



# EU RURALITeast

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### Rural Development in the Western Balkans: Key Findings from the EuRural Final Report

The EuRural Final Report offers the most comprehensive analysis to date of the rural sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro. It highlights both the fragility and the enormous potential of rural areas, where agriculture, tourism, cultural heritage, and natural landscapes play central economic and social roles.



## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Key insights:

- Strong agricultural potential but hindered by infrastructure gaps and depopulation.
- Heavy reliance on EU support such as IPA III, EU4AGRI, and EU4BusinessRecovery programmes.
- Need for administrative capacity-building to fully benefit from EU funding.
- Ongoing challenges due to the COVID-19 and Ukraine crisis, affecting inputs, production costs, and value chains.
- Emerging opportunities in rural tourism, traditional crafts, and local food branding.

## Albania

Key insights:

- Rural tourism is booming through agro-tourism, culinary heritage, and nature-based tourism.
- Agriculture remains essential for employment and food security.
- The IPARD III 2022–2027 programme brings €145 million to the sector.
- Strong policy alignment with the EU Green Agenda and biodiversity goals.
- Growth of organic agriculture and protected natural areas.
- National initiatives such as 100 Villages Programme bring integrated rural revitalization.

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## Serbia

Key insights:

- Small family farms form the backbone of Serbian agriculture.
- Serbia aligns with EU frameworks through the Stabilization and Association Agreement, Rural Development Programmes, and the National Agricultural Strategy.
- Strong support for women and youth entrepreneurship, including grants, training, and microfinance.
- Growing focus on diversification (tourism, crafts, processing).
- Development of products with geographical indications, strengthening branding and exports.

## Montenegro

Key insights:

- Rural depopulation, especially in the north, remains a critical issue.
- Strong policy focus on skills development, youth empowerment, and sustainable tourism.
- IPARD funding supports modernization of agriculture and improved green production.
- Support structures like Tehnopolis Innovation Center and green business incubators encourage entrepreneurship.

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# Innovation, Skills & EU Integration: The Future of Rural Development in the Western Balkans

Rural areas in the Western Balkans face structural challenges—aging populations, outmigration, limited access to services—but also unprecedented opportunities thanks to EU support, innovation ecosystems, and sustainable development initiatives. The EuRural report highlights these opportunities in detail.

A major catalyst for rural progress is the process of EU integration. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro are steadily aligning their policies, legislation, and institutional frameworks with EU standards. Through pre-accession instruments such as IPA and IPARD, as well as cross-border cooperation programmes, each country benefits from financial support and technical expertise that modernize agriculture, upgrade rural infrastructure, and strengthen governance. EU-funded initiatives also promote environmental sustainability, improve food-safety systems, and reinforce the capacities of rural institutions, ensuring that communities are better positioned to access markets and participate in regional growth.

People remain central to rural transformation, and the EuRural Report illustrates how women and youth are emerging as key drivers of change. Dedicated support programmes—often developed in partnership with the EU and international organizations—offer entrepreneurship grants, tailored training, credit guarantees, mentorship schemes, and employment incentives. These initiatives address the historical barriers that rural women and young people have faced, empowering them to start businesses, adopt new technologies, and participate more fully in local decision-making. Their increasing engagement is essential for revitalizing rural labour markets and slowing outmigration.

## CLLD: Strengthening Community-Led Local Development

Local Action Groups (LAGs) play a major role by:

- ✓ Designing local development strategies
- ✓ Mobilizing actors
- ✓ Promoting bottom-up governance
- ✓ Supporting rural tourism, crafts, and SMEs

LAGs play a vital role in translating national priorities into community-level impact. By operating under LEADER and Community-Led Local Development principles, LAGs engage residents, businesses, farms, youth groups, and civil society organizations in planning and implementing locally tailored strategies. This bottom-up approach strengthens rural governance, fosters social cohesion, and produces development initiatives that are genuinely aligned with local needs—such as small-scale infrastructure upgrades, and support for micro and family businesses.



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Rural areas across the Western Balkans  
continue to evolve through a powerful  
combination of innovation, skills development,  
and growing integration with the European  
Union. Although these territories face  
persistent structural challenges they also  
exhibit extraordinary potential.

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## What future brings

Overall, the EuRural Report paints an optimistic picture of the future. Rural communities in the Western Balkans are showing renewed dynamism, supported by innovation, sustainability, and EU integration processes. While challenges remain, the region is steadily building the foundations of resilient, vibrant, and inclusive rural economies. With continued investment, strategic coordination, and community participation, these areas have the potential not only to thrive but to emerge as models of rural regeneration and sustainable development in Europe.



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