

EUROVOICES: USING EMPIRICAL DATA TO DIAGNOSE GAPS IN JUSTICE AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS IN THE EU

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Abstract: Ensuring justice, inclusion, and non-discrimination requires not only robust legal frameworks but also a clear understanding of how these concepts are experienced by people in their everyday lives. This article examines the extent to which human dignity is protected and operationalized across EU Member States using empirical data from EUROVOICES, a large-scale initiative led by the World Justice Project, which measures people's experiences and perceptions with the rule of law through surveys conducted among the general population and legal experts. The article focuses on key dimensions that form the practical conditions of human dignity: fundamental rights and civic space; equality and non-discrimination; and access to justice.

Key words: survey data, rule of law, fundamental rights, human dignity, justice

1. Introduction

Human dignity is both a fundamental right and essential to the functioning of a democratic society and to upholding the rule of law (European Union, 2007). While these concepts are embedded in international and constitutional texts, recognition alone is not sufficient. They must also be operational in people's daily lives. The question guiding this article is: to what extent do people across the European Union (EU) experience, in practice, the institutional guarantees of human dignity that are promised in law?

Ensuring human dignity requires not only robust legal frameworks but also a clear understanding of how it is experienced by individuals in their everyday lives. To this avail, this paper will explore findings from EUROVOICES, a large-scale data initiative conducted by the World Justice Project (WJP), which captures people's experiences and perceptions of the broader state of rule of law across the 27 EU Member States. By integrating expert assessments and representative household surveys, EUROVOICES

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provides a people-centred perspective that complements traditional legal analysis. Its results offer a unique diagnostic tool for identifying where legal protections function effectively and where they fail to secure human dignity in practice.

Integrating a people-centred perspective into legal and policy assessments is key for advancing justice, fostering inclusion, and meaningfully safeguarding human dignity in the EU. By grounding reform in the realities of those the law seeks to protect, institutions can better identify where protections are falling short, and how to improve them.

1.1. Human dignity and the rule of Law in a changing world

Human dignity is recognized as an inviolable and inherent right in major international treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Civil and Political Right and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. Within the EU, Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) enshrines dignity alongside democracy, equality, human rights, and the rule of law as a foundational value.

Although there is no single, uniform interpretation, three core features of dignity remain constant. First, human dignity expresses the inherent worth of every person simply by virtue of being human. It is neither granted by the state nor earned through conduct (Dupré, 2024). Second, according to the Council of Europe, dignity has a relational dimension. It structures how individuals treat one another in society, requiring equal concern, reciprocal respect, and mutual recognition. Thus understood, dignity is both individual and social. Third, in today's technological and geopolitical environment, dignity also safeguards individual autonomy and agency. People must retain the capacity for self-determination, including the ability to make free and informed choices, to understand and contest how developments affect their lives, and to live without coercion, manipulation, or other forms of dehumanization (Council of Europe, 2024). When upheld, dignity ensures that each person's inherent value and worth are respected, regardless of background, characteristics, or circumstances. It likewise pertains to the equal and inclusive manner in which all people should be treated (Council of Europe, 2024).

The rule of law is the primary mechanism through which human dignity becomes enforceable (Venice Commission, 2011). According to the Venice Commission (2016), it constrains arbitrariness through checks and balances, secures equality before the law, protects fundamental rights and freedoms, and provides effective remedies when preconditions of dignity are violated. When the rule of law weakens, human dignity is the first to suffer. People lose the means to defend themselves against discrimination or violence, and the legal order ceases to protect the vulnerable, allowing political or economic power to prevail unchecked.

It is within this relationship between dignity and the rule of law that this analysis draws on findings from EUROVOICES. By examining how the rule of law is experienced rather than merely proclaimed, EUROVOICES provides empirical evidence of where these safeguards hold and where they fall short across the 27 EU Member States. The indicators selected for the following analysis represent practical preconditions for the

enjoyment of human dignity. The next section describes the EUROVOICES methodology on which these findings are based.

2. EUROVOICES: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

EUROVOICES is a large-scale data initiative conducted by WJP to measure people's perceptions and experiences of the rule of law in practice, including key aspects of democratic governance and justice across the 27 EU Member States. It draws upon more than 8,000 survey responses from local and independent legal experts, as well as over 64,000 regionally representative household surveys. This exercise builds upon WJP's experience assessing the rule of law in more than 140 countries through the *WJP Rule of Law Index*, with an expanded framework adapted to reflect the EU context.

2.1. Conceptual framework

EUROVOICES features dozens of people-centered indicators organized into ten pillars: (1) checks on government powers, (2) government respect for checks on power, (3) civic participation, (4) fundamental rights, (5) civil justice, (6) criminal justice, (7) safety, (8) control of corruption, (9) transparency and access to information, and (10) administrative proceedings, regulatory enforcement, and property rights. They assess outcomes and effectiveness as experienced by individuals, instead of what laws say or how institutions are organized on paper (WJP, 2024). Figure 1 displays the 10 pillars and 51 sub-pillars of EUROVOICES.

EUROVOICES is based on WJP's four principles definition of the rule of law: accountability; laws that are clear, public, stable, and rights-protective; fair and accessible lawmaking and enforcement; and timely justice by competent, independent, and impartial institutions. This definition guides the adaptation of these people-centered indicators for the EU context.

During the conceptual design phase, WJP researchers conducted an extensive literature review process and held consultations with representatives from international organizations, academic institutions, EU agencies, and civil society organizations. The team then drafted questionnaires for legal experts and the general public.

The following table lists the 10 pillars and 51 sub-pillars measured in EUROVOICES.

1. Checks on government powers 1.1. Legislative oversight 1.2. Judicial independence 1.3. Independent oversight 1.4. Independent prosecution 1.5. Free, fair, and secure elections 1.6. Non-governmental checks	2.2. Government respect for judicial independence 2.3. Government respect for independent oversight 2.4. Government respect for independent prosecution 2.5. Government respect for the electoral system 2.6. Government respect for civil liberties
2. Government respect for checks on power 2.1. Government respect for the constitution and political opponents	

Fig. 1. *The pillars and subpillars measured in EUROVOICES*

2.7. Data Collection and Data Analysis

EUROVOICES uses two original sources of information collected in 2024: surveys conducted among local and independent legal experts (“Expert Scorecard”) and regionally representative household surveys (“People’s Voices”). The expert surveys were administered online in 12 languages to qualified legal practitioners across the EU. WJP reached these legal practitioners through partnerships with bar associations, universities, law firms, and civil society organizations, and vetted each respondent for expertise in civil law, civil liberties, commercial law, constitutional law, criminal law, or labor law. In total, the team obtained 8,042 expert survey responses. The household surveys were

administered to a representative sample of 64,089 people across the EU. The poll was conducted either face-to-face (in 10 countries) or online (in 17 countries) by leading polling companies in the EU. The survey was translated into more than 20 languages.

These surveys were conducted throughout 110 subnational regions, which correspond to the EU's Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) system, at either the NUTS1 or NUTS2 level, depending on the country. For transparency and reuse, EUROVOICES published questionnaires, expert counts by country, and polling/sample details, together with a variable map linking survey questions to each indicator online.

The WJP team employed several strategies to ensure the robustness of results, such as cross-validation with trusted third-party sources, an AI-assisted review of news articles, a comprehensive review of official documents and reports published by peer organizations, and semi-structured interviews with experts. EUROVOICES presents aggregated expert assessments on a standard 0-1 scale separately from question-level population results (percentages). This improves clarity and usability by providing two complementary perspectives on how the rule of law functions in practice. Together, these sources enable coherent sub-national mapping of rule of law variation across the EU.

By systematically capturing both expert evaluations and the voices of ordinary people, EUROVOICES provides a diagnostic tool that can inform evidence-based policy reform at both national and EU levels. It identifies where rights are strong on paper but weak in practice, and where institutional integrity and public trust require renewed attention. The next section summarizes the most relevant EU-wide findings from this approach.

3. From Guarantees to Lived Reality: EU-Wide Findings

Human dignity is upheld when individuals enjoy equal treatment without discrimination, can freely speak and assemble, have access to reliable information, are protected from arbitrary power, and have access to timely, affordable, and impartial justice. These conditions are also core elements of the rule of law landscape evaluated by EUROVOICES. This section examines the extent to which those conditions are secured in practice across the EU. Using EUROVOICES indicators, it assesses whether formal guarantees are translated into daily life. Taken together, the results provide a people-centred diagnostic of strengths and gaps across the EU Member States, identifying regional patterns, pockets of resilience, and areas where the conditions for dignity are at risk. Figure 2 presents data for selected indicators, noting whether it refers to data from expert surveys ("Expert Data") or household surveys ("People's Voices").

Panel A includes selected indicators from WJP's expert surveys in the EU. These scores range between 0 and 1, with 1 being the highest possible score. Panel B includes selected indicators from WJP's household surveys in the EU, presented as percentages.

Panel A. EUROVOICES, Expert Scorecard (scales 0-1), Selected Indicators

Country	Freedom of opinion and expression	Freedom of assembly and association	Equality before the law	Accessible, appropriate, and timely dispute resolution
EU average	0.70	0.75	0.71	0.49
Austria	0.74	0.77	0.77	0.58
Belgium	0.73	0.73	0.73	0.59
Bulgaria	0.54	0.62	0.63	0.49
Croatia	0.55	0.65	0.59	0.44
Cyprus	0.59	0.65	0.66	0.41
Czechia	0.81	0.84	0.75	0.50
Denmark	0.87	0.90	0.82	0.55
Estonia	0.84	0.88	0.88	0.64
Finland	0.90	0.87	0.86	0.54
France	0.65	0.72	0.64	0.43
Germany	0.84	0.83	0.78	0.56
Greece	0.57	0.71	0.62	0.40
Hungary	0.41	0.58	0.59	0.44
Ireland	0.85	0.87	0.70	0.54
Italy	0.63	0.69	0.61	0.42
Latvia	0.72	0.72	0.73	0.56
Lithuania	0.72	0.68	0.76	0.69
Luxembourg	0.78	0.83	0.75	0.55
Malta	0.65	0.71	0.61	0.41
Netherlands	0.86	0.85	0.75	0.57
Poland	0.59	0.67	0.59	0.38
Portugal	0.75	0.81	0.65	0.42
Romania	0.61	0.68	0.65	0.40
Slovakia	0.65	0.75	0.68	0.42
Slovenia	0.66	0.69	0.77	0.51
Spain	0.67	0.77	0.70	0.43
Sweden	0.84	0.85	0.79	0.57

Source: WJP EUROVOICES 2024

Panel B. EUROVOICES, People's Voices, Selected Indicators

Country	Freedom to participate in peaceful protests	Freedom to express opinions against the gov.	Freedom of media to expose cases of corruption	Freedom of CSOs to criticize gov. policies	Use of misinformation to shape public opinion	Attacks on media and civil society	Experiences of discrimination	Equality and fair treatment in the civil justice system
EU avg.	69.2%	70.9%	53.1%	57.9%	62.0%	54.6%	35.6%	36.7%
Austria	75.4%	75.3%	54.2%	63.1%	67.6%	54.7%	52.0%	36.9%
Belgium	75.4%	73.0%	58.3%	65.1%	53.0%	38.6%	44.6%	33.6%
Bulgaria	71.7%	75.8%	46.9%	57.4%	74.0%	65.1%	10.5%	24.3%
Croatia	68.3%	59.5%	46.2%	49.9%	73.8%	73.4%	33.4%	24.0%
Cyprus	64.3%	63.1%	45.3%	51.6%	79.0%	65.4%	32.4%	23.1%
Czechia	68.6%	63.2%	49.8%	50.7%	58.3%	58.3%	53.0%	31.4%
Denmark	82.7%	86.1%	74.0%	81.6%	40.5%	29.9%	41.4%	62.2%
Estonia	66.4%	73.4%	57.6%	56.7%	60.4%	50.6%	38.3%	36.4%
Finland	84.2%	82.9%	69.9%	73.8%	46.6%	41.5%	40.8%	53.0%
France	62.2%	69.1%	46.8%	48.8%	59.9%	58.8%	37.0%	34.0%
Germany	69.8%	71.2%	57.2%	62.4%	50.0%	38.4%	47.1%	44.0%
Greece	66.4%	70.5%	37.3%	49.3%	76.0%	72.9%	14.4%	43.5%
Hungary	45.7%	43.0%	28.7%	32.8%	70.5%	66.1%	58.0%	26.2%
Ireland	74.3%	80.1%	53.2%	66.5%	57.5%	49.4%	46.2%	36.1%
Italy	52.6%	64.5%	44.4%	56.9%	65.0%	58.4%	35.9%	29.7%
Latvia	65.8%	64.0%	47.1%	51.8%	61.7%	53.5%	23.3%	37.6%
Lithuania	72.8%	64.5%	52.4%	54.6%	59.8%	48.2%	24.9%	32.1%
Lux.	77.5%	73.7%	41.8%	50.5%	37.6%	26.9%	40.2%	52.2%
Malta	76.4%	75.4%	49.3%	53.6%	64.9%	68.5%	26.2%	34.0%
Nether.	78.4%	82.2%	68.3%	72.5%	44.9%	33.5%	43.7%	54.3%
Poland	64.8%	65.3%	59.7%	64.7%	64.1%	62.9%	14.8%	47.1%
Portugal	74.3%	81.4%	73.2%	69.3%	68.8%	53.7%	10.4%	41.1%
Romania	70.1%	75.1%	65.1%	67.8%	76.0%	71.5%	16.7%	42.8%
Slovakia	67.8%	69.7%	43.7%	45.8%	65.7%	64.2%	50.5%	21.3%
Slovenia	59.6%	62.4%	46.0%	45.6%	72.2%	65.1%	42.9%	20.5%
Spain	59.9%	65.5%	49.8%	54.5%	73.8%	66.4%	43.3%	29.2%
Sweden	74.4%	84.4%	67.3%	66.9%	51.9%	38.8%	39.0%	41.6%

Source: WJP EUROVOICES 2024

Fig. 2. Selected data from WJP EUROVOICES 2024

3.1. Fundamental Rights, Freedoms, and Civic Space

Freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of assembly and association are among the key means by which human dignity is exercised in public life. These rights enable public debate, allow individuals to question authority, and ensure accountability. Yet protection of these freedoms varies across the EU, with Hungary consistently showing the greatest challenges in these areas, both according to legal experts and to the general population. These freedoms are not abstract entitlements. They are the conditions through which human dignity finds collective expression. The ability to speak one's mind, to assemble with others, and to engage freely in public life transforms dignity from a moral principle into a lived reality.

The expert indicator for *freedom of opinion and expression* has an average of 0.70 across the 27 EU Member States, on a scale of 0 to 1. This indicator evaluates the right of all people to express their opinions without censorship, including the media and civil society organizations (CSOs). Finland (0.90) and Denmark (0.87) have the highest scores, while Hungary (0.41) and Bulgaria (0.54) have the lowest scores. Similarly, the expert indicator for *freedom of assembly and association* has an average of 0.75 across the EU. This indicator examines the right of all people to organize, debate, and demonstrate collectively, as well as the right to assemble and form associations without unjustified government obstacles. Denmark (0.90) and Estonia (0.88) have the highest scores, while Hungary (0.58) and Bulgaria (0.62) present the lowest scores.

Public perceptions mirror this trend. In 26 EU countries, the majority of respondents from the general population think that *people can freely participate in peaceful protests* and believe that *people can freely express opinions against the government*, with Hungary being the only country where fewer than half of the population believe so.

Regarding freedom of the media, in 14 EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain) fewer than half of respondents think that the *media can freely expose cases of corruption by high-ranking government officers without fear of retaliation*. Findings from the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) 2025 validate these findings, revealing deteriorating conditions for journalists in several EU countries, including physical threats and online harassment and surveillance. In fact, the MPM 2025 categorizes 13 EU countries as having medium-high and high risk for the state of media pluralism and safety of journalists across Europe (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2025).

Across the EU, people also identify challenges regarding the civil society environment. In six EU countries, fewer than half of the population believe *CSOs can freely express opinions against government policies and actions without fear of retaliation* (Croatia, France, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia). This pattern aligns with the analysis in the European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report, which notes that although "most Member States continue to ensure an enabling and supportive framework for civil society", there are "increasing challenges for civil society, with new legal restrictions,

insufficient funding or physical and verbal attacks" in some countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia (European Commission, 2025).

These challenges are particularly troublesome in the information environment. In 23 EU Member States, the majority of respondents believe that *top government officials use misinformation to shape public opinion in their favor* (in eight countries, this proportion is higher than 70%), or where more than half of respondents across 18 EU countries think that *top government officials attack or discredit the media and civil society organizations that criticize them*, according to EUROVOICES data. When public discourse is distorted by misinformation or intimidation, individuals lose the capacity for autonomous judgment. In such conditions, human dignity is undermined, for it depends on access to reliable and truthful information as the foundation of freedom and equality in public life.

3.2. Equality and Non-Discrimination

The average score for the expert indicator of *equality before the law*, which measures whether all people enjoy the same legal and political rights and access to public services, is 0.71 across the 27 EU Member States. No country obtained a perfect score. Top performers include Estonia (0.88) and Finland (0.86), while Croatia, Hungary, and Poland (all 0.59) had the lowest scores. Furthermore, in 22 Member States, more than 20% of respondents reported experiencing *discrimination or harassment* in the last 12 months, mostly due to age and political opinion.

These findings echo results from the most recent Eurobarometer on Discrimination (2023), where more than one in five respondents say they have personally felt discriminated against or experienced harassment in the past 12 months (an increase of 4 percentage points since 2019), and that the most common forms of discrimination were age, gender, and political opinions. While formal guarantees for equality and non-discrimination exist in the EU, the findings highlighted above point to potential deficiencies in their implementation in practice.

3.3. Access to Justice

Access to justice represents a practical test of dignity in the EU. Rights have substance only if individuals can obtain remedies that are affordable, timely, and impartial when they need them. The expert indicator for *accessible, appropriate, and timely dispute resolution* averages 0.49 across the 27 EU Member States (country-level scores range from 0.64 in Estonia to 0.38 in Poland). This indicator captures whether state and alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms are available to all people regardless of socioeconomic status, responsive to different types of problems, and free of unreasonable delays. EUROVOICES data also shows a gap between expert assessments and public experience. In 20 Member States, fewer than half of public respondents

believe legal aid is accessible; in 26 (all but Malta), fewer than half say people can afford the costs of state dispute-resolution mechanisms when facing legal problems. Only four EU countries have a public majority who think that *all parties are treated equally and fairly within the civil justice system of their country*. A similar pattern is seen in criminal justice. Expert scores are moderate for adjudication (0.63) and investigation (0.60), yet fewer than 53% of people across the EU agree that the criminal justice system handles cases promptly and efficiently.

From this, two considerations follow. First, the findings highlight shortcomings in both the design of justice mechanisms and their implementation. Legal frameworks exist, but they often fail to ensure that procedures are affordable, timely, and applied equally. Reforms that simplify procedures, enforce strict time limits, and expand means-tested assistance can turn rights into effective remedies. Second, regional consistency is essential, as uneven performance across the EU Member States undermines the equal protections intended by the EU legal framework. When proceedings are delayed, inaccessible, or perceived as unequal, the justice system fails to fully achieve its mission of giving real effect to personal dignity through effective redress (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, Article 47).

4. Conclusion

Human dignity and the rule of law are mutually reinforcing. Human dignity serves as the moral foundation of law, while the rule of law gives dignity its institutional form. By translating the moral imperative of dignity into enforceable guarantees, the rule of law restrains arbitrariness through checks and balances, ensures equality before the law, protects fundamental rights, and provides effective remedies when dignity is violated. Drawing on EUROVOICES data, which is based on responses from more than 64,000 individuals and 8,000 legal experts across the EU, this article examines how this relationship functions in practice. It explores to what extent people experience, in their daily lives, the legal protections that give effect to human dignity.

Three groups of indicators were selected for this analysis (fundamental rights, freedoms and civic space, equality and non-discrimination, and access to justice) as they represent the practical preconditions for the enjoyment of human dignity.

Across these dimensions, the findings show the EU with strengths but uneven performance. Fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, association, and assembly, remain robust but face strain in some Member States. Where civil society and independent media are under pressure, these freedoms weaken. Equality before the law is guaranteed by constitutions but enforced inconsistently. Discrimination based on political opinion, ethnicity, and age is still common. Access to justice shows areas of opportunity too. Delays, costs, and unequal treatment erode trust and leave many without redress when dignity is violated.

The rule of law is Europe's main safeguard of human dignity. But its strength depends on implementation, not just legal texts. When checks and balances work, reliable information flows freely, participation matters, and justice is timely, human dignity thrives. When safeguards weaken, dignity suffers first. Without effective enforcement, dignity remains a promise without substance.

As the EU faces unprecedented challenges, the task is to renew, not reinvent, its core values. Human dignity must remain at the centre of law, policy, and governance. The credibility of the EU's rules-based order hinges on protected civic space and a free, plural press; on the equal enforcement of anti-discrimination norms; and on justice that is accessible and affordable. Embedding people-centered evidence such as EUROVOICES within monitoring and evaluation provides the basis for targeting reforms where risks are most acute.

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