



Core EU Values: Democracy, Rule of Law & Human Rights



Introduction

The European Union is founded on a shared commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and respect for **human rights**. All of the above are enshrined in **Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union** and many other UE documents. These values ensure that governments are accountable, laws are applied fairly, and all individuals' fundamental freedoms are protected. They underpin how the EU functions, from the way decisions are made to how member states interact with their citizens and with each other.

Values such as **democracy, the rule of law and human rights** are essential to the EU's identity. Together, these three principles maintain trust between citizens and institutions and promote **peace, stability, and fairness across Europe**. They are not just an abstract ideal but **practical commitments that shape everyday life in the EU**, from how leaders are elected to how individuals' rights are protected in court.

Democracy ensures that citizens have a **voice** in shaping the future of the Union through free and **fair elections, public debate, and transparent decision-making**. The rule of law guarantees that all people and institutions are subject to the same legal standards, preventing abuse of power and ensuring justice is applied equally. Human rights safeguard **the dignity and freedoms of every individual**, protecting people from discrimination, ensuring freedom of expression, and upholding basic social and economic rights. Ultimately, understanding those three core values is vital for understanding how the EU works and why it exists.



Key concepts and definitions

- ◆ **Democracy:** A system of government in which power is vested in the people, who exercise it directly or through elected representatives.
- ◆ **Rule of law:** The principle that all individuals and institutions, including governments, are accountable to laws that are fairly applied and enforced.
- ◆ **Human rights:** Fundamental rights and freedoms inherent to every person, such as freedom of speech, equality, privacy, and protection from discrimination.
- ◆ **Fundamental rights:** Specific rights protected under EU law, including social, economic, and political rights.
- ◆ **Equality & non-discrimination:** Principles ensuring that all people are treated equally and fairly, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, or other status.
- ◆ **Accountability & transparency:** The obligation of institutions to explain their decisions and allow public scrutiny.
- ◆ **Treaty on European Union (TEU):** One of the EU's two foundational treaties. Article 2 explicitly states the EU is founded on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. Article 7 allows action against member states that breach these values (e.g., rule of law disputes).
- ◆ **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU):** Defines EU policies and operational rules. Establishes procedures for democratic governance, protection of fundamental rights, and the internal market based on fairness and equality.
- ◆ **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights:** A single document consolidating personal, civil, political, economic, and social rights for EU citizens and residents. Ensures protection of fundamental freedoms, workers' rights, consumer rights, equality, and data protection (Article 8).



- ◆ **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR):** A Council of Europe treaty to which all EU member states are parties. Protects civil and political rights (e.g., fair trial, freedom of expression). The EU is committed to acceding to the ECHR to strengthen human rights protection.



Real-world examples

- ◆ **Defending the rule of law – Poland & Hungary**

The EU launched Article 7 proceedings against Poland and Hungary over concerns about judicial independence and threats to democratic checks and balances. Led to regular EU monitoring, court cases and funding conditionality linked to rule of law compliance. It shows how the EU acts to protect democratic principles and the independence of courts when member states fail to meet their commitments.

- ◆ **Protecting human rights – European Charter of Fundamental Rights in action**

In 2021, the Court of Justice of the EU ruled against indiscriminate data retention by telecom companies in France and Belgium, citing the Charter's protection of privacy and data. Strengthened privacy rights and limited mass surveillance. It illustrates how the Charter ensures citizens' fundamental rights are protected in digital and security policies.

- ◆ **Promoting democracy – European Citizens' Initiative**

In 2012, 1.8 million signatures were collected across the EU demanding that water be recognised as a public good, not a commercial product in the initiative "Right2Water". Influencing EU policies on water management and access to clean water. It demonstrates direct citizen involvement in EU policymaking and democratic participation beyond elections.

- ◆ **Supporting free media & civic space – EU response to disinformation**

The European Democracy Action Plan focuses on countering disinformation, supporting free journalism, and protecting election integrity. The EU supports funding for fact-checking networks and independent media in countries facing political pressure on press freedom (e.g., Hungary, Bulgaria). This



action protects democratic debate and citizens' right to accurate information.

◆ Humanitarian values in action – EU support for Ukraine

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU triggered the **Temporary Protection Directive** to give Ukrainian refugees the right to live, work, and access healthcare in all EU countries. It is a clear application of human rights, solidarity, and the EU's commitment to protecting people facing war.

◆ Equality & non-discrimination – LGBTIQ Freedom Zones

Several Polish municipalities declared themselves "LGBT-free zones". The European Parliament declared the entire EU as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone illustrating EU commitment to equality and non-discrimination.



Data and statistics

◆ Rule of Law

According to **Eurobarometer** and **Enlargement**, about 72% of Europeans consider that the EU plays an important role in helping to uphold the rule of law in their country. 89% say it is important for them that all EU Member States respect the core values of the EU, including fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democracy. At the same time, 86% say it is important for them that media and civil society organisations in all other EU Member States than their own country are able to operate freely and without pressure, even when they are critical. 53% of Europeans say they feel informed about the rule of law.

◆ Participation in political life

According to **Eurobarometer**, participation in political life remains strong, with 67% of EU citizens voting in local, national or European elections. Nearly one in five respondents (19%) indicates taking part in volunteering activities or community projects. Around one in ten EU citizens indicates being involved in NGOs, civil society organisations (10%) or in trade unions, political movements or parties (9%).



◆ Awareness

According to **Eurobarometer**, over 60% of respondents report being aware of various pieces of EU legislation on justice, rights and values, with the highest level of awareness of: rights of EU citizens and their families to reside freely anywhere within the EU (77%), equal treatment in employment and occupation regardless of the religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (74%) as well as the EU General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR and decision that makes certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia punishable by criminal penalties (both 72%). Although most EU citizens have heard of the above legislation, in most cases around a third are aware but do not really know what they entail.



Challenges and controversies

◆ Rule of law backsliding

Some member states like Poland or Hungary have been accused of undermining judicial independence, restricting media freedom, and weakening checks and balances. Its start debate centers on how far the EU can intervene in the internal governance of sovereign states.

◆ Democratic deficit & citizen participation

There are some citizens who feel disconnected from EU institutions and believe that EU decision-making is too distant or complex. This is why the European Citizens' Initiative allows citizens to propose legislation directly. At the same time, EU institutions are expanding online consultations and investing in education about the EU.

◆ Human rights under pressure

The issues include treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, the rise of hate speech, discrimination against minorities and digital rights concerns. At the same time, some member states argue for national sovereignty in sensitive areas, creating tension with EU-wide human rights norms.



◆ External pressures & global challenges

Influence of authoritarian powers spreading disinformation, financing political parties, or undermining democratic norms. Starts new dilemmas over relations with countries accused of human rights violations, like trade with China or Russia.



Further reading and resources

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