

# Human-Centric Ethics: A Guiding Principle in the European Union's AI Act

## Benelux Plenary

Dr. Elif Biber

## Chambre des Députés

## Luxembourg

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In her address at the BENELUX Plenary on 21 March 2025, Dr. Elif Biber emphasized *human-centric ethics* as a foundational principle of the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act (AI-Act). She argued that understanding the societal impact of emerging technologies requires a structured philosophical and ethical approach, assessing technological novelty, anthropological implications, and the values at stake.

Dr. Biber highlighted the 2019 *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* by the EU High-Level Expert Group on AI, which define the role of ethics as:

1. Understanding unique features of technologies,
2. Guiding what ought to be done—not just what can be done,
3. Grounding ethical concerns in fundamental rights.

She stressed that human dignity and fundamental rights must remain central in AI development, especially in public sector applications involving privacy, surveillance, behavioral manipulation, opacity, and bias.

- **Privacy:** Surveillance has shifted from state to corporate and even individual actors.
- **Manipulation:** Tech giants exploit user data to influence behavior, threatening autonomy.
- **Opacity:** AI systems, especially those based on machine learning, often lack transparency—even for developers.
- **Bias:** Predictive policing and similar tools raise critical ethical red flags.

She noted a global rise in AI policy initiatives—over 450 identified by the Council of Europe—illustrating a growing consensus on AI governance rooted in human rights. Major institutions like the EU, OECD, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe contribute to this evolving soft law framework.

The EU, distinct from the market-driven U.S. and state-driven China, champions a *rights-driven, human-centric approach*. Key legal instruments such as the GDPR, Digital Services Act, and the AI Act reflect this ethos. The *European Declaration on Digital Rights and*

*Principles for the Digital Decade* enshrines the EU's commitment to putting people at the center of the digital transition.

The formal adoption of the AI-Act in 2024 marked a regulatory milestone, setting a comprehensive framework to govern AI systems while balancing innovation and rights protection. However, Dr. Biber pointed out a gap in how the EU's human-centric principles are applied to specific AI use cases.

To address this, she proposed three key recommendations:

1. **Legal:** Strengthen judicial interpretation and constitutional frameworks like "digital constitutionalism" to reinforce rights-based protections.
2. **Social:** Empower civil society and public awareness; only 40% of Europeans know they can contest automated decisions about them.
3. **Economic/Technological:** Foster innovation through collaborative models (e.g., Renaissance Florence), encouraging sustainable and interdisciplinary development.

Ultimately, human-centric AI enhances not only ethical legitimacy but also public trust and the "social license to operate." Dr. Biber concluded that the EU's approach is essential for aligning AI with human values and ensuring the digital realm serves—not overrides—human dignity.