



Policy Paper Series

**Bridging the trust gap: Youth perceptions on the
Fundamentals of EU integration**

Albania Youth Perceptions Survey on EU

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Introduction and Background

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.

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.

Thematic Analysis Introduction

This section presents the thematic interpretation of the findings from the 2025 ESN Tirana Survey on Youth Perceptions of EU Integration, with a particular emphasis on *Cluster 1: The Fundamentals*. The views of Albanian youth concerning the rule of law, judicial reform, and public administration reform are organized into distinct thematic areas that reflect the main patterns emerging from the data. Each theme is analyzed in relation to the EU's core policy frameworks and normative principles guiding enlargement, ensuring that the interpretation of survey data is grounded in policy-relevant contexts.

By linking empirical evidence with policy documentation, and reform priorities, the analysis seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how young people in Albania perceive the foundations of EU integration. The section further aims to draw meaningful connections between youth attitudes and the broader policy environment, identifying insights that can inform more inclusive and youth-responsive reform strategies.

European values

Albanian youth are increasingly exposed to European values through multiple channels, including media, government policy initiatives, and various EU-supported programs such as workshops, cultural events, and organizations promoting intercultural exchange. The launch of Cluster 1: Fundamentals on 15 October 2024 emphasized democratic principles and the development of a robust public administration underpinned by effective democratic institutions and an independent judiciary. These objectives articulate a vision of Albanian society grounded in the values of the European Union.

Survey findings reveal strong normative support for EU membership and European values among young Albanians. A clear majority of respondents consider EU membership either important or very important, with overall interest in integration notably high. Furthermore, a significant portion of youth express alignment with core European values such as justice, fairness, and equality.

The significance of youth alignment with EU ethical standards is emphasized in EU

policy frameworks. For instance, the *EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027* emphasizes the centrality of young people’s commitment to democratic participation and European values in fostering social cohesion. Similarly, *the Charter on Youth and Democracy* by the European Committee of the Regions highlights that sustainable democratic governance requires youth to feel both represented and empowered.

In the Albanian context, the survey results suggest that youth endorsement of European ideals provides a solid foundation for supporting judicial and administrative reforms, indicating that young people are likely to be key stakeholders in the implementation of EU-driven governance initiatives.

The Trust Gap

The accession process for the Western Balkans particularly under *Cluster 1*—prioritizes rule of law and anti-corruption reforms. EU conditionality links financial and political support to measurable reform progress. However, scholars have identified phenomena such as *stabilitocracy* and *fake compliance*, where formal commitments are not matched by genuine implementation. This disconnect fosters a persistent gap between policy adoption and practical outcomes.

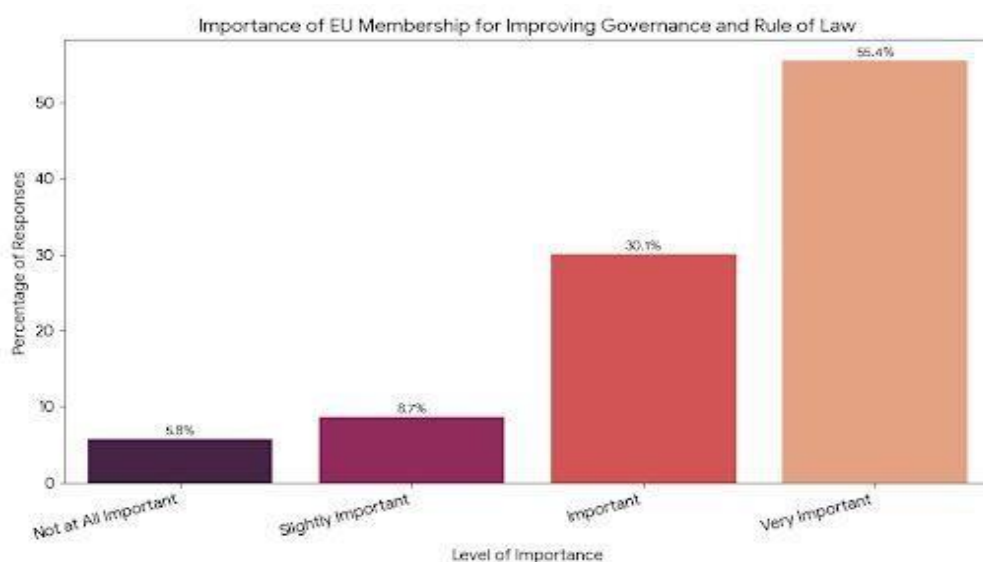


Figure 1. Importance of EU Membership for Improving Governance and Rule of Law

Note: Data from Governance Perception Survey, 2025. $N = [264]$. Respondents rated how important EU membership is for improving governance and the rule of law. 56.4% consider it *very important*, 30.1% *important*, 8.7% *slightly important*, and 5.8% *not at all important*.

Survey data indicate that Albanian youth are highly aware of this implementation gap. This is evident in the 13.7 percentage-point discrepancy between the proportion of youth who rate EU membership as “very important” for rule of law reforms (55.4%) and those who expect EU integration to have a “very positive” impact on the rule of law (41.7%). Furthermore, 58.3% of respondents selected an option other than “very positive” regarding the anticipated impact of EU integration on reforms, reflecting a notable lack of trust in the political will of national elites.

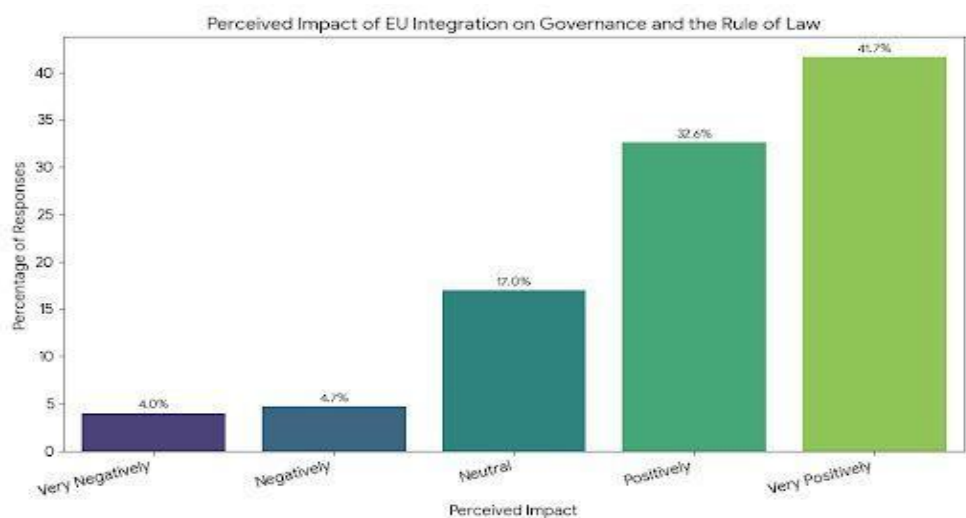


Figure 2. Perceived Impact of EU Integration on Governance and the Rule of Law

Note: Data from Governance Perception Survey, 2025. $N = [264]$. Respondents assessed how EU integration affects governance and the rule of law. 41.7% view the impact as *very positive*, 32.6% *positive*, 17.0% *neutral*, 4.7% *negative*, and 4.0% *very negative*.

The results suggest that while Albanian youth recognize the importance of rule of law reforms, their confidence diminishes when assessing whether these reforms will be realized in practice.

From the youth perspective, *the EU is perceived as a guarantor of reforms*, whereas national institutions and government actors are perceived as unreliable drivers of implementation.

Anti-Corruption Test

Corruption is widely recognized in EU enlargement policy as the primary barrier to democratic consolidation and economic alignment with EU standards in the Western Balkans. Within *Cluster 1, Chapter 5 (Public Procurement) and Chapter 32 (Financial Control)* are specifically designed to curb the misuse of public funds, a principal source of elite corruption. EU assessments consistently emphasize the need for Albania to demonstrate measurable progress in tackling high-level corruption.

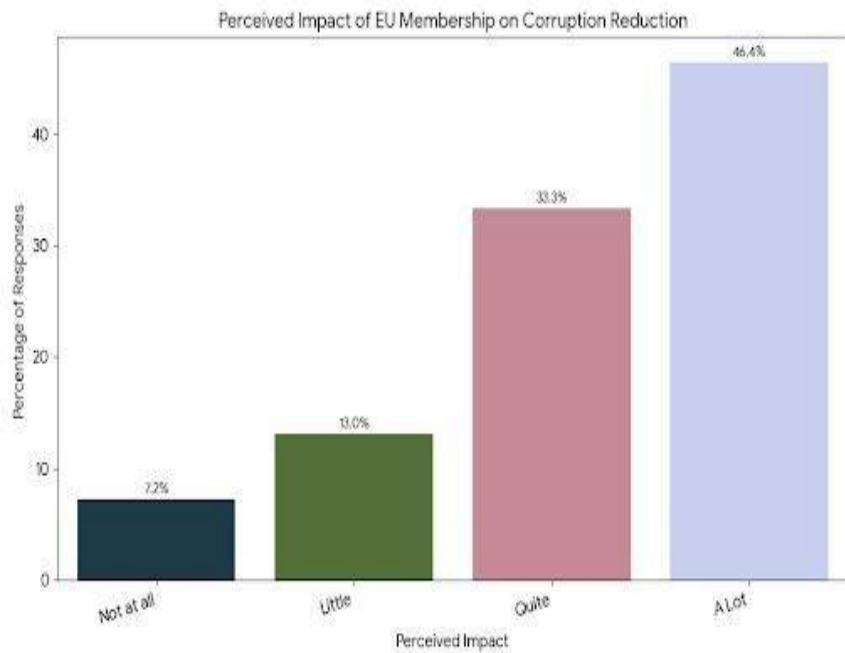


Figure 3. Perceived Impact of EU Membership on Corruption Reduction

Note: Data from Governance Perception Survey, 2025. $N = [264]$. Respondents evaluated how EU membership contributes to reducing corruption. 46.1% believe it helps *a lot*, 33.3% *quite*, 13.0% *a little*, and 7.7% *not at all*.

Survey findings indicate that Albanian youth attach significant importance to anti-corruption reforms. Across three policy impact questions, 46.4% of respondents anticipated “a lot” of impact on corruption reduction, identifying anti-corruption

measures as their top reform priority. This alignment between youth priorities and EU benchmarks underlines the political salience of anti-corruption as both a reform driver and a test of credibility.

Interestingly, the survey data reveal that negative perceptions regarding the expected impact of corruption reduction are lower than those associated with other reforms. This pattern indicates greater youth confidence in EU anti-corruption mechanisms, such as the *Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK)*, compared to other institutional reforms. These results provide important insights for policymakers, highlighting that anti-corruption efforts constitute a key avenue for building trust and legitimacy among young Albanians.

Citizen-Centric Services

Public Administration Reform (PAR), formally included in the Cluster 1 agenda, aims to establish an accountable, transparent, and effective public administration capable of implementing the acquis and delivering high-quality, citizen-oriented services. EU policy, reinforced through instruments such as the *Sector Reform Contract for PAR*, emphasizes strengthening local governance units to enhance service delivery, accountability, and public trust.

Research on youth attitudes in the Western Balkans shows that dissatisfaction with public services and local administration is a key driver of emigration and civic disengagement, underscoring the importance of tangible improvements at the local level to legitimize broader reform efforts and sustain public confidence in EU-driven governance reforms.

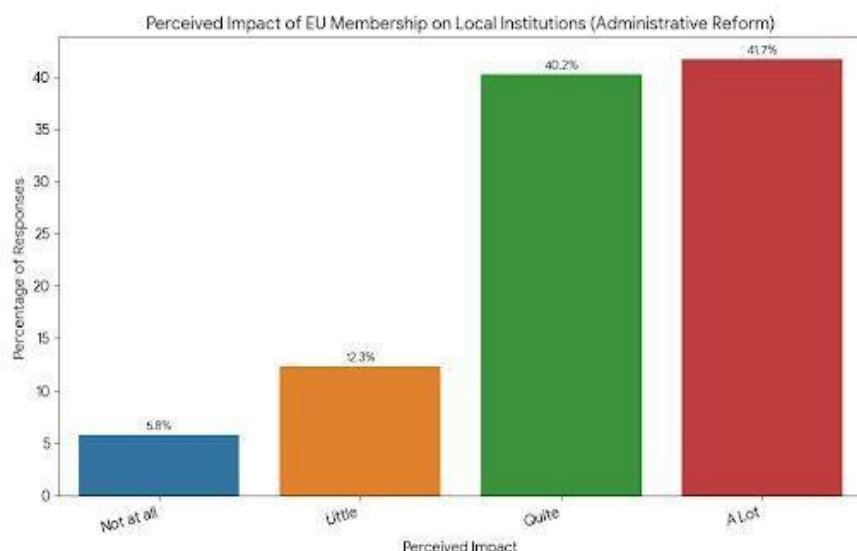


Figure 4. Perceived Impact of EU Membership on Local Institutions (Administrative Reform)

Note: Data from Local Governance Perception Survey, 2025. N = [insert actual number of respondents]. Respondents assessed the anticipated impact of EU membership on administrative reform at the local level. Overall, 82% perceive a positive impact (40.2% “quite” + 41.7% “a lot”), while 12.3% expect little and 5.8% none at all.

Survey results underscore the significance of public administration reform from the perspective of Albanian youth. Overall, 81.9% of respondents indicated “A lot” or “Quite” when asked about the expected impact of reforms on the improvement of local institutions.

These results validate the EU’s strategic investment in strengthening local governance capacity, such as through *IPA funding* for municipal and regional units and indicate that administrative reform under Cluster 1 must continue to be prioritized. Crucially, future reform initiatives should be demonstrably tied to measurable improvements in citizen services to consolidate legitimacy and reinforce trust among young people.

Policy Recommendations

The survey data serves as a clear mandate: the youth demographic offers strong political support for deep governance reforms, provided they are convinced these

reforms will be effectively implemented. Policy action must be targeted to bridge the gap between high expectations and low certainty. This paper will aim to provide recommendations for different actors in the integration process to ensure youth engagement and higher levels of transparency, effectiveness and democratic values.

Government of Albania

- Establish *Youth Integrity Advisory Boards* within major anti-corruption and judicial institutions (e.g., SPAK, Administrative Courts), involving young professionals and students in monitoring public procurement (Chapter 5) and administrative case backlogs. These boards should publish regular *Youth Transparency Reports*.
- Ensure *Public Administration Reform* is visibly implemented at the municipal level by expanding participatory budgeting mechanisms (e.g., *ReLOaD* model) across all 61 municipalities, dedicating part of local development funds to youth co-designed projects.

Recommendations for the European Union Institutions

- Reinforce conditionality credibility by linking *Cluster 1* financial incentives to tangible outcomes, not merely legislative progress.
- Develop Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps initiatives on *Governance Mentorship*, enabling young Albanian public servants to work within EU member state administrations and anti-corruption bodies to address implementation gaps.

Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations and Youth

- Develop digital tools (e.g., integrity platforms or mobile apps) to translate complex EU requirements into accessible language and allow youth to report governance irregularities via *Youth Integrity Labs*.
- Collaborate with the *Albanian School of Public Administration (ASPA)* and universities to introduce a certified elective on *Integrity and the Rule of Law*, strengthening youth capacity to identify and resist corrupt practices.

Conclusion

This paper has thoroughly analyzed the data from the 2025 ESN Tirana Survey on Youth Perceptions on EU integration whilst drawing on existing EU literature and documentation with the aim to clarify the perception of young Albanians towards the main pillars of Cluster 1: Fundamentals. To this aim, the data has been presented through charts and has been divided in themes, allowing for implications for future policies and conclusions to be drawn.

The survey indicates that while Albanian youth hold highly positive perceptions of EU values and membership, the European Union is often placed on a pedestal—as an external guarantor and perhaps the only credible force capable of ensuring reform in the areas they deem most critical, particularly anti-corruption.

On the other hand, there is a contrast between this positive view of membership and the unfavorable view towards implementation of such reforms and policies reflecting persistent concerns about the domestic political will of local elites and institutions to deliver substantive reform. The need for enforcement of conditionality of the EU in more effective ways, as well as the need for more citizen and youth centric approaches to reforms, especially focused on public procurement are vital conclusions drawn from the analysis of this survey.

The way forward is clear: young people are the drivers of democratic renewal. For Albania's integration to be credible and sustainable, both local authorities and EU institutions must move beyond symbolic engagement and embed youth participation at the core of governance and accountability reforms.

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