Student Protests Monitoring

May - July 2026

Europe's students challenge the cost of being unheard

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ESU EUROPEAN STUDENTS' UNION

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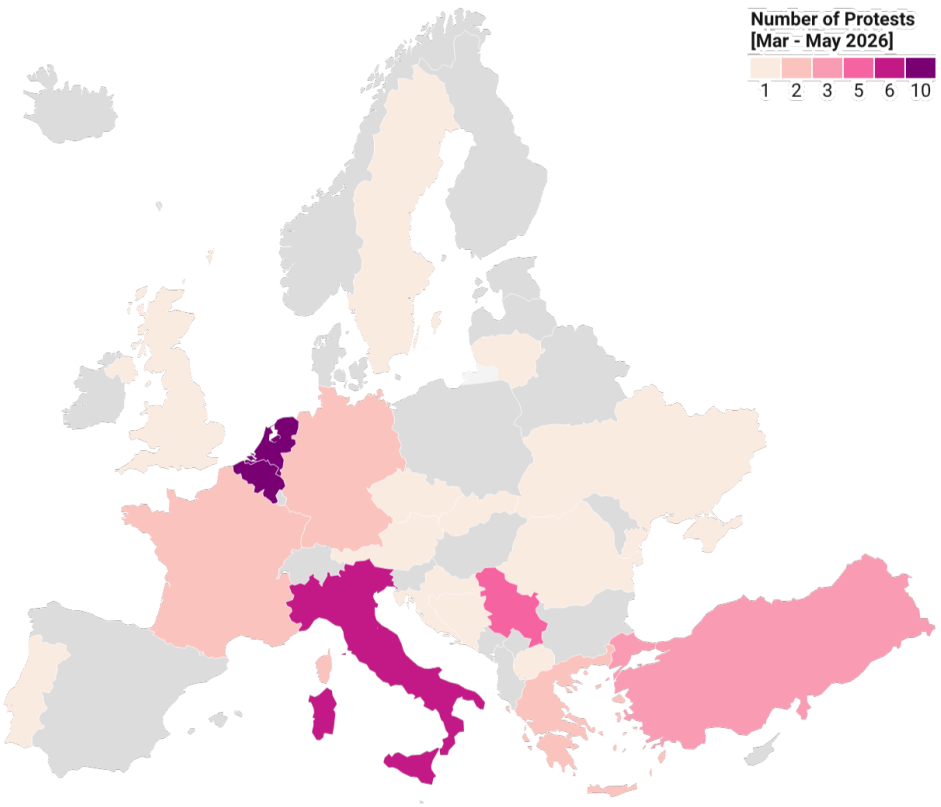

Figure 1. Number of recorded student protest actions by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Introduction

Decisions over **higher education funding**, **access** and **institutional governance** continued to bring students into the streets across Europe. Beyond the immediate demands, many of these protests raised a broader question: ***how much influence do students have over the decisions that shape their education and their future?*** University funding, access to education and the treatment of student protesters were prominent concerns. On some campuses, demands concerning international solidarity also became disputes over institutional governance and the limits of protest.

Between **16 May and 16 July 2026**, ESU's Student Protest Monitoring recorded **47 protest actions across 13 countries**. Thirty-nine began within the two-month window, while eight had started earlier and remained active during it. The recorded actions ranged from large demonstrations against cuts to higher education budgets to smaller campus occupations, student solidarity actions and protests over university-level decisions.

A defining feature of this period was the prominence of **higher education funding** and **democratic accountability**. **Austria** saw a coordinated series of demonstrations against university budget reductions. In **Germany**, students protested over institutional funding and the adequacy of public student support. In **Serbia**, continuing mobilisation against corruption and for political accountability was accompanied by protests addressing decisions within individual universities. In **the Netherlands**, students continued to challenge universities over academic partnerships and the treatment of Palestine solidarity actions.

These cases point to pressures that are not confined to one part of Europe or one type of institution. When funding decisions threaten students' access to education, or when questions about governance cannot be resolved through established channels, **universities can become sites of sustained public disagreement**. How institutions and public authorities respond to these demands is therefore not a secondary issue. It is itself a measure of how seriously student participation, accountability and fundamental rights are upheld.

What we mapped

This report summarises student protests and related actions recorded in ESU's monitoring database that were active within the reporting window (16 May 2026 to 16 July 2026). In total, we tracked **47 distinct student protests** across the European Higher Education Area.

The actions were recorded across 13 countries: **Serbia, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Türkiye, Belgium, Italy, Spain, France, Georgia, Greece, Poland and Romania.** Compared with the previous monitoring report, which contained 54 actions across 22 countries, the present edition shows a more geographically concentrated set of recorded actions, although reporting coverage and the treatment of continuing campaigns limit direct comparisons of overall mobilisation.

Alongside recording protest activity, this report aims to identify recurring patterns in scale, issues raised, tactics, risks and outcomes.

Some key patterns:

Scale

Of the 47 recorded actions:

- **10 were nationwide**, meaning they spread beyond a single campus or city
- **15** were **large-scale actions** (over 1000 participants)
- **12** were **medium-scale actions** (around 100 to 1000 participants)
- **10** were **small actions** (under 100 participants)

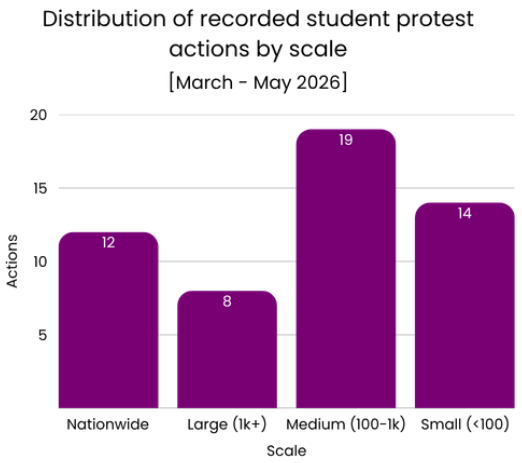

Figure 2. Distribution of recorded student protest actions by scale, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Large-scale actions accounted for **15 of 47 records**, close to one third of this period's total. However, this should not be read as a Europe-wide increase in protest size. Five large-scale records relate to local demonstrations within the same Austrian university-funding mobilisation, and several others are connected to repeated gatherings in Serbia. Local actions remained important, with 22 medium- and small-scale records combined.

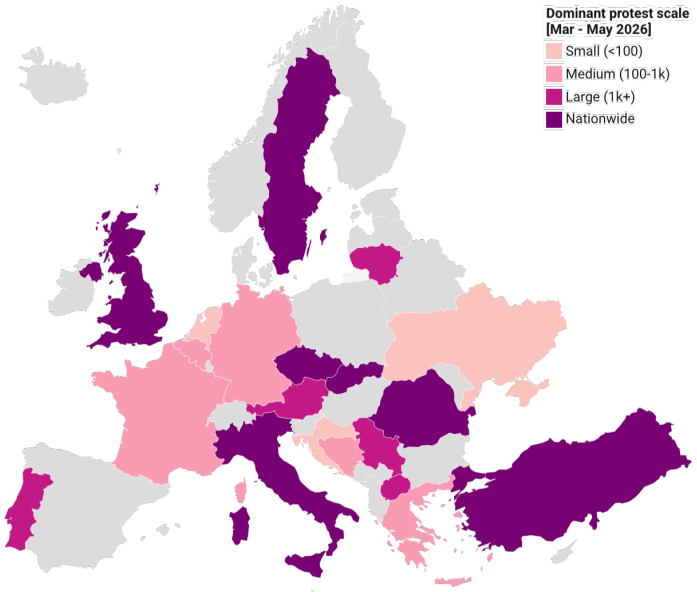

Figure 3. Dominant scale of recorded student protest actions by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Geography

- Recorded activity was particularly concentrated in **5 countries**

- Examples include:
    - **Serbia: 13 actions**, including student-led rallies, marches, legal solidarity actions, road blockades and a university governance protest.
    - **Germany: 7 actions**, particularly on university funding, student support and educational access
    - **The Netherlands: 7 actions**, including campus Palestine solidarity protests and continuing institutional disputes
    - **Austria: 5 actions**, all linked to the university-funding protests in late May
    - **Türkiye: 4 actions**, including continuing national mobilisation, a university closure dispute and student solidarity actions.

These five countries accounted for **36 of the 47 recorded actions (76.6%)**. Belgium, Italy and Spain each had two recorded actions; France, Georgia, Greece, Poland and Romania had one each. The prominence of particular countries partly reflects repeated, separately recorded local events within wider campaigns.

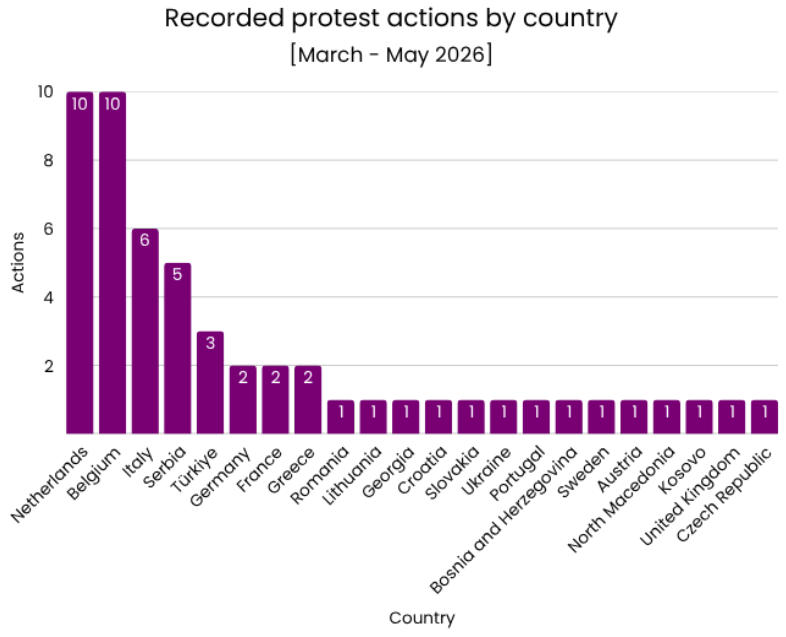

Figure 4. Number of recorded student protest actions by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Timeline

Of the 47 actions:

- **39** began **within the reporting window**
- **8 began earlier and continued into this period**
- **7 were still active at the end of the reporting window** on 16 July

Several campaigns demonstrate the persistence of unresolved demands:

- In **Serbia**, nationwide student mobilisation dates back to November 2024, while separate actions continued to emerge during this reporting period.
- In **Türkiye**, the national protest cycle that began in March 2025 remained recorded as ongoing.
- In **Romania**, student organisations continued to challenge changes affecting student support and education financing following mobilisation that began in September 2025.
- In **Georgia**, opposition to higher education reforms remained active beyond the January 2026 demonstrations.
- In **the Netherlands**, prolonged Palestine solidarity campaigns continued alongside new campus-level actions.

What drove students to act

The recorded actions were driven by a combination of university-specific concerns and wider political demands. **University Governance remained the most frequently recorded individual cause**, while education access and the material conditions of studying were especially prominent. In parallel, the Serbian protest cycle maintained the connection between student activism and democratic accountability.

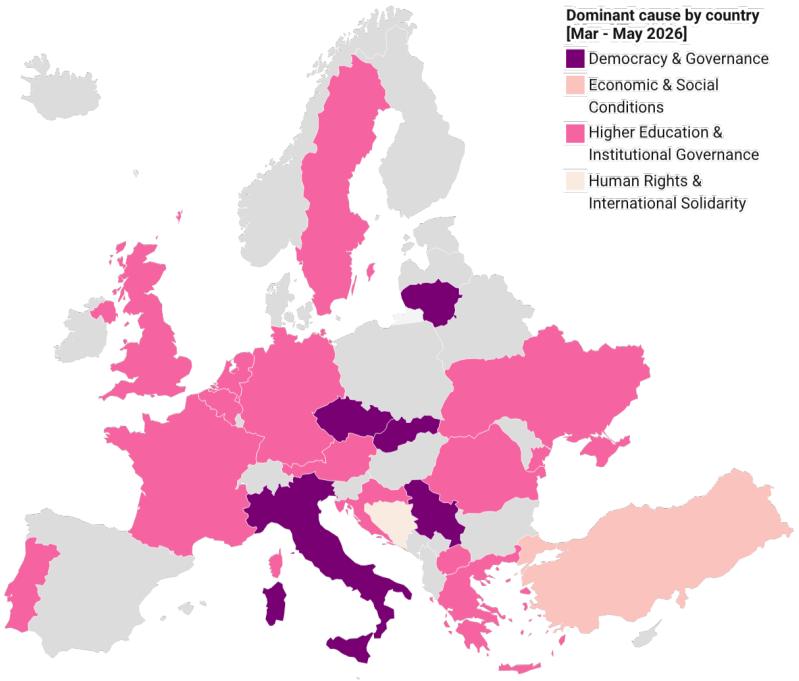

Figure 5. Dominant thematic cause of student mobilisation by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

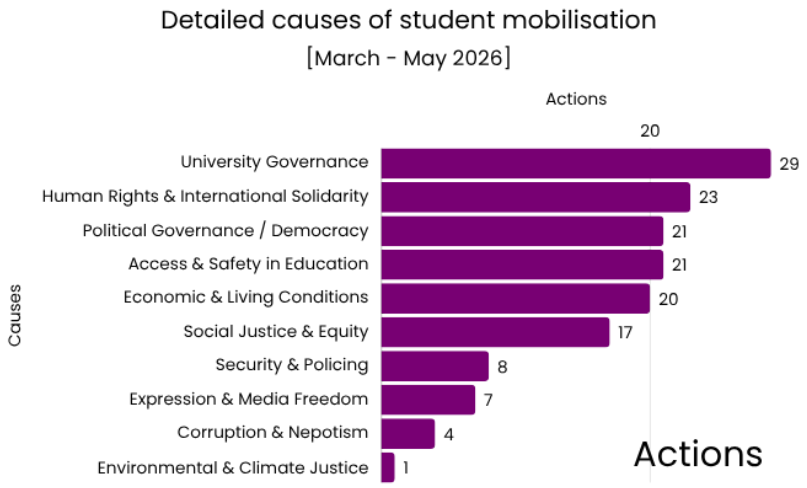

Figure 6. Frequency of recorded causes of student mobilisation, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Out of 47 recorded actions, the leading causes were:

- **University Governance: 24 actions**

- **Access & Safety in Education: 22 actions**
- **Political Governance / Democracy: 19 actions**
- **Economic & Living Conditions: 19 actions**
- **Human Rights & International Solidarity: 12 actions**
- **Corruption & Nepotism: 11 actions**
- **Social Justice & Equity: 9 actions**

Democracy and governance

Among recorded causes:

- **19** cases explicitly reference **Political Governance/Democracy**
- **11** add **Corruption & Nepotism** as a cause
- **10** called for **Government Transparency**
- **9** called for **Snap Elections / Free Elections**
- **6** involved demands for the **Dismissal of Charges against Protesters**
- **5** included **Anti-Corruption** demands, and **5** called for **Accountability for Violence**

Democratic accountability remained a significant driver, particularly in **Serbia**, where students continued to demand transparency, investigations and accountability for violence against protesters. Actions included the May rally at Slavija in Belgrade, the late-June Vidovdan mobilisation, student-organised court-related protests and road blockades extending into July. The movement continued to involve issues that reached well beyond higher education, but the protection of students and their ability to participate in public life remained central.

Not every Serbian action was directed at the same institution or demand. On **4 June in Niš**, students protested the separation of three departments from the Faculty of Philosophy, raising questions about educational access and university autonomy. The example demonstrates how a wider movement can contain distinct disputes over immediate institutional decisions.

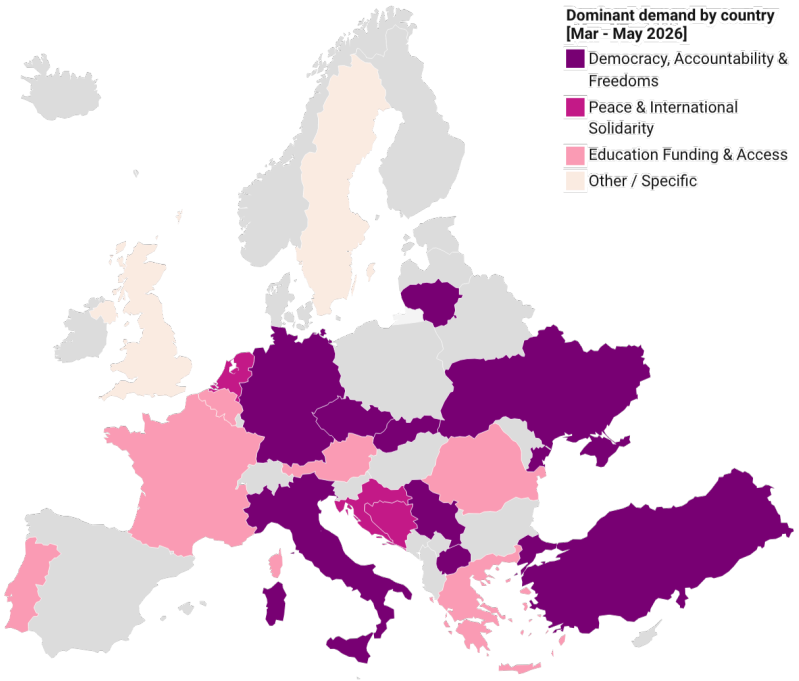

Figure 7. Dominant thematic category of student protest demands by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Higher Education Institutions and university governance

- **24** actions involved **University Governance**
- **22** concerned **Access & Safety in Education**
- **14** demanded increased **Higher Education Funding**
- **4** demanded greater **Transparency in Universities**

Institutional governance was the leading recorded cause, but the underlying disputes varied. In **Austria**, university representatives, staff and students mobilised in Vienna, Graz, Linz, Salzburg and Klagenfurt against proposed budget reductions. In **Germany**, student funding and university financing were prominent in Hamburg and the coordinated 'Schlussverkauf Bildung' demonstrations. In **Poland**, students and researchers participated in mobilisation calling for a greater public investment in science.

Other actions concerned institutional decisions more directly. In **Türkiye**, students and staff at **İstanbul Bilgi University** protested the proposed closure of the university. The subsequent reversal of the closure decision was an identifiable concession, although concerns remained about the institution's state-appointed governance. In **the Netherlands**, campus protests contested decisions over

international academic cooperation, the use of university premises and institutional responses to demonstrations.

Together, these actions underline that **university governance is not only about formal structures of representation**. Decisions on resources, programmes, institutional partnerships and the management of campus space can have immediate consequences for students, and may become the focus of collective mobilisation when they are contested.

Material conditions and access

- **19** protests involve **Economic & Living Conditions**
- **22** involve **Access & Safety in Education**
- **14** demanded increased **Higher Education Funding**
- **9** include **Social Justice & Equity**
- **4** involved **Housing Improvement** demands
- **2** called for the **Abolition or reduction of fees**

Education costs and public investment were recurring concerns. In **Germany**, students mobilised for changes to **BAföG** support and against university funding cuts. In **France**, international students opposed restrictions affecting exemptions from differentiated tuition fees. In **Belgium**, education reforms and tuition arrangements were contested through public demonstrations. In **Spain**, the University of Granada student strike and Barcelona student mobilisation highlighted concerns about educational services, public support and the wider education system.

These actions demonstrate how questions of affordability extend beyond tuition fees. Housing, student maintenance support, institutional staffing and the availability of study facilities can all affect whether students are able to access and complete higher education. **Without adequate public funding and student support, equal access to higher education remains a commitment that many students cannot fully exercise in practice.**

Human rights and international solidarity

- **12** actions include **Human Rights & International Solidarity** as a cause
- **10** cases involved **Divestment from Conflict States**
- **10** explicitly demanded **International Solidarity**
- **2** called for **Peace and Solidarity**
- **2** involved **Demands for Human Rights Accountability**

Palestine solidarity remained visible on university campuses, although it accounted for a smaller share of recorded actions than in the previous period. In **the Netherlands**, separate protests took place in Amsterdam, Delft, Eindhoven and Nijmegen, alongside continuing mobilisation at other universities. Actions also took place in **Germany**, including Leipzig, and at **Bursa Technical University in Türkiye**.

These protests often crossed the boundary between an international political demand and an institutional governance dispute. Students questioned university partnerships, the transparency of institutional decision-making and decisions on permitting assemblies or occupations. In **Ghent, Belgium**, the occupation that began in April continued into May and ended after further developments concerning the university's research partnerships.

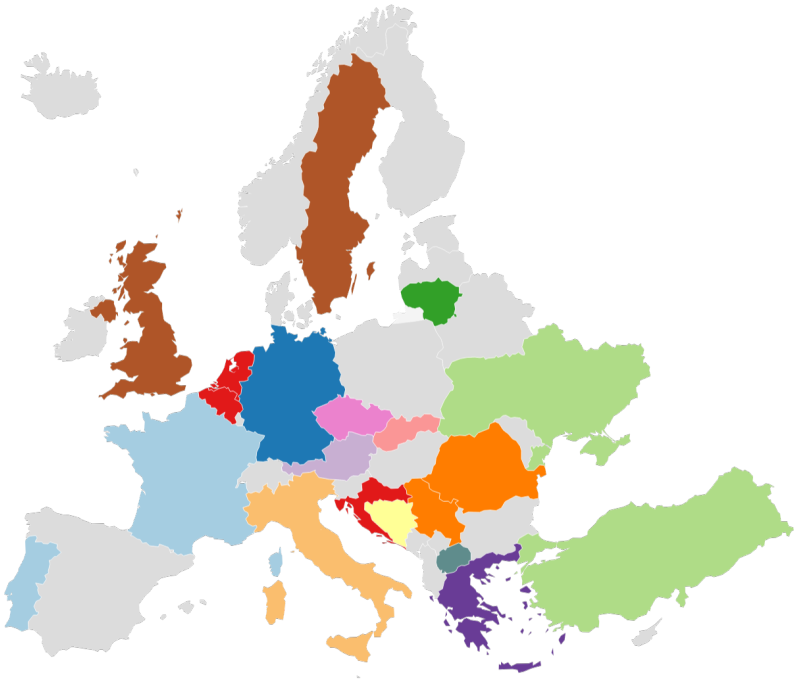

Figure 8. Most frequently recorded specific student protest demand by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

How students mobilised

Student protest during this period remained predominantly **collective, visible and based in public space**. While demonstrations were the most frequently recorded tactic, strikes, occupations, sit-ins and blockades remained part of students' repertoire when disputes concerned particular institutions or when campaigns sought to increase pressure on decision-makers.

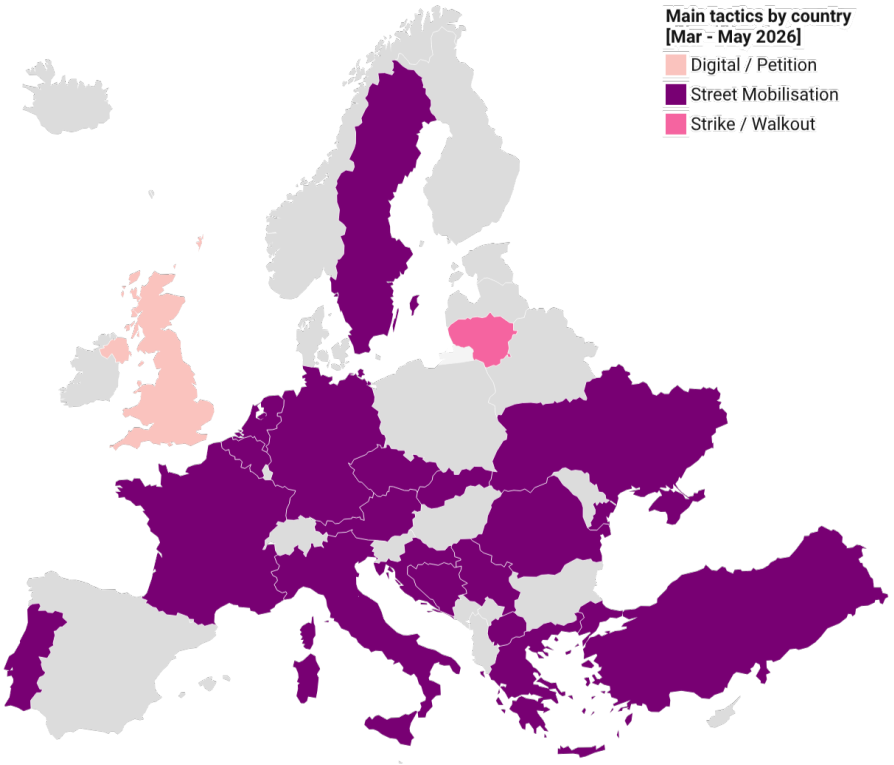

Figure 9. Most frequently recorded distinctive protest tactic by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Across the 47 recorded actions:

On the streets:

- **Demonstrations** appear in **45 of 47** cases
- **Rallies** in **29**
- **Marches** in **19**

Demonstrations were therefore recorded in approximately **96% of the actions**. The prominence of public demonstrations reflects both the large funding campaigns in Austria and Germany and the repeated rallies connected to the Serbian protest

movement. Visible collective action continued to be the principal form of mobilisation in the cases recorded by ESU.

Disrupting "business as usual"

- **Sit-ins** in **7** actions
- **Strikes** in **6**
- **Occupations** in **5**
- **Blockades** in **4**
- **Boycotts** in **2**

These tactics were used in different contexts. University buildings and academic events became protest sites in **the Netherlands**, while the University of Granada recorded a two-day academic strike. In **Serbia**, road and intersection blockades formed part of a wider campaign for accountability and political change.

Where the institution itself is the target of protest, the choice of location becomes part of the message. Occupying a university space, interrupting a formal event or organising a strike can direct public attention to a particular decision. While these actions may disrupt institutional activities, the response must remain proportionate and **respect students' rights to peaceful assembly and expression**. The use of campus space for protest should not, in itself, be treated as grounds for punitive measures.

Hybrid tactics

- **Online campaigns** are recorded in **2** actions
- **Petitions** in **2**

Digital communication remained relevant to organising and publicising protests, but the database records relatively few cases where an online campaign or petition was coded as a distinctive tactic. **Digital tools generally complemented physical mobilisation rather than replacing it.**

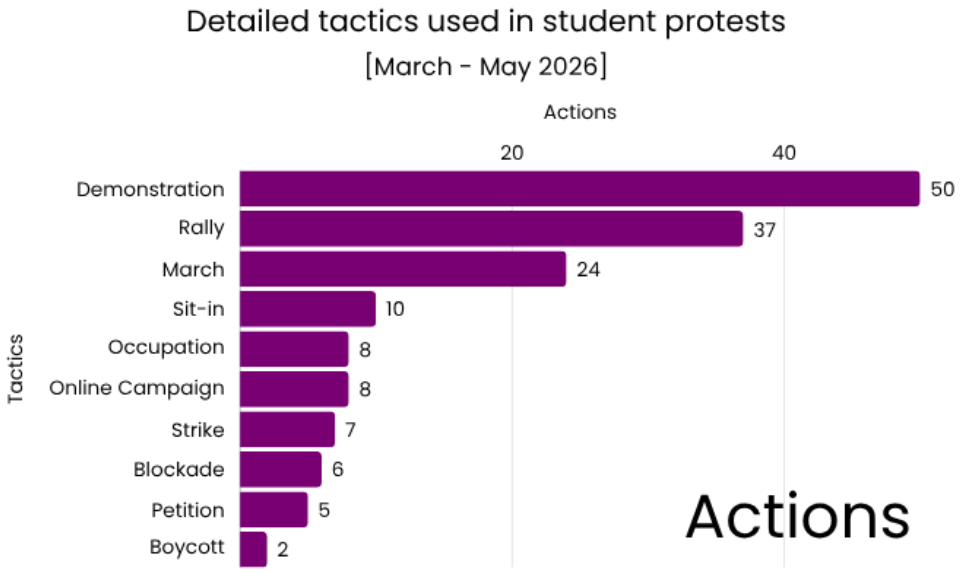

Figure 10. Frequency of tactics used in recorded student protest actions, 16 May–16 July 2026.

This period shows a continued preference for public, visible mobilisation, complemented by disruptive campus tactics and pressure tactics, depending on risk levels and institutional openness.

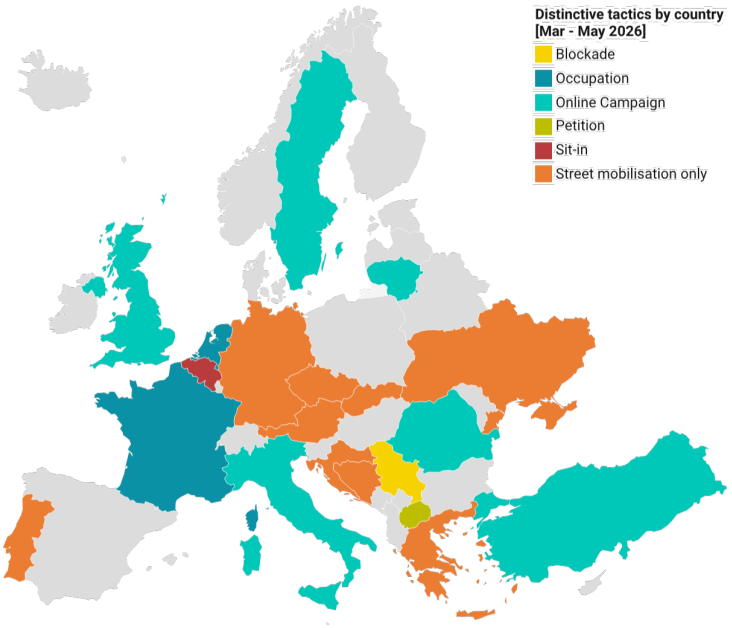

Figure 11. Distinctive protest tactic by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Risks students faced

The reporting window included actions associated with **police intervention, arrests, physical injury, legal proceedings and institutional pressure**. These risks were not confined to any single issue area. They appeared in politically contentious national protests and in disputes centred on campuses.

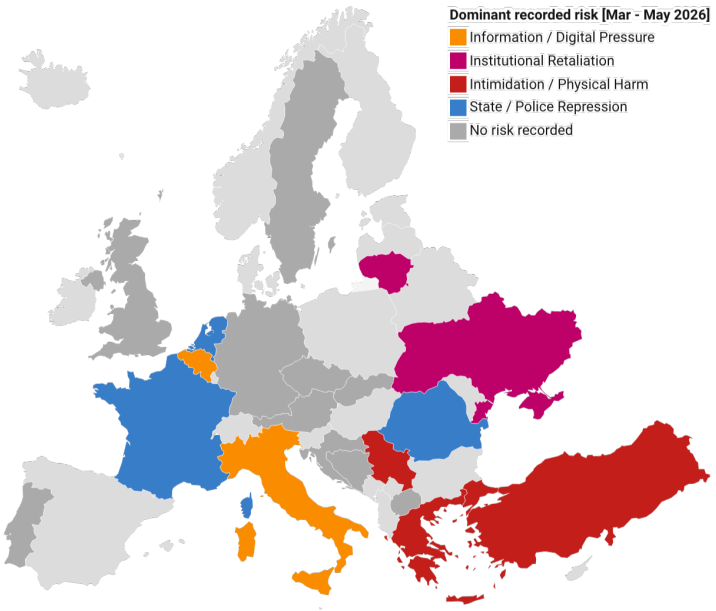

Figure 12. Dominant broad threat or risk category associated with student protest activity by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Across the 47 recorded actions, the database includes:

Repression and policing

- **Police Violence: 7 cases**
- **Arbitrary Arrests: 7**
- **Government Repression: 4**
- **Use of Tear Gas / Water Cannons: 3**
- **Campus Raids: 3**
- **Selective Enforcement: 3**
- **Lawfare: 5**

Police intervention was documented in relation to campus solidarity actions and some wider political demonstrations. At **Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam**, the occupation on **18 May** ended following police intervention, with arrests reported

by the university and campus media. In **Belgium**, confrontations and the use of tear gas were reported during the **4 June** demonstrations concerning education reforms. Student mobilisation in **Serbia** also remained associated with arrests, legal proceedings and policing concerns.

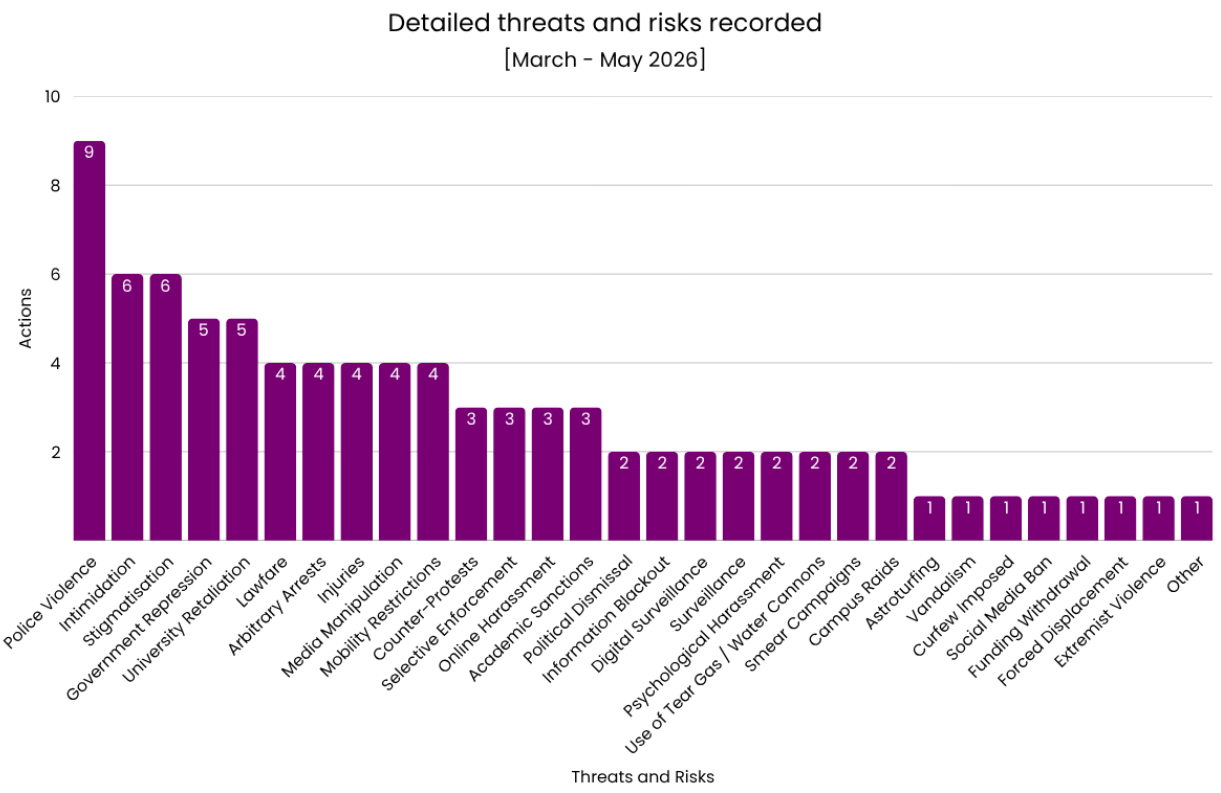

Figure 13. Frequency of threats and risks recorded in connection with student protests, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Physical risks

- **Injuries** reported in **6** cases
- **Counter-protests** in **2** cases
- **Extremist Violence** in **1** case

Physical risks arose from different sources, including confrontations with police and other groups. Reports concerning the **Amsterdam** occupation and campus protests in **Türkiye** illustrate the importance of distinguishing the conduct of demonstrators, institutional decisions and actions by law-enforcement authorities. The existence of confrontations does not remove the obligation to protect peaceful assembly and prevent avoidable harm.

Intimidation, psychological pressure and online risks

- **Intimidation** appeared in **3 cases**
- **Stigmatisation** in **2**
- **University Retaliation** in **2**
- **Media Manipulation** in **2**
- **Digital Surveillance** in **2**
- **Psychological Harassment** and **Online Harassment** in **1 case each.**

Restrictions on student participation do not always take the form of arrests or formal bans. Institutional disciplinary pressure, reputational attacks and the possibility of consequences for one's studies may discourage students from organising. The consequences can reach beyond the moment of protest, particularly where students must continue studying at an institution whose decisions they have publicly challenged.

Taken together, the recorded risks demonstrate that student mobilisation can carry legal, physical, academic and reputational consequences. The **protection of peaceful assembly and expression**, together with clear and proportionate institutional responses, **remains essential to students' ability to participate in democratic life**.

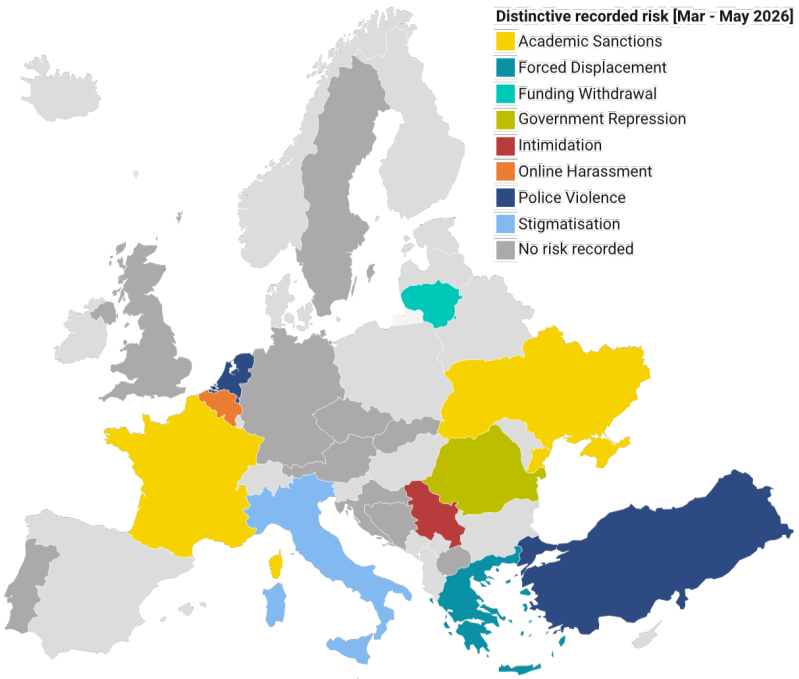

Figure 14. Most frequently recorded specific threat or risk by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Why ESU is watching

ESU monitors student protests because they provide evidence about both **the condition of students' rights and the responsiveness of higher education and democratic institutions**. During this window, student mobilisation frequently concerned decisions with immediate effects on access, funding or representation. In a number of cases, the response to protest became an additional point of contention.

Within the 47 protests we tracked the database currently records:

- **6** cases of **partial success**
- **0** cases of **full success**

At the same time:

- we see **4** cases with **no response**
- **8** where the situation **escalated**
- **6** where **repression** is directly recorded
- **32** cases with an **unclear** outcome
- In addition, **7** actions were still ongoing on **16 July**.

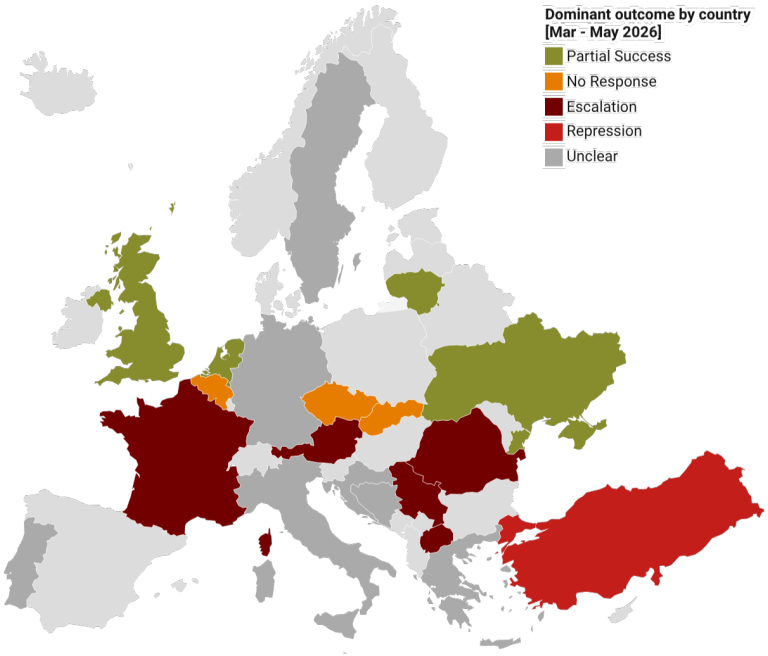

Figure 15. Dominant recorded outcome of student protest activity by country, 16 May–16 July 2026.

These categories can overlap. An action can produce a concession while other demands remain unresolved, and repression can coexist with a later policy response. The high proportion of **unclear outcomes** also underlines the importance of following institutional decisions beyond the initial protest. Recording mobilisation is only one part of understanding whether students' concerns ultimately influence policy or practice. In many cases, the available reporting establishes that an action took place but does not provide sufficient follow-up to determine what changed afterwards.

There were identifiable concessions in some cases. At **İstanbul Bilgi University**, the proposed closure was reversed, although the institution's governance dispute was not fully resolved. In **Ghent**, the university reported further steps concerning research partnerships during a continuing occupation, which concluded on 21 May. For longer-running campaigns, partial successes recorded in the database do not necessarily originate within this reporting window.

In other cases, substantive demands remained unresolved at the time of the latest follow-up. The **French** measure affecting exemptions from differentiated tuition fees remained in place. In **Germany**, student demands concerning BAföG

were followed by a government reform proposal in October, but the proposal had not yet been adopted in the reporting window. These examples illustrate why the report distinguishes **the end of a particular protest action from the resolution of the demands that motivated it**.

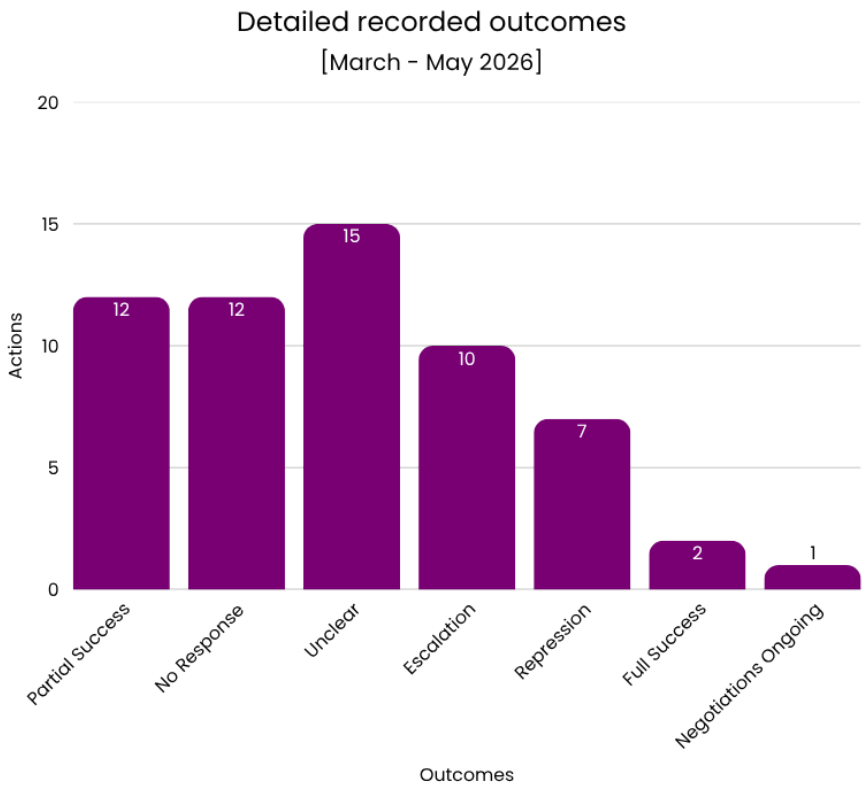

Figure 16. Frequency of outcomes recorded for student protest actions, 16 May–16 July 2026.

Comparison with the full database up to the 16 of July 2026

ESU's database records **151** actions across **33** countries in total, from 16 of September 2025 to 16 of July 2026. The current monitoring window contains **47**, representing **31.1%** of all recorded actions.

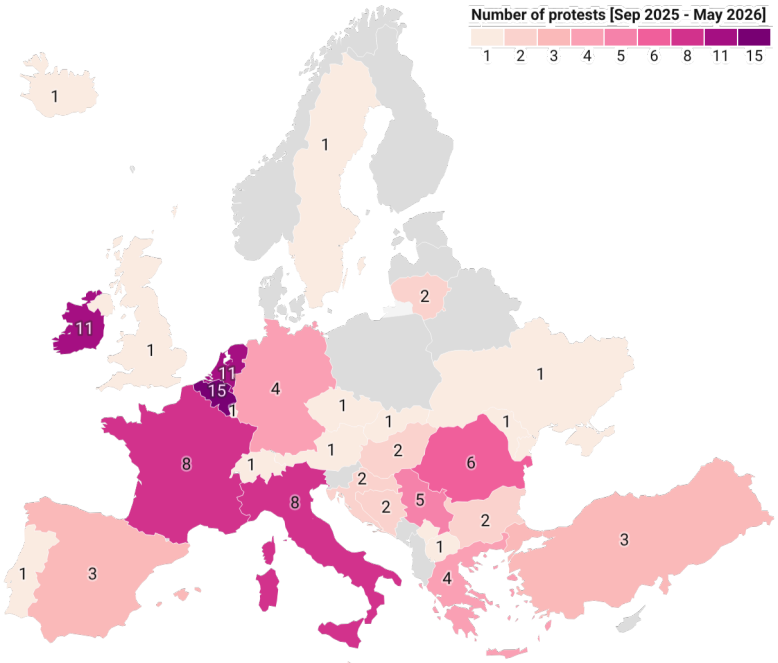

Figure 17. Number of recorded student protest actions by country, 16 September 2025–16 July 2026.

Across that current cumulative dataset, the leading causes are:

- Access & Safety in Education: **64** actions
- University Governance: **63**
- Economic & Living Conditions: **59**
- Political Governance / Democracy: **58**
- Social Justice & Equity: **55**
- Human Rights & International Solidarity: **50**

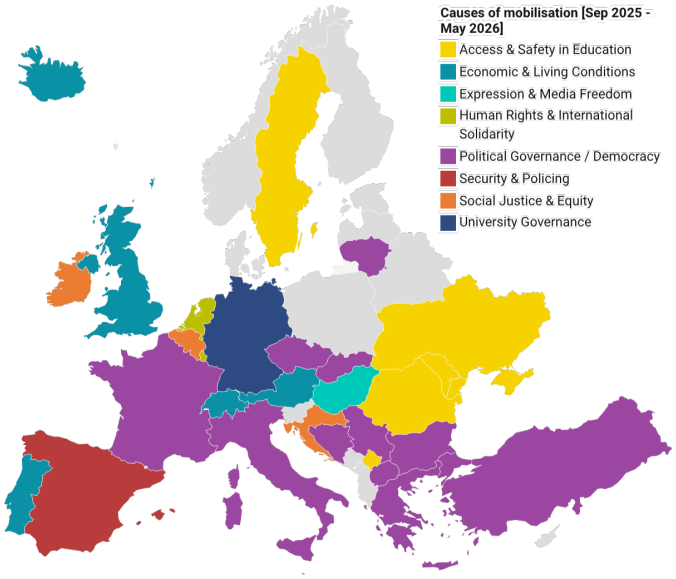

Figure 18. Dominant thematic cause of recorded student protest activity by country, 16 September 2025–16 July 2026.

Demonstrations remain the most frequently recorded tactic, appearing in **140** of the **151** cumulative records (**92.7%**). Across the database, students have combined education-specific demands with concerns about public accountability, fundamental rights and international solidarity.

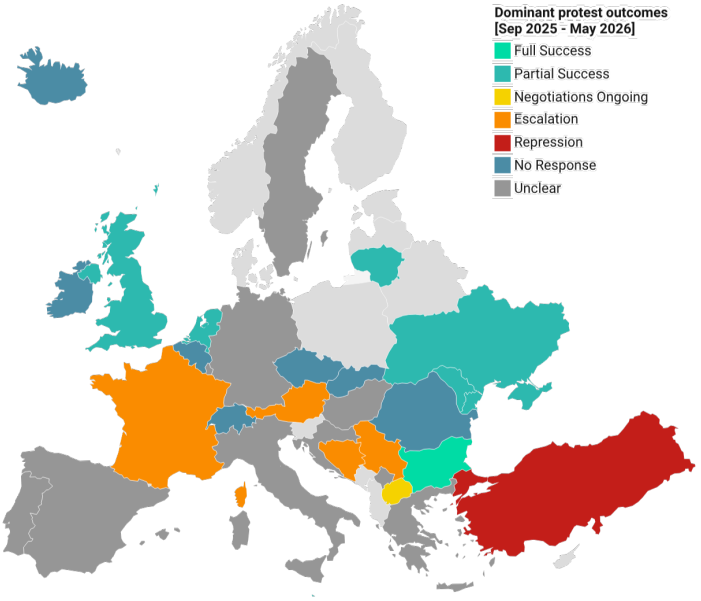

Figure 19. Dominant recorded outcome of student protest activity by country, 16 September 2025–16 July 2026.

Within the cumulative database, the May to July 2026 reporting window shows a different distribution of several causes, demands, tactics and outcomes:

- **University Governance** was recorded in **51.1%** of window actions, compared with **41.7%** cumulatively, a difference of **9.3 percentage points**.
- **Access & Safety in Education** appeared in **46.8%**, compared with **42.4%** cumulatively, a difference of **4.4 percentage points**.
- **Corruption & Nepotism** was recorded in **23.4%**, compared with **10.6%** cumulatively, a difference of **12.8 percentage points**, influenced by the repeated Serbian actions.
- **Snap Elections / Free Elections** appeared as a demand in **19.1%** of window actions, compared with **6.0%** cumulatively, a difference of **13.2 percentage points**.
- **Sit-ins** appeared in **14.9%** of window actions, compared with **9.9%** cumulatively, a difference of **5.0 percentage points**. Demonstrations nevertheless remained the leading tactic.
- **Arbitrary Arrests** were associated with **14.9%** of window actions, compared with **6.6%** cumulatively, a difference of **8.3 percentage points**. This comparison includes the wider risk history of continuing campaigns.
- **Unclear outcomes** accounted for **68.1%** of window actions, compared with **49.0%** cumulatively, a difference of **19.1 percentage points**, indicating a substantial gap in documented follow-up for the recent records.

At the same time:

- **Human Rights & International Solidarity** appeared in **25.5%** of window actions, compared with **33.1%** cumulatively, a difference of **7.6 percentage points**.
- **Social Justice & Equity** was recorded in **19.1%**, compared with **36.4%** cumulatively, a difference of **17.3 percentage points**.
- **Rallies** appeared in **61.7%** of window actions, compared with **74.2%** cumulatively, a difference of **12.5 percentage points**.

What comes next

The **47** actions recorded between May and July show that **higher education funding, access** and **institutional governance** remained central points of student mobilisation, while the student movement continued to engage with wider questions of democratic accountability, human rights and international solidarity.

The reporting period also shows how different forms of pressure can reinforce one another. **Inadequate funding may affect access** to education and the conditions of studying. **Institutional decisions** on programmes or partnerships **can become debates about transparency and representation**. Where students face arrest, legal proceedings or disciplinary pressure, the dispute may extend beyond the original demand to the **protection of the right to protest itself**.

The right to protest must never become a substitute for the right to participate in decisions.

Annex I - Methodology

Information regarding the protests was collected through a structured spreadsheet used to log any and all protests which are either reported to ESU by NUSes and/or are observed and followed online through news and media outlets or social media channels.

Set against extensive data lists, which include: Scale, Status, Causes, Demands/Goals, Tactics, Threats/Risks, Outcomes, and ESU actions; all flagged protests are categorised accordingly in order to determine patterns, progressions and developments on a European wide scale - facilitating the identification of certain common topics of protest and how central protesting for higher education is to the student movement scene.

Annex II - Resources

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