

WJP 2025 Index Shows Sharp Acceleration of Global Rule-of-Law Decline

News

Anna Pingen

On 28 October 2025, the [World Justice Project released its latest Rule of Law Index 2025](#), warning that the global erosion of rule-of-law standards had deepened significantly over the past year. According to the new figures, more than two-thirds of the 143 countries assessed saw their scores fall in 2025, signalling the sharpest annual downturn since the Index was launched in 2009. For the eighth consecutive year, the rule of law has weakened in more countries than it has improved (68% declined vs. 32% improved).

WJP Executive Director [Alejandro Ponce stated](#) that the modest stabilisation seen in recent editions had reversed, with declines now outnumbering improvements by a wide margin. Countries that registered progress did so only marginally, while those backsliding experienced declines roughly twice as steep, underscoring how quickly institutional checks can be weakened once democratic safeguards come under strain.

How the Index measures rule of law

The WJP defines rule of law as a “durable system of laws, institutions, norms, and community commitment that delivers four universal principles: accountability, just law, open government, and accessible and impartial justice.”

The WJP Index is built on one of the world’s most extensive rule-of-law datasets, drawing on over 150,000 household surveys and more than 3400 expert assessments. Country performance is evaluated across 44 indicators grouped into eight globally comparable factors:

- Constraints on government powers;
- Absence of corruption;
- Open government;
- Fundamental rights;
- Order and security;
- Regulatory enforcement;
- Civil justice;
- Criminal justice.

These factors collectively make up the assessment of how power is limited, how corruption is prevented, how transparent and participatory government is, how rights are protected, how security is ensured, and whether civil and criminal justice systems function independently, impartially, and without undue delay.

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Authoritarian tendencies drive the downturn

The 2025 report attributes much of the global deterioration to the continued spread of authoritarian governance practices. Three areas of government accountability saw widespread weakening:

- Oversight institutions lost independence in a majority of states;
- Parliaments exercised less effective control over executives;
- The judiciary faced growing pressure that reduced its ability to restrain governments.

At the same time, civic space narrowed across most regions. Indicators capturing freedom of expression, assembly, and association as well as broader civic participation declined in over 70% of the countries assessed. The WJP notes that these freedoms are essential for democratic scrutiny and for enabling the public to hold those in power accountable.

Courts under increasing political pressure

Judicial independence – described as a critical barrier against executive overreach – also deteriorated. More than half of the assessed jurisdictions saw rising political interference in criminal and civil justice, longer delays, and fewer effective mechanisms for resolving disputes outside the courts. Taken together, these trends point to growing fragility in institutions traditionally relied upon to uphold legal certainty and individual rights.

Rule of Law in the EU: Deterioration with only a handful of exceptions

Among the top decliners globally from 2024 to 2025 were two European countries: Hungary and Slovakia. Poland stands out as an unusual case: despite remaining among the lower-performing EU Member States, it is simultaneously one of the fastest improvers in 2025, reflecting the first measurable effects of its judicial and institutional reforms after years of decline.

The 2025 WJP Rule of Law Index paints a sobering picture for the European Union. While the EU continues to host several of the world's highest-scoring democracies, the overall trend inside the Union mirrors the global rule-of-law recession: declines are widespread, improvements are rare, and structural weaknesses are deepening. Only five EU Member States registered improvements this year – Ireland (+0.4%), Poland (+0.4%), Estonia (+0.2%), Austria (+0.1%), and Lithuania (+0.1%).

The largest drops occurred not only in states with long-standing rule-of-law concerns but also in countries traditionally perceived as stable. Slovakia (–2.3%) and Hungary (–2.0%) recorded some of the sharpest declines in the region, followed by Slovenia (–0.9%), Greece (–0.8%), and the Netherlands (–0.7%), an unusually large fall for a consistently high-performing Western European state. Spain, Portugal, and Italy also posted notable decreases, while France and Germany experienced smaller but still negative shifts. Bulgaria and Romania continued their downward trajectories, with annual declines of –1.0% and –1.2% respectively.

The scoring results also confirm a persistent structural divide within the Union between high-performing Nordic/Western states and the countries of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Nevertheless, even the EU's strongest performers are not immune. Denmark (0.90), Finland (0.87), Sweden (0.85), Germany and Luxembourg (0.83), Ireland (0.82), and Estonia (0.82) remain global leaders, but several registered small declines – signalling that vulnerabilities are surfacing even within the bloc's traditionally robust rule-of-law systems.

Taken together, the 2025 data show that the EU is not insulated from the worldwide rule-of-law contraction. Declines are broad-based, stretching across regions and political families, and the index captures both entrenched weaknesses and emerging risks. With only a handful of modest improvers, the EU faces a dual

challenge: reversing deterioration in long-problematic systems while addressing early signs of erosion in those once considered resilient.

Rule of Law Report 2025 and the WJP 2025 Index

A comparison with the European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report (→ [eucrim 2/2025, 107-108](#)) – which likewise pointed to uneven reform trajectories across Member States; persistent shortcomings regarding judicial independence, anti-corruption frameworks, and civic space; and continued concerns over surveillance practices – suggests that the global trends captured by the WJP Index are also reflected within the EU. Both assessments underline that, despite sustained engagement and reform initiatives, rule-of-law vulnerabilities remain a structural challenge for a number of Member States.

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