POLICY BRIEF

The right to stay in the eyes of rural youth in Albania

Based on a consultation with around 100 young people from rural areas of Albania

Picture credits: Julvin Marku

Introduction

Across Europe, the right to stay in rural communities has become a central topic of discussion when addressing the depopulation of rural areas. The European Union (EU) Strategy on the Right to Stay, formally launched in May 2026 by the European Commission, represents a strong political commitment to ensure that all European citizens can remain and build their future in the place they call "home".[1]

Alongside it, the EU Strategy for Generational Renewal in Agriculture, adopted in October 2025, sets out an ambitious goal: to double the share of young farmers in the EU by 2040, from 12% to 24%.[2] It goes beyond agriculture alone, recognising that generational renewal depends on vibrant rural communities and on meaningful inclusion of young people in decisions about their territories. The strategy introduces a Starter Pack for Young Farmers, promotes zero interest credit instruments, Rural Youth Ambassador networks and calls on each Member State to prepare a national generational renewal plan in agriculture as part of its post 2027 programming.

Albania is not yet an EU Member State, but as a candidate country it is committed to aligning with the European framework of rural development policy and to pursuing European values. However, the concept and fundamental principles underpinning the right to stay in rural communities are absent from national policy discourse. Currently, there is no national framework that addresses the outmigration of young people from rural areas, and no systematic mechanism for including them in decision making processes concerning their future.

The needs of rural youth have been overlooked in national youth policies for a long time. Albania's National Youth Strategy (2022-2029)[3] outlines a broad framework for youth inclusion, focusing on employment, education, and participation in decision making. However, it does not address the specific needs of rural youth. The strategy mentions rural youth only when it refers to the European Union Youth Strategy (2019-2027), but it does not include any measure addressing the specific needs of rural youth. By contrast, the EU Youth Strategy dedicates its sixth goal to rural youth,[4] aiming to create conditions for rural youth to fulfil their potential by improving infrastructure, offering high quality jobs, and encouraging rural youth participation in decision making. Yet Albania's National Youth Strategy lacks concrete measures aimed at empowering rural youth.

The Strategy for Agriculture, Rural Development, and Fisheries (SARDF)[5] emphasises the importance of supporting young farmers. However, while it has proposed several measures

[1]European Commission. (2026). *European Commission launches landmark 'Right to Stay' strategy*. Inforegio. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/whats-new/newsroom/05-05-2026-european-commission-launches-landmark-right-to-stay-strategy_en

[2]European Commission. (2025). *Strategy for generational renewal in agriculture* (COM(2025) 872 final). https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/overview-vision-agriculture-food/generational-renewal_en

[3]Republic of Albania, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. (2021). *Strategy on agriculture, rural development and fisheries (SARDF) 2021-2027*. https://leap.unep.org/en/countries/al/national-legislation/strategy-agriculture-rural-development-and-fisheries-2021-2027

[4] European Union. (2018, December 18). *Resolution on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union youth strategy 2019-2027* (OJ C 456). Official Journal of the European Union. https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

[5]Republic of Albania, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. (2021). *Strategy on agriculture, rural development and fisheries (SARDF) 2021-2027*. https://leap.unep.org/en/countries/al/national-legislation/strategy-agriculture-rural-development-and-fisheries-2021-2027

targeting youth in rural areas, these efforts have been insufficient. The SARDF Action Plan recommended a new initiative for young farmers under the national budget, envisaged for implementation in 2022-2023. However, this scheme was only approved in 2026. By contrast, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy has introduced instruments such as the Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers (CISYF)[6] and other support mechanisms to encourage young farmers to invest in rural areas.

Key findings from the consultation with young people

Between January and February 2026, as part of the 2nd Assembly of Young People from Rural Areas in the frame of the 4th Albanian Rural Parliament, an open consultation targeting young people from rural areas of Albania was conducted. A total of 100 young people aged 18 to 40 from across Albania completed the questionnaire. Participants were asked to reflect on the key challenges they face, what is missing to turn their ideas into action, and recommendations for empowering young people from rural areas.

One of the most important findings of this consultation is the gap between the desire to stay and the need to move away from rural communities. The majority of respondents expressed a wish to remain in their communities and contribute to rural development. Emigration is not a first choice, but it is a response to the continuous failure of policy instruments to create conditions in which staying is viable.

> *"We do not want charity, we want equal opportunities. Change does not come by telling people to stay in the village, but by making the village a place where people want to live."*

The language of respondents across regions conveyed urgency. Several described the current decade as a last window of opportunity to reverse depopulation trends before rural communities reach a point of irreversible decline.

> *"Appreciate the work of these people, who with worn out hands and with that small energy that remains, are still trying to survive and save hundreds of communities across Albania. Rural areas must breathe 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, not just for a few months in summer or winter."*

Furthermore, the consultation identified five interconnected challenge clusters that young people from rural areas consistently raised across all regions and age groups.

1 **Lack of road infrastructure, public transport, quality education, healthcare and reliable internet access were among the most frequently cited challenges in the consultation. Many described this not as a matter of comfort, but as a question of basic rights.**

Road connectivity was the single most concrete complaint, as villages remain unreachable by paved roads, particularly in winter, cutting young people off from schools, jobs, hospitals and markets. Several respondents described entire communities where ambulances cannot reach homes and where children walk for hours to reach the nearest bus stop. Public transport, where it exists, is

[6] European Commission. (n.d.). *Young farmers: Complementary income support for young farmers (CISYF)*. Common Agricultural Policy income support. Retrieved July 9, 2026, from https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/young-farmers_en

infrequent and unreliable, making daily commuting to jobs or universities in nearby towns practically impossible for many young people.

> *"We are still in an era where villages have no roads. Lack of basic living conditions is pushing young people out of the country."*

Education infrastructure is an urgent issue, starting with the existence of multi grade classrooms and the lack of vocational schools, libraries and quality secondary education. The same holds true for healthcare, where functioning health centres are scarce, often unstaffed or open only part time. Internet access, increasingly a precondition for remote work, online learning and access to information, was described as unreliable, especially in the most remote villages, deepening the digital divide between rural and urban youth.

> *"Basic services are not an urban luxury."*

2 **Insufficient financial support and limited trust in transparent funding processes is another challenge facing young people from rural areas in Albania. Nearly one in five respondents pointed directly to the lack of financing as a barrier to investing in rural areas. However, this challenge goes beyond a lack of money, extending to a lack of trust between young people and the institutions meant to support them.**

Respondents perceive grant and subsidy schemes as non transparent, bureaucratic, and often favouring applicants with political or personal connections over quality proposals.

> *"Many grants are sometimes taken by people close to power. It is shameful and painful to watch young people with clear, innovative ideas not even get their applications read."*

3 **Limited access to information, knowledge and technical assistance was described as a barrier that is hidden but widespread. Even where opportunities, grants or programmes exist, many young people in rural areas are unaware of them, hear about them too late, or lack the knowledge needed to apply.**

Information is often fragmented, procedures are complicated, and there is no clear mechanism to guide young people from an idea all the way through to implementation. Respondents described a persistent gap where ambition and ideas are not missing, but the practical knowledge of how to write a business plan, navigate bureaucratic procedures, or access technical advice on agriculture is lacking.

> *"Ideas stay unrealised because of a lack of know-how, of the right education, of how to put an idea into practice. There needs to be a greater focus on training that specifically targets rural youth."*

4 **Lack of social life and opportunities for personal development was described by many young people as an aspect that erodes their sense of belonging and long term motivation to stay in their communities.**

Respondents described villages with no youth centres, no cultural spaces, no sports facilities, and no social or cultural activities. Some connected this directly to mental health and wellbeing, describing a sense of stagnation and isolation that compounds economic hardship.

5 Limited inclusion in decision making can be considered a structural reason why the other challenges continue to remain unaddressed year after year.

Young people in rural areas expressed a profound sense of invisibility to the institutions meant to serve them. They are rarely consulted by local government on development plans, budgets, or service priorities. In this frame, some of the respondents pointed out that local councils are dominated by older age groups, with few or no formal mechanisms through which young people's perspectives are systematically gathered or acted upon. Where consultations do occur, respondents described them as symbolic, a box ticking exercise disconnected from actual policy outcomes.

Furthermore, there is a limited perceived meritocracy in hiring and grant allocation, and bureaucratic processes that discourage rather than enable youth led initiatives. Also, there is a general sense that decisions about rural development are made for young people rather than with them. This was framed not as a request for token representation, but as a call for structural change.

> *"Include us, we want to be at the table not just as participants, but as the ones shaping the agenda of rural and youth policies."*

Recommendations

The following recommendations come directly as a result of the consultation with young people from rural areas, who call for:

1. Ensure essential services and basic infrastructure for young people from rural areas, such as road infrastructure, public transport, healthcare, education and internet access, as prerequisites for equal opportunity.
2. We support the introduction of the dedicated support scheme for young people by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, but we call for continued financial support: small starter grants covering core launch costs, zero interest or low interest state guaranteed credit, simplified application procedures, and mentoring support throughout implementation, not just at the funding stage.
3. Ensure transparency in the allocation of funds in the agriculture and rural development sector, to guarantee accountability and the fair distribution of resources.
4. Ensure social, cultural and community life in rural areas, essential to encourage young people in rural areas to stay and invest there, through the funding and functional, year round maintenance of youth centres, and ongoing cultural and sports programmes designed specifically for rural youth.
5. Ensure access to information, mentorship and technical assistance, through the creation and support of local advisory centres, such as Agricultural and Rural Assistance Centres (QABRs), staffed by qualified young professionals who proactively provide information on funding opportunities, application procedures and technical guidance.
6. Ensure the meaningful inclusion of young people from rural areas in decision making processes, by creating formal mechanisms through which young people are systematically

consulted on local development plans, budget preparation, and the consideration of their needs and priorities.

7. Ensure that Albania's forthcoming national strategy for agriculture and rural development directly places young people at its centre. In practice, this must translate into concrete commitments: clear objectives for retaining young people in rural areas, and a formal mechanism for the ongoing participation of rural youth in the implementation of the strategy.

The young people who participated in this consultation did not ask for charity. They asked for equal conditions, basic infrastructure, access to financing, training, information and inclusion, that would allow them to build their futures at home. They asked to be seen not as passive beneficiaries, but as strategic partners in shaping the future of their communities.

The right to stay must not remain merely a political principle; it must be translated into investment, quality services and the genuine participation of young people in decision making. Only in this way can Albania build vibrant and sustainable rural communities.