



## The EU as a Global Actor: Promoting Democracy & Human Rights



### Introduction

Rooted in its foundational values of **human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights**, the EU seeks to extend these principles beyond its borders, ensuring that individuals globally have the opportunity to live in democratic societies where their rights are upheld.

EU member states are committed to fostering **active citizenship** and **democratic participation** by engaging with global partners. Doing so, the EU **promotes inclusive governance, empowers civil society, and encourages the protection of fundamental freedoms**.

The EU's actions abroad, including its **diplomatic and financial support for democratic transitions**, deeply affect active citizenship within and beyond its borders, where individuals are encouraged to **participate in decision-making processes and contribute to the development of policies that reflect democratic values**. By fostering environments where human rights and democracy thrive, the EU helps to build societies where **citizens are informed, engaged, and empowered to shape their futures**.



### Key concepts and definitions

- ◆ **Democracy** refers to a political system in which power is held by the people, typically through elected representatives, based on principles such as fair elections, respect for civil liberties, and the rule of law.
- ◆ **Human rights** are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to all individuals, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, orientation, or religion. These include rights such as the right to life, freedom of expression, and protection from violence and discrimination.



- ◆ **Diplomatic relations** refer to the formal interactions between countries or international organisations aimed at fostering cooperation, resolving conflicts, and advancing mutual interests. Diplomacy involves negotiation, dialogue, and the establishment of agreements or treaties.

The EU seeks to influence global civic matters, promote democratic values, foster peace, and protect human rights by combining diplomacy, aid programs, trade relations, and international cooperation:

- ◆ The **EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World** documents how the EU consistently pushes for global recognition and respect for human rights, supporting civil society organisations and holding governments accountable for human rights violations.
- ◆ Through the **European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)**, the EU funds projects that aim to enhance political participation, freedom of speech, and equality worldwide, aligning with its broader strategy to empower citizens and civil society groups.



## Real-world examples

- ◆ The **EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020–2024)** has been extended until 2027, reaffirming its commitment to promoting human rights and democratic governance globally. This plan outlines strategic priorities, including the protection of human rights defenders, support for democratic transitions, and promoting inclusive governance.
- ◆ Through the **European Neighbourhood Policy** and the **EU accession process**, various countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans have been encouraged to adopt democratic reforms and increase protections for human rights as they aim for EU membership.
- ◆ In the context of the Arab Spring, the EU supported democratic movements across North Africa and the Middle East by providing financial support for democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt and strengthening institutions and human rights protections (EEAS, 2021).



- ◆ Through **EUPOL COPPS** (European Union Mission for the Support of Palestinian Police and Rule of Law), the EU provides technical assistance and training to enhance democratic governance and the rule of law, particularly in conflict areas such as Palestine.



## Data and statistics

- ◆ In the 2021–2027 program, **NDICI-Global Europe**, the EU's financial instrument for international cooperation, allocates **€11.5 billion to governance and peacebuilding**, including support for democratic institutions, human rights defenders, and civic organisations (ECDPM, 2023).
- ◆ While EU member states Finland, Sweden, and Denmark lead among the **top five democracies globally**, the EU's financial and diplomatic aid has helped **improve democracy scores** in countries like Tunisia, Georgia, and Moldova, where the EU is deeply involved in political reforms (EIU, 2023).
- ◆ According to the 2023 EEAS report "The EU as a global actor":

**145** EU diplomatic representatives around the world.

**200** Electoral missions in over 75 countries since 2000, by the EU Election Observation Missions (EOM), to **support electoral reforms and enhance public trust in democratic processes**.

**6600** Human rights defenders received EU support in 2022.

**70.2** Billions invested in **development assistance**, making the EU the world's #1 provider, more than the rest of the world combined.

**1.7** Billion granted to **provide millions of people with emergency food, shelter, education and healthcare in over 110 countries**, making the EU the world's #1 donor of humanitarian aid.

**7.9** Billions invested in global security and defence by the European Peace Facility (EPF) to **support allies, prevent conflicts, build peace, and strengthen international security**.



## Challenges and controversies

- ◆ **Contradictions in external relationships with authoritarian regimes**, such as the EU's dealings with countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, have raised **concerns about whether economic and geopolitical interests compromise the EU's commitment to democracy and human rights** (Bojinović Fenko & Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2024).
- ◆ The **rise of nationalism and populism within some member states** has made many people question the EU's ability to promote democracy abroad while facing internal political struggles (EEAS, 2024).
- ◆ In regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, **political instability, economic challenges, and local resistance** often reduce the impact of EU policies (European Commission, 2023).
- ◆ As of 2023, approximately **30.6% of the global population lives in countries with "closed" civic space**, up from 26% in 2018 (ECDPM, 2023).

These limitations emphasise the importance of the EU's engagement in supporting civil society, social justice actions, socio-economic aids and democratic institutions within and outside of its borders, and the need for youth to take part in these movements to ensure their continued efficiency.



## Further reading and resources

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- ✦ Tocci, N. (2023). *The Resilience of the European Union in the Global Context*. In *The European Union in Global Politics* (pp. 215-234). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003089117-3>

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