



The right to stay in rural areas: an evidence-informed agenda shaped by youth voices?

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CONTEXT

The European Commission and the Council of Europe have both recently prioritised the need to support rural dwellers' right to stay and thrive in their communities. This is reflected in the European Commission's Cohesion and Policy Funds, its EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and European Youth Goal 6: Moving Rural Youth Forward. It also follows the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth.

For rural youth, the "right to stay" is not a legal concept or a political proclamation on mobility choices. It constitutes a policy agenda for enabling younger generations to prosper in the countryside – whether they are locals or newcomers.

This policy brief provides a quick guide for institutional decision makers and organisational leaders from the youth sector and beyond on how to implement a new agenda for rural youth prosperity based on the right to stay. It combines four elements.

- » A short overview of the policy agenda on the right to stay, driven by the European Union and the Council of Europe.
- » The discussion of place attachment as a pivotal concept for inspiring policies on the right to stay agenda.
- » A summary of the evidence upholding the right to stay among rural youth, including a research study on rural youth transitions, published by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership (Youth Partnership 2026).
- » An overview of the most pressing actionable measures for pushing forward the right to stay agenda among rural youth.

THE RIGHT TO STAY IN THE EUROPEAN POLICY AGENDA

The right to stay has become a buzzword in institutional agendas. The European Commission, through its Cohesion and Reforms policies, is committed to “supporting community needs and tackling regional disparities so that all citizens have an [effective right to stay](#) in the place they call home”.

The right to stay is endorsed by the European Parliament (2025) in its report “Strengthening rural areas in the EU through cohesion policy” (2025), as well as in European Commission’s resolution on the “Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion” (European Commission 2024). Both documents establish the right to stay as a pillar of the cohesion policy in tackling problems such as depopulation, ageing, brain drain and labour force shortages in rural areas. Enforcing it arises through action at multiple levels, such as:

- a. **territorial cohesion** by reducing regional disparities;
- b. **access to essential basic public goods and services** for all citizens, regardless of where they live;
- c. **economic and local development**, particularly by backing up small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and innovation ecosystems;
- d. **expanded infrastructure and digital connectivity**, driven by targeted investments in energy supply or broadband and 5G networks;
- e. **demographic renewal**, with a focus on attracting and retaining young people, with dedicated investments in access to education, employment or housing.

The development of the right to stay in the European Union has evolved in stages. It began with the territorial cohesion principle in the 1990s to 2000s and was later formalised in the Treaty of Lisbon. Between 2008 and 2016, rising concerns over demographic decline, youth outmigration, and regional inequality reinforced debates on cohesion and introduced the idea of a right to stay, thus ensuring that individuals are not forced to leave their regions due to economic pressure. From 2021 to 2023, this concept gained policy relevance through rural development strategies, especially the EU’s Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission 2021). Since 2024, it has become consolidated within institutional cohesion policy frameworks.

The Council of Europe has also acknowledged the right to stay as a key pillar of future rural youth prosperity, through Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic, and political participation of rural youth (Council of Europe 2025).

According to the recommendation, rural youth should not feel compelled to leave their communities due to a lack of opportunities or services. Remaining in rural areas must, therefore, be a viable choice supported by access to quality education, employment, healthcare, housing and social participation. In this sense, the right to stay is framed as a matter of social justice and territorial balance, requiring targeted public policies and investment to make rural living

sustainable and attractive.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 also stresses the importance of mobility as a complementary right, enabling rural youth to access opportunities beyond their immediate environment. It recognises that barriers such as weak transport infrastructure, limited connectivity and social constraints restrict rural youth’s ability to access education, work and participation. Promoting affordable, safe and accessible mobility, both physical and digital, as well as opportunities for international mobility, are seen as essential drivers of inclusion, personal development and active citizenship.

PLACE MATTERS: GROUNDING A RIGHT TO STAY AGENDA

The right to stay is embedded in several spatial notions circulating in the literature (Cefalo and Simões 2026, in press).

Space itself refers to the qualities of an area, in terms of dimensions, arrangements, distances and physical characteristics. It has been widely used in sociology to depict unequal resource distribution across individuals, families and groups mapped into physical spaces, such as neighbourhoods, cities or regions (Galster and Sharkey 2017).

Territory focuses on the administrative organisation of physical space, through the definition of boundaries and the distribution of power among states, organisations or other actors. Territorial approaches enabled to examine inter-territorial disparities in domains such as job markets, economic development or demographic trends (Iammarino et al. 2019). These disparities are driven by economic and institutional priorities affecting the allocation of resources.

Place refers to a specific geographic location that is endowed with meaning through human interaction, social networks and cultural practices (Cefalo and Simões 2026, in press).

Thus, while space and territory frame physical and institutional approaches to human livelihoods, **place emphasises the social-emotional dimension of individuals’ relationships with their communities and physical environments and how this influences individual life chances and policy outcomes.**

As Cefalo and Simões (2026, in press) put it: “the notion of place shifts the focus from *where* social phenomena happen (space) and *how they are regulated* (territory) to *how they are experienced, interpreted, and shaped* by the individuals and communities living there”. Thus, place as a concept offers an agency-based perspective of how people interact with space.

The role of place in individual agency and decision making is often grounded in the concept of **place attachment**. This notion refers to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural bonds that individuals or groups form with specific places

(Lewicka 2011). Place attachment is a multidimensional concept involving both place identity (meaning the extent to which place is part of one's self-concept) and place dependence (the functional value or support a place provides for desired activities) (Williams and Vaske 2003). These bonds may form at varying spatial scales, from homes and neighbourhoods to larger landscapes and symbolic locations.

Tangential notions such as **emotional geographies** or **soft infrastructure** share with place attachment the recognition that the role of place is mediated through social experience, emotional resonance and relational networks. The emotional geographies approach focuses on affective processes and how they shape local cultures and power distribution (Anton and Lawrence 2014). Soft infrastructure stresses organisational and relational support systems that uphold individual belongingness (Kavanagh et al. 2022). Place attachment emphasises psychological bonds between people and environments and the resulting agency (Lewicka 2011). Place attachment seems, thus, a promising avenue to reaching a deeper understanding of rural youth's mobilities and the exercise of the right to stay.

RURAL YOUTH: ARE THEY STAYING OR LEAVING? UPDATES FROM THE LATEST RESEARCH

Scholarly research has relentlessly shown that **rural youth mobility trends are dominated by outmigration**. Indeed, existing data illustrate that rural younger generations are inclined to leave the countryside in search of better

education and employment opportunities. Moreover, these trends are upheld by strong, negative representations of rural areas as spaces of decline and decay, while those staying are portrayed as a failure (Farrugia 2016).

Comparative studies have confirmed that more deprived European regions, dominated by youth outmigration trends, which are often in predominantly rural areas, show limited access to education, weaker labour markets, and narrow innovation potential (Cefalo et al. 2024). Existing indicators further confirm that rural youth outmigration is still a dominant mobility trend (Eurostat 2024).

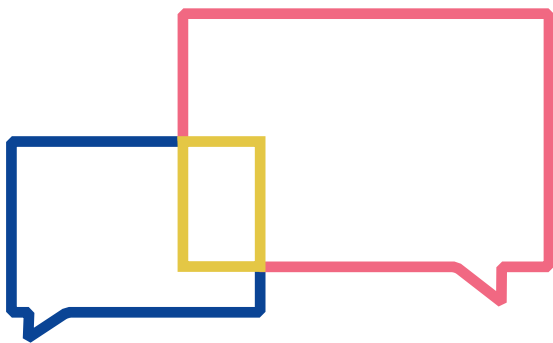
[The recent Youth Partnership study \(Youth Partnership, 2026\) on rural youth transitions adds unexpected evidence for rethinking a right to stay agenda.](#) The key findings of the study are listed in Box 1.

The Youth Partnership study findings may stem from three interconnected reasons. Firstly, rural youth mobilities are becoming more fluid, with commuting, returning and circular mobilities becoming more frequent, as shown elsewhere (Silva et al. 2021; Simões et al. 2021). Given that many of the participants also chose "having a car" as the most important reason for finding a job, this study certainly captured an important share of participants who commute daily, thus justifying this result. Secondly, the evidence may reflect increasingly demanding living costs in urban areas, reducing mobility intentions, particularly in rural areas closer to cities that benefit from better rural-urban linkages (OECD 2025). Thirdly, the time frame applied to the question on mobility intentions (12 months) is short. A longer time projection could lead to different results. However, transitional periods are marked by quick changes and chance, meaning that longer time projections to study rural youth's mobility intentions tend to be less precise.



Box 1. Key findings concerning mobilities from the Youth Partnership study on rural youth transitions

- » Most of the participants in the study lived in the rural area where they were originally from.
- » Half of the participants never left to live somewhere else for a period longer than at least 6 months. This trend is fairly consistent across gender and age groups.
- » 76% of the participants envisioned themselves staying, commuting or moving to a nearby rural area in the next 12 months.
- » These results are even more unexpected because most of the participants were aged 18-24 and highly educated. These subsets of rural youth tend to show stronger outmigration intentions.
- » Staying intentions were also stable across rural young men and rural young women: 78% and 75% respectively choose an option aligned with immobility (staying in the same rural area) and restricted mobility categories (moving to a rural area nearby).
- » The most important reason for remaining in rural areas was staying closer to family and friends (31.6%); not having enough financial resources was referred to by only 25.8%.



YOUTH VOICES AND FUTURE MOBILITY PERSPECTIVES

Rural youth voices provide an essential insight into the meaning of their emerging mobility trends. A recent report from the [European Rural Youth Observatory \(EURYO\)](#) (Jonsson et al. 2025) summarises trends on how rural youth in Italy, Portugal, Sweden and Türkiye perceive their future mobilities, reaffirming the findings of Youth Partnership's study. These trends are summarised in Box 2.



Box 2. Findings from the EURYO report on rural youth im/mobility

- » **Im/mobility is a dynamic process.** Im/mobility among rural youth is not seen as a simple choice between leaving and staying. **Mobility decisions evolve throughout the lifespan and often combine intentions to depart, return and contribute back home.** Many rural youth want to leave temporarily to gain education, experience or resources, and for then bringing benefits back to their communities. These choices are shaped by support, opportunities and recognition that foster personal and social development. **Yet strong place attachment and a sense of belonging also guide decisions.** Staying can be seen not as stagnation but as responsible commitment if rural areas offer decent jobs.
- » **Im/mobility is a right rather than a response to socio-economic constraints.** Rural youth view staying, leaving and returning as equally valid choices, **but structural barriers, such as limited access to education, jobs, transport and welfare restrict this right.** They envision a future where improved public transport, locally connected education and employment, technological progress, climate adaptation, and inclusive, youth-driven initiatives make rural living both viable and attractive.
- » **Im/mobility is gendered and reflects family values and local traditions.** Rural youth stressed agency and opportunity in shaping their futures, yet **im/mobility conditions differ across contexts and are strongly gendered.** In Türkiye, rural young women face constraints related to safety, social norms, marriage and caregiving expectations, while young men may feel obliged to remain to support family livelihoods. In Italy, family provides emotional security but can also limit autonomy, as intergenerational expectations and economic or political factors influence rural youth decisions to stay or leave.

THE RIGHT TO STAY, THE RIGHT TO LEAVE AND RETURN: TOWARDS A FLUID MOBILITIES POLICY AGENDA

The right to stay ranks high in the current policy agenda. However, the latest findings on rural youth mobilities show that **fluid mobilities, meaning the combination of staying, leaving and returning movements, are becoming a life norm for rural youth.** The proposed measures listed in Box 3 focus on **enabling and removing barriers to fluid mobilities** among rural youth. Overall, reducing the tension between staying or leaving is the best approach to ensure that more rural youth stay, while young people originating from other regions are also attracted into the countryside.



Box 3. Actionable policy measures for supporting fluid mobilities among rural youth

ENABLING FLUID MOBILITIES

- » **Balancing the rollout of universal and targeted youth policies.** Increasing targeted programmes prioritising rural youth are needed in areas such as active labour market policies or regional development packages. Spain followed this approach in the context of the Resilience and Recovery Facility Framework.
- » **Investing in a significant improvement of daily mobility.** Reducing car dependence for regular commuting and increasing the availability and affordability of public transport is a priority. This can be achieved through public transport provided by local on-demand mobility services, organised and co-funded by rural inhabitants or incentives for private initiatives such as ride-sharing to complement public transport offers.
- » **Potentiating place attachment through early and continued civic, social and political participation.** Translating strong bonds with the community into intentions to stay or return must be nurtured in youth from an early age. Participation initiatives, mediated by civil society, including by youth organisations, leading to local problem solving are effective in increasing and perpetuating individual bonds to the community. Keeping young people involved even when they are away studying, increases their odds of returning, as shown by some participation initiatives in Portugal.
- » **Strengthening short-mobility instruments on rural youth, with a focus on the Erasmus+ programme.** This outcome can be achieved by giving a higher priority to rural youth as a target group in pivotal EU programmes, adding new calls or specific outcomes in existing calls aimed at rural youth, or improving/prioritising networking, exchange and mobility schemes between rural as well as rural and urban areas – with a focus on remote rural areas.
- » **Defining or refining specific incentives and policy instruments to advance jobs in cutting-edge areas.** These areas include economic activities aligned with major European strategies, such as the Green Deal (European Commission 2019) or digital agendas (European Commission 2020). The circular economy, and also cultural activities with an economic value often associated with rural youth entrepreneurship or with youth work, are good examples of promising economic activities in rural areas. Specific incentives can include tax reductions or exemptions, or formal initiatives for creating technology-neutral spaces (Maxwell and Bourreau 2014). These sectors have the potential to generate more appropriate and meaningful jobs, particularly for professionals with intermediate qualifications who more often tend to stay in rural areas.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO FLUID MOBILITIES

- » **Ensuring a better vertical co-ordination of policies targeting rural youth.** This involves a more efficient streamlining of international and EU-level initiatives into national, regional and local programmes and agendas in areas such as vocational education and training, active labour market policies or rural development. Regulations often do not match local opportunities and resources, imposing intense constraints on rural development that affect youth mobilities.
- » **Investing in new public employment services delivery methods.** Both mobile (e.g. mobile public employment services as the ones implemented in Bulgaria) or concentrated services at regional or inter-municipal level (e.g. youth one-stop shops) can help increase institutional capacity to uphold school-to-work transitions in rural areas appropriately, thus helping to reduce the pressure to leave permanently.
- » **Developing dedicated policy agendas to increase the capacity of vulnerable rural youth groups (e.g. women, young people with disabilities).** Efforts here can include programmes to promote remote work, including investments in digital infrastructure, digital skills for young workers, and provision of key support services, such as childcare or work–life balance measures.

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