European Charter of Fundamental Rights: five things you need to know

The 10th anniversary of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights was marked on 1 December. Here are five facts you should know about it:

What does the EU Charter stand for?

The European Charter of Fundamental Rights encompasses the ideals underpinning the EU: the universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity, which have created an area of freedom, security and justice for people based on the principles of democracy and the
When was the Charter established?

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was adopted in 1950, but the expansion of EU competences to policies which directly affect fundamental rights meant that EU values needed to be clearly defined. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights came into effect with the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009. It is legally binding in every EU member state.

The Lisbon Treaty extended the power of the European Parliament to co-legislate with member states in the Council to a raft of new areas including agriculture and security and also gave Parliament the power to elect the president of the European Commission. The treaty introduced the citizens’ initiative and set the maximum number of MEPs at 751.

Why do Europeans need the Charter?

The rights of EU citizens were established at different times, in different ways and in different forms in different countries. To meet changes in society, as well as social, scientific and technological developments, the EU decided to bring together all the personal, civic, political, economic and social rights of its people in a single document: the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

What rights does the EU charter guarantee?

The charter contains 54 articles that ensure the rights and freedoms of EU citizens in these areas:

- dignity
- freedoms
- equality
- solidarity
- citizens’ rights
- justice

The charter has been expanded to cover fundamental rights that go beyond just civil and social rights including:

- data protection
- guarantees on bioethics
- transparent administration
How does the Charter deal with new challenges?

Every year the European Commission publishes a report on how EU institutions and member states have been applying the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The European Parliament adopts its position on the fundamental rights in the EU in response to the Commission’s report. Among the rules adopted by the EU to protect fundamental rights are the General Data Protection Regulation.

Some of the new initiatives mentioned in the 2018 report are:

- EU protection of whistleblowers guaranteeing a high level of protection for whistleblowers who report breaches of EU law. The law was approved by the European Parliament and member states, and will enter into force in 2021.
- MEPs approved measures to promote free and fair elections in March 2019, introducing sanctions to European political parties if they misuse people's data during an election campaign.
- The Commission agreed a code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, with Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, Youtube and other digital companies.

Find out more
Press release
Fact sheet
European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights website
The agency’s role