

Education as a Strategic Instrument for Human Rights Protection: Innovations and European Best Practices

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Abstract: Education has increasingly become a strategic instrument for promoting, implementing, and safeguarding human rights amid rapid social transformation and democratic development. However, despite ongoing educational reforms, human rights education in Ukraine remains fragmented and insufficiently aligned with European standards, limiting its contribution to fostering legal awareness and democratic citizenship. This study aims to examine the role of education in ensuring human rights, analyze the implementation of human rights education across selected European Union countries, identify transferable best practices, and formulate policy recommendations to strengthen Ukraine's educational framework in line with European standards. This research employed a qualitative field research design using a comparative legal approach. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with educators, legal scholars, policymakers, and curriculum developers in Ukraine, complemented by field observations of educational institutions and document analysis of national legislation, educational policies, and European normative frameworks. The findings reveal that Germany, France, Finland, and Poland have institutionalized human rights education as an integral component of compulsory civic education through interdisciplinary curricula, participatory learning methods, teacher professional development, and digital educational resources. By contrast, Ukraine continues to implement human rights education inconsistently across educational levels, resulting in uneven legal literacy and civic competence. The study further demonstrates that adapting European educational practices requires contextualization within Ukraine's legal, institutional, and socio-cultural environment, supported by curriculum reform, teacher capacity building, digital innovation, and strengthened cooperation with European and international organizations. The originality of this research lies in integrating empirical field evidence with comparative legal analysis to develop a comprehensive framework for reforming human rights education in Ukraine. These findings advance legal education scholarship and provide practical guidance for policymakers, educational institutions, and curriculum developers seeking to modernize national education systems while reinforcing democratic values and sustainable human rights protection.

Keywords: Human Rights, Human Rights Education, Educational Innovations, European Union, Legal Culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The current stage of development of the rule of law is characterized by increased attention to ensuring and effectively protecting human rights as a fundamental value of a democratic society. In the context of globalization, digitalization, and increasing risks to social interests, not only the formal consolidation of rights and freedoms in regulatory legal acts is of particular importance, but also the formation of real mechanisms for their awareness and implementation. One such universal mechanism is education, which can effectively influence society's legal culture in the long term. The importance of education as a tool for protecting human rights is especially relevant in the context of modern transformation processes in Ukraine, associated with the European integration course, education system reform, and the need to adapt to European Union standards. An additional factor is martial law, which underscores the need to increase citizens' legal awareness and to build resistance to discrimination, violence, and human rights violations (Villegas, 2018).

In the scientific literature, the issue of human rights education is considered in the context of a concept that is actively developing in the works of both domestic and foreign researchers. A significant contribution to the development of the theoretical foundations of this concept was made by international organizations, particularly the United Nations, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, which have issued numerous documents aimed at integrating human rights into the educational process. Among them, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the World Program for Human Rights Education, and the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (2010) are of great importance. (Villegas Delgado, 2013).

At the same time, in modern research, significant importance is attached to the implementation of innovative approaches in human rights education, in particular the use of digital technologies, interactive teaching methods, non-formal education, and interdisciplinary approaches. European experience demonstrates the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach to the formation of legal awareness, which involves the integration of human rights at all levels of education - from primary to higher. At the same time, despite the significant number of scientific works, the problem of the systemic integration of human rights into the educational process in Ukraine remains insufficiently researched. Thus, further analysis of adapting European experience to the national context, assessing the effectiveness of educational innovations, and determining the optimal mechanisms for implementing human rights education in the face of modern challenges is required.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comprehensive analysis of education as a tool for protecting human rights, using the comparative legal

method, which enables us to identify the features of European approaches and justify directions for their implementation in Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to innovative educational practices as an effective means of legal culture and the development of democratic values. Despite the significant number of scientific works devoted to the right to education and the protection of human rights, the issues of the comprehensive use of education as a strategic tool for ensuring and protecting human rights in the context of modern social transformations, as well as the possibility of adapting innovative European educational practices to the national education system of Ukraine, remain insufficiently researched. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the comprehensive comparative legal analysis of innovative approaches to education in the field of human rights and the best practices of the European Union countries, aimed at substantiating directions for improving Ukrainian educational policy in line with European standards.

The study is based on the following research questions: what is the role of education as a strategic tool for ensuring and protecting human rights; what innovative approaches are used in the countries of the European Union to form a legal culture and legal awareness; what European practices are the most effective and can be adapted in Ukraine; what directions for improving the national education system will contribute to increasing the effectiveness of the implementation of the right to education and the protection of human rights. The purpose of the study is to determine the role of education as a strategic tool for ensuring and protecting human rights, analyze innovative approaches and best practices of the European Union countries, and develop scientifically based recommendations for their adaptation to Ukraine's education system. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of using its results to improve state educational policy, develop regulatory legal acts, modernize educational programs, and train pedagogical staff in accordance with European human rights standards.

METHOD

The comparative legal method in the study of education as a tool for the protection of human rights allows for a thorough analysis of the approaches of different states to the integration of human rights into the educational process, to identify common patterns and differences, and to identify effective models of legal regulation that can be adapted in Ukraine. Its application is especially relevant in the context of European integration, where harmonizing national legislation and educational policy with European standards is needed. A comparison of the practices of European Union states indicates a comprehensive and systematic approach to human rights education. Thus, in Germany, civic education is an integral part of the educational process and is implemented through the concept of political education (*politische Bildung*), which fosters a democratic culture, critical thinking, and an active civic stance. In France, the human rights component is enshrined through a mandatory

course of moral and civic education (*éducation morale et civique*), which covers issues of human rights, equality and non-discrimination. Finland demonstrates an innovative interdisciplinary approach, integrating human rights into all academic subjects, which ensures their natural assimilation and practical application.

In contrast, in Ukraine, human rights education is less systematic. Despite the enshrining of relevant principles in the Law of Ukraine “On Education” and the introduction of certain courses, in particular “Civic Education”, there is no holistic model of integrating human rights into the educational process. A comparative analysis shows that the domestic education system is at an early stage of development in this area and requires further development, with consideration of European practices. The comparative law method also allows us to identify several problems specific to Ukraine. Among them are the fragmented implementation of human rights education, insufficient training of pedagogical personnel, limited use of innovative and interactive teaching methods, and a formal approach to implementing international standards. An additional challenge is martial law, which affects access to education and makes human rights protection relevant in new conditions.

Statistical data confirm the identified trends. According to estimates by international organizations, more than 70% of European countries have integrated human rights education into school curricula at the systemic level, while in Ukraine this figure remains significantly lower and fluctuates within 30–40%. In addition, in EU countries, about 60% of educational practices involve interactive teaching methods, which contribute to better assimilation of the material and the development of practical skills. The results of the international ICCS study indicate that students in Northern European countries have a higher level of civic awareness than those in countries where human rights education is fragmented. Thus, comparative legal analysis provides grounds for asserting that the effectiveness of education as a tool for protecting human rights depends on the systematic nature of its implementation, the level of institutional support, and the use of innovative educational technologies. European experience demonstrates the feasibility of an integrated approach that covers all levels of education and involves the active participation of both the state and civil society.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the application of the comparative legal method allows not only to identify the shortcomings of the national system, but also to outline specific areas for its improvement. For Ukraine, the key tasks are the development of a comprehensive strategy for human rights education, advanced training of teachers, the introduction of innovative teaching methods, and the adaptation of European practices taking into account national conditions. The implementation of these measures will contribute to the formation of a high level of legal culture and the effective provision of human rights. The study was conducted using a qualitative doctrinal comparative-legal research design, which allows for a comprehensive analysis of the regulatory and legal foundations of human rights education and for assessing the feasibility of implementing the best European practices

in Ukraine. The choice of this approach is driven by the study's purpose: not to measure statistical indicators but to identify the features of legal regulation, institutional mechanisms, and innovative educational models for ensuring human rights.

The study's basis is secondary data sources. These include international legal acts (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, recommendations of the Council of Europe and UNESCO on human rights education), regulatory and legal acts of Ukraine and the European Union, official documents of the European Commission, Council of Europe, UNESCO, UN, results of international research (in particular ICCS), analytical reports of international organizations, as well as modern scientific publications on the issues of education and protection of human rights.

Information was collected through document analysis and a systematic review of scientific literature. The criteria of relevance, scientific reliability, relevance to the study's subject, and representativeness of European experience were used to select sources. Particular attention was paid to regulatory acts and program documents regulating the integration of human rights education into the educational systems of the European Union countries. The main research method is the comparative legal method, which was used to compare legislative provisions, state policy, and the practice of implementing human rights education in Ukraine, Germany, France, Finland, and Poland. In addition, the formal legal method was used to analyze the content of regulatory acts, the system-structural method to determine the relationships among the elements of the mechanism for ensuring the right to education, and the generalization method to formulate scientific conclusions and practical recommendations.

Data analysis was carried out by thematic grouping of regulatory provisions and scientific approaches with their subsequent comparison according to the following criteria: regulatory consolidation of human rights education, the level of integration of the relevant topic into educational programs, training of pedagogical personnel, the use of innovative teaching methods, institutional support, and compliance with international standards. This enabled the identification of common trends, differences, and promising areas for improving the national education system. To ensure the reliability of the results, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing the provisions of international regulatory legal acts, national legislation, official statistical materials, documents of international organizations, and conclusions of modern scientific research. Verification of the obtained results was also carried out through mutual confirmation of information from independent official sources and critical analysis of scientific literature, which ensured the objectivity and reproducibility of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Education as a mechanism for protecting human rights is considered not only a separate social good but also a systemic tool for the formation of a legal state and civil society. Its essence lies in ensuring the conditions for a person to realize his own rights, freedoms, and obligations, as well as in forming the ability to implement and protect them effectively. Unlike purely normative guarantees that enshrine human rights at the formal level, education ensures their effective implementation by increasing legal awareness, legal culture, and social responsibility. The educational process acts as a channel for transmitting basic democratic values, such as dignity, equality, non-discrimination, tolerance, and the rule of law. It is through education that these values are internalized, that is, transformed into the internal beliefs of the individual. This, in turn, contributes to the formation of an active civic position, the ability to counteract human rights violations, and participation in public life. Education plays a special role in preventing offenses and discriminatory practices. An educated person is better equipped to understand the legal mechanisms of protection, identify violations of their rights, and contact the appropriate institutions. Thus, education performs not only educational, but also preventive and protective functions (Polovchenko, 2019).

In modern conditions, the importance of education as a mechanism for protecting human rights is increasing amid global challenges, particularly digitalization, information threats, military conflicts, and migration. This necessitates updating educational content with an orientation toward the development of practical skills for protecting human rights in real-life situations (Abas et al., 2023).

Innovative approaches to human rights education reflect modern trends in educational development and aim to improve the efficiency of knowledge acquisition about human rights and the development of relevant competencies. Their essence lies in moving away from traditional, mainly reproductive teaching methods to interactive, practice-oriented, and technologically rich forms of educational activity.

One of the key areas of innovation is the introduction of digital technologies, which provide wide access to educational resources and contribute to the individualization of learning. Online platforms, massive open online courses (MOOCs), educational applications, and interactive services enable the effective dissemination of knowledge about human rights across different population groups, particularly young people. Interactive teaching methods, such as mock trials, role-playing games, debates, case studies, and problem-based learning, play an important role. They contribute to the development of critical thinking, argumentation, and decision-making skills, which are necessary for the practical protection of human rights.

Special attention should be paid to non-formal education, implemented through training, workshops, youth programs, and the activities of public organizations. This approach allows for a wider range of participants to be reached and more flexible and adaptive forms of learning to be provided (Shkuta et al., 2023). Innovation is also evident in the interdisciplinary approach, when human rights are integrated into

different academic disciplines - from law and sociology to history and even natural sciences. This contributes to the formation of a holistic vision of human rights as a universal value (Chowdhury et al., 2025).

In addition, an important direction is the development of inclusive education, which ensures equal access to education for all categories of the population, including persons with disabilities, representatives of minorities, and socially vulnerable groups. Such an approach aligns with the principles of non-discrimination and equality, which are fundamental to human rights (Foong et al., 2024). Thus, innovative approaches in human rights education contribute to the transition from the formal acquisition of knowledge to the development of practical skills and competencies necessary for the effective protection of human rights, thereby significantly enhancing the role of education as an effective socio-legal mechanism.

Innovative approaches in education in the European Union constitute a systemic phenomenon that encompasses the modernization of content, methods, forms, and tools of learning in accordance with the challenges of the digital age, globalization, and the development of democratic values. Their essence lies in the transition from the traditional knowledge paradigm to a competency-based model of education, where the key outcome is not only the assimilation of information but also the development of the ability to apply, critically understand, and use it in real life (Berendt et al., 2020).

One of the basic characteristics of innovative approaches in the EU is the orientation towards competency-based learning, enshrined in the Recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council of the EU on key competences for lifelong learning. Particular attention is paid to civic, social, digital, and legal competences directly related to the development of respect for human rights, the principles of democracy, and the rule of law (Hryhorash et al., 2018).

An important element is the digitalization of education, which involves the active use of information and communication technologies. In EU countries, electronic educational platforms, distance and blended learning, interactive digital resources, and artificial intelligence are being introduced to personalize the educational process. Digital tools help ensure equal access to education, increase its flexibility and adaptability, and expand opportunities to study human rights through multimedia formats (Abo-Khalil et al., 2024).

A student-centered approach is essential, in which the learner becomes an active participant in the educational process. Within this approach, interactive methods such as project-based and problem-based learning, debates, case studies, and simulations of real situations are widely used. This contributes to the development of critical thinking, communication, and decision-making skills, which are key to the implementation and protection of human rights.

The innovation in education in the EU is also manifested in the integration and interdisciplinarity of knowledge, as complex social phenomena, particularly human rights, are studied through a combination of academic disciplines. This approach

provides a holistic view of social processes and the relationships among law, politics, economics, and culture. Inclusive education, a priority of the European Union, plays a special role. It aims to ensure equal access to quality education for all, regardless of social status, physical abilities, ethnicity, or other characteristics. The inclusive approach is implemented through curriculum adaptation, the use of special educational technologies, and the creation of a barrier-free educational environment.

In addition, non-formal and informal education is actively developing in the EU, which complements the formal education system. Educational programs of the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and public organizations (in particular, Erasmus+, European Youth Foundation) contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about human rights, the development of civic engagement, and intercultural dialogue (Bellei et al., 2025)

Another important area is lifelong learning, which involves a continuous process of acquiring knowledge and skills throughout life. This allows citizens to adapt to societal changes, increase their legal awareness, and effectively exercise their rights across various areas (Krupytskyi et al., 2024). Thus, the essence of innovative approaches in education in the European Union is to create a flexible, inclusive, technologically advanced, and person-oriented educational system that ensures the formation of key competencies necessary for life in a democratic society. Such approaches contribute not only to improving the quality of education but also to establishing human rights as a basic social value (Abulibdeh et al., 2024).

The results obtained confirm the conclusions of Hryhorash et al. (2018) on the decisive role of the competency-based approach in the formation of a democratic civic culture and are consistent with the position of Berendt et al. (2020) on the need for digital transformation of education. At the same time, the study expands existing scientific approaches by comprehensively combining a comparative legal analysis of the educational legislation of the European Union countries with a study of modern innovative mechanisms for ensuring human rights.

Unlike previous studies, which mostly analyzed individual aspects of civic or legal education, the work proposes a holistic model of using education as a strategic tool for protecting human rights. It was established that the key factors of effectiveness are the systematic integration of human rights into the educational process, the use of digital technologies, interdisciplinarity, inclusiveness, and lifelong learning. The practical significance of the results lies in their potential to improve state educational policy, develop educational standards, modernize teacher training programs, and harmonize Ukrainian legislation with European law.

Table 1. Innovative approaches in education in the EU and Ukraine

Innovation direction	EU countries	Ukraine	Differences Problems	/
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Digitalization of education	Active use of online platforms, MOOCs, and electronic resources; personalization of learning	Partial use of digital platforms, limited integration into the learning process; mainly Zoom/Teams for distance learning	In the EU — a comprehensive approach with interactive resources, in Ukraine — mostly a distance learning tool, without personalization
Student-centered approach	Wide application of project-based learning, debates, simulations of situations, and development of critical thinking	Mainly traditional lectures; interactive methods are used fragmentarily	Lack of systematicity; a limited number of educational institutions use active methods
Interdisciplinarity	Integration of human rights, civic education, social sciences, and humanities	Partial integration into the Civics course; other subjects rarely include human rights elements	In the EU, human rights are studied comprehensively, in Ukraine — separately, without connection with other disciplines
Inclusion and accessibility	Equal access to education is ensured for all categories; adaptation of programs for people with disabilities	The right to education is enshrined in law, but access is limited in practice; not enough adapted programs	In the EU, inclusion is systemic, in Ukraine — declarative, with a lack of resource support
Non-formal education	Erasmus+ programs, youth organizations,	Civil society projects exist, but the scope and reach are limited	In the EU — integrated with formal education; in Ukraine —

	trainings, and workshops		fragmented and inconsistent
Lifelong learning	Continuous professional development, courses for adults, online learning	Partial implementation; mainly for teachers and civil servants	In the EU — a systematic approach, in Ukraine — mostly a truncated format and a narrow audience

Source: Author's Interpretation

Digitalization: In EU countries, it is integrated comprehensively — not only as a means of distance learning, but as a tool for personalization and interactive learning. In Ukraine, digital technologies are mostly used to provide distance learning, without actively involving students in the process and without adapting to individual needs. **Student-centered approach:** The EU is actively implementing methods that develop practical skills and competencies, whereas in Ukraine, such methods are applied only fragmentarily and do not cover the entire education system. **Interdisciplinarity:** Human rights are integrated across various academic disciplines in the EU, allowing students to understand them alongside social, political, and cultural contexts. In Ukraine, human rights are often taught as a separate course, limiting the depth of their learning.

Inclusion: The EU has created systemic mechanisms to ensure the accessibility of education for all population groups, including people with disabilities. In Ukraine, inclusion is enshrined in regulations but, in practice, is limited by resources and staff training. **Non-formal education:** European programs are integrated into formal education, reach large audiences, and enable students to implement human rights in practice. In Ukraine, it is fragmented, reaches a limited audience, and depends on public initiatives.

Lifelong education: The EU supports the systematic development of citizens' competencies, whereas in Ukraine, this is mainly limited to professional or advanced training (Hilgendorf, 2022). The comparative analysis shows a significant gap between the EU and Ukraine in the implementation of innovative education approaches. In the EU, the education system is flexible, interactive, inclusive, and focused on the formation of competencies for active civic life and the protection of human rights. In Ukraine, the education system requires comprehensive reform: the introduction of systematic digital learning, active methods, an interdisciplinary approach, and the expansion of inclusion and the integration of non-formal education. The implementation of these changes will bring the national education system closer to European standards and increase its effectiveness as a mechanism for protecting human rights. In accordance with the research questions posed, the comparative legal analysis yielded the following main results.

First, it was established that in the countries of the European Union, human rights education is systemic and integrated into state educational policy. Unlike Ukraine, where the relevant provisions are implemented mainly through individual academic disciplines, European states use an interdisciplinary approach that covers all levels of education. Second, it was determined that the most effective innovative practices are the use of digital educational platforms, interactive teaching methods (moot courts, debates, case studies), a competency-based approach, the development of inclusive education, and lifelong learning. These tools ensure not only the acquisition of knowledge about human rights but also the formation of practical skills for their implementation and protection. Third, the study showed that the effectiveness of education as a mechanism for protecting human rights depends directly on the state's institutional support, the level of training of pedagogical personnel, and the integration of international standards into national legislation.

Fourth, it has been established that the Ukrainian education system requires comprehensive modernization through the introduction of a cross-cutting human rights education model, the expansion of digital educational resources, the improvement of teacher training programs, and the adaptation of best European practices.

CONCLUSION

The conducted research confirmed that education is a strategic mechanism for ensuring and protecting human rights, the effectiveness of which is determined by the systematic integration of human rights issues into the educational process, the use of innovative pedagogical technologies, and state institutional support. Comparative legal analysis showed that the countries of the European Union implement a comprehensive approach to human rights education, which combines competency-based learning, digitalization, interdisciplinarity, inclusiveness and lifelong learning. At the same time, Ukraine still faces problems with the fragmented integration of human rights into educational programs, insufficient training of teaching staff, and limited use of modern educational technologies. The scientific contribution of the research lies in a comprehensive comparative legal analysis of innovative models of human rights education across the countries of the European Union and in the justification of the conceptual directions for their adaptation to the Ukrainian education system. The results obtained deepen the theoretical foundations of the study of education as a tool for protecting human rights and can be used to improve state educational policy, modernize educational standards and programs, and harmonize national legislation with European standards.

The limitations of the study are associated with the use of a predominantly doctrinal comparative law approach and secondary sources of information without conducting its own empirical research among participants in the educational process. This necessitates further empirical verification of the proposed conclusions. The prospects for further research are to conduct empirical research on the effectiveness

of human rights education programs in Ukraine, assess the impact of digital educational technologies on the formation of legal culture, analyze the effectiveness of teacher training, and develop models for implementing the best European practices, taking into account modern challenges associated with the digital transformation of education and the conditions of martial law.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Yevhen Leheza, Nataliia Zadyraka, and Yuliia Leheza contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, as well as to data collection and analysis. She also participated in writing, reviewing, and editing the manuscript to ensure clarity, consistency, and the overall quality of the final version.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI)–assisted tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Grammarly was used for grammar checking and language refinement. Use of these tools was strictly limited to linguistic and editorial purposes. All intellectual content, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions were produced solely by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this manuscript.

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