests were particularly high in 2025.

All types of journalistic reporting during protests and demonstrations is of crucial importance for the protection of European democratic institutions, and it needs to be safeguarded in Member States and candidate countries alike, with the states' clear obligations both to facilitate and protect these two fundamental freedoms.

## Foreign agent laws and narratives

As detected in the general overview, legal attacks constitute a major concern for journalists and other media professionals across Europe. Use of domestic and cross-border lawsuits, introduction of harmful legislation and other forms of legal pressures consistently ranges between 20-30% of all measured attacks between 2020-2025, with 20% on average in EU Member States and 29% in candidate countries. Out of these, 145 [criminal charges](#) against the media and nearly 200 [civil lawsuits](#) were recorded.

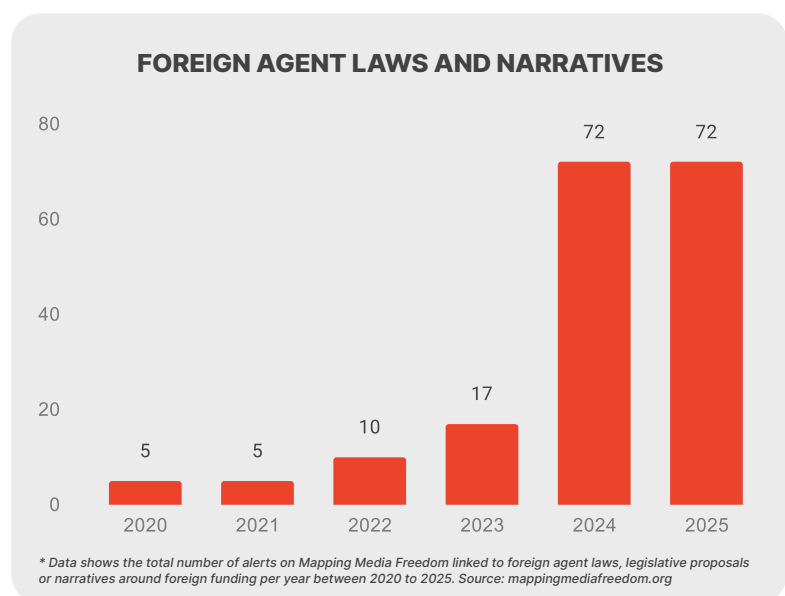
Out of [142 problematic legislative initiatives](#) mapped by the project, spread of foreign agent laws stand out as one of the biggest threats to media freedom and independent journalism in Europe to emerge since the MFRR began monitoring in 2020. Though ostensibly aimed at protecting national interests, a growing body of evidence shows that these Russia-style laws are more often misused to stigmatise, isolate and pile pressure on independent media and civil society organisations, often a part of wider lawfare strategies by undemocratic or illiberal governments.

Since 2020, five countries monitored by the MFRR have passed foreign agent-style laws: [Türkiye](#), [Georgia](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Slovakia](#) and [Hungary](#). While some of these laws were traditional foreign agent laws, others were foreign funding laws or similar laws regarding the protection of national sovereignty. While some were targeted directly at media, others targeted only civil society but ensnared non-profit media which are registered as NGOs. In some cases, these laws have been directly weaponised against media by authorities, while in others the legislation has had more of a chilling effect and led to an increase in self censorship.

More widely, MapMF has documented how these laws have been accompanied by a sharp increase in the past six years the use of rhetoric smearing and stigmatising journalists and media as “foreign agents” and “foreign mercenaries”. This data reveals how the spread of legislation has led to increased use of toxic foreign agent rhetoric by both public officials, private individuals and social media users, to attempt to delegitimise and discredit legitimate and professional journalism as representing foreign interests. Data collected by MapMF shows how the combined number of alerts linked to either foreign agent laws, legislative proposals or toxic narratives on foreign funding has increased significantly in 2024 and continued in 2025.

In total, MapMF has documented [180 alerts](#) related to foreign agent laws or narratives since 2020, affecting 312 journalists or media entities. While legislative developments were the most serious threat to media freedom, the majority of these alerts (58%) were [verbal attacks](#), such as smear campaigns linked to foreign funding. Almost half of these cases (48%) were perpetrated by political actors, indicating how narratives around foreign agents have entered public discourse and become part of the playbook for attacking the media. Other alerts included legal warnings and investigations and fines issued against media outlets under foreign agent laws.

Moreover, MapMF documented 24 alerts over six years which involved [legislative initiatives](#). While some of these were unsuccessful bills developed by fringe or populist parties, or laws not passed amidst parliamentary opposition, this data indicates the increased political interest in such foreign agent or funding legislation. Of the five countries to pass such legislation, two were in the European Union (Slovakia and Hungary), whereas three were EU candidate countries (Georgia, Türkiye and Bosnia



and Herzegovina). However, additional foreign agent or funding legislation has also been proposed in [Hungary](#), [Poland](#) and [Bulgaria](#), indicating how the trend is spreading within the EU. A deeper analysis of this trend is available in the MFRR's 2025 annual Monitoring Report.

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## More information

[Mapping Media Freedom \(MapMF\)](#) is part of the MFRR and is coordinated by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the International Press Institute (IPI). [Click here](#) to explore the data in full. The [Media Freedom Rapid Response \(MFRR\)](#) is a Europe-wide mechanism which tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. It is co-funded by the European Commission.

All documented press freedom violations (alerts) can be found on [mappingmediafreedom.org](https://mappingmediafreedom.org). Here you can find the Alert Explorer which also displays statistics as charts based on your selected filters, and learn more about the [methodology](#). The [About page](#) offers more information about MapMF and guidance on data interpretation.

Press freedom violations can be submitted through the [ReportIt form](#). The alerts analysed in this Fact Sheet were documented as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project.

**Disclaimer:** The numbers presented in this Fact Sheet cover all press freedom violations documented between 01 January 2020 and 31 December 2025 (Status of 28 April 2026) in the current EU Member States and candidate countries.

MFRR currently monitors all 27 EU Member States and all nine candidate countries, following changes within the EU membership and accession status of countries. Due to these changes in the MFRR monitoring mandate, the spotlight topics were identified by considering only the continuously monitored countries and the current EU Member States from 2020 to 2025. Additionally, to account for a potential bias caused by increased monitoring activity over time, the data was normalised by calculating the percentage shares for each topic within all alerts of the respective year. As the identified topics are also present in the countries that were added to the monitoring mandate at a later point, the Fact Sheet includes the total number of incidents recorded for each topic for current European Union Member State countries and candidate countries monitored until 31 December 2025.

If cases are reported and published after the publication of this Fact Sheet, they will still appear in the data available under the link of the Alert Explorer above, as well as under the individual links provided within the report to give an up-to-date view at any time. One incident – and thus alert – can include multiple types of attacks (e.g. verbal and physical attack performed within the same incident) affecting more than one journalist or media actor and performed by more than one type of actor. In particular, legal incidents where journalists or outlets receive multiple related or similar legal threats, are currently recorded as one alert. This means, when showing e.g. how many alerts included a certain type of attack, the sum of all shown numbers can be more than the total number of alerts and thus more than 100%.

## MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

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