

Policy Paper Series

Internal Market, Competition & Public Procurement

Albania Youth Perceptions Survey on EU

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Introduction and Background

For young Albanians navigating uncertain labor markets, limited educational resources, and pervasive institutional corruption, European Union membership represents far more than a diplomatic milestone. EU integration embodies a comprehensive reimagining of economic possibility, institutional credibility, and social mobility (UNDP, 2024). The internal market constitutes the European Union's foundational achievement, creating an integrated economic space of over 440 million consumers through the "four freedoms" of goods, services, capital, and persons (European Commission, 2023).

Public procurement occupies particular salience within Albania's integration trajectory. Government purchasing represents approximately 10-15% of GDP, constituting a massive economic sector where corruption has historically undermined fair competition and public trust (OECD, 2021). For Albania, where corruption consistently ranks as citizens' paramount concern, procurement reform symbolizes the broader governance transformation that EU integration promises to catalyze.

In line with the EU's evolving enlargement methodology, the integration process increasingly follows a *whole-of-society* approach, recognizing that sustainable progress depends on the active participation of all societal sectors. Within this framework, youth are positioned not merely as future EU citizens but as essential drivers of democratic development, social innovation, and civic engagement. Their participation strengthens public trust in institutions, fosters civic responsibility, and ensures that reforms reflect the aspirations of the next generation.

Albanian youth benefit from a range of EU-funded programmes that promote education, employability, and civic participation. Notable among these are:

- **Erasmus+** which supports youth mobility, civic engagement, and intercultural learning through exchange programmes, training, and participation projects (European Commission, n.d.);

- **EU4Youth**, a 36-month initiative co-implemented by UNDP and UNICEF to operationalize the Youth Guarantee scheme in Albania, improving employability among young people not in education, employment, or training (UNDP & UNICEF, 2024); and
- **Funded traineeships at the EU Delegation to Albania**, which provide young graduates with professional exposure to EU diplomacy, policy analysis, and public outreach (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2025).

Collectively, these initiatives not only empower young Albanians but also deepen social and institutional linkages between Albania and the European Union.

Methodology

Research Design

This policy paper series, developed by **ESN Tirana**, adopts a **mixed-methods research design** that combines quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine youth perceptions of Albania's EU integration process. The approach integrates survey data with documentary review, ensuring empirical robustness and contextual depth.

Data Source and Collection

The analysis draws on data from the **ESN Albania Survey on Youth Perceptions of European Integration**, conducted by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) Albania between **April and June 2025**. The survey explored how young people in Albania perceive, understand, and engage with the European Union and the country's integration trajectory.

The questionnaire was distributed online via **Google Forms** using a **snowball sampling** technique. While this method limits sample representativeness, it is appropriate for exploratory studies focused on identifying emerging patterns and attitudes within interconnected youth networks. A total of **264 valid responses**

were collected from individuals aged **15 to 29**, encompassing participants from urban, suburban, and rural areas with diverse educational backgrounds, employment statuses, and living conditions. This diversity allowed for comparative analysis across demographic subgroups and provided a broad overview of youth perspectives on EU integration.

The overarching purpose of this data collection was to generate **evidence-based insights** that inform policymakers, civil society actors, and EU institutions in designing reforms that reflect the needs and aspirations of young people in Albania.

Data Preparation and Cleaning

Data processing and analysis were conducted using the **R statistical environment (version 4.3.2)**. To ensure the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the results, a systematic data preparation workflow was applied:

1. **Variable standardization** – Column names were translated from Albanian to English and harmonized for clarity (e.g., *Mosha juaj* to *Age group*; *Gjinia juaj* to *Gender*).
2. **Missing data treatment** – The dataset was screened for incomplete responses. Records with substantial missing data were removed, yielding a final cleaned sample of 264 observations.
3. **Data normalization** – Text entries were trimmed and standardized to correct typographical inconsistencies and ensure uniform categorical labeling (e.g., *Femër/Mashkull* standardized to *Female/Male*).
4. **Recoding of categorical variables** – Demographic variables were regrouped into coherent analytical categories as follows:
 - Age groups: 15–19, 20–24, 25–29 years
 - Education levels: Secondary, University, Postgraduate
 - Residence area: Urban, Suburban, Rural
 - Employment status: Student, Employed, Unemployed

- These cleaning and recoding steps ensured that the dataset was analytically sound and suitable for both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

Variable Transformation and Analytical Design

The survey comprised both **ordinal (Likert-type)** and **nominal (categorical)** variables. Data transformation followed the logic of variable measurement types:

- **Ordinal variables** (e.g., frequency of following EU news, understanding of EU politics, perceived impact of EU integration) were converted into ordered factors with descriptive labels.
- **Nominal variables** (e.g., awareness of EU programmes, participation in EU initiatives, willingness to engage in EU-related activities) were recoded into binary indicators (*Yes/No*) to facilitate cross-tabulation and association testing.
- **Open-ended responses** (e.g., perceived challenges to integration) were manually coded into thematic categories, such as *corruption, political instability, economic reforms, and social issues*.

This transformation enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings within a unified analytical framework.

Analytical Approach

A **mixed analytical strategy** was employed, combining descriptive statistics, visualization, and inferential tests to examine youth awareness, engagement, and perceptions regarding EU integration.

1. **Descriptive analysis and visualization:**

Frequency and percentage distributions were computed to identify general patterns of youth awareness and engagement. Results were visualized using bar charts and comparative plots to highlight demographic differences.

2. Inferential analysis:

Relationships between key variables were explored through statistical testing:

- **Spearman's rank correlation** measured the strength and direction of associations between ordinal variables, notably between frequency of following EU news and understanding of EU politics ($\rho = 0.54, p < .001$).
- **Chi-square tests of independence** assessed relationships between categorical variables, such as awareness of EU programmes and participation in EU activities ($\chi^2 = 27.6, p < .001$; Cramer's V = 0.325). These tests revealed statistically significant relationships between information exposure, value alignment, and youth engagement behaviour.

3. Sectoral and thematic analysis:

Perceptions of EU integration's impact across domains such as education, employment, governance, culture, and the economy were examined using Likert-scale responses converted into ordered categories ranging from "Very negative" to "Very positive." Open-ended responses were coded and quantified to identify the most frequently cited obstacles to integration.

Software Environment and Reproducibility

All analyses were conducted in **R (version 4.3.2)** using open-source packages from the **diverse** ecosystem for data management, visualization, and reproducibility. Analytical scripts and documentation were maintained to ensure transparency and replicability of findings

Youth stakeholders and knowledge gaps

Young people hold a unique role in processes of economic integration: they are exposed to the most unstable labour-market conditions, will inherit the outcomes of institutional reforms, and are increasingly demanding both accountability and opportunity. In Albania, youth unemployment is significantly higher than the overall rate, and many ambitious young people, seeing limited local prospects, view emigration as the default path (Instituti i Statistikave (INSTAT) 2024).

However, youth engagement in economic integration processes remains largely passive. While young people express broad support for EU membership, they often possess limited knowledge of the specific policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and implementation challenges involved. This lack of understanding constrains their ability to act as agents of accountability, to recognize opportunities arising from market integration, and to participate meaningfully in policy discourse.

Youth Understanding of Economic Integration and Market Opportunities

Strong belief in economic growth through integration

Survey data from 264 young Albanians indicate a strong sense of optimism regarding the economic implications of EU integration. When asked whether EU membership would positively affect Albania's economy, 200 respondents (75.5%) expressed either *agreement* or *strong agreement*. In contrast, 43 participants (16.2%) adopted a neutral stance, while 22 respondents (8.3%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, reflecting a relatively small segment of skepticism toward the potential economic benefits of integration.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of respondents demonstrated positive expectations: 108 participants selected “strongly agree”, and 92 selected “agree”, together comprising 75 percent of the total sample. Forty-three respondents opted

for a neutral response, whereas 22 respondents, selecting either “disagree” or “strongly disagree,” perceived EU integration as potentially detrimental to Albania’s economy.

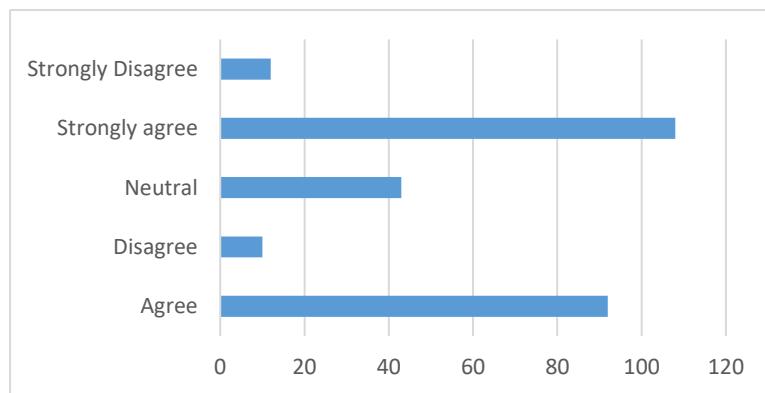


Figure 1. *Youth Perceptions of EU Integration's Impact on Albania's Economy*

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Data from National Youth Perception Survey on EU Integration, 2025.

These results align with existing literature emphasizing widespread youth optimism toward the EU’s anticipated economic impact in Albania, despite persistent informational and participatory gaps noted in previous studies. However, such optimism also entails potential risks if the anticipated economic benefits of EU integration materialize slowly or are distributed unevenly across social groups. Historical experiences from Central and Eastern European countries illustrate that, although EU accession has often been associated with accelerated economic growth, the resulting gains have not been automatic, uniform, or universally shared. Uneven regional development, labour market polarization, and disparities in institutional capacity have, in some cases, tempered the initial expectations of broad-based prosperity.

High expectations for employment and education

Market expansion resulting from EU integration is widely perceived as a potential remedy for the employment challenges faced by Albanian youth. As illustrated in Figure 2, 124 respondents selected “strongly agree” and 92 selected “agree”, amounting to 81.5 percent of participants who believe that EU membership would

have a positive impact on employment. In contrast, 32 respondents (12.1%) adopted a neutral position, while 17 respondents (6.4%)—those who chose “*disagree*” or “*strongly disagree*” expressed skepticism regarding the employment benefits of integration.

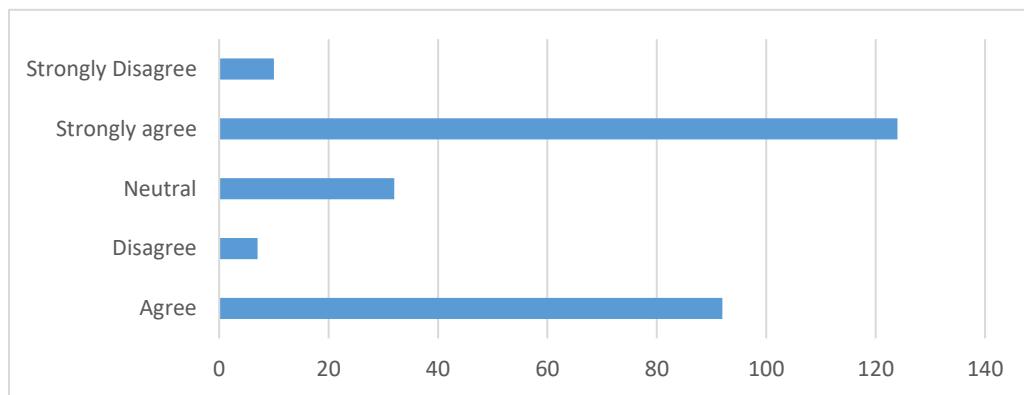


Figure 2. Youth Expectations Regarding EU Integration's Impact on Employment

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

Education is also expected to improve through the EU integration process, as the current state of the sector remains a significant concern. For years, Albania’s education system has struggled with inadequate funding and inefficient resource allocation. In 2021, government expenditure on education accounted for only 9.8% of the total national budget (Monitor, 2025). According to the draft state budget for 2024, this figure is projected to rise modestly to 10.7%, which represents some progress but remains comparatively low (Council of Ministers, 2023). It is anticipated that EU integration will help alleviate these limitations by increasing access to financial and structural support for the education sector.

Survey data reflect similar expectations among young people. As shown in Figure 3, 214 respondents (approximately 80%) either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that EU integration will positively influence Albania’s education system. In contrast, 20 respondents expressed disagreement, and 31 remained neutral.

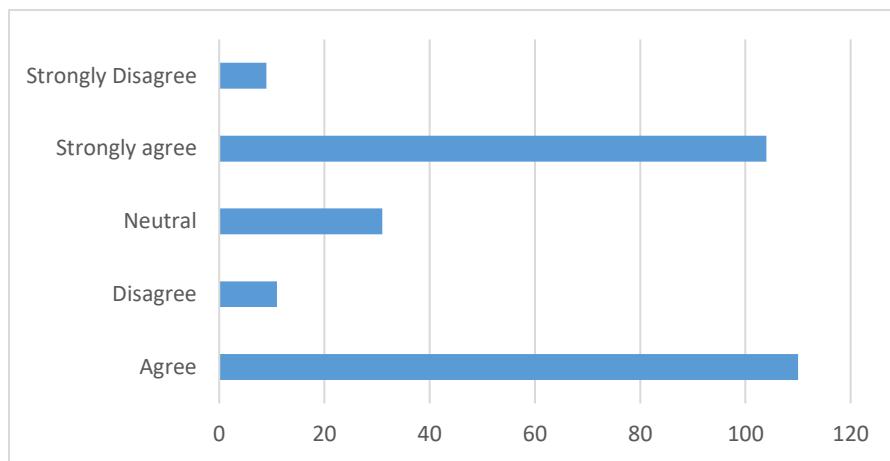


Figure 3. Youth Perceptions of EU Integration's Educational Impact

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) regarding educational improvements. Survey data, 2025.

Governance transformation as primary integration objective

Survey findings reinforce this perception. When respondents were asked to identify Albania's primary challenges, 224 participants (84.5%) selected corruption; either independently or in combination with issues such as economic reform and political stability. Similarly, youth expectations regarding governance reform are high. As illustrated in Figure 4, 110 respondents (41.7%) selected "strongly agree" and 85 (32.2%) selected "agree", indicating that 195 participants (73.5%) believe EU integration will improve governance quality. In contrast, 46 respondents (17.3%) remained neutral, and 24 (9%) expressed disagreement, suggesting that only a small minority are skeptical of the reform potential associated with EU accession.

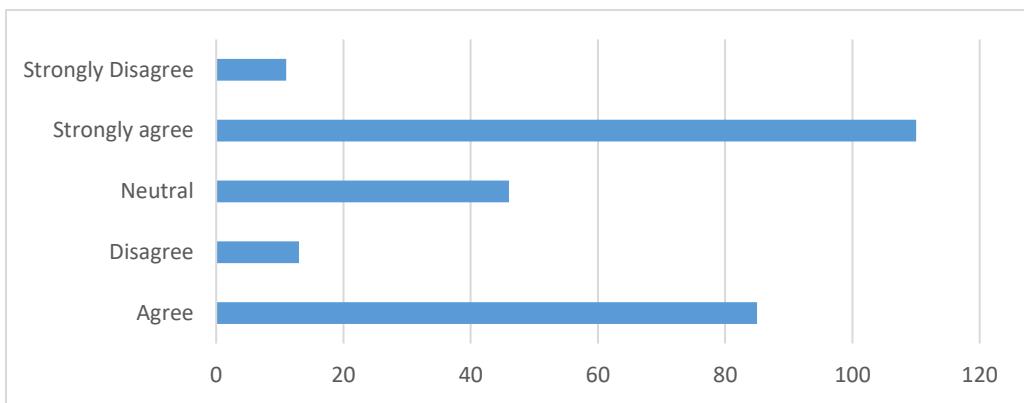


Figure 4. Youth Expectations for Governance Improvements Through EU Integration

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

This optimism reflects a broader understanding that the conditionality mechanisms embedded in the EU accession process create external incentives for institutional reform. Young Albanians tend to perceive governance improvements not as abstract administrative adjustments but as changes with tangible effects on daily life. From this perspective, corruption distorts labor markets by making employment dependent on political connections rather than merit, undermines educational quality by turning university admissions into a commodity, and discourages entrepreneurship by linking business success to informal payments. Governance reform driven by EU integration is widely regarded as a crucial opportunity for Albania to enhance transparency, strengthen accountability, and reinforce the rule of law—foundations essential for sustainable development and public trust. Survey results indicate strong optimism among Albanian youth regarding the economic impacts of EU membership: 215 respondents (81%) believe that Albania’s overall economy will improve, while 220 participants (83%) expect local businesses, particularly SMEs, to benefit from integration (INSTAT, 2023). Youth perceive EU integration not merely as a political milestone, but as a pathway toward tangible economic improvement, fostering better rules and regulations for SMEs and strengthening the backbone of the Albanian economy. As illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, the majority of participants selected “agree” or “strongly agree,” reflecting widespread expectations of both macroeconomic and sector-specific benefits.



Figure 5 & Figure 6. Youth Confidence in Overall Economic Improvement and Local Business Benefits

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on 5-point scales. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

Perceptions of Competition Policy and Public Procurement Reform

Knowledge deficits in competition policy awareness

While Albanian youth express strong support for economic integration, their understanding of specific policy frameworks reveals significant gaps. When asked whether they feel adequately informed about competition rules and market regulations, approximately 39% indicated low knowledge (disagree or strongly disagree), while 40% positioned themselves neutrally. Only 20% expressed confidence in their knowledge.

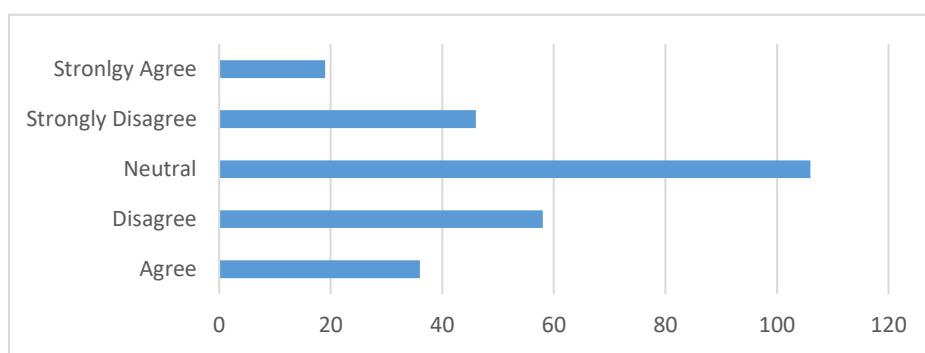


Figure 7. Youth Self-Assessment of Knowledge Regarding Competition Rules

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale for "I feel adequately informed about competition rules." National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

This knowledge gap is concerning, as competition policy is a cornerstone of the EU internal market. Without a basic understanding of its principles, young people cannot assess whether reforms are effective, identify violations, or judge market fairness. The gap stems from limited curriculum coverage, scarce media attention, and weak government outreach.

High expectations for competition and procurement improvements

Although their knowledge of competition rules is limited, young people remain confident that EU membership will strengthen market competition. This suggests a gap between understanding and trust; youth expect EU systems to deliver fairer outcomes than those in Albania.

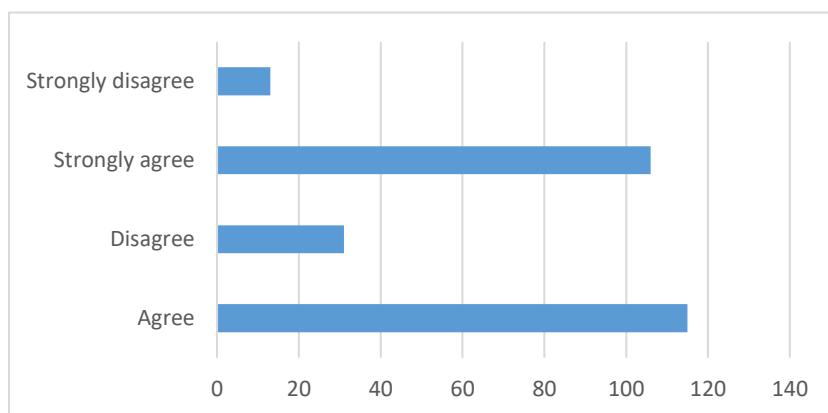


Figure 8. Youth Expectations for Competition Improvements Through EU Membership

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. Survey data, 2025.

Public procurement reform occupies particular salience in youth expectations. When asked whether EU membership will improve public procurement processes, 225 respondents (85%) expressed agreement or strong agreement.

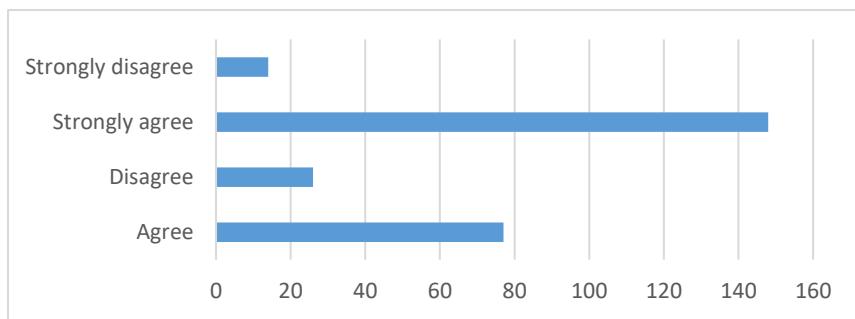


Figure 9: Youth Expectations for Public Procurement Improvements Through EU Membership

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

Confidence in anti-corruption impact and civil society oversight

Efforts are widely expected to focus on Albania's greatest challenge: corruption. Strengthening the rule of law is seen as the key to curbing corrupt practices and fostering more transparent institutions, accountable governance, and fairer economic opportunities. In the context of EU integration, such reforms are not only legal obligations but also social imperatives that build public trust and promote equitable resource distribution.

Survey data reinforce this sentiment, approximately 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that EU membership will help reduce corruption. This optimism, however, also creates significant accountability pressure, as corruption remains the central measure by which young people are likely to judge the success of integration.

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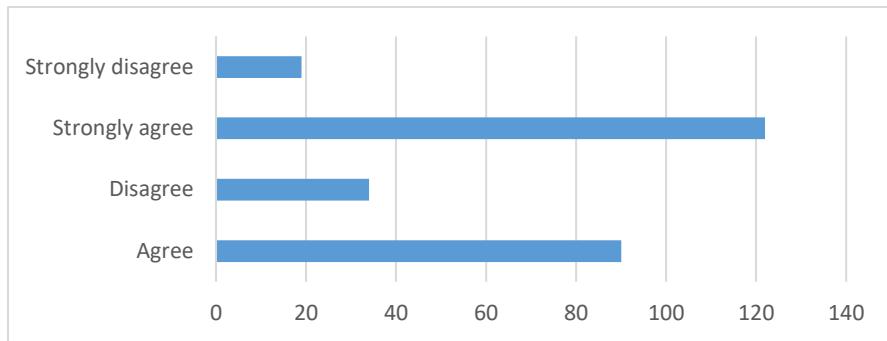


Figure 10. Youth Expectations Regarding EU Membership's Anti-Corruption Impact

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

Survey results indicate strong recognition of civil society's role in promoting transparency and fairness. Over 200 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NGOs play a crucial part in monitoring government processes and reducing corruption risks, while only a small minority disagreed. These findings suggest that Albanian youth not only support reforms in procurement and competition practices but also view civil society organizations as essential partners in building accountability and improving market integrity.

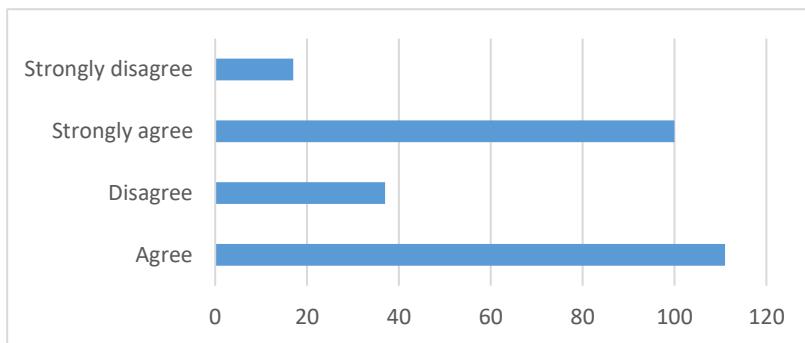


Figure 11. Youth Perceptions of NGO Importance in Competition and Procurement Oversight

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. Survey data, 2025.

The graph on the effects of EU membership on local institutions (Figure 12) reinforces the broader survey findings. A clear majority of respondents over 200 in

total; agreed or strongly agreed that EU integration will strengthen municipal governance and improve service delivery. This perspective reflects a mature understanding that effective governance requires not only formal institutional reforms but also active civil society engagement serving watchdog functions.

The results are consistent with earlier findings identifying corruption and weak institutions as Albania's biggest challenges. By aligning with EU standards, local administrations are expected to become more transparent, accountable, and professional. Only a small minority of respondents expressed disagreement, indicating that while optimism prevails, some skepticism remains. Overall, these findings highlight how Albanian youth view EU integration as a means to transform the institutions that citizens interact with daily.

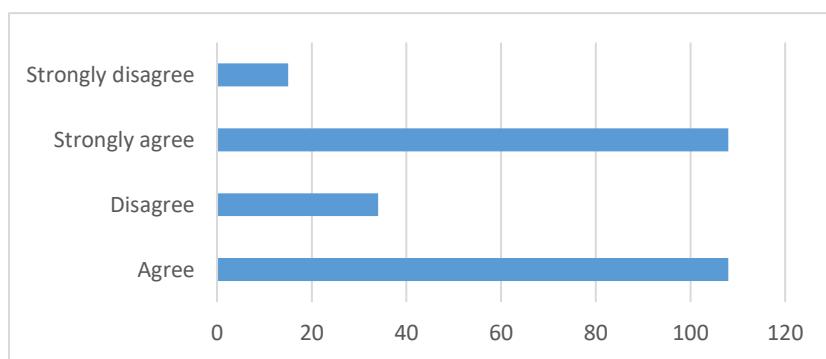


Figure 12. Youth Expectations for EU Membership's Impact on Local Institutions

Note. Agreement levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

Recent reform initiatives and implementation challenges

Albania has recently undertaken significant reforms to strengthen transparency and integrity in public procurement. The *National Strategy for Public Procurement 2024–2030* sets ambitious goals, including full e-procurement implementation, enhanced monitoring systems, a professionalized procurement workforce, and open contracting data standards (European Movement Albania, 2024). Legislative amendments under Law No. 16/2024 mandate complete electronic communication

throughout procurement processes and reinforce conflict-of-interest provisions (European Movement Albania, 2024).

To support these efforts, the government established a Central Purchasing Operator and launched *Diella*, an AI-based virtual assistant designed to oversee tenders and detect corruption risks (France24, 2024). While these initiatives align with youth expectations for greater transparency and fairness, concerns persist regarding algorithmic accountability, institutional resistance, and limited technical capacity. The credibility and effectiveness of these reforms will depend on consistent enforcement and genuine political will.

Policy Recommendations: Strengthening youth engagement, governance, and market integration in Albania

Albania's youth represent a critical stakeholder in advancing transparency, competitiveness, and EU integration. The following recommendations provide actionable measures to enhance youth participation, economic literacy, and institutional accountability.

1. Strengthen youth engagement in governance

- **Establish Youth Councils:** Create national and municipal councils focused on economic integration, public procurement, and market development. Councils should provide structured channels for input, monitoring reform implementation, and identifying barriers.
- **Integrate Youth in Oversight Mechanisms:** Reserve positions for youth representatives in procurement monitoring committees and support youth-led oversight initiatives, ensuring accessible platforms for reporting irregularities.
- **Expand Experiential Opportunities:** Broaden internships in public institutions and Erasmus+ programs, with targeted outreach to rural and disadvantaged communities. Programs should align with sectors where Albania holds comparative advantages.

2. Enhance economic literacy and professional capacity

- **Integrate EU Market Practices into Education:** Incorporate internal market functioning, competition policy, and procurement into secondary and tertiary curricula. Use case studies, simulations, and “how-to” modules for practical learning.
- **Establish Public Procurement Helplines and Resources:** Provide dedicated support for young entrepreneurs and civil society organizations to navigate procurement processes, eligibility requirements, and grievance procedures.

- **Expand Vocational and Professional Training:** Align training with EU market integration, emphasizing technical skills and business competencies in sectors such as tourism, IT, agriculture, and creative industries.

3. Strengthen institutional integrity and enforcement

- **Professionalize Procurement Workforce:** Implement mandatory training on procurement procedures, ethics, and corruption risk management, supported by competitive compensation and international partnerships.
- **Enhance Competition Authority Independence:** Strengthen legal autonomy, investigative powers, and resource allocation, accompanied by transparent public reporting and multi-year funding commitments.
- **Implement Comprehensive E-Procurement:** Accelerate digital procurement systems with open data standards, user-friendly interfaces, and technical support to facilitate small business participation and civil society monitoring.

4. Support youth entrepreneurship and market access

- **Establish Youth-Focused Business Incubators:** Provide mentoring, finance access, and guidance on EU market entry, focusing on sectors with competitive advantages.
- **Introduce Youth Procurement Set-Asides:** Reserve small-scale government contracts for youth-led enterprises, combined with capacity-building programs to ensure sustainable growth.
- **Expand International Mobility Programs:** Increase Erasmus+ and structured internship opportunities, with financial support and mechanisms to share acquired skills and knowledge domestically.

5. Enhance transparency and civil society oversight

- **Strengthen Access to Information:** Amend Right to Information legislation to reduce response times, expand proactive disclosure, and establish independent oversight for procurement, competition, and state aid data.

- **Secure Sustainable Civil Society Funding:** Establish multi-year funding for NGOs monitoring procurement and competition policy to strengthen independence and long-term effectiveness.
- **Develop Participatory Monitoring Platforms:** Create digital platforms allowing citizens to access procurement data, report irregularities, and track institutional responses, ensuring user-friendly design and responsive follow-up.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that Albanian youth are highly optimistic about EU integration, yet insufficiently equipped to engage effectively in its processes. Key findings include:

- **Optimism for economic and governance reform:** Approximately 75% of respondents believe integration will improve the economy, over 80% anticipate enhanced employment and educational outcomes, and 85% expect fairer procurement practices.
- **Corruption as a central concern:** 84.5% identify corruption as Albania's primary challenge, and 80% believe EU integration can reduce it.
- **Knowledge gaps:** Only 20% of youth report feeling adequately informed about competition rules and public procurement processes.
- **Recognition of civil society:** Over 200 respondents support NGO oversight as a means to monitor government actions and reduce corruption.

The stakes of economic integration

For Albanian youth facing precarious labor markets and limited domestic opportunities, EU integration represents a referendum on their future. Membership promises access to larger markets, improved education, and governance reforms that could facilitate successful domestic careers. Yet risks remain: uneven

distribution of benefits, exclusion of rural or disadvantaged youth, and delayed or ineffective reforms could undermine public trust and long-term outcomes.

From aspiration to agency

Currently, youth often act as passive observers. Effective engagement requires:

- **Institutionalized participation:** Establishing statutory mechanisms and allocating adequate resources for meaningful involvement.
- **Visible impact:** Ensuring youth contributions influence policymaking in tangible ways.
- **Economic empowerment:** Providing incubators, youth-targeted financing, procurement opportunities, and international exposure to enhance agency.

Managing expectations while accelerating progress

Youth optimism provides political capital but may exceed realistic outcomes. EU integration benefits are gradual, unevenly distributed, and contingent on complementary domestic reforms. Transparent communication is essential: celebrate progress through concrete examples while acknowledging setbacks honestly.

A call for inclusive economic transformation

Albania stands at a pivotal moment. Survey findings indicate that youth are ready to support and participate in reform. To translate aspiration into meaningful agency, policymakers should:

- Establish youth participation mechanisms.
- Expand economic literacy and training programs.
- Strengthen institutional capacity, transparency, and rule of law.
- Support entrepreneurship and enhance market access.
- Foster civil society engagement and international cooperation.

By implementing these measures, Albania can ensure that EU integration is technically compliant, socially embedded, and generationally inclusive. The decisions made today will shape the economic and democratic opportunities available to Albanian youth for decades to come.

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