

Policy Paper Series

Youth Awareness and Engagement with European Union Developments and Foreign Relations in Albania

Albania Youth Perceptions Survey on EU

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AI Disclaimer: This report was developed by the author through independent analysis and interpretation of survey data. Digital tools, including language editing and proofreading software, were used solely to improve grammar, clarity, and formatting. No AI-generated content was used in the conceptualization, data analysis, or interpretation of findings.

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Introduction and Methodology

Context of EU Integration in Albania

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.

Background

Albanian youth represent a pivotal demographic in shaping the country's future relationship with the European Union (EU). Their views and engagement are not only reflective of present attitudes but also predictive of Albania's democratic and European trajectory. As the country advances along its integration path, understanding how young people perceive, engage with, and relate to EU developments becomes essential for crafting effective policy interventions and sustainable public support.

This analysis explores multiple dimensions of youth awareness and engagement with the EU, including exposure to EU news, understanding of EU politics, familiarity with accession procedures, participation in EU programs, and perceptions of the EU's role in foreign affairs and situates these findings in a broader European context. By combining descriptive analysis with statistical testing, the study seeks to paint a nuanced picture of Albanian youth: generally enthusiastic and pro-European, yet unevenly informed and facing real barriers to meaningful participation.

This discussion extends beyond Albania's borders. Across the EU, policymakers increasingly emphasize the integration of youth perspectives across all policy domains. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, which serves as the main framework for cooperation in the youth field, explicitly aims to *engage*, *connect*, and *empower* young people while ensuring “youth mainstreaming” in policy design and implementation (European Commission, 2024; Council of the European Union, 2023). The EU Youth Report 2024 confirms that young Europeans continue to shape the continent's future: while more than 70% of them participated in recent elections, concerns remain over declining turnout in the 2024 European elections and persistent socio-economic challenges (European Commission, 2025).

Across Europe, issues such as educational inequalities, digital skills gaps, mental health struggles, and sustained youth unemployment still around 10% on average persist (European Commission, 2025). In response, EU institutions have expanded flagship programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and have launched new initiatives focused on mental health, skills

development, and civic participation. Following the European Year of Youth 2022, the European Commission also created new participatory mechanisms such as Youth Policy Dialogues, an EU Youth Stakeholders Group, and the forthcoming President's Youth Advisory Board to ensure that young people play an active role in shaping decisions that affect their lives. These EU-level efforts underscore a clear message: young people matter, and their engagement is essential for Europe's future.

In the enlargement context, empowering youth has likewise become an integral part of the EU reform process. The European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package, for example, highlights that Western Balkan governments have committed to implementing Youth Guarantee schemes mirroring the EU model for tackling youth unemployment. By 2023, several pilot schemes were already under way (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2023). The EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans also prioritizes human capital development through education reform, student exchanges, and research capacity building (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2023).

All these efforts point toward a shared goal; Albanian youth are eager for EU integration, and the EU is equally eager to involve and invest in them. The following sections combine empirical findings on Albanian youth with broader European trends, offering an integrated perspective on where we stand and how youth engagement in the EU accession process can be strengthened.

Youth Awareness of EU Developments

Understanding how in touch young Albanians are with EU developments is the first step in gauging informed support for integration. This section looks at their engagement with EU-related news, understanding of EU politics, and familiarity with accession procedures and situates these findings within broader European patterns of youth political engagement.

Engagement with EU News and Understanding of EU Politics

The frequency with which young Albanians follow EU-related news varies markedly across demographic groups. Older respondents (ages 25–29), those living in urban areas, and individuals

with postgraduate education follow EU developments far more closely than their younger, rural, or less-educated counterparts. For instance, only 17.8% of respondents aged 15–19 report following EU news frequently, compared to 28.9% of those aged 20–24, and an even higher proportion among the 25–29 cohort. Similarly, youth in suburban or rural areas, and those with only secondary education, show notably lower engagement (around 18% report following EU news regularly). In contrast, among urban and postgraduate respondents, a much larger share keep up with EU coverage (urban youth reported the highest engagement; among postgraduates, 61% recognized Erasmus+—see later section).

These patterns reveal a clear information gap: younger and less advantaged groups are less exposed to EU-related information and, consequently, less likely to engage in informed discussions about integration.

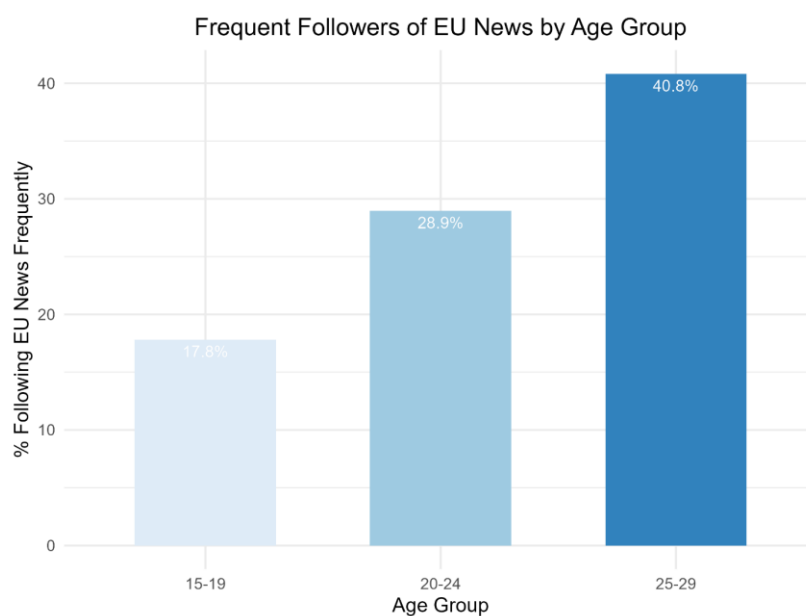


Figure 1. Frequency of Following EU-Related News by Age Group *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Age groups: 15-19, 20-24, 25-29 years. Frequency categories range from "Never" to "Very Often."*

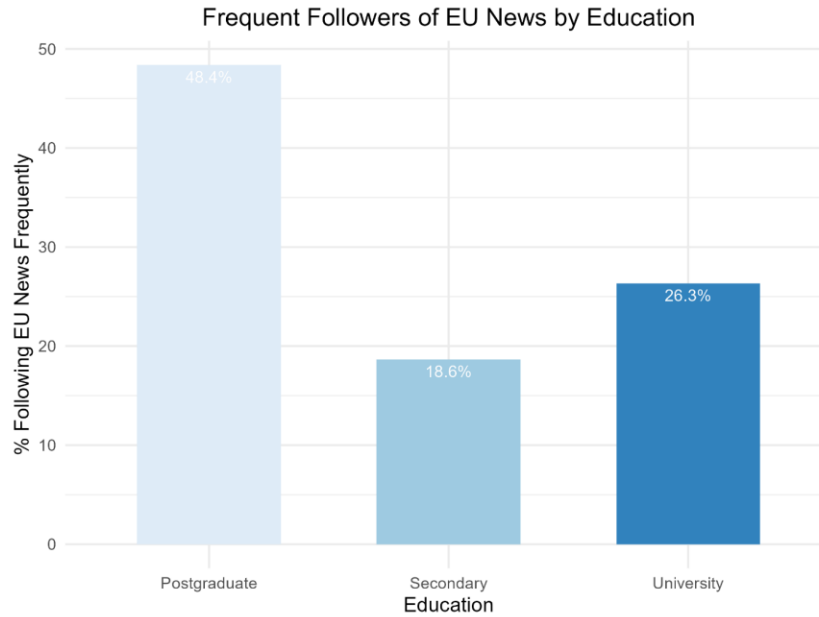


Figure 2. Frequency of Following EU-Related News by Education Level *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Education levels: Secondary, University, Postgraduate.*

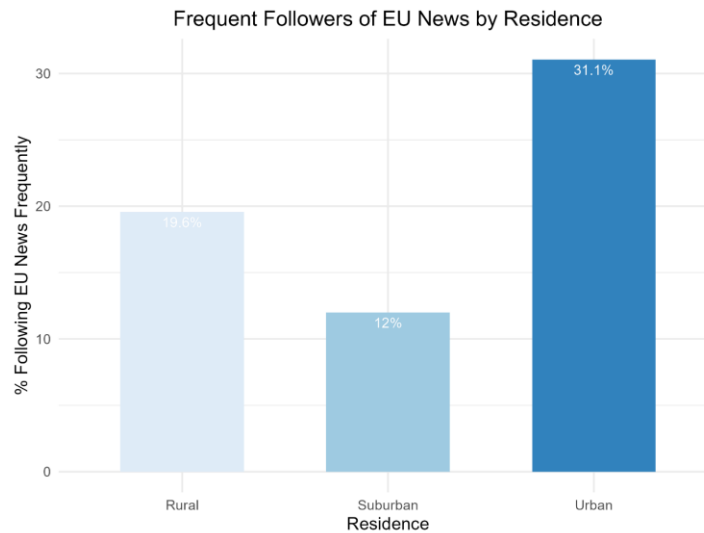


Figure 3. Frequency of Following EU-Related News by Residence Type *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Residence categories: Urban, Suburban, Rural.*

Unsurprisingly, those who follow EU news more frequently also tend to report a better understanding of EU politics and institutions. Respondents aged 25–29 stand out once again: about 40.8% of them state they understand EU politics “well,” compared with 26–28% among the 15–

19 group. Education shows a particularly strong correlation with understanding: nearly 48.4% of respondents with postgraduate degrees say they understand EU events well, compared with only 25.4% among those with secondary education. Geography matters, too only 20% of rural youth feel confident in their grasp of EU politics.

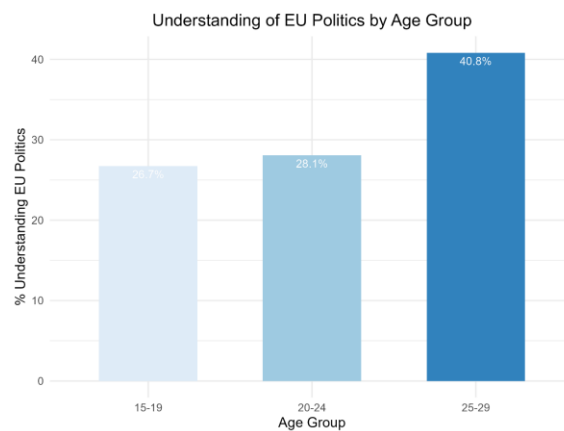


Figure 4. Self-Assessed Understanding of EU Politics by Age Group *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Understanding scale: Very poorly, Poorly, Neutral, Well, Very well.*

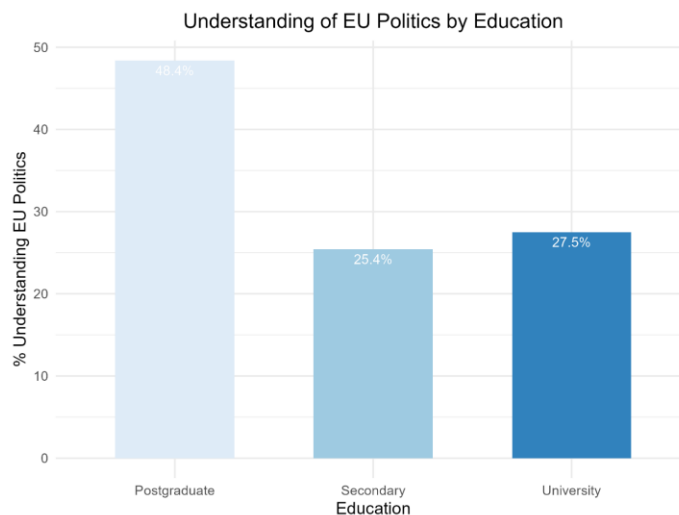


Figure 5. Self-Assessed Understanding of EU Politics by Education Level *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2024. N=[264]. Shows significant correlation between education level and political understanding.*

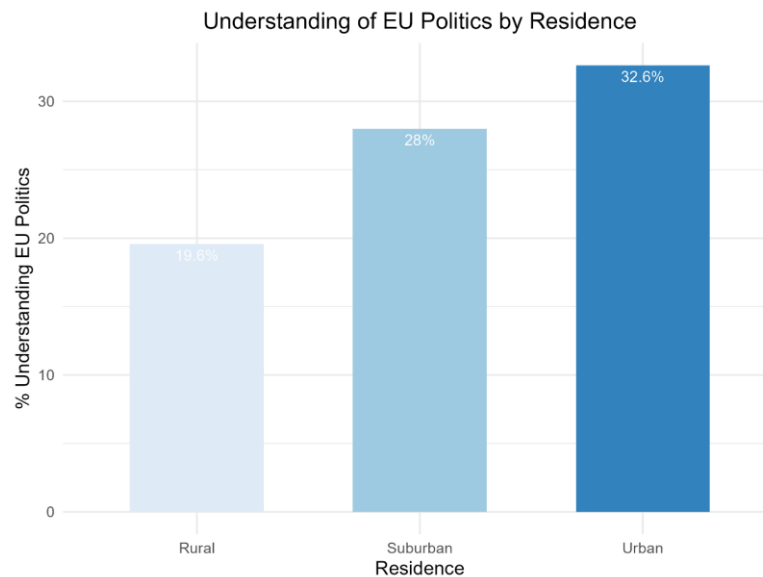


Figure 6. Self-Assessed Understanding of EU Politics by Residence Type *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Rural youth show notably lower understanding levels (20%).*

Statistical analysis supports this pattern: a Spearman’s correlation ($\rho = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) confirms a strong positive relationship between following EU news and self-assessed understanding of EU politics. In simple terms, the more frequently young people engage with EU news, the better they understand it a finding consistent with EU-wide data on political literacy. Among respondents who never follow EU news, 8.7% admit to understanding EU politics “very poorly,” and almost none of them express confidence in their knowledge. Conversely, those who follow EU news weekly or daily show much higher self-assessed understanding, clustered in the “well” or “very well” categories.

In short, information drives comprehension: the more exposure youth have to EU-related news, the higher their level of political understanding. This finding highlights the importance of targeted information outreach, especially to those who are least engaged, such as rural and younger groups.

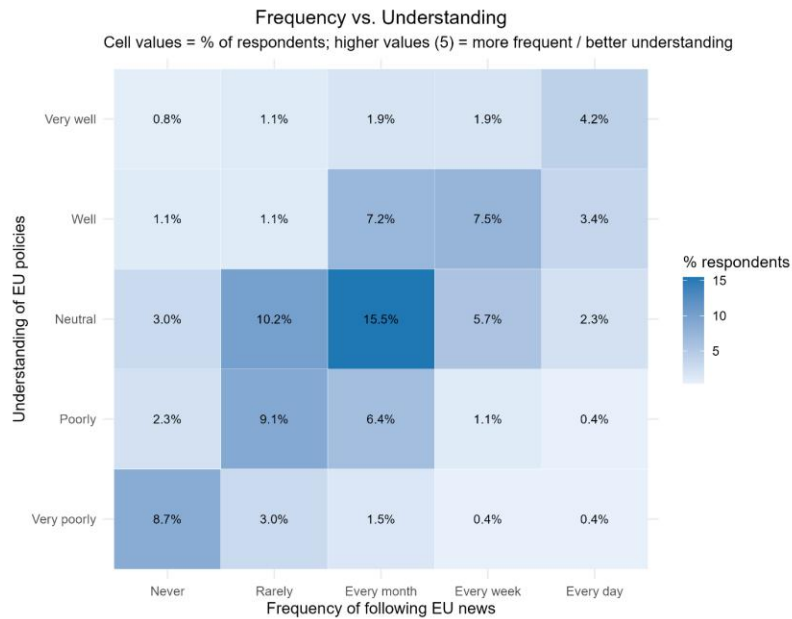


Figure 7. Correlation Between News Engagement Frequency and Understanding of EU Politics *Note: Likert scale heatmap showing relationship between frequency of following EU news (x-axis) and self-assessed understanding (y-axis). Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Spearman's $\rho = 0.54, p < 0.001.$ ***

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of accessible information. The fact that younger teenagers and rural youth lag in awareness suggests targeted outreach is needed. EU-level experience reinforces this. The EU Youth Strategy explicitly calls for improving access to information and "knowledge of youth about Europe" as part of empowering young people (European Commission, 2024). Moreover, EU ministers have promoted youth mainstreaming, meaning all policies should consider youth impacts and involve youth in design (Council of the European Union, 2023). One practical implication is that information on EU affairs must be delivered in youth-friendly ways and through channels youth actually follow. The EU has developed participatory tools like the EU Youth Dialogue, its largest platform for youth consultation, to bridge the gap between young citizens and policymakers (European Commission, 2024). Through regular dialogues, consultations, and even new digital platforms, European institutions try to meet young people where they are. However, our data shows that in Albania (as elsewhere) a "neutral majority" of youth neither actively follow nor firmly understand EU politics, representing an untapped segment that could be engaged with the right approach.

Encouragingly, the strong interest Albanian youth express in the EU (discussed below) is an asset to build on. The correlation between news following and understanding suggests that if more young people, especially in rural areas or younger cohorts, are reached with compelling EU-related content, their knowledge will likely grow. This could involve integrating EU topics into school curricula, leveraging social media and influencers for civic information, and using local youth networks. Youth mainstreaming in practice means involving youth organizations, schools, and local authorities in disseminating EU information. The Council of the EU's November 2023 Conclusions specifically urge that a youth perspective be incorporated in policy design and implementation across sectors (Council of the European Union, 2023) a principle equally relevant to how information campaigns are crafted. In short, improving Albanian youth's understanding of EU politics will require proactive efforts to make EU news relevant and accessible to the demographics that currently miss out (younger, rural, and less-educated youth).

Interest in Albania's EU Integration Path

While knowledge levels vary, Albanian youth exhibit high overall interest in Albania's progress toward EU membership. Across all demographics, a strong majority report being extremely or very interested in the European integration process. Enthusiasm is slightly tempered among the youngest (15–19) group; they have a higher share of "moderate" or "slight" interest than older peers but even in this group, the majority care about integration. Older youth (25–29) and those with higher education are especially passionate: postgraduates had the highest share of "extremely interested" responses, and women and urban youth also showed slightly higher enthusiasm than men and rural youth.

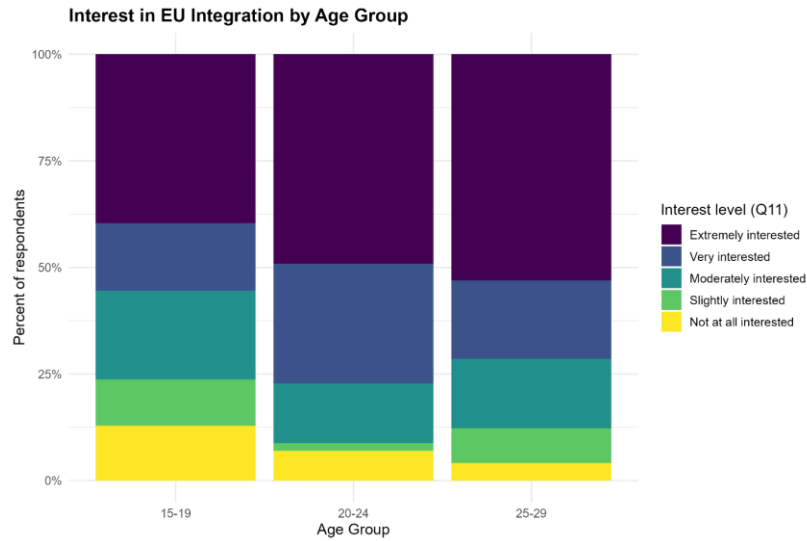


Figure 8. Level of Interest in Albania's EU Integration Process by Age Group *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Interest scale: Not at all interested, Slightly interested, Moderately interested, Very interested, Extremely interested.*

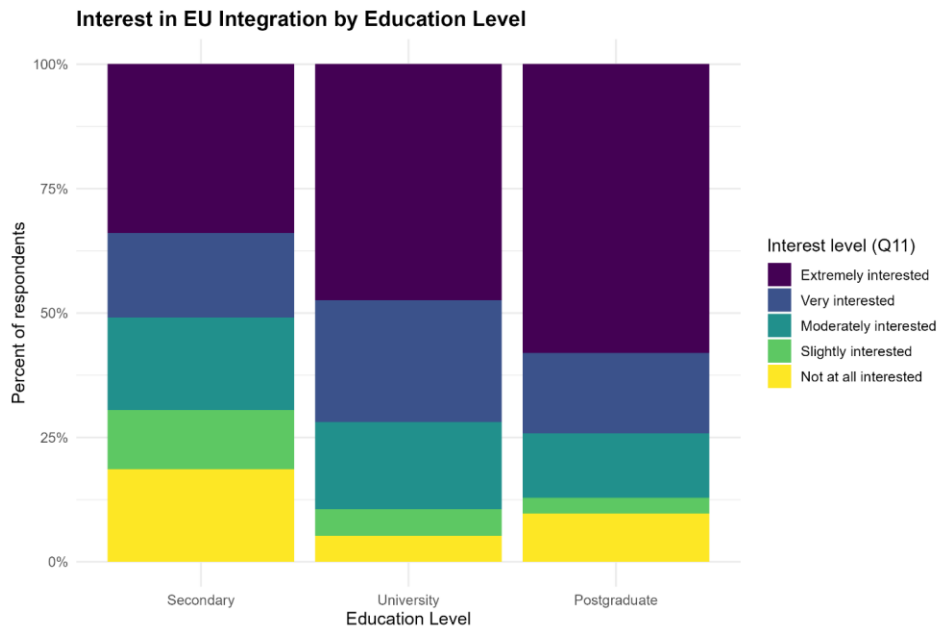


Figure 9. Level of Interest in Albania's EU Integration Process by Education Level *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Postgraduate students show highest levels of extreme interest.*

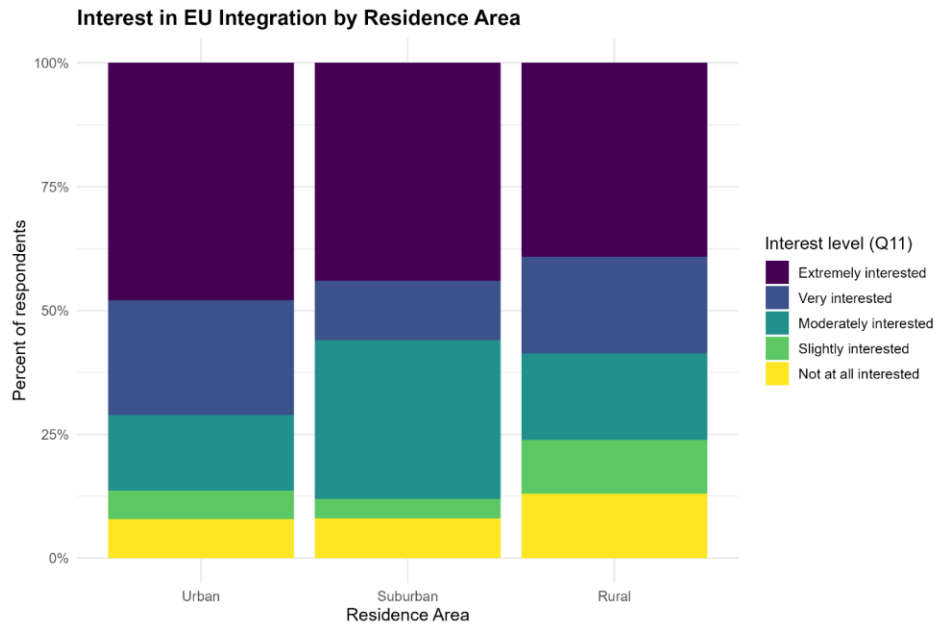


Figure 10. Level of Interest in Albania's EU Integration Process by Residence Type *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Urban youth demonstrate slightly higher interest levels.*

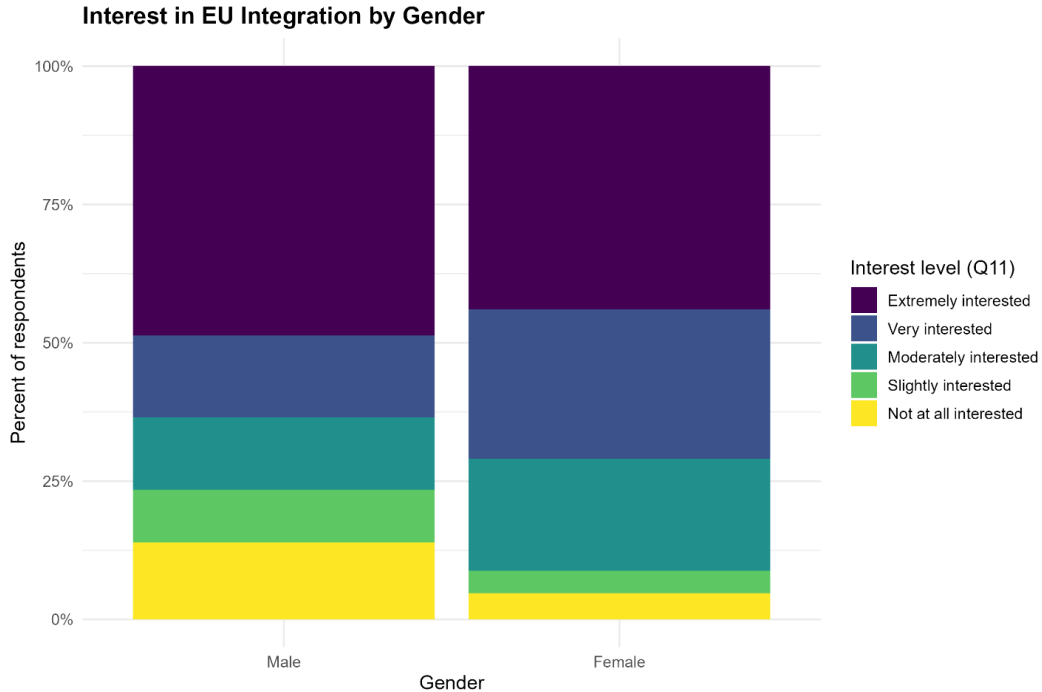


Figure 11. Level of Interest in Albania's EU Integration Process by Gender *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Female respondents show marginally higher interest.*

Notably, interest remains robust despite gaps in detailed knowledge of accession procedures. Even youths who know little about the EU negotiation chapters or criteria still overwhelmingly want Albania to join the EU and believe it is important for the country. Familiarity with EU accession procedures, however, is only moderate and quite stratified. More educated respondents know a lot more about the mechanics of integration. Around 45% of those with postgraduate degrees say they are familiar with the EU accession requirements and steps, compared to 33% of university-level youth and just 22% of secondary-educated youth. Likewise, urban youth are somewhat more aware of the technical process (33% familiar) than rural youth (28%). There is also a modest age gradient: 37% of the 25–29 cohort feel informed about accession procedures, versus 29% of teenagers. In other words, the groups who frequently follow EU news are the same ones who have picked up more detailed knowledge about the accession process. Those who have had less exposure to EU-related education or media understandably find the topic obscure.

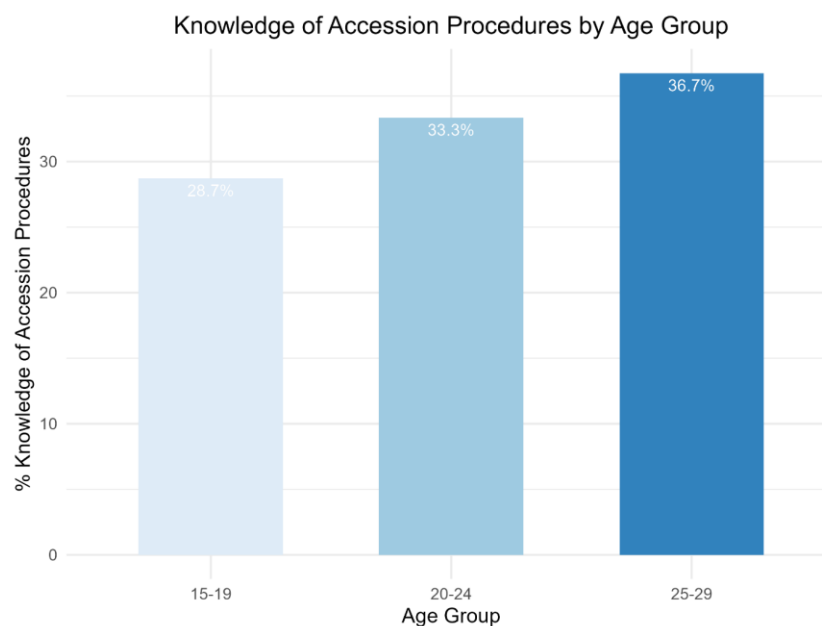


Figure 12. Familiarity with EU Accession Procedures by Age Group *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Familiarity scale: Not familiar, Somewhat familiar, Very familiar.*

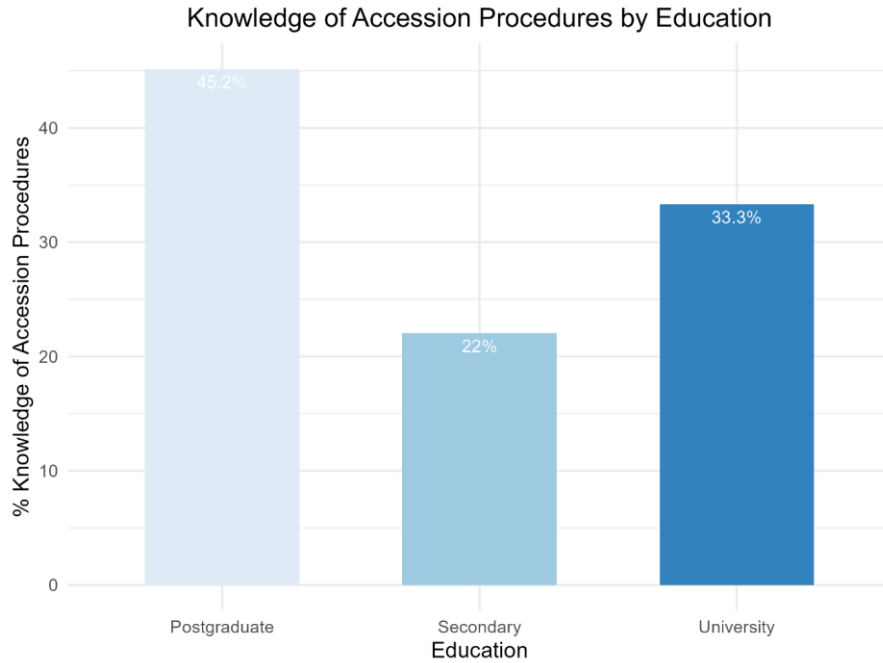


Figure 13. Familiarity with EU Accession Procedures by Education Level *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Clear educational gradient: 22% (secondary) to 45% (postgraduate) familiarity.*

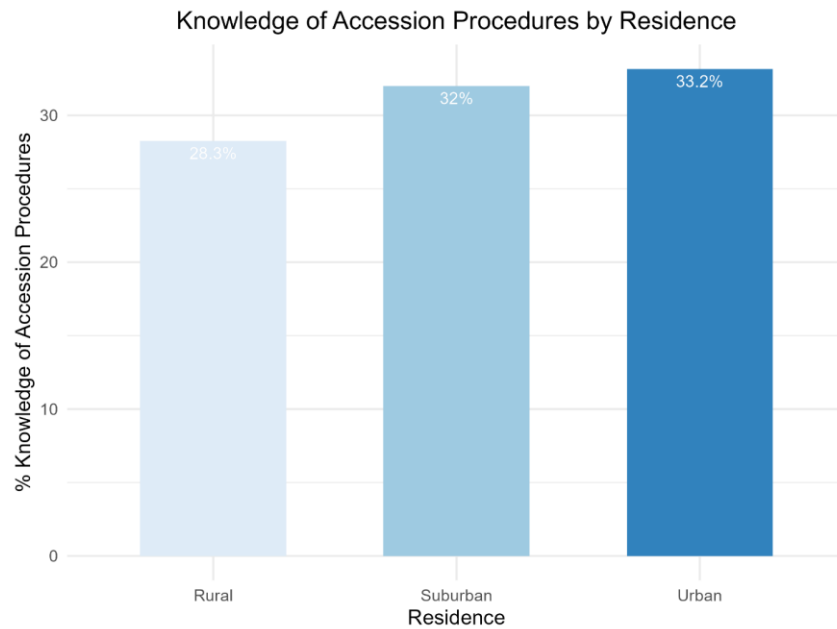


Figure 14. Familiarity with EU Accession Procedures by Residence Type *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Urban youth (33%) show higher familiarity than rural youth (28%).*

This finding that large segments of young Albanians remain poorly informed about how EU accession works points to a need for civic education. Explaining what the EU integration path entails (chapters, reforms, timelines) in clear, relatable ways could empower more young people to engage critically with the process.

High interest often coexists with limited knowledge; a revealing combination. The enthusiasm is there; the substance is not yet. Policymakers can leverage this enthusiasm. For instance, youth-centric communication campaigns or peer education programs might tap into the strong pro-EU sentiment while delivering substance about what EU membership involves. Such efforts align with broader EU youth engagement strategies. Under the EU Youth Strategy's "Engage" pillar, one objective is to encourage young people to become active citizens and agents of positive change inspired by EU values (European Commission, 2024). Ensuring they actually understand EU processes is part of that empowerment. Additionally, the 2023 Enlargement Communication noted that young people in candidate countries are the most ardent supporters of EU enlargement (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2023). Indeed, surveys show about two-thirds of youth (15–39) across the Western Balkans and EU believe in the benefits of enlargement. Albanian youth's strong interest is very much in line with this regional trend. It is an encouraging sign for Albania's democratic future that its youth remain idealistic about joining the European family, even if many lack detailed information at present.

In summary, Albanian youth are highly interested in EU integration but only moderately familiar with the formal accession process—with big disparities by education, age, and residence. Interest is an invaluable asset that policymakers can build upon; the challenge lies in converting that enthusiasm into informed engagement. Targeted outreach and education programs are needed to raise knowledge levels, particularly among rural and less-educated youth who may not gain such exposure otherwise. This could include workshops through Europe-oriented youth NGOs, info sessions by Europe Direct centers or EU delegations in Albania, and integration of EU topics in school civics curricula. The EU's own youth engagement toolkit (e.g. EU Youth Dialogue, Youth Parliament simulations, etc.) could be localized to bring the accession story closer to Albanian youth. With the Council's call for youth mainstreaming in mind, every policy reform or communication about EU integration should consider how to involve or inform young people

(Council of the European Union, 2023). Albania's aspiring youth are ready to be "architects of their own lives" in a European future as the EU Youth Strategy envisions (European Commission, 2024) but they need the blueprints and knowledge to do so.

Awareness and Engagement with EU-Financed Programs

An important dimension of youth engagement with the EU is participation in EU-funded opportunities such as Erasmus+ exchanges, European Solidarity Corps volunteering, Horizon Europe research projects, Creative Europe, and other youth initiatives. These programs represent tangible ways young people can experience Europe and benefit from EU resources. This section assesses how aware Albanian youth are of these programs and to what extent they have participated, and it integrates comparative insights from European surveys on inclusion and barriers in such programs.

Awareness of EU youth programs among Albanian respondents is relatively widespread but not universal. About 69% report being aware of at least one EU program for youth, while roughly 31% say they are not aware of any such opportunities. This one-third uninformed segment indicates a communication gap. Among specific programs, Erasmus+ (education and training) is by far the best known (61%). This tracks with Erasmus+ being the EU's flagship youth program and perhaps the most actively promoted. By contrast, other programs have much lower visibility: Creative Europe (13%), European Solidarity Corps (12%), Horizon Europe (11%), and others (4%). These figures show that Erasmus+ dominates the awareness landscape, whereas many newer or specialized initiatives fly under the radar of most Albanian youth.

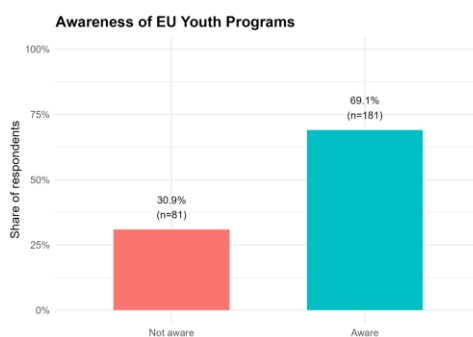


Figure 15. Overall Awareness of EU Youth Programs *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264].*
Percentage of respondents aware of at least one EU youth program: 69% Aware, 31% Not Aware.

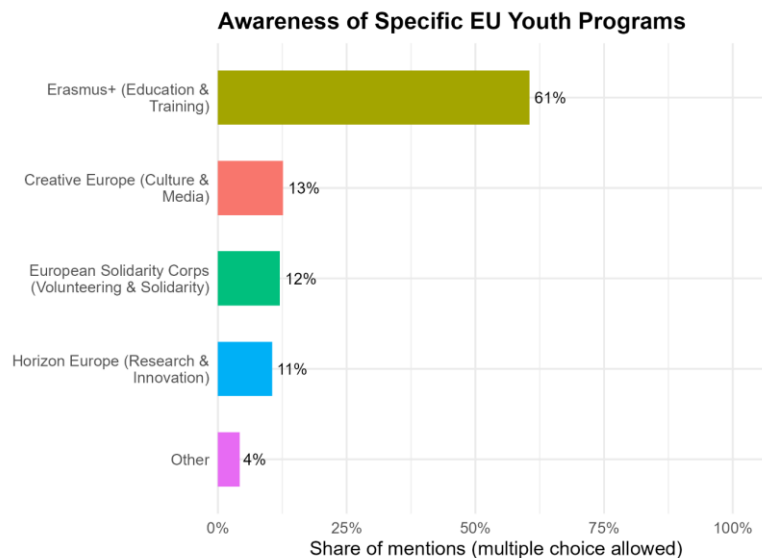


Figure 16. Awareness Levels of Specific EU Programs Among Albanian Youth *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[insert sample size]. Programs: Erasmus+ (61%), Creative Europe (13%), European Solidarity Corps (12%), Horizon Europe (11%), Others (4%).*

Participation in EU programs is even more limited. Overall, only 37% of youth surveyed have participated in at least one EU-funded program or opportunity, while 63% have not participated in any. Notably, awareness strongly predicts participation: among those who were aware of programs, 48% had participated in something, whereas among those unaware, only 14% managed to participate (likely via indirect invitations or school programs without knowing the EU connection). A chi-square test confirms a significant relationship between awareness and participation ($\chi^2 = 27.6$, $p < 0.001$), with a medium-strength association (Cramer's $V = 0.325$). In practical terms, youth who know about EU programs are over 3 times more likely to participate than those who do not. This is hardly surprising: without awareness, participation is almost impossible. It nonetheless highlights how critical communication remains.

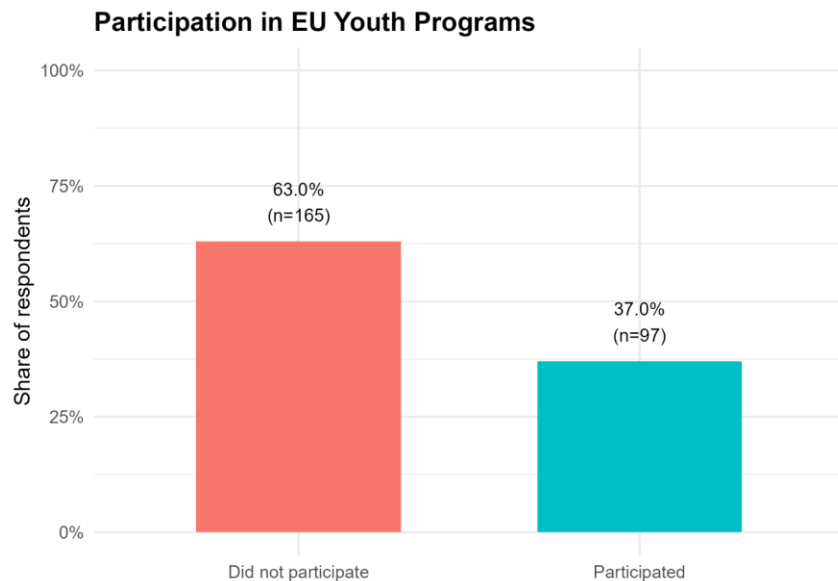


Figure 17. Overall Participation in EU-Funded Programs *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Percentage of respondents who have participated in at least one EU program: 37% Participated, 63% Not Participated.*

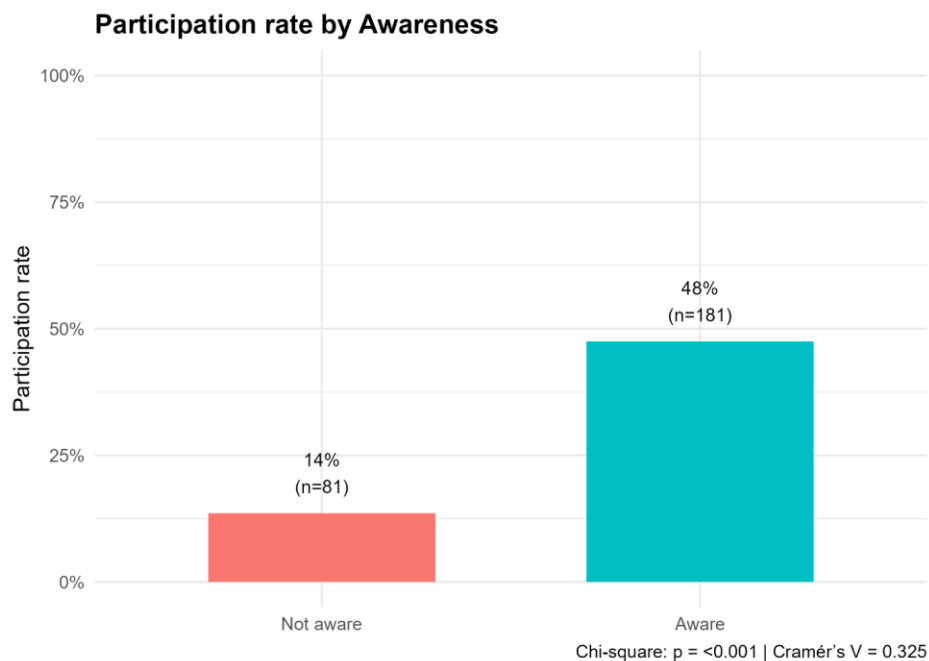


Figure 18. Participation Rate in EU Programs by Awareness Status *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Participation rate among aware youth: 48%; among unaware youth: 14%. $\chi^2 = 27.6, p < 0.001^{**}$, Cramer's $V = 0.325^{**}$*

The large gap between the 69% awareness and 37% participation also suggests that knowing about opportunities does not always translate into accessing them. Barely over half of those aware actually participated, indicating that significant barriers or mismatches persist even for interested youth.

Indeed, the conversion rate from awareness to action appears low, hinting at barriers such as limited accessibility, eligibility hurdles, financial constraints, or lack of mentorship. As the data notes, awareness without support is not enough "knowledge into action" is a hurdle for many. Only about one-third of all youth benefited from EU programs, while two-thirds did not, despite a solid majority knowing about them. Many youths may perceive these opportunities as out of reach due to cost, language, academic competition, or simply not knowing how to apply. The survey findings explicitly point to "significant barriers in participation such as accessibility, eligibility, and motivation" limiting engagement. Albanian youth might be aware of Erasmus+ in theory but lack the resources (e.g. funding for living abroad) or confidence to pursue it. Others might not meet specific criteria or deadlines and thus miss out.

This pattern is not unique to Albania, it resonates with *Europe-wide evidence on mobility gaps*. The Erasmus Student Network's ESNsurvey XV (2024), a comprehensive study with over 23,000 student responses across Europe, put a spotlight on inclusion and non-mobile youth. In that survey, 3,064 non-mobile students (those who had not gone abroad) were specifically asked why they hadn't participated in mobility (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). The results confirmed that financial constraints and lack of information are the top barriers keeping students from going abroad (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). Many students simply cannot afford the costs of an exchange (even with an Erasmus grant), or they don't have enough information/support to navigate the opportunity (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). The ESNsurvey XV report highlights that insufficient funding remains a significant obstacle: 35.6% of students Europe-wide said their Erasmus grant didn't cover living costs, and most students rely on personal savings or work to finance their mobility (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). A key takeaway was that some students face financial constraints so severe that they are entirely excluded from studying abroad (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). In addition to money, non-mobile youth in the ESN study cited lack of

information or guidance as a reason for not pursuing mobility (Erasmus Student Network, 2024) echoing the dynamic we see in Albania's awareness vs. participation gap.

These findings carry an implicit lesson: raising awareness is a necessary first step, but lowering practical barriers is equally vital to increase participation. Albanian youth are relatively aware of EU programs (especially Erasmus+), and our data showed awareness triples the likelihood of participation. This suggests that continued outreach through universities, Europe Direct information centers, youth networks, and social media could bring more young people to the threshold of participation. However, to push them over that threshold, support mechanisms are needed. This could mean providing additional financial aid or top-up scholarships for students with fewer means, simplifying application procedures and providing hands-on guidance, and offering flexible or shorter-term mobility options. The EU is in fact moving in this direction by promoting short-term "blended" mobilities that combine a brief period abroad with virtual exchange, making it easier for those who cannot leave for long periods or have family/job commitments to still get international exposure. Under the new Erasmus+ program design (2021–2027), university students can do mobilities as short as 5–30 days if combined with online components a format explicitly intended to be inclusive for those who might otherwise not participate (European Commission, n.d.). These innovations address the exact issues identified in both the ESN survey and our Albanian data.

In summary, Albanian youth are aware of EU opportunities at a moderate to high rate (roughly two-thirds), and many are interested, yet actual participation is much lower (37%) due to various bottlenecks. Awareness itself greatly boosts the chance of participation, underscoring the need for better communication and outreach. But beyond awareness, tackling the barriers financial, informational, logistical is crucial. The Europe-wide evidence (ESNs survey XV) shows that without adequate funding and support, significant portions of youth will remain on the sidelines of flagship programs (Erasmus Student Network, 2024). Policymakers should therefore focus on both diversifying program visibility (so more than just Erasmus+ is known) and making programs more inclusive. This could involve: increasing grant amounts or providing cost-of-living stipends (the Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation and youth organizations have called for this, given many students report grants are insufficient) (Erasmus Student Network, 2024); offering training and mentoring to help students from underrepresented groups apply; and strengthening promotion of

opportunities in local communities and high schools (since our findings and an EUTEAM survey in four countries found that 87% of youths could not name a single EU-funded project in their community, indicating very limited local outreach so far) (Centrul Român de Politici Europene, 2025). By boosting both awareness and accessibility, Albania can improve youth engagement with EU programs which in turn creates a generation with first-hand European experiences and stronger pro-EU attitudes.

In line with the EU Youth Strategy's "Connect" objective, which encourages connecting youth across the EU and beyond, it will be important to ensure that Albanian young people can access exchange and volunteer programs on an equal footing (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). Such experiences not only build skills but also increase young people's sense of European identity and civic activism. The ESNsurvey XV noted that after going abroad, students felt a stronger connection to Europe and the world, and an increased sense of belonging to the EU (ESNsurvey XV, 2024). These are exactly the kinds of outcomes that can cement long-term public support for integration. Thus, narrowing the participation gap in EU programs is both a social inclusion imperative and a strategic investment in Albania's European future.

Youth Awareness of EU Foreign Affairs

Beyond domestic EU developments and programs, it is enlightening to see how Albanian youth view the EU's external role that is, the EU as a global actor in foreign policy, security, development aid, trade, and regional affairs. This section explores youth awareness in Albania of the EU's actions in security and defense and development/humanitarian aid, as well as their opinions on EU trade agreements and their expected impact on Albania's economy. Understanding these perceptions is important because EU membership is not only about internal reforms; it also means aligning with the EU's foreign policy and values on the world stage. We also integrate references to EU initiatives that specifically involve youth in foreign affairs, which provide context for engaging young people in this domain.

Awareness of EU Security/Defense and Development/Humanitarian Initiatives

When asked about the EU's role and activities in security and defense policy, Albanian youth responses were quite mixed. Only about 39% could be considered in the "aware" category

(answering that they are quite or very aware of what the EU does in security and defense), whereas roughly 31% admitted low awareness (14% "not at all" + 17% "slightly" aware). The largest single group around 30% chose a neutral stance. This sizable neutral group likely reflects uncertainty or ambivalence, i.e. they are not confident enough in their knowledge to say they are aware, but they don't outright say they know nothing.

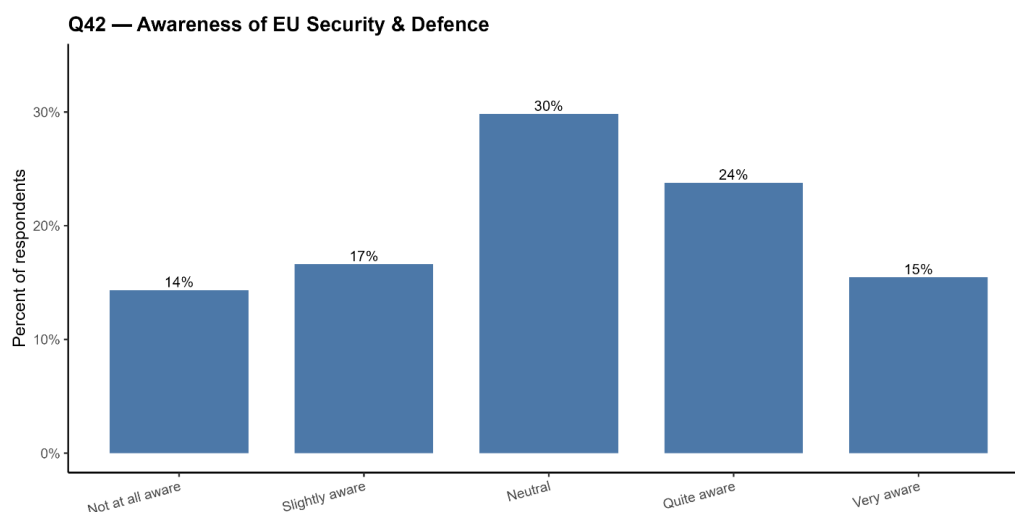


Figure 19. Youth Awareness of EU Security and Defense Policies *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Awareness scale: Not at all aware, Slightly aware, Neutral, Quite aware, Very aware. 39% aware (quite + very), 31% low awareness, 30% neutral.*

A similar pattern emerged for awareness of EU efforts in development cooperation and humanitarian aid: about 37% claimed to be at least quite aware, 31% said they were not/slightly aware, and about 32% were neutral. In both cases, only around two in five youth seem to have substantial information, while the rest either lack knowledge or aren't sure. The neutrality being the largest category is telling it suggests many young people have not formed a clear impression of the EU's foreign policy roles, likely due to low exposure to these topics.

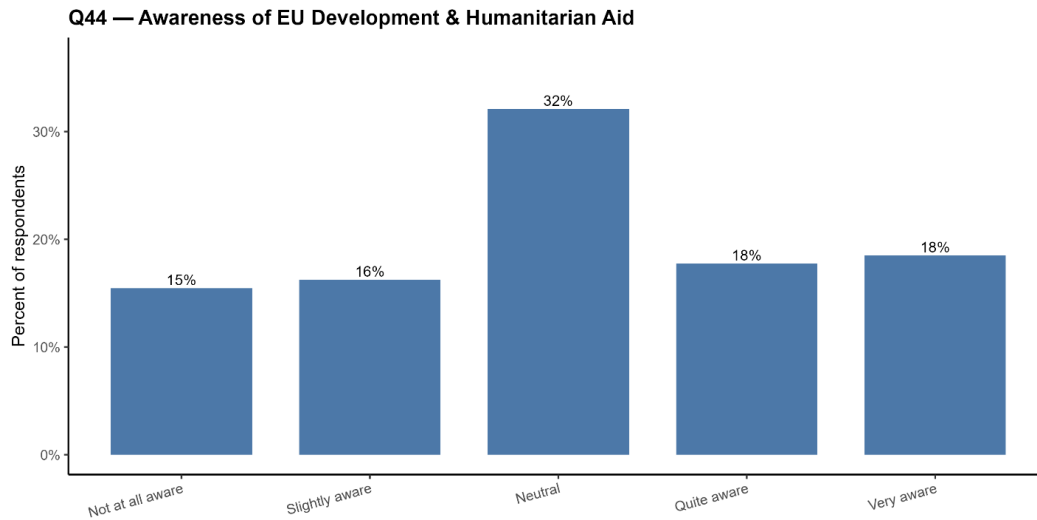


Figure 20. Youth Awareness of EU Development and Humanitarian Aid Programs *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Awareness scale: Not at all aware, Slightly aware, Neutral, Quite aware, Very aware. 37% aware, 31% low awareness, 32% neutral.*

When the two policy areas are compared; security and defense on one hand, development and humanitarian aid on the other awareness levels appear strikingly similar. There isn't a major difference in how youth perceive the EU's involvement in hard security versus soft power aid both are relatively vague to a majority. Importantly, the data did not show widespread negative perceptions; low awareness is not the same as disapproval, as most either don't know much or are generally positive if they do know. This indicates an opportunity: a "neutral majority" could potentially be educated and persuaded to appreciate the EU's contributions in these areas if given more information. The finding that neutral responses are the largest single category implies that much of the cohort is a blank slate regarding EU foreign policy.

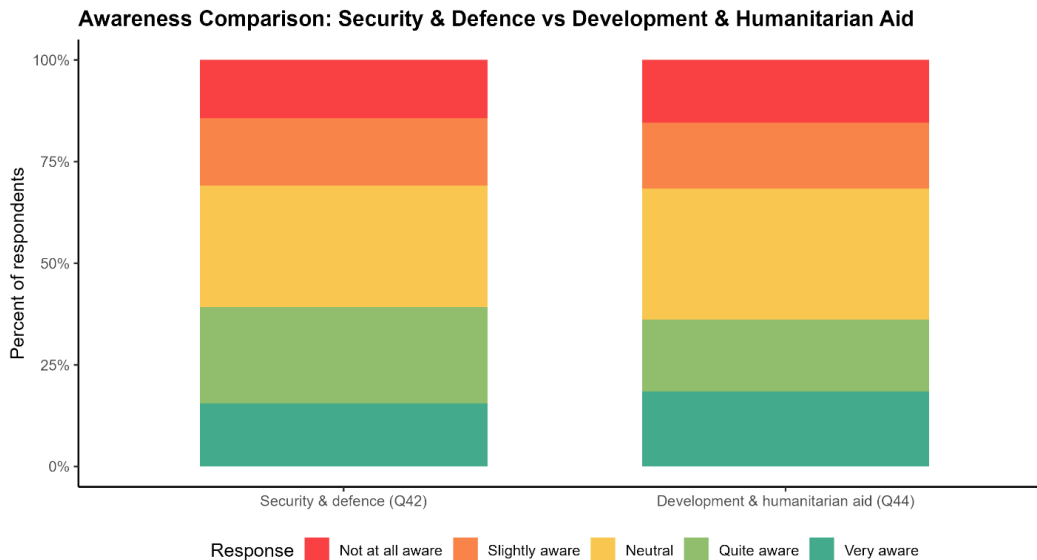


Figure 21. Comparative Awareness: EU Security/Defense vs. Development/Humanitarian Policies *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Side-by-side comparison showing similar distribution patterns across both policy areas.*

Such limited and uncertain knowledge of EU external action among youth is not surprising. Foreign policy tends to be a less tangible and more complex area than, say, education or travel opportunities that directly touch young people's lives. However, it is crucial as Albania prepares for EU accession that young citizens understand the EU's global role and how it might affect their country (peacekeeping missions, disaster response, development funds, etc.). Recognizing this, the EU has started initiatives to bridge the gap between Brussels' foreign policy and youth engagement. Notably, in October 2022 the EU adopted its first-ever Youth Action Plan in EU External Action (2022–2027) a landmark policy making young people "strategic partners" in the EU's foreign policy and international cooperation (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). This Youth Action Plan (YAP) extends the EU Youth Strategy to the global arena and explicitly aims to increase youth participation in external action for sustainable development, equality and peace (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). Under the YAP's "Partnership to Engage" pillar, the EU is establishing mechanisms for direct youth input into foreign policy. For example, the European Commission and External Action Service have created a Youth Sounding Board for International Partnerships, a group of young advisers from various countries who provide feedback on EU development programs (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). The YAP also calls for every EU

Delegation (embassy) in partner countries to set up youth advisory structures by 2027, so that local youth can regularly dialogue with EU diplomats (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). These efforts recognize that if youth are consulted and involved in shaping external actions, they will naturally become more aware of and invested in what the EU does abroad.

In the Western Balkans specifically, the EU has supported numerous youth cooperation and reconciliation initiatives to address the legacy of conflict and prepare these societies for a shared European future. An EU-funded multi-country program for youth in the Western Balkans explicitly aims to "contribute to reconciliation" by increasing regional cooperation opportunities for young people (European Commission, 2019). It boosts people-to-people exchanges (such as the RYCO Superschools, youth camps, conferences) and encourages youth to be involved in decision-making, while also improving young civil servants' knowledge of the EU enlargement process (European Commission, 2019). In practice, this has meant EU-backed Western Balkans Youth Forums, support for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and local workshops where youth from different countries tackle common issues (from dealing with the past to entrepreneurship). All these are part of a soft diplomacy strategy: engage youth across former divisions and connect them through European-oriented programs. For Albanian youth, participation in such regional initiatives (many funded by the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession) can increase their awareness of the EU's peace and cooperation role.

Despite these top-down efforts, our data shows that as of now, only a minority of Albanian youth feel well-informed about the EU's global activities. The relatively higher awareness (around 37–39% "top-2-box" aware) could include those studying in relevant fields (international relations, etc.) or who have been exposed to EU content via media or youth projects. Meanwhile, the majority either don't know or sit on the fence (neutral). From a communication standpoint, this is a call to action. As one interpretation, "neutral" respondents may be open to learning more they just lack exposure. Thus, targeted awareness-raising campaigns could focus on this neutral majority, as the data suggests. For example, informational campaigns and school/university debates might highlight what the EU does in disaster relief, or how EU security policy (like civilian missions in the Balkans) contributes to regional stability. Framing these abstract policies in local terms is key, e.g. explaining how EU humanitarian aid in crises can benefit Albanian communities (through

stability, less migration pressure, etc.), or how EU security initiatives relate to Albanian forces participating in missions.

Youth Views on EU Trade Agreements

In contrast to the lukewarm awareness of foreign policy, Albanian youth have much more concrete opinions on one external aspect: trade agreements between Albania and the EU¹. The survey asked whether they believe EU trade deals will positively impact Albania's economy, and the response was overwhelmingly optimistic. About 64% of young respondents think such agreements will have positive effects (35% "very positive" and 29% "slightly positive"). Another 24% are neutral or uncertain, and only 11% express a negative expectation (most of those just "slightly negative"). This indicates that, for the most part, youth see economic integration with the EU as beneficial. It is likely they associate EU trade with more jobs, investments, and growth opportunities for Albania; a perception that aligns with broader public opinion in Albania, which has long been very pro-EU membership for economic reasons.

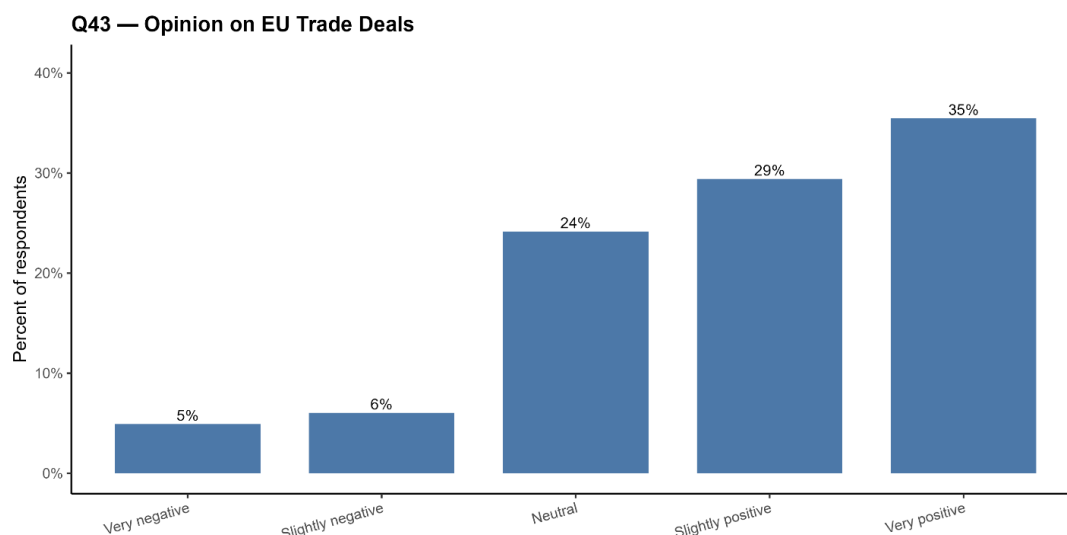


Figure 22. Youth Expectations of EU Trade Agreements' Impact on Albanian Economy *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Impact scale: Very negative, Slightly negative, Neutral, Slightly positive, Very positive. 64% positive (35% very + 29% slightly), 24% neutral, 11% negative.*

¹ Note: The survey question referred to **Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA)**, and **Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)**

This finding is important because it shows that economic aspects of EU integration are the most tangible and salient for young people. While foreign policy in terms of security or aid might seem distant or abstract, trade hits home perhaps through expectations of more foreign companies, better products, or chances for entrepreneurship. The strong majority viewing EU trade agreements positively stands in stark contrast to the limited awareness of EU security or aid roles. As the analysis notes, trade is seen as the dimension of EU integration with the highest perceived benefit. Indeed, many youth likely equate EU membership with the common market's advantages, easier movement of goods and people, and overall prosperity. Negativity is minimal, suggesting very few fear competition or adverse effects; the EU's economic appeal remains a powerful draw.

This optimism about trade can be a gateway to broader engagement. Since youth already value the EU's potential economic benefits, policymakers and communicators can start there to spark interest in other EU topics. For example, showcasing EU-funded infrastructure or investment projects in Albania could reinforce the idea that the EU brings tangible gains. From there, one could bridge into discussions about why the EU can invest because of its budget generated by a strong economy, which ties into how EU policies (regulatory standards, single market rules, etc.) function. In other words, economic optimism can be leveraged to broaden policy awareness: if youth are excited about trade and jobs, these can be entry points to talk about EU standards in governance, or EU programs in innovation, etc., which are part of the same integration process.

Another angle is that the EU itself is keenly aware of youth's economic aspirations. The 2023 Enlargement Package explicitly notes the focus on jobs and opportunities for youth, via instruments like the Youth Guarantee and the Economic and Investment Plan as mentioned (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2023; European Commission, 2019). If Albania continues to progress, young people expect membership to bring more trade and investment, validating their hopes. The EU has an interest in meeting these expectations to maintain support, which means emphasizing deliverables like funding for startups, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, etc., that directly link EU integration to youth economic empowerment.

Overall, the findings in this section suggest a disconnection: Albanian youth strongly value the EU's economic role (trade, market access) but are relatively uninformed about its geopolitical or foreign aid roles. They are confident that EU integration will boost Albania's economy, yet many remain neutral or unaware of how the EU contributes to security or global development. This

mirrors a common phenomenon where citizens see the EU mainly as an economic project, not a political or security union. For Albanian accession to be fully supported, bridging this knowledge gap is advisable. Otherwise, there's a risk that support is "a mile wide but an inch deep" high-level enthusiasm without understanding of all that EU membership entails (like aligning with EU foreign policy positions, participating in EU missions, contributing to EU aid budgets, etc.).

For policymakers and educators, a two-pronged approach can be derived: leverage the economic optimism (since 64% positive on trade is a very strong mandate) to keep youth engaged and supportive, and educate on foreign policy by linking it to everyday impacts. For instance, discussions could highlight how EU security initiatives in the Balkans create a safer environment for tourism and business, or how EU humanitarian actions reflect values of solidarity that benefit all. The EU's new Youth Action Plan in External Action is precisely about making foreign policy relevant to youth by involving them and highlighting issues they care about (e.g. climate action, human rights) in external partnerships (European Commission & EEAS, 2022; European Movement International, 2024). Additionally, concrete programs like the EU's Youth Sounding Boards and youth delegate programs to the UN (introduced under the Youth Action Plan) give young people channels to directly engage with international policy (European Commission & EEAS, 2022). If Albanian youth participate in such frameworks, their awareness and interest in foreign affairs should naturally rise.

In conclusion, Albanian youth currently show limited knowledge and ambivalence about the EU's foreign affairs role in areas like security and aid, but strong confidence in the EU's economic benefits for Albania. This highlights that the EU is seen foremost as an economic engine by young people, while its global political roles are less understood. Bridging this divide is an opportunity: by capitalizing on the economic narrative to draw attention, and by introducing youth-centric foreign policy initiatives (like dialogues and exchanges focused on EU external action), stakeholders can deepen young citizens' holistic understanding of the EU. Given that these youth will soon be voters and possibly policymakers in a (hopefully) EU-member Albania, cultivating a well-rounded perception of the EU as not only a market, but also a community of values with a security and humanitarian dimension is strategically important. The youth awareness findings here imply a homework assignment for communicators: turn that 30% "neutral" on foreign policy into informed supporters by showing how seemingly distant EU actions abroad connect back to

Albanian and youth interests. The precedent of high support for trade suggests that, once the connection is made clear, young Albanians are likely to appreciate the broader EU role as well.

Policy Impact Perceptions

This section explores how young people in Albania *perceive the country's progress toward meeting the EU's membership criteria and what they expect the impact of EU integration will be on various sectors of society*. It covers (a) youth opinions on Albania's current progress in fulfilling EU requirements, (b) their expectations of how EU membership will influence key areas like governance, education, employment, economy, culture, etc., and (c) which challenges they believe are the main obstacles in the integration process. These perceptions matter because they reflect youth's confidence (or lack thereof) in reforms and their hopes or concerns about EU accession. We will also relate these views to EU and regional benchmarks, such as priorities identified in enlargement policy and youth perspectives in other candidate countries.

Perception of Albania's Progress in Meeting EU Criteria

Albanian youth are split in their assessment of how well Albania is doing in meeting EU accession criteria (the political, economic, and legislative standards required). The overall distribution of responses shows a near-even three-way division: about 36.4% of youth believe Albania is making progress, 33% believe the country is not making progress, and 30.7% say they are unsure (neither agree nor disagree that progress is happening). This balance of cautious optimism, skepticism, and uncertainty indicates that the integration process is not clearly felt or observed by a large portion of youth. While slightly more are positive than negative, the differences are small, and the high uncertainty suggests many young people either lack information on the reforms or have seen mixed signals.

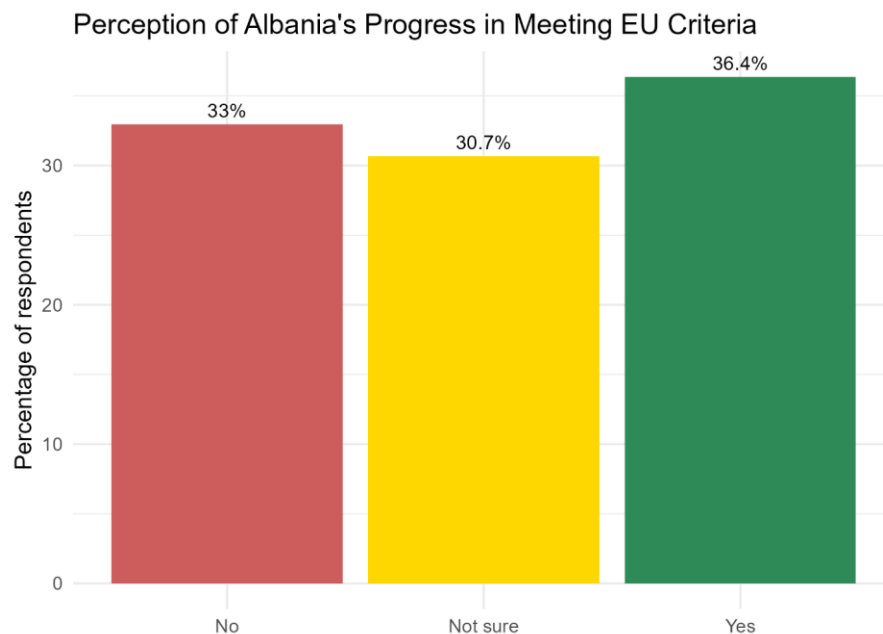


Figure 23. Youth Perception of Albania's Progress in Meeting EU Criteria *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Response distribution: 36.4% see progress, 33% see no progress, 30.7% unsure.*

There is an interesting age pattern: optimism increases with age. Among older youth (25–29), around 40.8% say Albania is making progress on EU criteria, the highest optimistic share of any age group. They may have more exposure to institutional changes or be in the workforce where they notice EU-related improvements. In contrast, the youngest group (15–19) is quite polarized: 36% of them see no progress, and an equal 36% do see progress, with the rest unsure. This polarization among teens could stem from some being idealistic and others being disillusioned (perhaps reflecting differences in education or media consumption even within that group). Those in the middle (20–24) have the largest proportion of "not sure" responses (about 36% unsure). Many in this cohort are university students or early jobseekers, who might feel they don't have enough evidence to judge national progress or they see slow movement and thus hesitate to commit to a view. Notably, the oldest youth (closer to 30) are the least uncertain (only 24.5% unsure), implying that with a bit more life experience, young people form a firmer opinion one way or another.

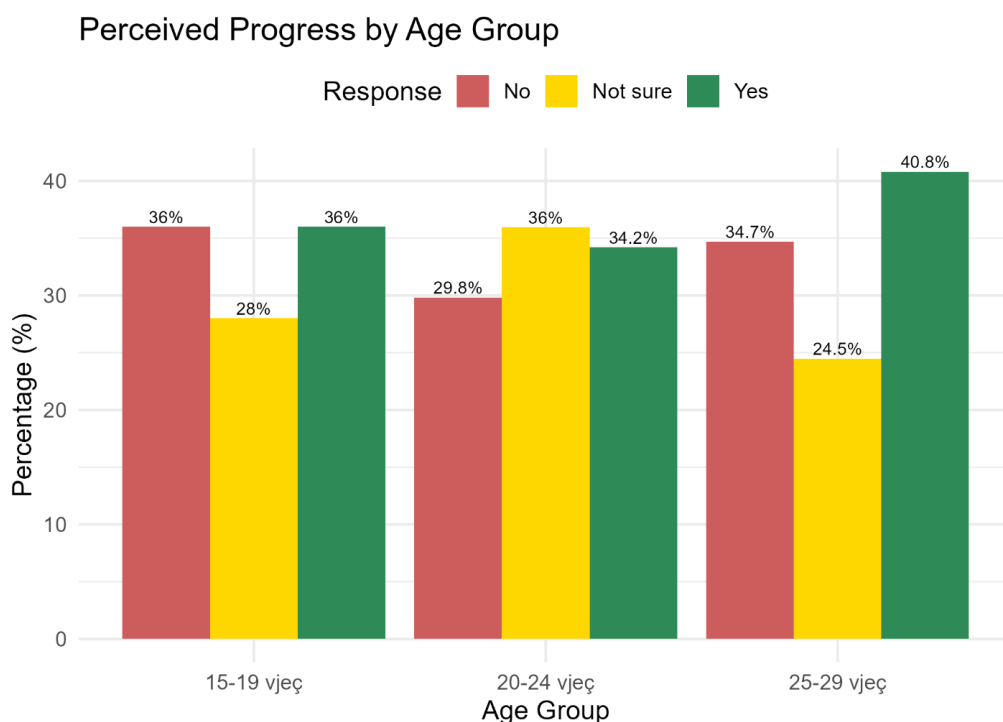


Figure 24. Perceived Progress in Meeting EU Criteria by Age Group *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Age gradient visible: 40.8% optimism among 25-29 age group vs. polarized views in 15-19 group.*

These perceptions reflect the reality that Albania's EU accession journey has been long and often stalled by governance issues, which can breed skepticism. The fact that one-third of young people think there's no progress likely ties to daily frustrations (e.g. ongoing corruption, political strife) that make EU-related reforms invisible or not credible to them. On the flip side, the slightly larger third that sees progress might cite things like the opening of accession negotiations in 2022, recent justice reforms, or infrastructure improvements supported by the EU. The substantial "undecided" group highlights a communication issue: perhaps many youths do not recall any clear indicators of progress, which suggests that achievements (when they occur) may not be well publicized or tangible in their lives.

For policymakers, this highlights an evident gap between reform efforts and public visibility. If a reform happens in line with EU criteria say, a new anti-corruption body is set up, or an

environmental law is passed it needs to be visible to the public for them to acknowledge progress. The near-even split in positive vs. negative perceptions could be shifted toward optimism if success stories were effectively conveyed and if youth felt the changes in their communities (for example, an EU-funded project improving their school). The European Commission's Enlargement Reports often note areas of progress (e.g. digitalization improvements, some judicial changes) along with shortfalls. Bridging the gap between those technical reports and youth public perception is crucial. It might involve youth-friendly summaries of the annual EU progress report, town-hall meetings involving young people, or youth-led monitoring of reforms to increase transparency.

It's worth noting that the Enlargement Package 2023 specifically highlighted youth-related reforms as well. As mentioned earlier, Western Balkan governments, including Albania, have started Youth Guarantee schemes to tackle youth unemployment by mid-2023, several had pilot programs operational (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2023). This is exactly the kind of concrete initiative that, if communicated well, could make young people feel progress: the sense that "the government is doing something about youth job prospects in line with EU models." If 36% currently don't see progress, perhaps they are not aware of steps like these. Additionally, the focus on education reform under the EU's investment plan (European Commission, 2019) can yield visible improvements (curriculum updates, vocational training projects) that youth might notice. The gap between perception and reality can sometimes be closed by better outreach and by including youth in the reform process (e.g. youth observers in anti-corruption efforts, student feedback in education changes).

Expected Impact of EU Integration by Sector

When asked how they expect EU integration (future EU membership) to influence various sectors in Albania, youth responses reveal high hopes, especially for improvements in *governance, education, and employment*. These three sectors were seen as likely to change "for the better" by a majority of respondents:

Governance (i.e. the functioning of institutions, rule of law) had the strongest positive expectations. A majority of youth predicted "very positive" change in governance from EU membership. This likely reflects a belief that EU accession will force Albania to improve its democracy, reduce corruption, and strengthen the rule of law, essentially that the EU will demand

cleaner governance, which many Albanians yearn for. Given corruption was cited as the top obstacle to integration (discussed below), it makes sense that youth simultaneously see EU accession as a cure for that ailment.

Employment prospects are also seen as a big winner from EU integration. Many young people expect EU membership to create job opportunities whether through foreign investment, access to the EU labor market, or economic growth. The data showed "employment" rated highly positive by a large share of youth. This aligns with Albania's high youth unemployment and underemployment; the EU is perceived as opening doors for work, both at home (via more investors, funding for enterprises) and abroad (the freedom to work in any EU country).

Education is another area of high optimism. Youth expect that joining the EU will improve academic standards and opportunities. This could be due to prospects of more funding for schools, Erasmus exchanges becoming even more accessible, or recognition of Albanian diplomas in Europe. The idea that EU membership acts as a quality stamp on education and brings modernization to curricula is a common positive narrative.

Other sectors like economy and culture are also viewed positively but with slightly more nuance. The economy in general is expected to improve, though youth gave a bit more mixed responses (some neutral or slight negatives) compared to governance or education. Perhaps some are cautious that economic reforms can be painful or that EU competition might hurt local businesses initially but largely, the sentiment is still positive. Cultural exchange and opportunities are also seen with high optimism. Many youth foresee greater cultural exchange, travel, and broadening of horizons, essentially Albania becoming more cosmopolitan within Europe.

What's interesting is that governance had the most "very positive" responses. This underscores that young Albanians pin a lot of hope on the EU to fix entrenched governance problems at home. It's a faith that EU pressure or compliance with EU norms (on justice, administration, rights) will achieve what domestic politics alone has struggled to do. Whether this is realistic or not, it is a powerful expectation and one that EU institutions often encourage by emphasizing the transformative power of the accession process. If these expectations were not met post-accession, it could lead to disillusionment; thus, managing and working to fulfill these hopes is a responsibility for future leaders.

These perceptions align well with the EU's own prioritization in accession talks the EU does put heavy weight on governance (chapters 23/24, rule of law) and economic reforms. The optimism of youth is a positive sign, suggesting they will support tough reforms in those areas under the banner of EU accession, because they believe in the end goal. This mirrors regional findings: across the Western Balkans, youth consistently expect EU integration to improve both governance and economic conditions. (European Commission, 2019). The challenge is ensuring those expectations are guided and realistic. For instance, EU membership alone doesn't automatically create jobs; it provides a framework, but national policy will still matter. Civic education could play a role in explaining both the potential and the limits of what EU accession means for these sectors.

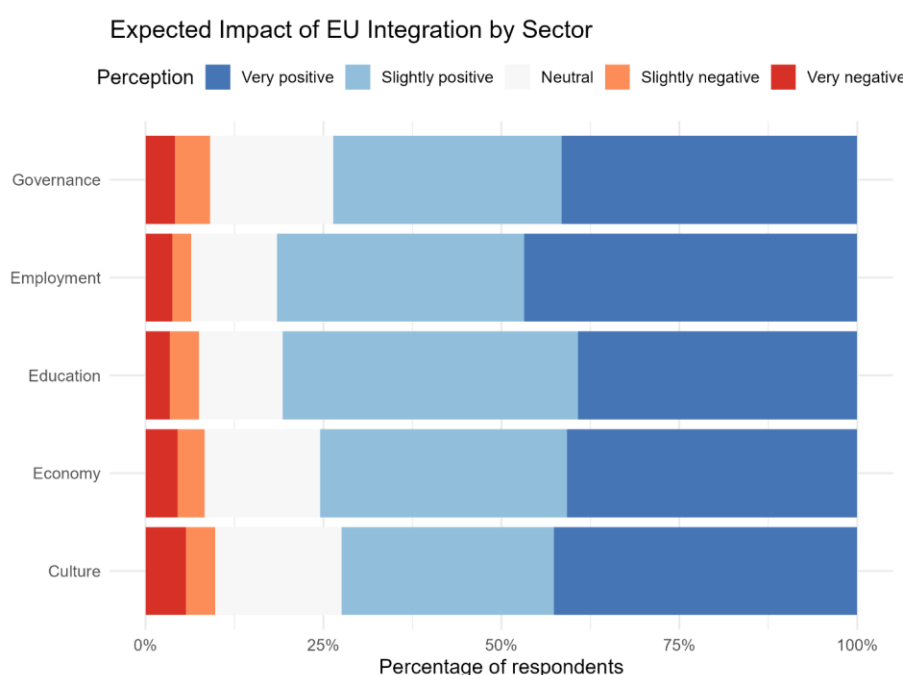


Figure 25. Expected Impact of EU Integration on Key Sectors *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Sectors evaluated: Governance, Employment, Education, Economy, Culture. Impact scale: Very negative to Very positive. Governance shows highest positive expectations.*

Main Challenges in the EU Integration Process

When asked "what is the biggest obstacle to Albania's EU integration?", corruption was far and away the top concern among youth (39.4%). This is a striking, though not unexpected, statistic it shows that nearly two out of five young people see internal governance failures (corruption, abuse of power) as the key thing holding Albania back from the EU. Indeed, corruption has been a consistent finding in national surveys as a top public concern, and the EU's reports also stress that tackling high-level corruption is essential for accession. The youth perspective here aligns perfectly with the EU's stance: without addressing corruption, integration can't succeed.

The next most cited challenges were political instability (21.1%) and economic reforms (20.2%), almost tying for second place. Political instability likely refers to the contentious domestic politics, frequent crises or protests, and lack of consistent policy implementation due to partisan fights all of which can slow EU-related reforms. Economic reforms, at 20%, indicates youth are also aware that the economy needs to meet certain criteria (competitive market, etc.) and that issues like unemployment, informality, or brain drain are hurdles. Social issues (which could include things like inequality, social inclusion, maybe youth flight) were noted by 19.2%, making them somewhat less pressing in youth's view than governance and economy. Social issues are important but, in terms of EU accession, youth might perceive them as secondary or as consequences of the bigger governance/economic problems.

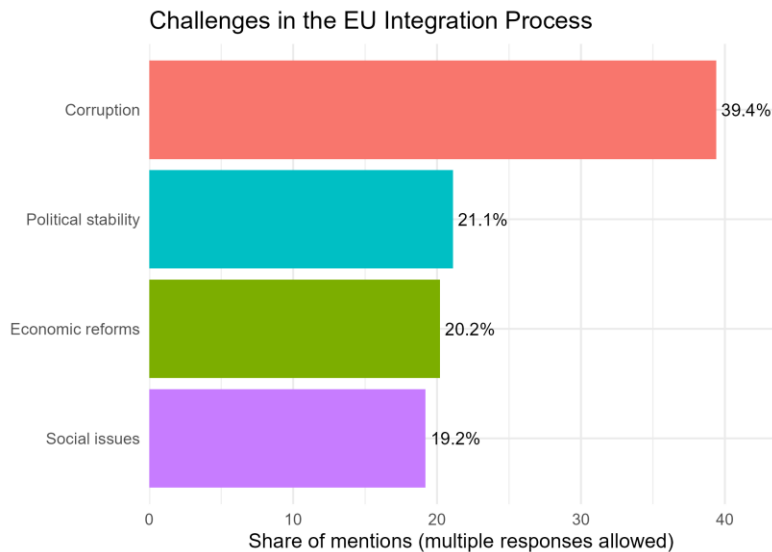


Figure 26. Youth-Identified Challenges to Albania's EU Integration Process *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Top challenges: Corruption (39.4%), Political instability (21.1%), Economic reforms (20.2%), Social issues (19.2%).*

These responses paint a picture that youth are quite clear-eyed about the hurdles: they predominantly see it as *Albania's own internal issues* (corruption, unstable politics, slow reforms) rather than, say, external bias or EU reluctance. In other words, they understand that "the ball is in our court" to do the homework for EU entry. This level of awareness is encouraging, as it suggests youth would support anti-corruption measures and reforms since they already pinpoint those as necessary. It also reinforces why they expect EU membership to improve governance: they see EU-driven reform as the solution to the corruption and political issues.

The strong focus on corruption and governance challenges among youth mirrors the priorities laid out by the EU in the Enlargement Communication and local EU delegation messaging. The EU consistently emphasizes rule of law, democratic institutions, and public administration reform as foundational. Youth recognizing these as challenges creates a convergence of understanding that could be harnessed: for instance, youth could be engaged in anti-corruption campaigns, watchdog activities (some NGOs have youth branches monitoring local government), etc. The Council of Europe/EU youth projects on youth activism or the recently formed National Youth Congress in Albania could mobilize this energy to demand better governance.

In summary of this section: Albanian youths remain cautiously optimistic about EU integration. They strongly believe EU membership will bring positive changes in governance, education, and jobs; essentially a better future but they are also aware that there are serious obstacles to overcome, chiefly corruption and political instability. Their opinions on whether progress is currently happening are mixed, showing both hope and frustration. This nuanced perspective hope in the EU's transformative potential, coupled with realism about Albania's current shortcomings can be interpreted as conditional support: youth will champion EU integration as long as it indeed addresses the issues they care about (corruption, jobs, education).

For policymakers, these insights imply a mandate to tackle governance issues head-on and to demonstrate tangible progress, or risk losing the youth's trust. The findings also highlight that integrating youth into the reform process can be beneficial. Since they identify the problems clearly, giving them a voice (e.g. youth councils advising on anti-corruption strategy, youth-inclusive policymaking as part of youth mainstreaming) could improve policy design and public buy-in. The EU institutions, on their side, should continue (and perhaps amplify) support for civil society and independent media that fight corruption, as these are crucial in meeting the expectations of Albanian youth.

In regional context, Albania's youth are not alone in these views. Surveys in other candidate states similarly show that young people pin hopes on the EU for democracy and jobs, but worry about domestic governance failures. This pan-European youth perspective has led the EU to stress a "youth-centered approach" to enlargement, arguing that sustainable and inclusive enlargement requires engaging youth and addressing their concerns (European Movement International, 2024). Our findings back that up: address the challenges (corruption, instability), and youth will be the strongest supporters and beneficiaries of Albania's European path. If challenges fester, youth could become disillusioned or apathetic. Right now, however, their stance can be summed up as cautious optimism with the caution tied to very concrete issues that can, in principle, be fixed through strong political will and EU-aligned reforms.

EU Values and Youth Participation in Integration

This section examines how Albanian youth relate to the values of the European Union and how that alignment (or lack thereof) translates into their willingness to engage in activities and

discussions about Albania's EU integration. Specifically, we look at (a) to what extent young people feel that the EU represents their values and aspirations, and (b) how willing they are to participate in pro-EU activities or dialogues. Understanding these aspects is important for figuring out how to mobilize youth as active contributors to Albania's EU accession journey.

Willingness to Join EU-Related Activities

The data shows a strong base of potential youth engagement: about 72% of young respondents said they are willing to participate in EU-related activities and discussions, whereas only 28% said they would not be willing. This indicates a large majority of youth are open to getting involved in some way be it attending an information session, joining a youth forum on EU matters, participating in a debate, volunteering for a pro-EU campaign, etc. Such willingness is a very positive sign; it suggests that youth are not apathetic about EU integration. In fact, given that earlier we saw 72% mirror the share who support EU membership in principle (value alignment discussed below), it appears there's a broad cohort of "EU-friendly" youth ready to act.

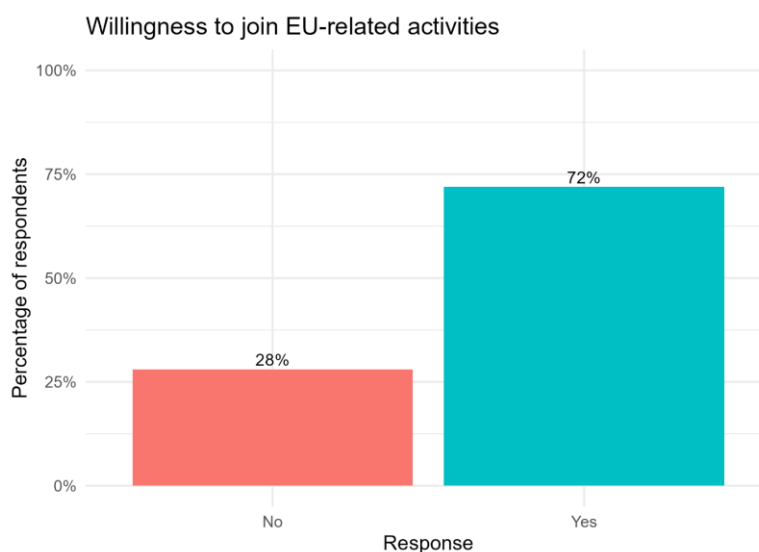


Figure 27. Willingness to Participate in EU-Related Activities and Discussions *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. 72% willing to participate, 28% not willing.*

This finding also aligns with anecdotal observations of high youth turnout in events like Europe Day celebrations, Erasmus alumni networks, and the activities of organizations like the National Youth Congress in Albania or Young European Ambassadors. It mirrors the European Year of Youth 2022 experience, during which many young people across Europe engaged in events and dialogues about the EU's future, signaling an appetite to be heard (European Commission, 2025). A 2022 Eurobarometer cited by an EUTEAM project also found 72% of young Europeans want decision-makers to listen to their demands and act on them (Centrul Român de Politici Europene, 2024)—the exact same proportion as here, interestingly. Albanian youth seem no different: roughly three-quarters want to do something relating to EU integration rather than just passively watch.

The 28% unwilling to engage cannot be ignored, however. They might include those disillusioned or feeling their voice doesn't matter, or simply not interested. It's important to understand their reasons: is it because they oppose EU integration (probably a small minority, since overall support for EU membership in Albania is very high) or because they are apathetic and don't see the point?! If it's apathy, then one needs to make engagement opportunities more appealing or relevant (e.g. cultural or sports angles tied to EU themes, not just formal discussions). If it's skepticism that youth input matters, then showing concrete effects of youth participation (like youth recommendations being adopted) could help.

Overall, though, a 72% willingness rate is a foundation to build on. Policymakers and civil society should capitalize on this readiness by creating more avenues for youth participation. This could range from local EU clubs in schools, youth consultations on specific EU-related policies (environment, digital, etc.), to including youth representatives in governmental EU integration structures. The EU's youth engagement instruments such as the EU Youth Dialogue, which operates in cycles and brings youth and officials together could be mirrored at the national level for Albania's integration topics. In fact, the Western Balkans have had "Youth Summits" alongside Berlin Process meetings where young people present recommendations on regional cooperation and EU integration. Ensuring Albanian youth have platforms to contribute ideas and volunteer in EU-related projects will harness that latent 72% goodwill into tangible support.

Perceptions of the EU Representing Youth Values

When it comes to values and aspirations, the majority of young Albanians see the EU in a positive light, though there is a sizeable neutral contingent. Specifically, 51% of youth agree that the EU represents their values and aspirations (26% strongly agree, 25% agree), while about 18% disagree (either strongly or somewhat). The remaining 31% are neutral. So overall, more than half lean towards "Yes, the EU embodies what I believe in or strive for," but a significant number either aren't sure or don't see a values connection.

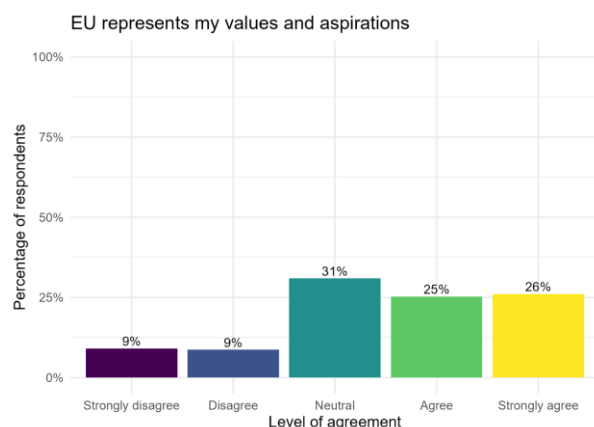


Figure 28. Youth Agreement that the EU Represents Their Values and Aspirations *Note: Data from Youth Survey on EU Awareness and Engagement, 2025. N=[264]. Agreement scale: Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. 51% agree (26% strongly + 25% agree), 31% neutral, 18% disagree.*

That more than half see their values reflected in the EU is encouraging. It suggests that concepts like democracy, human rights, freedom of movement, peace, and multiculturalism which are core EU values resonate with many Albanian youths. It also reflects the pro-European cultural orientation often noted in Albanian society (the country has consistently been one of the most pro-EU in the region). Youth likely view the EU as standing for opportunity, modernity, justice, and prosperity, which align with their personal aspirations for a better life and a better society. The neutral 31% possibly indicates uncertainty some youth might not be fully aware of what "EU values" specifically entail, or they might have mixed feelings (e.g. they like some aspects of the EU but not others). The 18% who disagree could include those with nationalist or traditionalist views who feel EU social values conflict with theirs, or simply skeptics who feel the EU is more rhetoric than action on values.

It's notable that the positive-to-negative ratio is roughly 3:1, implying there is broad identification with European values among youth. This bodes well for Albania's European future.

Taken together, the data show that most young Albanians see themselves reflected in the EU not only through its programs and opportunities, but also through its core values. Meanwhile, a significant minority remain on the fence or unconvinced, highlighting an area for further engagement and dialogue. Strengthening value-based connections through education on what the EU stands for, and through showcasing how European values translate into concrete benefits and protections could convert more of the neutral group into enthusiastic supporters. Given Albania's long-standing aspiration to join the EU, having a youth population that broadly shares European values is a positive indicator for the country's integration journey. Integrating youth voices and addressing their concerns will be key to sustaining this pro-European outlook as Albania moves closer to EU membership.

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