



# Citizenship in the EU: Rights, Responsibilities & Economic Participation



## Introduction

Citizenship in the European Union goes beyond national belonging - it reflects shared values like democracy, equality, and human rights. It grants rights such as free movement, residence, employment, and consumer protections across member states, encouraging active participation in community life. Beyond economic benefits, EU citizenship promotes civic engagement, including voting and contributing to democratic processes at both national and European levels. It links personal freedoms with collective responsibility, showing how everyday choices - like where to live or work - connect to broader democratic principles.

Understanding these rights and duties empowers citizens to shape a more inclusive, democratic, and resilient Europe.



## Key concepts and definitions

- ◆ **EU citizenship:** A legal status granted automatically to nationals of EU member states, introduced by the Maastricht Treaty (1993). It provides additional rights beyond national citizenship, such as freedom of movement and participation in EU elections.
- ◆ **Freedom of movement:** The right for EU citizens to travel, live, study, and work in any EU member state without requiring a visa or work permit.
- ◆ **Right of residence:** The right for EU citizens to reside in any EU country under specific conditions (e.g., employment, study, or having sufficient resources).
- ◆ **Right to work:** The ability to seek employment or establish a business in any member state without discrimination based on nationality.



- ◆ **Consumer rights in the EU:** Protections granted to consumers, including product safety, fair trading, and the right to information, when buying goods or services across EU borders.
- ◆ **Single market:** An integrated market that allows the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people within the EU, enabling businesses and consumers to operate freely across borders.
- ◆ **Civic responsibility:** The duty of citizens to engage in democratic processes, respect the law, contribute to society (e.g., volunteering, paying taxes), and promote social cohesion.
- ◆ **Active citizenship:** Taking an active role in society and politics, from participating in elections and community initiatives to engaging in public debates and advocacy.
- ◆ **Democratic participation:** Involvement of citizens in decision-making processes at local, national, and EU levels to ensure policies and laws reflect the will of the people.
- ◆ **EU values:** Core principles enshrined in EU treaties, including respect for human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law.



## Real-world examples

### ◆ The Erasmus+ Programme as an example of freedom of movement & work

Erasmus+ is an EU initiative supporting student exchange, training and work placements abroad. Over 13 million people have studied or trained abroad since 1987 (the first Erasmus programme) because of its opportunities. For example, a Polish student studying in Spain not only benefits from EU-funded mobility but also exercises their right to live and work in another EU country without restrictions.

### ◆ EU Solidarity & Civic Responsibility – Volunteering via the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

The European Solidarity Corps brings together young people across the EU to build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding

to societal challenges. It offers an inspiring and empowering experience for young people who want to help, learn and develop. European Solidarity Corps participants embrace the values of solidarity, respect for human dignity and human rights, and believe in the promotion of a fair and equal society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality prevail.

### ◆ Labour Mobility & Equal Treatment – EURES Job Portal

EURES network services are publicly available and targeted at unemployed and job seekers, interested in travelling to another Member State to take up employment, and at employers wishing to recruit workers from other EU or EFTA Member States. For example, a nurse from Romania finds employment in Sweden using EURES, benefiting from equal work rights and contributing to the host country's economy.

### ◆ Participatory Democracy – The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)

A European citizens' initiative is a way for you and other Europeans to take an active part in EU policy-making. If you want the EU to take action on a particular issue, you can launch a citizens' initiative calling on the European Commission to propose new EU legislation on that issue. For an initiative to be considered by the Commission, you need to get 1 million citizens from across the EU to sign it in support. For example, in 2012, „Right2Water” collected 1.8 million signatures from across the EU, leading to new policies on access to clean water.



## Data and statistics

### Population

According to [Eurostat](#), on 1 January 2024, there were 449 million people living in the European Union. The most populous EU countries were:

- ◆ Germany (83.4 million, 19% of the EU total)
- ◆ France (68.4 million, 15%)

- ◆ Italy (58.9 million, 13%)
- ◆ Spain (48.6 million, 11%)
- ◆ Poland (36.6 million, 8%)

In total, these 5 countries accounted for 66% of the EU population. At the other end of the range, the least populous EU countries were:

- ◆ Malta (563 000 people, corresponding to 0.1% of the EU total),
- ◆ Luxembourg (672 000, also 0.1%),
- ◆ Cyprus (934 000, 0.2%).

EU citizens have the freedom to move and reside in different EU countries. The largest group of EU citizens residing in other EU countries as non-nationals on 1 January 2024 was Romanian citizens (3.1 million or 22% of the 13.9 million EU citizens living in another EU country as non-nationals), followed by Italian and Polish citizens (both 1.5 million or 11%).

### Citizenship

According to [Eurostat](#), in 2023, EU countries granted citizenship to over 1.1 million people who had their usual residence on EU territory, an increase of 6.1% compared with 2022.

Most of the new citizenships were granted by:

- ◆ Spain (240 200; 22.9% of the EU total),
- ◆ Italy (213 600; 20.3% of the EU total),
- ◆ Germany (199 800; 19.0%),
- ◆ France (97 300; 9.3%),
- ◆ Sweden (67 800; 6.5%).

In 2023, Syrians, Moroccans and Albanians remained in the top 3 recipients of EU country citizenship.

### Erasmus and Erasmus+

According to [Erasmus-plus](#), from 1987 to 2013, around 7.1 million people took part in the Erasmus programme. Between 2014 and 2023 alone, another 8.5 million benefited from an Erasmus experience.



## Challenges and controversies

### ◆ Unequal access to rights

Not all EU citizens are fully aware of their rights, or they face administrative and language barriers when exercising them. There is an argument that EU citizenship benefits mainly those who are mobile or better educated. This is why the EU Citizenship Report from 2020 focuses on raising awareness of rights through information campaigns like “Your Europe” portal. At the same time, the EU tries to simplify online tools and multilingual services, for example, EURES or European Digital ID.

### ◆ Social and economic inequalities

Labour mobility can create “brain drain” in some countries. It means that skilled workers leaving Eastern EU states for Western states leading to economic imbalances and slower development of poorer regions. Because of it, the EU Cohesion Policy Funds Support job creation and development in less-developed regions and investment in training to balance skills across the EU.

### ◆ Democratic participation gap

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.

### ◆ Migration & non-EU citizens

Distinguishing between rights for EU citizens vs. third-country nationals often sparks a controversy, especially during refugee or migration crises which leads to wide debate: Should EU citizenship evolve into a broader “residency-based” concept or remain tied strictly to nationality of member states or how to reform asylum and migration policies ensuring fairness while protecting EU labour markets and social cohesion.



### ◆ Brexit & EU citizenship

Brexit showed how EU citizenship rights can be lost when a member state exits. Raised questions about whether EU citizenship should be permanent and independent of national membership.

### ◆ Housing crisis

Europe is grappling with a deepening housing crisis that disproportionately affects low-income households and renters. Housing Affordability: In many European countries, a growing number of households spend over 40% of their disposable income on housing costs - a threshold known as "housing cost overburden".



## Further reading and resources

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