

DVC Michaelmas Report: Right to Protests in Türkiye

Introduction

Since 2017, the Cambridge Digital Verification Corps (DVC) has mobilised student volunteers to support frontline investigations through the application of open-source intelligence (OSINT). Through our collaboration with Amnesty International and the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), the DVC transforms publicly-available digital content into actionable evidence that promotes human rights and international accountability.

In this termly report, our newest investigators reflect on their first months with the team, offering a practical insight into the group's investigative workflow in action. It outlines the key stages of a DVC investigation, from discovery and verification to analysis, while providing researchers with the opportunity to present their findings in the style of an investigative report.

The findings presented here are not exhaustive or determinative. Rather, we document allegations of police violence in Türkiye as an example of the DVC's research focus, highlighting their human rights implications where appropriate. Through a detailed case study, the report aims to demonstrate how user-generated content is verified and transformed into deployable open-source intelligence. In line with the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations, all material was collected exclusively from publicly accessible sources; information that members of the public can lawfully observe, purchase, or request.¹

Project briefing

Our first project of Michaelmas term examined allegations of human rights violations attributed to law enforcement officials during the policing of mass protests in Türkiye between 2024 and 2025. The team identified, archived and verified user-generated content that appeared to show unlawful policing practices, including the use of excessive force, arbitrary detentions, and restrictions on free assembly. The unlawful use of Less Lethal Weapons (LLWs), such as pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons, was also documented. The analysis focused on specific protest events in Ankara, Istanbul, and Van, including demonstrations following the 19 March detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu; protests opposing the reversal of a mayoral election in Van; International Women's Day marches; LGBTQ+ Pride events; and protests organised by the '1000 Youth for Palestine' movement.

Discovery

After establishing our research scope, our first task was to begin 'discovery': the process of collecting user-generated content for analysis. Photos and videos were sourced from social media platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). To ensure comprehensive and relevant data collection, the team employed iteratively refined keyword searches, tailored to the Turkish language and to protest-specific terminology.

The criteria for inclusion were twofold. First, the documented demonstrations had to fall within the timeframe of January 2024 to December 2025. Second, the content needed to

¹ https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/OHCHR_BerkeleyProtocol.pdf

show incidents of violence or unlawful restrictions imposed on protesters by law enforcement agencies. This included the dispersal of peaceful assemblies, the imposition of blanket bans, and the use of excessive force against protesters, including the unlawful deployment of less-lethal weapons. The team also considered allegations of torture and included content that appeared to show the arbitrary detention of protesters, lawyers, and journalists.

Analysis

The distribution of our data is shaped by the scope of the project brief and our available research capacity. This analysis considers the influence of the DVC's workflow on the findings and identifies areas for future investigation.

In total, we documented 166 alleged human rights violations attributed to Turkish authorities. The majority of the content originated from X (99 cases), followed by YouTube (33 cases), with smaller numbers obtained from other social media platforms (See: Appendix 2). A limited number of sources (six cases) were found on local news websites. Preliminary research indicated extensive usage of X within Türkiye, which informed our decision to focus on this platform.

We identified the first date of upload for 105 of the 166 documented incidents. The highest concentration of content was from February/March 2025, largely in connection with protests in Van opposing the replacement of the city's elected mayor, Abdullah Zeydan, a pro-Kurdish candidate. Smaller peaks were observed in April 2024, coinciding with the annulment of Zeydan's election victory, and in May 2025, particularly in relation to the 1 May protests in Istanbul. A location was given for 150 of the documented incidents. Just over half (84) took place in Van, with 53 cases in Istanbul and the remainder (18) in Ankara. A full breakdown of this distribution is provided in Appendix 1. These findings are illustrative rather than exhaustive, influenced both by the availability of verifiable material and by our research focus and methodology, such as the specific keywords we selected to identify relevant content.

The discovery process focused on a limited number of well-publicised protests over the past two years. We used keywords specific to individual protest events, which allowed the team to rapidly identify high-impact incidents. However, this approach may have resulted in the underrepresentation of police violence from smaller-scale protests, or those with less media coverage.

We excluded all content relating to the March 2025 protests in Istanbul against the detention of Ekrem İmamoğlu. This decision was taken to avoid duplication with a previously [published](#) investigation by Amnesty International that focused on post-19 March events in Istanbul. Nevertheless, contemporaneous protests in Ankara responding to İmamoğlu's detention were included within the DVC's research scope, since these have received comparatively less attention to date.

Verification

To ensure that manipulated footage or misinformation does not undermine efforts to secure justice and accountability, the DVC conducts technical analysis to assess the authenticity and credibility of digital content. Geolocation constitutes a core component of this verification process, enabling investigators to determine the precise location of an incident.

To pin down the location of a video, our investigators begin by extracting screenshots – known as keyframes – which allow them to isolate and examine distinct visual details. Investigators then conduct reverse image searches to identify the earliest known appearance of the imagery online. The team analyses visual cues within the footage, such as road signs, landmarks, and shop fronts, to determine an approximate location. Finally, investigators use satellite imagery and Google Street View to corroborate the location and establish precise coordinates.

From the 166 documented incidents, we were able to attribute specific protest events to 140 individual photos and videos, of which 91 were successfully geolocated.

Case study

A video, posted on X on May 1 2025, appears to show the violent detention of a protester in Istanbul. The individual is carrying a yellow and red banner containing Turkish text. Although much of the text is obscured by movement, a frame at 0:00 briefly reveals the phrase '1 Mayıs' ('May 1'), linking the incident to the 1 May 2025 Labour Day protests.

Four men – two in civilian clothing and two dressed as law enforcement officers – tackle the protester to the ground. Three additional uniformed police officers are visible nearby. As the plainclothes officers attempt to restrain the protester, his hands are forced behind his back in a reverse handcuff position. One officer is then seen forcefully pushing the protester's head to the ground and pressing his knee against the individual's neck.



Screenshot showing police officers and individuals in civilian clothing forcefully detaining a protester in Istanbul (timestamp: 0:09, faces blurred for privacy).

This content was highlighted in our investigation because the officers appear to use excessive force against a peaceful protester. The United Nations' OHCHR Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement (2020) specifies that 'force that is likely to result in moderate or severe injury [...] may not be used simply to obtain compliance with an order by a person who is only passively resisting'.² The use of reverse handcuffing and the obstruction of the protester's airway risked causing significant pain or injury and are likely to contravene the general principles governing the lawful use of force outlined by the OHCHR.

The video contains several visual features that facilitated geolocation. The description names the province of Mecidiyeköy, and the footage shows a number of distinctive landmarks, including colourful shopfronts, blue fencing, and a large overpass. Investigators

² Ch. 2, 'General Principles on the Use of Force', section 2.10 "Proportionality", p. 7.

compared the user-generated content with satellite imagery and Google Street View footage to corroborate the location.

Key reference points included diagonal parking bays visible at 0:01 and yellow and red shopfronts observed at 0:06 on the northern side of the road. Vegetation lining both the northern and southern sides of the roadway is visible throughout the footage and corresponds with Google Earth imagery. Blue fencing is visible to the north of the road (0.10) and black permanent fencing is also seen throughout the video in the central reservation.

The team extracted screenshots from the video and produced a panorama using two keyframes. To visualise the geolocation, we created an infographic that identifies common features visible across the user-generated footage, Google Street View, and Google Earth (see: Appendix 3).

Conclusion

The DVC's investigation into the policing of mass protests in Türkiye suggests that, between 2024 and 2025, law enforcement agents routinely used unlawful force to restrict peaceful assembly. Our provisional findings indicate that the policing of demonstrations, alongside the imposition of blanket bans and other wide-ranging restrictions, undermine the fundamental right of peaceful assembly which is enshrined in international law. Besides causing significant individual distress, the excessive use of force and less-lethal weapons by Turkish police also likely contravenes UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.³

In November, our team handed over this project to DVC colleagues at the Hertie School and Essex University. As we begin work on a new investigation, investigators at Essex and Hertie will continue content discovery for the Türkiye project, with the aim of producing a dataset that can support a comprehensive Amnesty report in the near future. For now, we hope that this summary provides an insight into the methodology and analytical capability of the DVC, highlighting our commitment to human rights advocacy and the development of research capacity.

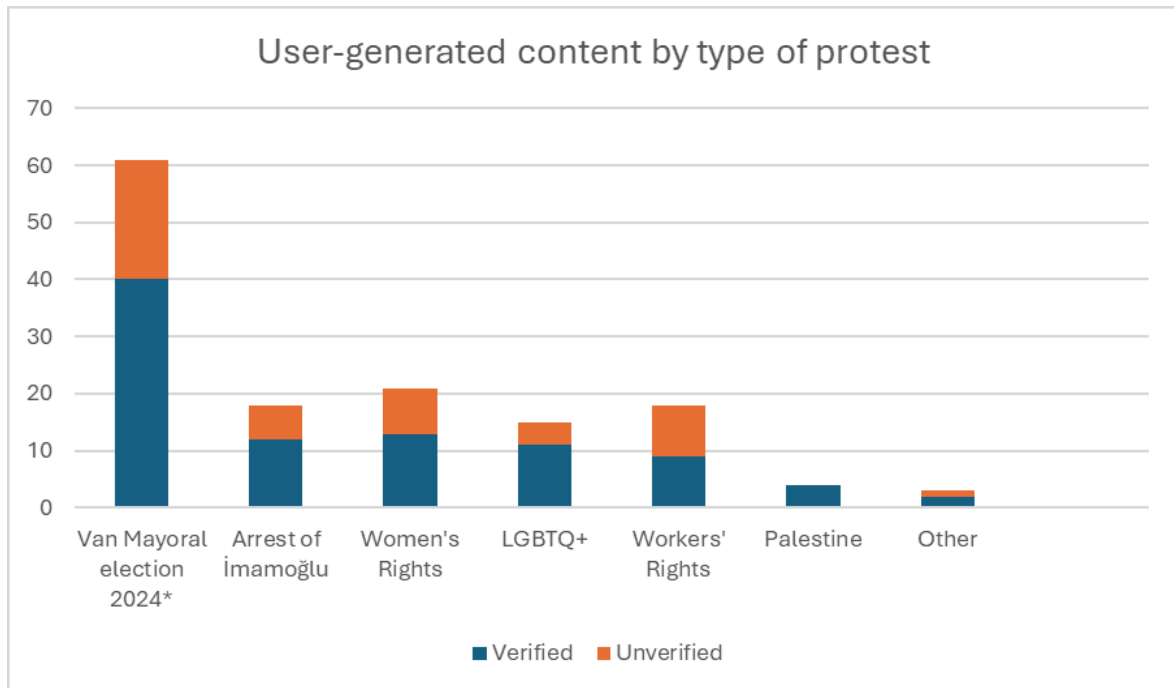
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With thanks to all 30 student investigators who give their time freely to the Cambridge DVC and made this report possible.

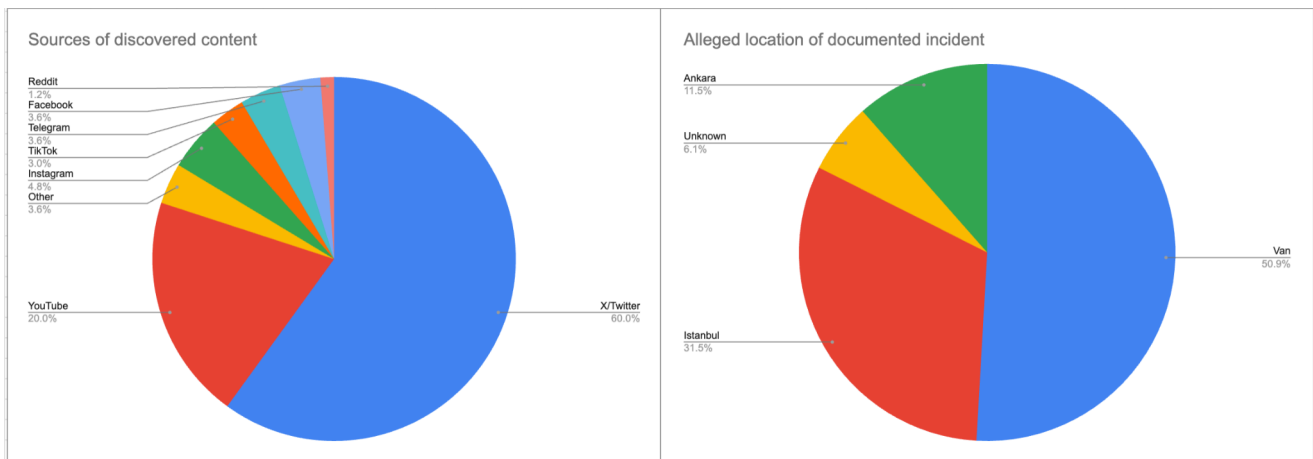
³ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/firearms.pdf>

Appendices



Appendix 1: Bar chart showing the distribution of our data set, categorised according to protest type.

* Includes content from protests in April 2024 opposing the annulment of Abdullah Zeydan's victory in the Van mayoral election, and from protests in February 2025 following his replacement by a state-appointed trustee.



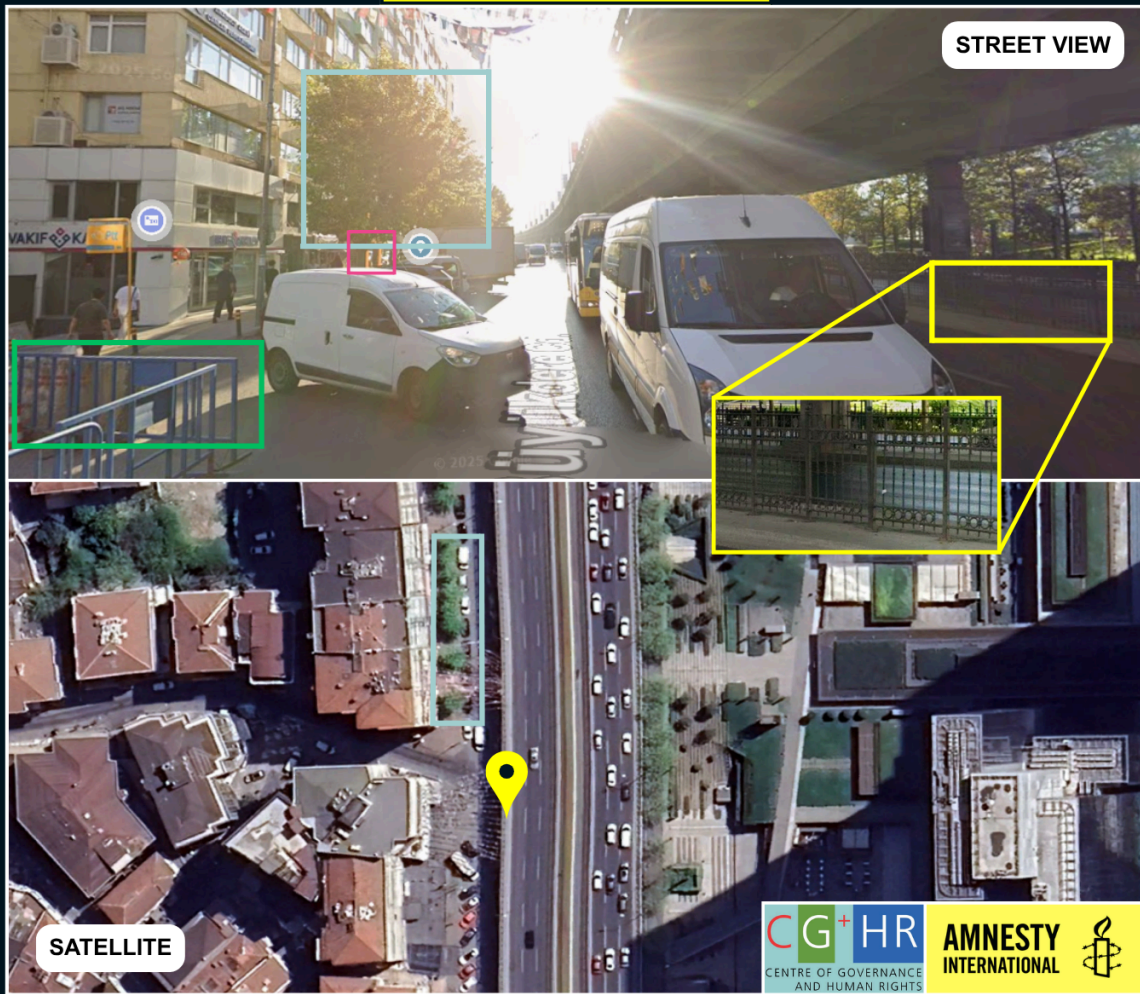
Appendix 2: Pie charts showing the distribution of our data set, categorised by social media platforms and location.



01 May 2025
Time not yet verified

41.066691, 28.998447
Mecidiyeköy, Istanbul

Alleged actor:
Turkish police



Appendix 3: Visualisation showing the geolocation of our case study.