France, October 2026: what the democracy measures showed before the unrest

Before the weekend of 17 October, did the standard measures of democratic health show that France was at risk?

France | As of 24 October 2026 | Nevo Goor | An independent project by Nevo Goor

For France, the four headline indices I track (Freedom House, RSF, Transparency International and V-Dem) gave no warning. It scored high and moved by a point or less, and the warnings sat outside them: in how police handled protest, and in how little people trust politics. Italy, which I keep to one short paragraph, shows a different pattern: several of its measures were falling before its own unrest, and I found no evidence that the fall explains why people marched.

On Saturday 17 October 2026, marches in France ended in fire, looting and clashes with police. In Limoges the city hall burned until its roof collapsed. In Italy, marches the same day also ended in clashes.

This piece asks one question. Before that weekend, did the standard measures of democratic health show that France was at risk?

SECTION 1

What happened

Human Rights Watch dates the high-school protests from 21 September: students angry at a shortage of teachers, classes that are too large and school buildings in poor repair. HRW calls the protests overwhelmingly peaceful, with some violence. On Saturday 17 October they met union and activist calls over rising living costs and poor conditions in schools (AP; its photo captions also cite fuel prices). Authorities counted about 550,000 marchers; organisers counted 800,000 (AP). Riots and looting followed in several cities. In Limoges the city hall burned until its roof collapsed and the building was nearly destroyed. The prefect said radical troublemakers broke in while officials, staff, security personnel and members of the public were inside, and set it on fire deliberately (AP). At least 2,400 people were arrested across the country (AP).

These counts come from authorities, organisers and the press, and each has its own limits. I give every count with its source. Who took part in the riots is not established. Macron and Interior Minister Nuñez blamed far-left groups, troublemakers and criminals. That is not a court finding.

SECTION 2

What the measures showed before

MEASURE	FRANCE
Freedom House 2026, out of 100	89 (89 the year before)

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RSF press freedom 2026	25th of 180, score 76.68 (2025: 25th, 76.62)
Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2025, published February 2026	66, down 1; 27th of 182
V-Dem Democracy Report 2026	Liberal democracy, LD- (could also belong to the lower category); not on the list of 44 autocratising countries
CIVICUS Monitor, civic space (not one of the four)	Obstructed since 9 December 2025 (before: Narrowed)

V-Dem uses the minus sign to mark that a country could also belong to the lower category.

Italy, briefly. Its measures fell further than France's before the unrest: Freedom House gave it 87, down from 89; RSF ranked it 56th of 180, down from 49th; and V-Dem lists it among five new European autocratisers, with the episode dated from 2021. In the CEVIPOF barometer, 40% of Italian respondents said they trust politics, against 22% of French respondents (given below). Marches in Italy on 17 October also ended in clashes in Milan (Il Post), and after the weekend President Sergio Mattarella called the violence unacceptable (ANSA). I found no official count of marchers and no national arrest total for Italy, so I do not say which country's unrest was larger. The government answered with a decree-law published on 22 October (no. 190) and in force the next day, which creates a new offence of organised violence at demonstrations. I found no evidence linking Italy's falling measures to why people marched. The Italian record would need its own note.

SECTION 3

The warnings outside the indices

Two kinds of evidence were on record before the unrest. Neither feeds the four headline indices.

The first is how police handle protest. On 9 December 2025 the CIVICUS Monitor downgraded France from Narrowed to Obstructed, citing tear gas, explosive grenades and mass arrests against largely peaceful protests in 2025. In July 2026 the European Commission's Rule of Law Report said, in its France chapter, that "cases of excessive use of force by law enforcement during demonstrations have been pointed out" by the European Court of Human Rights, the Defender of Rights, the CNCDH and civil society organisations.

The school movement repeated the pattern. On 5 October in Lens, a 15-year-old lost a hand during a demonstration (LCP). Interior Minister Laurent Nuñez said a stun grenade was a strong possibility; Human Rights Watch reports a 15-year-old who lost a hand to an explosive police stun grenade, without naming the place. On 7 October Nuñez announced that he had suspended the use of stun grenades for the school movement until the facts were known. HRW also reported a 14-year-old whose jaw was shattered by a tear-gas canister fired at close range. AP reported that the Mulhouse prosecutor opened an investigation after a 17-year-old girl lost an eye, and that another was opened after a young protester lost a hand in Saint-Etienne; AP does not say how either was injured. On 9 October the Justice Ministry reported 6,877 people held in custody since the start of the violence, 86% of them minors, and 2,376 prosecuted. The grenade was suspended after Lens, not after the 6,877.

The second is trust. In the Sciences Po CEVIPOF barometer of political trust (wave 17, fieldwork in January 2026), 22% of French respondents said they trust politics, 4 points fewer than in February 2025. These are online quota samples, and one wave cannot show when trust fell this low or why unrest came this year. The Italian figure from the same barometer is given above.

Living costs are also outside the indices, and they were a stated demand alongside school conditions.

SECTION 4

How the state responded

On 18 October President Emmanuel Macron addressed the nation. AP quotes him: "Those who looted will have to pay for the damage, and those who sought to bring down the Republic will be held accountable." The address announced no state of emergency. He said prefects would decide with mayors how to protect cities, public buildings and shops, including by banning certain gatherings when necessary (Elysée). On 19 October Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu told prefects to impose very limited, local curfews (AP); in Marseille the prefect banned all protests and gatherings from noon to 8 p.m. that day. Nuñez had offered to resign. Macron refused, and asked him for full transparency about the failures in planning and intelligence that led to the violence, and for new policing tactics (AP). Nuñez said authorities had "lost control" in some major cities. Justice Minister Gérald Darmanin said on France 2 that the state had failed, beyond doubt, and asked prosecutors to seek pretrial detention for looters and for those who attacked police (Actu17). In my reading the French response combined restriction and correction. The restriction was custody on a large scale, bans and curfews. The correction was the grenade suspension, a demand for transparency about failures, and ministers who said in public that things had gone wrong.

SECTION 5

What I can and cannot conclude

The best-supported risk factor before the unrest was the documented pattern of protest policing. It was on record months before the school movement, and the injury in Lens came two weeks into a movement that HRW dates from 21 September. My reading is that it plausibly helped the movement spread beyond its first demands. I have no measure of that, and my confidence is low to moderate. Low trust is a background weakness, with the same confidence. The 2026 budget passed in February through Article 49.3, after censure motions got 260 and 135 votes against the 289 needed (LCP). I found no source linking that to the protests. The measures show no decline that could explain the 17 October riots. What I can show is what people said they wanted: schools, and the cost of living.

Overall. The record shows the order of events and what people said they wanted. It does not show cause. This is one main case with no counterfactual, and annual indices that lag by about a year.

SECTION 6

What this means for measuring democracy

The headline indices read the building. They describe institutions over a year. They were not built to hear how police treat protesters or how little people trust their politicians. In France those were the things on record before the unrest. A reading of democratic risk that stopped at the headline indices would have missed France entirely.

SECTION 7

Method and limits

I researched and wrote this alone, with AI research assistance, and checked it claim by claim. A fact needs a primary document or two independent sources; anything less is given with its source named. Event counts come from authorities, organisers and the press. French quotations are my translations, given without quotation marks. The framework behind this piece is not externally validated and makes no predictions. This is a structured analytical opinion.

SECTION 8

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