

# Policy Paper Series

Resources, Agriculture, and Cohesion

*Albania Youth Perceptions Survey on EU*

November 2025

**Author:** Dallandyshe Xhaferri  
**Research Supervisor:** Fjolla Spanca  
**Survey Design:** Renisa Selenica & Kevin Topi  
**Initiative Lead:** Lutjona Lula

**November 2025**

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# Introduction

Youth engagement in EU rural development programs is critical for Albania's sustainable growth. However, research indicates persistent gaps in awareness and access, which limit participation and impede policy effectiveness. This study explores Albanian youth knowledge, trust, and perceptions of EU programs, with an emphasis on IPARD initiatives, food safety, fisheries, and cohesion policies.

Albania's accession to the European Union (EU) remains a strategic national priority, reflecting the country's enduring commitment to democratic consolidation, economic modernization, and institutional alignment with EU standards. The *European Commission's 2024 Albania Report* highlights continued progress in areas such as public administration reform, economic governance, and approximation with the EU *acquis* (European Commission, 2024). Nonetheless, persistent challenges remain in the domains of judicial reform, media freedom, and anti-corruption—key pillars within the Fundamentals Cluster. The report emphasizes the need for inclusive, transparent reforms and the strengthening of institutional capacities to meet accession benchmarks effectively.

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*

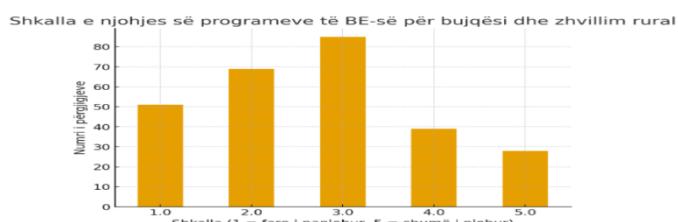
All analyses were conducted in **R (version 4.3.2)** using open-source packages from the **diverse** ecosystem for data management, visualization, and reproducibility. Analytical scripts and documentation were maintained to ensure transparency and replicability of findings

# Youth knowledge and perceptions of EU rural development

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire. According to the data gathered by ESN regarding students' perceptions of the impact of EU policies on rural development, food standard improvement, and sustainable fisheries management, it appears that young people do not possess sufficient knowledge about EU programs that support agricultural and rural development in the country. However, they perceive improvements in food standards, infrastructure development, and sustainable fisheries management as being directly linked to the support provided by European Union programs.

## Awareness of EU Rural Development Programs

Survey results indicate that Albanian youth have limited knowledge of EU rural development programs. On a 1–5 self-assessment scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high), only 10.5% (n = 28) reported high knowledge (rating 5), whereas 43.6% (n = 115) rated their knowledge as low or minimal (ratings 1–2). The overall average score of 2.7 underscores insufficient awareness among young people.



**Figure 1. Youth Knowledge Levels Regarding EU Agricultural and Rural Development Programs**

Note. Self-assessed knowledge levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale where 1 = very low knowledge and 5 = very high knowledge. Data from National Youth Perception Survey on EU Integration, 2025.

This knowledge gap is particularly concerning given the significance of IPARD III (2021–2027), which allocates substantial funding to Albania's agricultural modernization, including farm investments, agro-processing infrastructure, rural diversification, and environmental measures (MARD, 2021). Limited awareness restricts youth participation, constrains evaluation of fund absorption, and diminishes engagement in rural policy debates.

Several factors contribute to this gap:

- **Technical complexity:** Information is often presented in highly technical language, targeting specialists rather than broader rural audiences. Application processes require

extensive documentation and compliance with multiple standards, discouraging inexperienced applicants.

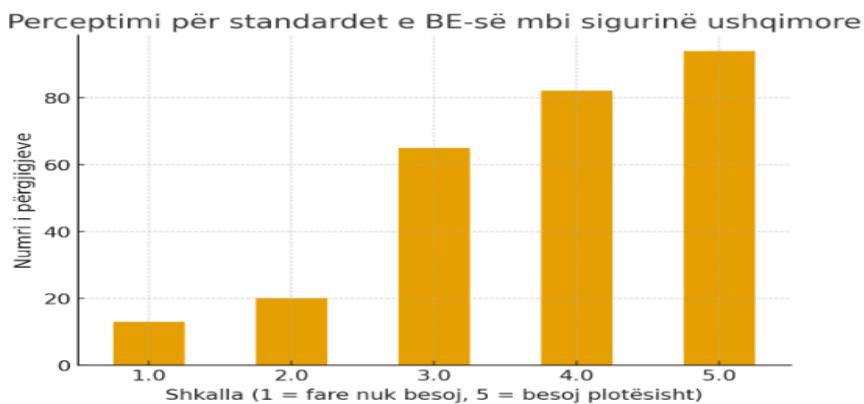
- **Limited outreach:** Agencies such as the Agency for Agricultural and Rural Development prioritize existing farmers, while new entrants, particularly youth, receive minimal engagement.
- **Educational gaps:** Formal education rarely covers EU agricultural policy, funding instruments, or rural entrepreneurship, leaving young people ill-equipped to navigate available opportunities.

Consequently, young innovators remain largely unaware of support mechanisms, while older, well-connected farmers may dominate access to IPARD resources, reinforcing generational disparities.

## Trust in EU food safety standards

In stark contrast to the limited knowledge of EU rural development programs, Albanian youth display substantial confidence in the positive effects of EU food safety standards. When asked whether these standards would improve the quality of food products in Albania, approximately 169 respondents (64%) selected high ratings (4 or 5)... Only 32 individuals (12%) expressed skepticism (ratings 1 or 2), while 63 (24%) positioned themselves neutrally. The average score of 3.8 demonstrates a generally high level of trust in the EU as a guarantor of food quality.

This trust, despite the comparatively low average knowledge score (2.7), suggests that young people perceive the EU as an objective benchmark of quality and institutional credibility. While such confidence provides a strong foundation for future awareness and engagement initiatives, it also underscores the need to complement favorable perceptions with accurate, accessible information on how EU standards are implemented and monitored in Albania.



**Figure 2. Youth Confidence in EU Food Safety Standards Improving Product Quality**

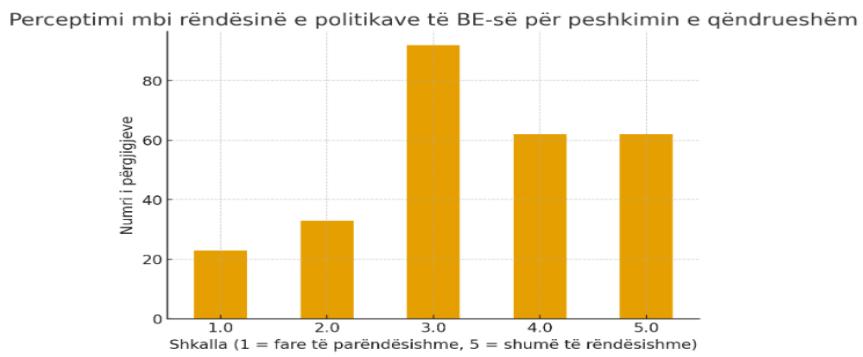
**Note.** Confidence levels (N = 264) on a 5-point scale where 1 = very low confidence and 5 = very high confidence regarding EU standards' impact on food quality in Albania. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

## Perceptions of sustainable fisheries

Survey results show that 120 young people (45.6%) rated the importance of EU policies for sustainable fisheries as *important* or *very important* (values 4 and 5), while 33.8% ( $\approx 89$  respondents) considered them *moderately important*. This pattern suggests that fisheries policies are perceived as less immediately relevant than food safety, which 64% of respondents rated highly, or infrastructure, which 66% viewed as a top priority. At the same time, the majority of respondents expressed stronger recognition of EU funds dedicated to regional development and infrastructure. Sixty-six percent rated these as *important* or *very important*, reflecting the perception that such investments have tangible, visible effects on daily life.

These findings reveal a clear hierarchy of priorities among Albanian youth. Issues with broad, everyday relevance, such as food quality, roads, and regional development, rank higher than specialized sectors like fisheries, which are understood as affecting smaller communities. Nevertheless, the moderate importance assigned to fisheries indicates some awareness of their role in environmental sustainability, coastal livelihoods, and long-term economic development.

This hierarchy has important implications for communication and policy design. Efforts to raise youth engagement in fisheries policy should integrate it within broader narratives of environmental protection and sustainable economic growth, rather than presenting it as a standalone technical issue. For coastal youth, targeted outreach and educational programs highlighting opportunities in sustainable aquaculture, marine tourism, and seafood processing could enhance relevance and participation.



**Figure 3. Youth Assessment of EU Sustainable Fisheries Policy Importance**

**Note.** Importance ratings (N = 264) on a 5-point scale where 1 = very low importance and 5 = very high importance. National Youth Perception Survey, 2025.

## Awareness of cohesion policies and regional disparities

Survey findings indicate that most young respondents view EU cohesion and regional development funds as highly significant for national and local development. Nearly two-thirds believe these funds have produced a positive and visible impact, particularly through improvements in local infrastructure and public services. This pattern aligns with earlier evidence showing that young people tend to value tangible, place-based improvements such as better roads, water systems, and schools over less visible governance or institutional reforms. Only a small minority (around 12%  $\approx$  32 respondents) expressed skepticism or perceived the funds as unimportant, suggesting that distrust exists but remains limited.

Given these perceptions, awareness campaigns should emphasize concrete and localized examples of EU-funded projects to consolidate support and enhance understanding. Communicating success stories, such as renovated schools, new irrigation systems, or improved transport links, can help youth connect abstract policy mechanisms to visible outcomes in their communities.

At the same time, this strong baseline of positive perception presents an opportunity for educational engagement. Awareness should extend beyond visible outputs to include knowledge of how cohesion funds operate, their allocation criteria, application procedures, and accountability mechanisms. Enhancing youth understanding of these processes ensures that trust in EU instruments is grounded in informed assessment rather than general optimism.

For the skeptical minority, increased transparency around project selection, budgeting, and monitoring can foster inclusion and credibility. Open communication about challenges, delays, or corrective measures would help maintain trust even when outcomes fall short, reinforcing a culture of accountability and partnership.

## The limited skeptical minority

Across survey dimensions, skepticism remains modest: approximately 12% of respondents expressed low confidence in food safety improvements or questioned the relevance of cohesion funds. Although numerically small, this consistent minority warrants attention.

While the available data do not permit a detailed demographic breakdown, several plausible explanations emerge. Skeptical respondents may include youth who have personally witnessed shortcomings in EU-funded initiatives, such as poorly executed or delayed infrastructure projects. Others may be politically engaged or better informed, aware of governance challenges, corruption risks, or discrepancies between official narratives and on-the-ground realities. Regional disparities may also contribute: young people in areas that have received limited EU investment may understandably question whether integration delivers equitable benefits.

Importantly, the small size of this group suggests that fundamental opposition to EU integration remains marginal among Albanian youth. This widespread baseline of trust represents a valuable policy asset. However, complacency would be risky: even limited skepticism can grow if implementation failures, corruption scandals, or unmet expectations persist.

Effectively engaging skeptical youth requires transparency, responsiveness, and dialogue. Policymakers should openly acknowledge shortcomings, provide clear explanations of remedial measures, and create opportunities for youth to voice concerns constructively. Mechanisms such as youth advisory councils, participatory monitoring platforms, or public forums could channel critical perspectives into policy learning and improvement. Rather than perceiving skepticism as a threat, institutions should treat it as a source of constructive feedback, essential for strengthening accountability and sustaining long-term public trust in the integration process.

## IPARD implementation failures and trust erosion

The suspension of IPARD II due to mismanagement and irregularities represents not merely a technical setback but a breach of public trust with far-reaching implications. When institutions responsible for program administration fail to uphold standards of financial control, transparency, and integrity, confidence in both domestic governance and the EU integration process erodes, particularly among young people who interpret such failures as confirmation that corruption remains entrenched regardless of external oversight (Transparency International, 2024).

The suspension stemmed from multiple weaknesses: inadequate internal controls, poor procurement oversight, conflicts of interest in project evaluation, and insufficient auditing capacity to detect irregularities before EU intervention. These are not isolated administrative shortcomings but symptoms of deeper systemic deficiencies that must be addressed for Albania to credibly advance toward EU accession.

For young people, IPARD II's failure carries several important lessons. It demonstrates that even substantial EU funding cannot compensate for weak domestic institutions; that political commitments to rural development and youth support ring hollow without administrative integrity; and that uncertainty persists over whether the same errors will recur under IPARD III or whether genuine reforms have taken place.

Restoring trust requires more than rhetorical assurances. Authorities must prove through transparent reporting, credible accountability measures, and consistent delivery that reforms are real. Publishing detailed data on IPARD III project approvals, disbursements, and beneficiary profiles would enable independent monitoring, while incorporating civil society into oversight mechanisms could reinforce public scrutiny. Ultimately, the decisive test will be whether approved projects reach intended beneficiaries efficiently and fairly—without political interference, bureaucratic obstruction, or corruption. Only through demonstrable results can institutional credibility and youth confidence be restored.

# Communication strategy deficits and structural barriers

## Critical knowledge gap

Despite strong commitments by both the Albanian Government and the EU to advance rural development, there remains a clear mismatch between these efforts and young people's awareness of available programs. The average self-assessed knowledge level of 2.7 (on a five-point scale) suggests that current communication tools are not reaching younger audiences effectively. Information may exist, but it often fails to connect either in language, tone, or accessibility.

## High trust as an untapped asset

Interestingly, limited knowledge coexists with a comparatively high degree of trust in EU standards. Respondents rated their confidence at an average of 3.8, particularly regarding food safety improvements. This finding matters. It shows that young people generally trust the EU as a guarantor of quality and fairness, even when they lack detailed understanding of specific mechanisms. Such trust is a valuable starting point for outreach, but it also underscores the need to link positive perceptions with accurate, practical information.

## Sectoral Imbalances in Prioritization

Perceptions differ sharply across sectors. About two-thirds (66%) of respondents view EU investments in infrastructure and regional development as important or very important, reflecting how visible projects: roads, schools, or public facilities, shape their sense of progress. By contrast, only 45.6% rate sustainable fisheries policies as highly important, a reminder that specialized areas with less immediate visibility attract limited attention. This hierarchy of priorities suggests that communication efforts should link more technical topics, such as agriculture or fisheries, to everyday concerns like jobs, environment, and local prosperity.

## Implications of IPARD suspension

The suspension of IPARD II due to irregularities represents more than an administrative issue; it risks undermining young people's trust in institutions. Many respondents already perceive corruption as Albania's main governance challenge, and failures in managing EU funds can reinforce that skepticism (Transparency International, 2024). The key question for youth is whether lessons have been learned will IPARD III deliver better results, or repeat old mistakes?

Rebuilding confidence requires more than statements of intent: it calls for transparent reporting, timely project delivery, and accountability that is visible to the public.

## Communication Gaps

Much of the problem lies in how information is communicated. Government announcements and formal websites may satisfy procedural transparency but do little to attract younger audiences. Youth rarely seek information through these channels; they engage through social media, where institutional presence is still minimal or overly promotional. Technical jargon and lengthy documentation further alienate potential applicants. Application manuals hundreds of pages long are necessary for compliance but inaccessible without professional help.

More effective communication would combine accuracy with approachability, simplified guides, infographics, short videos, and concrete examples of young beneficiaries who have successfully applied for EU support. Beyond explaining procedures, such stories show that modern agriculture and rural entrepreneurship can provide decent livelihoods and community belonging, addressing the concerns that most young Albanians voice about rural life.

## Structural Barriers Beyond Communication

Even with perfect outreach, significant structural barriers remain. Access to land is a persistent obstacle: fragmented holdings, uncertain property rights, and limited rental markets make it hard for youth to start independent projects. Education gaps add another layer. Many rural schools lack resources and qualified teachers, while higher agricultural education is concentrated in Tirana, forcing relocation and discouraging return migration.

Infrastructure deficiencies, poor roads, unreliable electricity, and weak internet further discourage rural settlement. Financing constraints are equally serious. Youth rarely possess the collateral or co-financing capacity required for IPARD grants, and banks remain cautious about lending to inexperienced farmers.

Addressing these barriers requires more than agricultural policy alone. Clarifying property rights, investing in rural education and connectivity, and creating youth-friendly financial instruments such as partial guarantees, lower collateral requirements, and longer repayment periods are all essential steps toward making rural life a genuine opportunity rather than a fallback option.

# Policy recommendations: addressing the knowledge–trust gap in EU rural development engagement

The findings of this study indicate a critical disparity between Albanian youth's high levels of trust in EU standards and their limited awareness of specific rural development programs such as IPARD. Bridging this knowledge–trust gap is essential for fostering meaningful engagement, enhancing the inclusiveness of EU policies, and promoting sustainable rural development. To this end, a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is required, encompassing government institutions, academic and research bodies, civil society organizations, and youth actors.

## Government and public institutions (Ministries and Local Authorities)

- **Enhancing institutional transparency:** Public institutions should establish comprehensive, user-friendly digital platforms that publish detailed information on EU funding mechanisms, including IPARD III and related initiatives. All documentation should include clear methodological notes, eligibility criteria, and procedural guidance, presented in accessible language to facilitate comprehension among non-expert audiences.
- **Proactive outreach and communication:** Governments should implement systematic engagement strategies, including webinars, informational sessions, and digital communication campaigns targeted at youth. Such initiatives should aim not only to disseminate information but also to clarify procedural steps for applying for funding, thereby converting trust into actionable participation.
- **Strengthening accountability and oversight:** Drawing lessons from the suspension of IPARD II, rigorous auditing frameworks and monitoring mechanisms must be institutionalized to prevent misallocation of resources. Transparent reporting on fund disbursement and project outcomes is essential to maintain credibility and public confidence.

## Academic and Research Institutions

- **Curricular integration and capacity building:** Universities and vocational training institutions should incorporate EU rural development, agricultural policy, and local governance into curricula. This approach equips young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to actively contribute to regional development and fosters the emergence of future leaders in rural innovation.

- **Creation of evidence-based knowledge repositories:** Academic institutions should establish public databases and conduct longitudinal research on the socio-economic impacts of EU rural development policies. These resources would facilitate informed decision-making by both policymakers and civil society actors, ensuring that interventions are responsive to local needs.

### **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the Erasmus Student Network Albania/Tirana (ESN Albania/Tirana)**

- **Information mediation and awareness raising:** CSOs should develop campaigns designed to translate complex EU policy data into accessible formats for young audiences, utilizing social media, workshops, and university-based forums. Infographics, interactive tools, and concise policy briefs can serve as effective instruments for knowledge dissemination.
- **Advocacy for policy standards:** Given the high trust of youth in EU regulatory frameworks, civil society actors should advocate for the consistent application of EU standards in areas such as food safety, environmental protection, and sustainable development. This reinforces public confidence and promotes normative adherence at local and national levels.

### **Youth and Local Actors**

- **Institutionalizing Youth Participation:** Mechanisms should be established to integrate young people into local decision-making processes, enabling them to contribute to the identification of regional priorities and development challenges. Such inclusion enhances policy responsiveness and strengthens civic engagement.
- **Capacity Development for Project Design:** Targeted training programs should empower young people to design projects eligible for EU funding, aligned with local needs and priorities. Equipping youth with project management and proposal-writing skills transforms them into proactive agents of rural development and ensures that interventions are locally relevant and sustainable.

By implementing this multi-tiered strategy, Albania can leverage the inherent trust of its youth in EU institutions and standards to achieve **active, informed engagement in rural development initiatives**. Such an approach not only addresses the existing knowledge gap but also strengthens institutional credibility, promotes inclusive policy participation, and fosters long-term socio-economic resilience within rural communities. Empowering youth as key

actors in the EU integration process is thus indispensable for realizing the potential of sustainable and inclusive rural development in Albania.

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