

Euroscepticism to Euro-engagement: Rural Dialogues about Europe's Future

Project No. 101146361

Policy Recommendation Report

Introduction

This Rural Policy Declaration was developed within the project “Euroscepticism to Euro-engagement: Rural Dialogues about Europe's Future”, following the RurEU Views Symposium in Kaunas and all the project activities carried out in Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Poland, Lithuania and other participating communities. It consolidates insights from the symposium, EU policy consultations, citizens' dialogues, youth engagement activities, institutional visit reports, future scenario workshops, cultural heritage activities and rural deliberations.

The declaration expresses a shared commitment to move from distance and mistrust towards active Euro-engagement. It recognises rural communities not as passive beneficiaries of European policy, but as equal partners in shaping Europe's future. The project evidence shows that rural citizens value European opportunities when they are visible, accessible and locally relevant, but they also expect decision-making to become more transparent, participatory and responsive to everyday realities.

This declaration therefore sets out a common vision: rural Europe should be connected, resilient, inclusive, environmentally responsible, culturally vibrant and democratically heard. EU policies, national authorities, municipalities, civil society organisations, schools, youth groups, businesses and local residents all have a role in turning that vision into practical action.

Key Insights

The project activities revealed recurring themes and challenges that contribute to rural Euroscepticism and disengagement, while also demonstrating strong potential for rural Euro-engagement:

- **A sense of disconnect remains a core challenge.** Many rural residents and young people feel that decisions affecting their communities are made far away, without enough attention to local knowledge, lived experience and rural diversity.
- **Trust is the foundation of engagement.** The events findings highlighted that trust creates psychological safety, shared purpose and credibility, while mistrust leads to disengagement and weak cooperation. Transparent governance, reliable institutions and inclusive participation are therefore essential.

- **Regional inequalities shape perceptions of the EU.** Depopulation, limited public services, uneven investments, poor connectivity, fewer education and employment opportunities, and weaker access to cultural and social spaces all reduce confidence in the future of rural areas.
- **EU investments can create tangible rural transformation when they are place-based and visible.** The Kaunas District experience showed how EU-supported education, digitalisation, community projects and cultural initiatives can strengthen communities, skills and local confidence.
- **Rural youth want influence, not only consultation.** Project discussions and institutional visit materials stressed the need for youth councils, youth centres, rural youth spaces, participation in EU Youth Dialogue, access to education, quality employment, entrepreneurship and support for young farmers.
- **Digital tools are both an opportunity and a risk.** Social media can amplify rural voices, support local businesses, agri-products and agritourism, and strengthen civic dialogue, but only if digital infrastructure, media literacy, online safety and local capacity are addressed.
- **Environmental transition must be fair and community-led.** Rural residents recognise the importance of climate action, ecological responsibility, waste reduction, biodiversity, renewable energy and sustainable agriculture, but reforms must not place disproportionate burdens on small farmers or vulnerable communities.
- **Local economies need diversified, cooperative and innovative support.** Consultations showed the value of SMEs, agricultural businesses, cooperatives, short supply chains, local processing, tourism, social business and creative rural projects.
- **Culture, heritage and local identity are development assets.** Activities in Broccostella, Lapès and the Europe Map and Stories exchange showed that heritage, gastronomy, festivals, storytelling, travel and intercultural learning can build belonging, pride, European identity and sustainable rural tourism.
- **Participatory and deliberative methods work.** World Café, SWOT analysis, citizens' dialogues, "City of the Future" exercises and consultation sessions helped participants move from identifying problems to proposing practical solutions and shared priorities.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the ideas and perspectives shared across the project, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Communicate EU benefits in accessible, localised and trustworthy ways.

EU institutions, national authorities and municipalities should make European policies, funds and results understandable in everyday language and clearly connected to daily rural life. Communication should show concrete local examples, explain procedures simply and use channels already trusted by rural residents.

- Support rural media, local information campaigns and community meetings that explain how EU policies and funds improve education, mobility, services, culture, farming, entrepreneurship and quality of life.
- Simplify language and administrative requirements for EU programmes, with special attention to young people, small municipalities, NGOs, cooperatives and small businesses.
- Use local storytellers, community pages, youth communicators and schools to make EU information visible, multilingual and accessible.

2. Institutionalise rural participation in EU, national and local policymaking.

Rural citizens should be involved before decisions are finalised, especially when policies affect land use, farming, mobility, education, digitalisation, climate transition, public services or local development.

- Introduce mandatory community consultations for EU-funded rural projects and strengthen rural citizens' panels linked to EU institutions.
- Apply rural proofing and territorial impact assessment to major policies, ensuring that rural and remote areas are considered from the start.
- Use deliberative methods such as citizens' dialogues, World Café formats, SWOT workshops and participatory planning to translate local concerns into policy proposals.

3. Put rural youth at the centre of rural development.

Young people living in rural and remote areas should be recognised as key stakeholders. Policies should respond to their needs for education, mobility, community life, mental well-being, employment, entrepreneurship and meaningful influence.

- Establish and support youth councils, youth centres and rural youth hubs for coworking, training, cultural activity, sport, creativity and civic participation.
- Expand Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, youth ambassador programmes, EU Youth Dialogue participation and cross-border exchanges for rural youth.
- Separate funds sections in youth programmes (such as Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, CERV) for rural and small urban areas.
- Provide start-up grants, mentoring, access to land, job placements and support for young farmers, social entrepreneurs and rural innovators.

4. Guarantee digital connectivity, digital skills and safe online participation.

Digital inclusion should be treated as basic rural infrastructure. High-speed internet, digital learning and responsible use of social media are necessary for education, entrepreneurship, public service access and democratic participation.

- Guarantee broadband access and reliable mobile coverage in rural and remote communities.
- Fund digital literacy and media literacy workshops, including training on misinformation, scams, cyberbullying, privacy and safe civic communication.

- Support community-led digital campaigns, public-private partnerships with telecom providers, mentorship with digital professionals, and measurable evaluation of digital rural initiatives.

5. Strengthen access to services, mobility and everyday quality of life.

Rural policy should focus on the practical conditions that shape whether people can live, learn, work and participate locally. Access to transport, healthcare, education, culture, public spaces and social services must be improved in an integrated way.

- Fund innovative rural mobility solutions such as on-demand buses, shared transport, safer evening connections and links to schools, workplaces, health services and cultural activities.
- Support intersectoral cooperation between education, training, health, youth, culture, sport and social services so residents can access support close to home.
- Invest in clean, safe and well-maintained community spaces, green areas and adaptive reuse of underused buildings for social, cultural and educational purposes.

6. Ensure a just and rural-sensitive Green Deal transition.

Environmental reforms must empower rural communities rather than burden them. Farmers, small businesses, youth and local residents should be supported to become leaders of climate action, biodiversity protection and sustainable resource use.

- Provide financial and technical support for small farmers adopting eco-practices, circular economy methods, sustainable production and biodiversity protection.
- Create dedicated just-transition support for rural communities affected by climate, agricultural or energy reforms.
- Support community-led renewable energy cooperatives, waste reduction, sorting, reuse initiatives and local environmental education.

7. Promote rural entrepreneurship, cooperatives and local economic resilience.

Rural development should diversify local economies while respecting local resources, landscapes and traditions. EU support should be easier to access for small actors and should promote long-term community value.

- Strengthen support for SMEs, agricultural businesses, cooperatives, social enterprises and community businesses.
- Promote short supply chains, local product processing, agri-food innovation, sustainable gastronomy, rural tourism and creative industries.
- Create intersectoral cooperation platforms bringing together municipalities, NGOs, businesses, schools, universities, farms and cultural organisations.

8. Preserve rural cultural heritage and use it as a bridge to Europe.

Local heritage is a living resource that can strengthen identity, tourism, entrepreneurship, environmental stewardship and intercultural understanding. Heritage policy should connect tradition with innovation and European exchange.

- Launch or strengthen an EU Rural Heritage Fund supporting crafts, festivals, local gastronomy, storytelling, cultural routes, museums, mills, farms and community archives.

- Integrate local identity and heritage into rural tourism strategies, with attention to sustainability, biodiversity, short supply chains and community benefit.
- Support cross-border cultural exchanges, mapping activities and travel-based learning that help citizens understand Europe through personal experience and local stories.

9. Invest in education, lifelong learning and rural innovation capacity.

Rural communities need skills, confidence and networks as much as physical infrastructure. Education and lifelong learning should support digital readiness, civic competence, green transition, entrepreneurship and cultural participation.

- Expand rural access to formal and non-formal learning, career guidance, STEAM education, hybrid classrooms and professional orientation services.
- Create training pathways for local leaders, youth workers, educators, rural entrepreneurs and community organisers.
- Promote European-level exchange of good practices on sustainable rural development, community-led transformation and rural innovation.

10. Monitor results and keep rural policies accountable.

Euro-engagement will grow only if rural residents see that dialogue leads to results. Policies and projects should include clear objectives, feedback loops and public reporting.

- Set measurable goals for rural participation, youth involvement, digital inclusion, mobility, sustainability and local economic impact.
- Publish accessible progress updates showing how community input influenced decisions and how EU-funded projects are performing.
- Continue periodic rural dialogues and workshops so communities can review progress, adjust priorities and co-design future actions.

Commitments

We, the undersigned, commit to:

- Rebuilding trust between EU institutions, national authorities, municipalities and rural communities through transparency, accountability and direct dialogue.
- Defending the right of rural people to be equal citizens of Europe, with real influence over the future of their communities and the future of the continent.
- Supporting place-based, rural-proofed and youth-sensitive policies that respond to local needs while contributing to shared European goals.
- Promoting inclusive participation, especially of young people, women, people with disabilities, under-represented groups, farmers, entrepreneurs and residents of remote areas.
- Strengthening rural connectivity, mobility, education, employment, entrepreneurship, cultural life and access to public services.

- Ensuring that the green and digital transitions are fair, practical, safe and beneficial for rural communities.
- Preserving rural cultural heritage, local identity and community memory while encouraging innovation, intercultural learning and European solidarity.
- Continuing grassroots cooperation across partner countries so that rural voices are heard, respected and translated into action.

Associations involved:

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IDEA FOR LIFE, Poland

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ASOTSIATSIA BIOMREZHA, Bulgaria

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