EUROMONTANA

At Home in the Mountains

Making the 'Right to Stay' a Reality for Mountain Communities

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Euromontana position paper on the Right to Stay Strategy

The Right to Stay: a new agenda for Europe?

The European Commission's DG REGIO is currently preparing a 'Right to Stay Strategy,'[1] a flagship initiative of the 2024-2029 mandate. The strategy will aim to address demographic decline and territorial imbalances in the EU, ensuring that people can build their future at home rather than being forced to move due to economic decline or lack of opportunity. The concept of the Right to Stay originates from Enrico Letta's April 2024 report[2], Much More Than a Market, which linked the single market's success to a strong Cohesion Policy and pointed to Article 174 TFEU's mandate to reduce disparities and supported disadvantaged areas.

European Commission Executive Vice President Raffaele Fitto announced the Right to Stay Strategy in May 2026, alongside a Call for Evidence for stakeholders and citizens. Euromontana responded in June with a submission highlighting the main challenges for mountain areas. The strategy will be linked to the future of Cohesion Policy under the 2028-2034 EU budget and future Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF).

This position paper outlines the key issues for mountain areas. It includes Euromontana's twelve priorities for the European Commission and the Right to Stay and highlights good practices for the Right to Stay in mountain areas.

What does the Right to Stay mean for mountains?

17% of Europe's population live in mountain areas and therefore call mountains their home[3]. As the Commission highlighted in its Call for Evidence: *"Rural and remote regions, including …mountain regions…are particularly exposed to the risks of economic decline and population loss."* Whilst European cohesion policy has been partially successful[4] in addressing the specific challenges of mountain regions, gaps and disparities persist. In many remote and structurally constrained mountain areas, stagnant or declining economic growth hampers prosperity, while a lack of sustained investment in new and innovative business models results in lower productivity and continued dependence on the core sectors of agriculture and tourism.

Demographic evidence shows that **Europe is the only region in the world with a declining population in mountain areas**[5]. Southern and Eastern Europe are declining faster than other subregions, whilst the trend of decline is more pronounced in rural areas and small mountain towns, with cities experiencing a slight increase in population by 2030, according to FAO projections. Yet population decline should not be equated with a general exodus from mountain areas. In the Italian Alps, for example, the population fell by 1.2% between 2013 and 2023 and the share of people aged 65 and over increased from 21.8% to 25.3%. At the same time, more than 70% of Alpine municipalities recorded a positive migration balance with non-Alpine Italian municipalities in 2023, compared with just over 55% ten years earlier[6]. These trends show how

[1] European Commission, European Commission Launches landmark 'Right to Stay' Strategy, 2026.
[2] Enrico Letta. (2024). Much more than a market. Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens. Available at: https://european-research-area.ec.europa.eu/documents/letta-report-much-more-market-april-2024
[3] Martin F. Price. (2016). Mountains Move Up the European Agenda. *Mountain Research and Development*, *36*(3), 376–379. http://www.jstor.org/stable/mounresedeve.36.3.376
[4] *Maria Carla Lostrangio (2022). Opportunities for mountains in the Cohesion Policy?* Regional Studies Association.
[5] Parisi, F., Russo, L., Romeo, R. & Manuelli, S. 2025. Mountain demographics and trends — Monitoring changes in the global mountain population: new insights and data. Rome, FAO.
[6] Membretti, A. Bender, O. et al. (2025). Demographic scenarios, residential mobility and impacts of climate change in the Alps. Intermediate report focusing on the Italian and, partly, Austrian Alps. Available here.

ageing, low birth rates, and negative natural population change can coexist with renewed residential attractiveness in remote areas.

Euromontana highlights **two contrasting pressures on the right to stay** in mountain areas: firstly, some mountain areas face **depopulation**, driven by the outmigration of young people, economic decline and shifting demographic patterns, including ageing populations[7]. At the same time, some mountain communities must manage **strong residential and tourism pressures, and large seasonal fluxes in visitor numbers.** In certain territories, depopulation and tourism pressures co-exist simultaneously, whilst in others, new inhabitants, often from urban settings, bring new ideas and social innovation. The impacts are clearly visible in the housing sector, where competition between permanent and temporary housing uses, expensive second homes, unoccupied houses, and a lack of social and affordable housing can reduce housing availability and affordability for permanent residents and workers. These pressures coexist with population growth or decline.

Overall, the specific challenges of mountain areas are therefore highly **diverse, localised and context dependent,** and therefore policy must be targeted through **a territorial and place-based approach, with responses adapted to the different drivers of demographic decline, renewal, and housing pressure.**

Mountains are also heavily impacted by **climate change,** warming faster and more intensely than other regions. For example, over the last 50 years, average temperatures in the Pyrenees have risen by 30%[8] (1.2°C) more than the global average. Climate change and extreme weather has serious consequences for glaciers and ecosystems, and in certain cases has led to entire villages being abandoned[9], as the natural ecosystem supporting a liveable environment (and therefore the right to stay) is undermined. To keep mountain areas habitable, it will be important not only to accelerate **climate action, but also to keep mountain areas lively, dynamic and inhabited, while respecting planetary boundaries,** as without adequate protection of the mountain environment, degradation and natural hazards, including wildfires, will increase. The impacts of climate change are felt far beyond mountain territories themselves and are already affecting urban and lowland areas across Europe, as well as Europe's main rivers. Mountains are a common good that must be carefully preserved.

Context matters, and policy delivery must be adapted to the needs of the territory, with adequate rural and mountain proofing. Some mountain municipalities see vast private investments in maladapted tourist infrastructures or real estate[10], where few benefits trickle down to local residents, whilst other are in a cycle of rural decline, facing depopulation and land abandonment, and an increasing risk of natural hazards, including landslides, wildfires and extreme weather events. In the public sphere, underinvestment in public services and infrastructure in certain municipalities mean that residents lack access to necessities, including healthcare, education, and housing. Mobility and accessibility are also distinct challenges. Natural constraints and low population density in remote areas remain major obstacles to the development of efficient transport, and dependence on the private car is still high. These challenges can have particularly strong impacts on young people, women, new residents and other groups whose needs and

[7] Euromontana (2021). Ageing in mountain areas- Contributions of Euromontana for the green paper on Ageing. Available here.
[8] OPCC-CTP (2018). Climate change in the Pyrenees: Impacts, vulnerabilities and adaptation Bases of knowledge for the future climate change adaptation strategy in the Pyrenees ISBN: 978-84-09-06268-3
[9] Anny Fiorentino (2025). A Swiss village was buried under a mountain. This town could be next. National Geographic.
[10] Rethinking Winter Tourism in the Alps. The TranStat consortium's position on the transition of alpine mountain winter destinations. 2025. Available here.

perspectives are not always adequately reflected in policymaking. The Right to Stay must also address their needs.

Mountain areas also face **governance challenges,** due to geographic fragmentation, a lack of strong intermediary bodies, and governance frameworks that are not adapted to the realities of cross-border challenges and remoteness. Despite this, **mountain areas have enormous potential.** As territories on the front line of demographic change, they can act as laboratories for **innovative governance, climate adaptation,** and as champions of **local democratic participation.**

Our vision for the Right to Stay

Mountain areas deliver vital strategic services for Europe. These include ecosystem services, such as nature, biodiversity and carbon sequestration, clean air, quality food production, fresh water, renewable energy provision, recreational tourism, and intangible cultural services, **from which the whole of Europe benefits.** Europe's mountain territories are of unparalleled strategic importance for a green and just transition in Europe and have untapped innovation potential. This contribution must therefore not only be recognised but also reciprocated at EU level through a dedicated policy framework that addresses their specific challenges.

Young people are key agents of the Right to Stay, as Euromontana's report on Being young in a mountain area shows: **66% of young residents would like to stay in the mountains, whilst 29% would like to leave for a short time before returning.** Mountain areas remain highly attractive to young people, and the right to stay and to return is a clear priority. The social contract in mountain areas must therefore remain intact, and the Strategy should adequately address all situations, from leaving or returning to a community, to the freedom to stay in a habitable environment, for all forms of human and non-human life.

The Right to Stay should not be understood solely as a demographic policy but should also be grounded in **democratic principles** that enable communities to participate actively in designing their long-term territorial development pathways. As mountains transcend administrative and natural borders, this means a Right to Stay strategy with an interregional, cross-border and cooperative approach. It is crucial to move beyond viewing mountain areas through the deficit lens, instead recognising the multiple contributions that mountain territories provide for upland and lowland Europe, from preparedness to respond to external shocks of all kinds, to ecological and climate resilience.

This will require specific and fully financed objectives, a legal recognition and operationalisation of **Article 174 TFEU**, accessibility of funding and strengthened capacity for municipalities, a guaranteed role for regions in territorial development policy, long-term political coherence, and more investment in public services to keep value in mountain communities. It also means youth participation and generational renewal, affordable housing, and adequate tracking and monitoring of how Europe spends its cohesion funds. Successful territorial cohesion will require a fairer balance between the places where Europe's resources are extracted and produced, and the places where their benefits are realised.

To prevent a backlash against EU policymaking in the remotest corners of Europe, the strategy requires legislative safeguards, dedicated funding, an enforceable policy objective for cohesion, and positive visibility to succeed. Europe has the knowledge and potential to make this happen if it can find the political will.

Euromontana is convinced that mountains should continue to be places where people can live and work with a high quality of life and societal wellbeing, within planetary boundaries. A right to stay strategy, correctly designed and implemented to address mountain challenges, is a meaningful investment in a forward thinking, innovative, ecologically sustainable, economically viable, prepared, resilient, and competitive Europe.

Going beyond a slogan: 12 tests for the EU Right to Stay Strategy:

To ensure the Strategy is a success, Euromontana calls on the Commission to:

1. Explicitly recognise Article 174 TFEU as a legal basis and scope for the Right to Stay, through the specific inclusion of the territories enshrined under Article 174 TFEU, including mountain areas, to ensure Member States uphold their obligations. Within the 'national plan' structure of the new MFF architecture (NRPPs), the principles of partnership and subsidiarity should be fully respected in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the Strategy, and cross border cooperation should be flexibly integrated. Guaranteed regional and local participation to promote bottom-up, place-based, cooperative, and inclusive policymaking must be ensured.

2. Reinforce the Right to Stay as a dedicated policy objective, via a financial envelope with a legally enforceable spending target. Ensure mandatory funding for the Right to Stay in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and cohesion policy within the National and Regional Partnership Plans, with a dedicated target (such as the 30% climate target in the 2021-2027 ERDF). At programme level, direct a portion of the Right to Stay funding towards cross-border programmes, macro-regional strategies, joint projects, and Interreg. Continue to support successful ongoing programmes to enhance place-based policy delivery, including LEADER, CLLD, ITI, and LAGs, with a sufficient allocation to address mountain range challenges.

3. Guarantee increased place-based governance capacity and accessibility of multiple funds for local municipalities and stakeholders. The Right to Stay Strategy should strengthen and simplify the delivery conditions, correct imbalances and misalignments in policy delivery, and better reflect territorial realities by encouraging horizontal cooperation across sectors, borders, regions and administrations. Small mountain municipalities must be able to strengthen their collective governance and operational capacities, and improve knowledge and capabilities, to bid for and successfully deliver efficient, timely public services for their communities and absorb and use funding opportunities effectively. The Strategy should contribute to a permanent participatory and democratic governance framework that respects principles of Community Led Local Development.

4. Ensure that the Right to Stay Strategy is fully coherent with relevant EU policy frameworks, by conducting a dedicated mapping of existing frameworks for their contribution to the Right to Stay. The Strategy should be fully consistent with the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy (including diversification and seasonal visitor flows), the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy (including the recent strategies on Generational Renewal and Livestock), and the EU's environmental and climate objectives under the European Green Deal and 2030 Biodiversity

Strategy (including landscape management and natural hazards), as well as the European Affordable Housing Act and the recent initiative on Short Term Rentals. The strategy should be an integrated and cohesive package that delivers, rather than an add-on to existing policy frameworks.

5. **Ramp up targeted territorial investment in accessible and affordable public services at EU level** to tackle social isolation and demographic decline in mountain areas, secured via a ring-fenced budget in the European Social Fund (ESF) in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF), including in remote and mobile healthcare, telemedicine, education, transport, digital connectivity and infrastructure, and emergency services. Regional actors must **improve sustainable mobility options** to and within mountain areas, including intermodal connections, public transport, and last-mile solutions, to minimise dependence on private cars, reduce transport emissions and improve accessibility for visitors, residents, and people with disabilities.

6. **Keep economic value in mountain areas to the benefit of local communities and visitors**, by **supporting fairer value chains** via public procurement rules. Ensure **fair local benefit sharing** from natural resources and existing extractive activities, and support the provision of quality mountain products, local processing, social economy and cooperative initiatives, entrepreneurship, and circular bio-based activities. Encourage **stronger synergies among farming, tourism, services, and local economies**, by strengthening the connection between the emerging needs and the business ecosystem of the territory with those of jobseekers, new arrivals, and at-risk groups, including young people, refugees and NEETs.

7. **Create further value-added activities and diversification in mountain areas** by promoting local economies and multi-season diversification, and support social economy organisations, local entrepreneurship and community-led initiatives, while harnessing the potential of smaller sectors with underrecognized territorial development potential, including the **bioeconomy, circular economy, agroecology, four season tourism and renewable energy sectors.** Strengthen the capacity of local actors to create and offer inclusive, skilled and year-round employment, particularly for vulnerable groups and young people. Engage diverse rural communities and stakeholders in the **early-stage design and assessment of new policies and initiatives** that affect them, in a fully transparent manner. New initiatives should respect the carrying capacity of the landscape and the ecological and social capacities of the territory, by operating within **planetary boundaries**.

8. **Boost inclusive participation and cross-sector generational renewal in the mountains** via dedicated EU youth mentorship schemes, a rural Erasmus programme, and accessible and affordable mobility opportunities for rural youth, as well as security for pastoral mobility in the agricultural sector. Learning, training and entrepreneurship opportunities in mountain economies should be **accessible and lifelong. Support and empower marginalised groups** in remote isolated mountain areas by recognising and promoting the role of social economy organisations, cooperatives, associations and community-led initiatives in fostering participation, inclusion and intergenerational exchange. Ensure **close cooperation between education providers, employers and regional and local authorities**, which can alleviate labour shortages and attract and retain young people, new residents and workers.

9. **Introduce territorially adapted measures for Article 174 territories in the recent Affordable Housing Plan** to promote a healthy balance and prevent the displacement of mountain residents by holiday homes and short-term rentals, ensuring that **housing serves local communities in all contexts**, under high or low tourism pressures, including through the management of empty buildings. As highlighted by the European Parliament[11], the EU Sustainable Tourism Strategy should ensure **the development of destination management frameworks** that empower mountain municipalities to manage visitor flows, set quality thresholds, and manage the potential redirection of visitors, where appropriate, via dedicated safeguards. Investments in in year-round infrastructure should be designed for residents first, including newcomers, families, and workers.

10. **Promote positive EU communication campaigns that can contribute to narrative change in mountain areas**, particularly those at risk of depopulation and abandonment, acknowledging the disparities and divergence across the EU, and acknowledging the people who take care of the mountain environment. The strategy could employ a stakeholder driven programme to establish Right to Stay "ambassadors" and diaspora networks who can promote the high quality of life in the mountains, the "right to the mountains", and shift the negative narrative of "marginalised" or "declining" rural and remote areas, towards a recognition of **mountain areas as a strategic asset for Europe**, particularly for children and young people in schools, and people in lifelong learning contexts.

11. **Systemically distinguish between rural, peri-urban, and urban areas for expenditure, investment patterns, and outcomes.** The Right to Stay Strategy should be grounded in adequate EU definitions of territorial typologies for the future programming period and beyond, using the existing DEGURBA and TERCET methodologies, including a coherent and flexible definition of mountain areas, and performance tracking at and below NUTS3 level, to ensure EU policies do not inadvertently harm the vitality or social fabric of mountain communities.

12. **Deliver further knowledge and research on the Right to Stay and Rural proofing, leveraging existing project pathways**, including Interreg, and Horizon Europe, to conduct research and innovation activities across diverse territorial typologies, including mountain areas. The JRC should produce robust and granular data on demographic trends in Article 174 areas, including new sets of indicators to catch local specificities, and to strengthen the evidence base for rural proofing and the right to stay, which can feedback into assessment and review of the Strategy.

[11] European Parliament resolution of 28 April 2026 on enhancing connectivity, preserving cultural heritage, and driving local excellence in European tourism: destination management and regional tourism growth (2025/2120(INI)). Available here.

What works? The Right to Stay in practice.

Ten territorial and place-based examples from the Euromontana good practices database and the wider Euromontana network.

1. Access to services: Keeping rural shops alive in small Czech municipalities

In response to the rapid disappearance of village grocery stores, especially in remote and mountain areas, the Czech Republic launched Obchůdek, a national support scheme providing financial aid to regions to co-finance small rural shops and preserve access to essential goods. This initiative addresses rural service decline through a simple but scalable and easily replicable governance model: national funding distributed via regional authorities to local shop operators. It safeguards basic services in sparsely populated areas, strengthens territorial cohesion, and provides flexible support adapted to local conditions, including mountain municipalities.

✓ **Read more:** Keeping rural shops alive in small Czech municipalities

2. Benefit sharing: the renewable energy community in Orexa, Gipuzkoa

The village of Orexa, in the province of Gipuzkoa (Basque country, Spain), has created an energy community to ensure its energy sovereignty while limiting the impact on land use and maximising the socio-economic benefits of local energy production and consumption. Orexa has made energy an essential part of its local development strategy to ensure its own energy sovereignty. The energy community has smartly combined legal and technical solutions to ensure local production and consumption of energy, bringing significant environmental and socio-economic benefits to the community.

✓ **Read more:** Orexa: the energy community of Gipuzkoa's smallest village

3. Positive narratives: 'Stay in the countryside – it pays off' campaign

In four Polish mountainous regions, a campaign was conducted to inform young people about the opportunities offered by rural development funds for youth employment. The tools and European funding deployed in rural and mountainous areas are often little known by local communities. More communication and information efforts are therefore needed in our territories to promote these opportunities. By promoting the multi-functionality of rural areas and explaining the available opportunities, the initiative reached out to a variety of young people who can benefit from rural development support and contribute to rural revitalisation through innovation and entrepreneurship. This initiative is easily transferable and should be encouraged under the 2028-2034 period.

✓ **Read more:** "Stay in the countryside – it pays off" campaign for youth

4. Generational Renewal: Shepherd Schools support the next generation of pastoralists

The Shepherd School is a training programme funded by the LIFE programme from 2023 to 2026. Designed to address the shortage of skilled shepherds and support biodiversity conservation and

ecosystem services, the programme delivers four training courses, each enrolling eight aspiring shepherds per year, with a target of thirty-two newly trained shepherds by the end of the programme. Each course consists of sixteen modules and two hundred hours of training, split equally between theory and practice, with a dedicated focus on the role of shepherds in supporting healthy ecosystems. Participants also complete a one-month internship on a working livestock farm. By the end of the third course, twenty-three shepherds had been trained, with only one dropout. Of those, fifteen are already active in pastoralism, five have launched livestock activities on existing farms, six are setting up new operations, and four are working as employees or contractors in the sector.

- ✓ **Read more:** LIFE Shep4Bio Sheperd Schools for Generational Renewal

5. Rural vitality: Desafio, the "rural Erasmus" programme (region Aragon, Spain)

Desafio is a rural internship programme created in 2018 to revitalise rural and mountainous areas by improving their attractiveness among students. Created by the Chair on Depopulation and Creativity of the University of Zaragoza, Spain, the programme connects rural public and private organisations willing to train young people and students eager to put in practice their academic knowledge. Thanks to Desafio, students at the University of Zaragoza can take an internship in rural areas between June and November, which includes 120 to 500 working hours. Medical students and future nurses had the opportunity to practice their skills in rural retirement homes or with homecare enterprises. Internships must take place in municipalities with less than 3,000 inhabitants and students must live in the municipality for the duration of their internship. A daily allowance is granted to interns and travel and accommodation costs are covered by the Desafio programme.

- ✓ **Read more:** The Desafio programme: a "rural Erasmus" to fight depopulation in rural and mountain areas

6. Health: A cross-border hospital to make up for the lack of medical care in the Pyrenees

The EGTC Hospital of Cerdanya is the first cross-border hospital in Europe. Located in the municipality of Puigcerdà (Catalonia, Spain), a few meters from the French border, it aims at providing healthcare services on both sides of the French Spanish border in a mountainous area where people had to drive one and a half hours to reach the closest hospital in Perpignan, France. Cerdanya is the first hospital welcoming citizens from both sides of the border as patients and staff. Such experiences show that cross border cooperation can overcome administrative issues and contribute to making life better for people living and working in mountain areas. In 2016, Cerdanya Hospital won the « Building a Europe without borders » award during the annual meeting of the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) held at the European Committee of the Regions.

- ✓ **Read more:** A cross-border hospital to make up for the lack of medical care in the Pyrenees

7. Youth engagement: shaping the future of mountain regions with youth councils

The SUERA Youth Council focuses specifically on the freedom to stay by promoting initiatives designed to enable young people to study closer to home, so that they can continue to take part in activities in their home region. The "Stay local, learn global" initiative thus aims to promote

distance learning as a means of enabling young people to remain in the Alpine regions whilst gaining access to high-quality educational and professional opportunities. As part of this, a broader initiative involving SUERA stakeholders is planned for 2027, to inform young people about the distance learning opportunities available, and create a forum for exchange between young people, experts and education stakeholders, and raise awareness amongst the local public. Youth is also at the heart of the 2021—2027 programme for the ALCOTRA programme, with the creation of an ALCOTRA Youth Council linked to the programme's governing bodies and support for numerous projects aimed at young people.

- ✓ **Read more:** Alpine Youth EUSALP: ALCOTRA 2021—2027

8. Diversification: The "Espaces Valléens" scheme to support tourism transitions

The 'Espaces Valléens' initiative is a regional development programme covering the French Alps, led by the State and the two Alpine regions, and funded by the ERDF. It supports 39 mountain areas in diversifying their tourism offering, promoting their natural and cultural heritage, and adapting to climate change. It thus aims to support year-round economic activity that is less dependent on snow, enabling local businesses and residents to continue living in these areas. The 2021-2027 scheme is based on two components: a common base for all territories, integrating climate change and prioritizing sustainable tourism operations. It includes differentiated support according to the needs and ambitions of the valley areas, with priority actions for each group of territories.

Read more: Diversifying and transforming tourism in the Alps with the Espaces Valléens

9. Governance: Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) in a cross-border setting

The Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach implemented under the Interreg Italy-Austria Programme is a valuable example of how territorial governance can contribute to the Right to Stay. Through Local Action Groups working across mountain territories, local communities jointly define development priorities and directly manage resources to address their specific needs. The approach combines European funding with strong local participation and multi-level governance, involving municipalities, civil society, businesses and citizens. It enables communities to move beyond sectoral interventions and deliver integrated territorial development strategies tailored to local realities. Several projects have specifically addressed demographic challenges and regional attractiveness. For example, the "Come2Stay" initiative in the Dolomiti Live area promotes the return of skilled people to mountain regions by creating opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship and social innovation. Such initiatives show that the Right to Stay should also include a "Right to Return", enabling former residents to reconnect with their territories and contribute to regional development.

- ✓ **Read more:** CLLD Projects Interreg Italy Austria Come2Stay – Dolomiti Live

10. Demography: Funding mobile services in ageing villages to improve quality of life for older adults

Population ageing is expected to accelerate in many rural and mountainous areas in the coming decades. This trend poses challenges for the quality of life of older people, particularly in terms of ensuring the availability of goods and services adapted to their needs. As part of the SILVER

SMEs project, the province of Burgos (Spain) has promoted the development of mobile services for the most ageing rural communities. Mobile services are recognised in rural areas as a solution to population sprawl and the lack of viability of some small shops. By supporting mobile services for older people, SODEBUR has adapted the concept to a specific segment of the population, thus responding to an important demographic challenge and preparing for a better quality of life for the increasing number of older people in the coming decades.

- ✓ **Read more:** Funding mobile services in ageing villages to improve quality of life for older adults