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RURACTIVE

Empowering rural communities for change

WP2- Milestone 4

Analysis of EU policies around rural innovation

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Introduction

The RURACTIVE project underscores the importance of empowering rural communities in shaping a just and sustainable transition in Europe. By addressing six RURACTIVE Rural Development Drivers (RDDs)— Sustainable multimodal mobility; Energy transition and climate neutrality; Sustainable agrifood systems and ecosystem management; Nature-based and cultural tourism; Culture and cultural innovation; Local services, health and wellbeing —the project aligns with the evolving priorities of the European Union (EU) under the 2024–2029 Commission. This analysis is the third in the series of EU policy analysis produced by AEIDL, highlighting possibilities for rural actors to influence these domains, leveraging insights from the RURACTIVE inception report (AEIDL, 2024a) and AEIDL’s detailed examination of EU policies and priorities for the new mandate (AEIDL, 2024b). The document also identifies key EU policies relevant to these domains, emphasizing opportunities for alignment and impact.

Overview of new EU Policy Context

The EU remains committed to its 2030 climate targets and 2050 neutrality. The EU’s new term marks a significant shift from sustainability-focused policies, like the EU Green Deal, towards the priorities centered on **Security, Prosperity, and Democracy** (Von der Leyen, 2024). This change is driven by global instability, the war in Ukraine, rising protectionism in major economies like China and the U.S., inflation, supply chain disruptions, and competition for strategic raw materials. Notably, the EU is placing a stronger emphasis on defense (Clapp, 2024), traditionally a NATO/national domain, while pursuing a “de-risking without decoupling” strategy to reduce geopolitical risks without fracturing global supply chains.

Economic and social policies are adapting to citizen concerns highlighted by the June EU elections. Health and housing are now key priorities, even though the EU’s powers in these areas are limited (Pape, 2025). The Letta Report (2024) emphasizes guaranteeing basic services and ensuring people can choose where to live. Supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is also a focus, with initiatives like the **SME Test** to reduce barriers, improve financing, and protect against non-EU takeovers. Budget reforms are underway to simplify over 50 EU funds and shift toward strategic investments, with Draghi (2024) proposing €800 billion annually for key sectors .

Governance reforms aim to strengthen the rule of law towards the implementing of public policies and build trust. This includes enforcement of anti-corruption measures, democratic processes, and judicial independence, which will be tied to EU funding. Broader consultation mechanisms, such as **Implementation Dialogues, Youth Tests, and Reality Checks**, will ensure greater transparency, stakeholder involvement, and regional and local level engagement.

Strategic priorities include new proposals on cybersecurity for critical infrastructure, clean industry, artificial intelligence, defense, and youth policy dialogues. Preparations are also underway for potential EU enlargement, requiring treaty reforms to accommodate new members (von der Leyen, 2024). Backed by Niinistö report, Europe should focus on civil and military preparedness across the Union (Niinistö, 2024). This term reflects a balance between responding to immediate crises and ensuring long-term resilience, adaptability, and sustainability.

The important first steps

The European Commission's new mandate prioritizes a swift and structured approach to policy implementation, emphasizing competitiveness, security, and sustainability. A key initiative within the first 100 days is the **New Vision for EU Agriculture and Food**, which aims to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of the agricultural sector (*European Commission, 2024b*). This reform seeks to balance productivity with environmental stewardship, ensuring that farming remains both economically viable and ecologically responsible. Another critical priority is the **Clean Industrial Deal**, designed to accelerate Europe's industrial decarbonization, strengthen clean technology investment, and create a more resilient energy system (*European Commission, 2024c & European Commission, 2024d*). This deal aligns with the broader goal of achieving a 90% reduction in emissions by 2040.

The EU is also reinforcing its **cybersecurity framework**, particularly in **critical infrastructure such as hospitals**, to mitigate digital threats in the healthcare sector. This move reflects the increasing digitization of public services and the necessity of resilient cybersecurity measures. In the digital space, the **AI Factories Initiative** aims to provide European AI startups with access to supercomputing resources, fostering innovation and ensuring that Europe remains competitive in artificial intelligence development.

Additionally, **the first Youth Policy Dialogues** will be launched, reflecting a commitment to democratic participation and inclusivity (*Von den Leyen, 2024*). This initiative will foster direct engagement between policymakers and young Europeans, ensuring that youth perspectives are integrated into the EU's decision-making process.

The early actions highlight a more politically assertive European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, focusing on policy efficiency, economic resilience, and democratic engagement. However, their success will depend on Member State cooperation and the Commission's ability to enforce coordination across its departments.

Key EU Policies influencing RURACTIVE Rural Development Drivers (RDDs)

This section identifies and analyses the most critical EU policies that intersect with RURACTIVE's six domains, offering a foundation for understanding the opportunities available to rural actors. Over the years, EU policies have evolved significantly to incorporate rural priorities, driven by the recognition of the critical role these areas play in achieving sustainability and cohesion goals. Early frameworks often focused on economic development through agriculture, but contemporary policies like the European Green Deal and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (*European Commission, 2024a*) have expanded to address complex, cross-sectoral challenges such as climate change, demographic shifts, and digital transformation. This evolution underlines the European Union's commitment to creating a balanced policy environment that supports rural innovation while addressing systemic inequalities.

Agrifood and ecosystem management

The RURACTIVE project enhances local food production through improved nutrient, water, and pest management, logistics, marketing, and ecological restoration efforts. Agriculture, a vital EU sector employing 29 million people and contributing 7.6% to exports, is also a major greenhouse gas emitter, responsible for 31% of emissions across the agri-food chain (*Margaras, Albaladejo Roman & De Nardin, 2023*). EU initiatives like the **Common Agricultural Policy**, **Green Deal**, and **Farm to Fork Strategy** aim to create more sustainable and resilient food systems.

RURACTIVE aligns with EU biodiversity efforts, including the **Biodiversity Strategy**, **Birds** and **Habitats** Directives, and the 2023 **Nature Restoration Law**, targeting the restoration of 20% of EU land and sea by 2030. **The new EU Forest strategy for 2030** (2021) is a flagship element of the European Green and a key action under the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. It is seen as a strategic component to achieve the EU's sustainable ecosystem management and biodiversity objectives, as well as its greenhouse gas emission reduction target of at least 55 % by 2030 and subsequent climate neutrality by 2050. Von Der Leyen presented in her new Commission Priorities for 2024 – 2029 several policies affecting heavily on agrifood and ecosystem management. In addition to **New Vision for EU Agriculture and Food**, which is to be proposed in the first 100 days, the new Commission will focus on **revision of CAP** and the planned **European Biotech Act**, both heavily addressing the challenges faced by the sector (*Von Der Leyen, 2024*). These policies support RURACTIVE's mission to balance rural development, ecological restoration, and sustainable resource use amidst competing interests like tourism.

Nature-based and cultural tourism

The RURACTIVE project addresses the growing trend of rural and proximity tourism, emphasizing sustainable, nature-based experiences. It develops services such as dynamic visitor tours, visitor management systems, and feedback platforms. By leveraging EU policies like the **Transition Pathway for Tourism** and the **European Agenda for Tourism 2030**, RURACTIVE supports a resilient tourism sector aligned with green and digital transitions. These policies aim to enhance sustainability, innovation, and circular practices across Europe's tourism industry, fostering economic, environmental, and cultural growth.

Nature-based tourism faces critical challenges from climate change. EU strategies such as the **European Green Deal**, **Fit for 55 Package**, and **Biodiversity Strategy** drive the tourism sector toward carbon neutrality and ecosystem restoration. By protecting 30% of the EU's land and sea and supporting sustainable mobility, these policies ensure the preservation of Europe's rich biodiversity, which is vital to nature tourism. Additionally, the **EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas** highlights tourism's role in strengthening rural communities, aligning closely with RURACTIVE's mission.

Culture and cultural innovation

The RURACTIVE project seeks to integrate culture as a critical element of sustainable development, focusing on improving accessibility for vulnerable groups through digital services and promoting sustainable festivals and events in rural areas. Although cultural policy primarily falls under the responsibility of EU Member States (*European Parliament, 2022*), the

European Union supports common challenges through initiatives like the **New European Agenda for Culture (NEAC)** and the **Creative Europe 2021–2027 Programme**, which emphasize social cohesion, economic growth, and cultural heritage protection.

EU strategies like the **European Green Deal** and **Fit for 55 Package** also shape cultural sectors by promoting climate neutrality and sustainability. Policies such as the **Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026** aim to empower cultural professionals, enhance societal participation, and strengthen cultural ecosystems. For the upcoming mandate, perhaps the greatest interest is focused on the development of comprehensive **Cultural Compass**, a strategic framework designed to guide and integrate the diverse dimensions of culture (European Commission, 2024f). By aligning with these frameworks, RURACTIVE contributes to advancing cultural innovation and creating inclusive, resilient, and climate-conscious rural communities.

Sustainable multimodal mobility

Sustainable transport is vital for rural connectivity, well-being, and decarbonization, yet it receives less attention than urban mobility. Particular emphasis should be based on people living in rural, remote, and hard-to-access areas (Kiss, 2022). The RURACTIVE project promotes flexible, multimodal solutions like shared mobility to enhance rural transport systems.

The EU's **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy**, from 2021, outlines ten flagship initiatives focused on reducing emissions, boosting zero-emission vehicles, adopting low-carbon fuels, and enhancing digital innovation for seamless, resilient transport. These align with RURACTIVE's efforts, especially amid changes accelerated by COVID-19, such as rising demand for sustainable and digital mobility.

Transport contributes 25% of EU greenhouse gas emissions, making it key to achieving the **European Green Deal** goal of climate neutrality by 2050 and the **Fit for 55** target of a 55% emissions reduction by 2030. The **TEN-T policy**, promoting multimodal EU transport infrastructure, will be revised in 2024 to further align with climate goals. RURACTIVE's innovations support these objectives by advancing sustainable rural mobility. Furthermore, one of the most important upcoming policies presented in Commissioner Tzitzikostas mission letter, from the perspective of local and smart development, is the proposal for a **new Single Digital Booking and Ticketing Regulation** and more deployment Intelligent Transport Service, Smart Mobility Solutions and ERTMS (European Commission, 2024e).

Energy transition and climate neutrality

Climate neutrality sits at the core of European Union's ambitions. However, as the study done by Erbach highlights, the challenges of European climate adaptation and mitigation actions are highly complex (Erbach, 2021). Rural areas are vital for renewable energy and carbon sinks yet often overlooked in climate strategies. The upcoming **Clean Industrial Deal** is a key component of EU guidelines and a cornerstone of Europe's strategy to achieve climate neutrality. It prioritizes industrial decarbonization, targeting a 90% reduction in emissions by 2040, with the ultimate goal of reaching full climate neutrality by 2050. Furthermore, the creation of **Energy Union** is main component to tackle

the rising prices of energy across the Union (Von Der Leyen, 2024). The RURACTIVE project promotes sustainable energy use, efficient production, and carbon-neutral solutions.

Key EU policies include the **European Green Deal** (climate neutrality by 2050), **Fit for 55** (55% emissions reduction by 2030), and the **European Climate Law**. The **REPowerEU plan** accelerates clean energy adoption, and the **Renewable Energy Directive** sets a 42.5% renewable energy target by 2030. The **Energy Efficiency Directive** aims to cut energy use by 11.5%.

The **EU Climate Adaptation Strategy** enhances resilience. Fair transitions are supported through the **Social Climate Fund** and **Just Transition Fund** (JTF). The JTF was designed to support EU regions, industries and workers facing challenges (Council of the European Union, 2021). It tends to mitigate negative repercussions of a green transition on employment by financing the diversification and modernization of the local economies and supporting workers to be employed in new industries and sectors (European Parliament and Council, 2021). Member States must develop **National Energy and Climate Plans** to align with these goals.

RURACTIVE’s work supports these objectives, fostering rural energy innovation for a sustainable future.

Local services, health and wellbeing

Rural areas face challenges such as limited access to basic services, aging populations, and depopulation. The RURACTIVE project addresses these by developing IoT-based care services and AI-driven home automation.

Although healthcare is mainly managed by Member States (Leclerc, 2023), the EU supports public health through initiatives like the **EU Global Health Strategy** (2022), which focuses on improving health systems and combating health threats. The **EU4Health Programme** (2021-2027) aims to improve healthcare access and health data use, aligning with RURACTIVE’s goals. For the upcoming mandate, perhaps the most crucial parts of the new priorities hoover around the completion of the **European Health Union**, a proposition for **Critical Medicines Act** and the push towards **preventive health**, particularly in the areas of mental health, including workplace well-being, cardiovascular diseases, treatments for degenerative illnesses, and research on autism (Von Der Leyen, 2024).

The EU also focuses on AI and robotics through strategies like the **AI for Europe** (2018) and the **AI Act** (2023), promoting ethical AI development, which intertwines with telemedicine, AI in health and innovative medical technologies. This is further enhanced by the coming **AI Factories Initiative** and **Apply AI strategy** (Von Der Leyen, 2024). RURACTIVE contributes to these efforts by enhancing rural healthcare with innovative technologies.

Table 1. Synthesis of major EU policies affecting RURACTIVE Rural Development Drivers (RDD).

Agrifood and ecosystem management	Nature-based and cultural tourism	Culture and cultural innovation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): CAP remains	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• European Agenda for Tourism 2030: Promotes resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New European Agenda for Culture

<p>the cornerstone of EU agricultural policy, offering subsidies and funding to promote productivity, sustainability, and farmer livelihoods. CAP's flexibility enables rural communities to integrate innovative practices that align with EU environmental goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy: These initiatives target sustainable food systems and emphasize the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions across the agri-food chain. • EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030: Aims to protect 30% of EU land and sea, providing a framework for ecosystem restoration and conservation efforts. • The New EU Forest strategy for 2030 aims to improve the quantity and quality of EU multi- 	<p>and sustainability in the tourism sector, emphasizing cultural heritage preservation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Biodiversity Strategy: Aligns with eco-tourism objectives by supporting ecosystem protection and sustainable tourism practices. • Transition Pathway for Tourism: Encourages the digital and green transformation of tourism services. 	<p>(NEAC) is an EU framework that promotes cultural diversity, strengthens cultural cooperation, and supports the cultural and creative sectors across Europe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative Europe 2021–2027 Programme is the EU program supporting the cultural, creative, and audiovisual sectors through funding, cooperation, and innovation. • Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 is an EU strategy to enhance cultural cooperation, focusing on cultural heritage, innovation, accessibility, and culture's role in social cohesion and external relations. • European Green Deal Aims for climate neutrality. Targets GHG reductions and transformation to sustainable energy sources and consumption
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functional forests, by reversing negative trends and increasing their resilience against the high uncertainty brought about by climate change and other drivers and pressures.		
Sustainable multimodal mobility	Energy transition and climate neutrality	Local services, health and wellbeing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy: Focuses on reducing emissions and enhancing connectivity, particularly in underserved rural regions. • TEN-T Regulation: Supports the integration of rural areas into Europe's comprehensive transport network. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fit for 55 Package: Aims to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030, setting a clear pathway for climate neutrality. • EU Green Deal: Aims for climate neutrality. Targets GHG reductions and transformation to sustainable energy sources and consumption • EU Social Climate Fund: Provides financing for energy-efficient infrastructure and addresses energy poverty in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Pillar of Social Rights: Emphasizes equitable access to essential services, including healthcare and education, as fundamental rights. • EU4Health Program: Strengthens health systems and promotes equitable healthcare access, particularly in remote areas. • European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan: Addresses health disparities and promotes social inclusion through targeted measures.

RURACTIVE's opportunities to influence and be influenced by

Rural communities play a critical role in shaping the socio-economic sphere of Europe. Despite their relative geographical isolation, rural areas are essential contributors to

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sustainability, cultural heritage, and innovation (*Pasikowska-Schnass & Widuto, 2022*). The European Union has increasingly recognized this significance, embedding mechanisms within its governance structure to ensure rural voices are heard and their unique needs addressed. Opportunities for influence extend across multiple domains, providing rural actors with tools to shape policies that align with their priorities.

Agrifood and Ecosystem Management

The agrifood sector, a major economic contributor and greenhouse gas emitter, faces increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices (*Margaras, Albaladejo Roman & De Nardin, 2023*).

- **Advancing sustainable practices:** Local stakeholders can utilize CAP funding to promote sustainable farming methods, aligning with EU climate and environmental objectives.
- **Ecosystem restoration projects:** Rural communities can showcase their efforts in habitat restoration to influence EU biodiversity policies and funding priorities.
- **Participatory governance:** Engaging in EU consultations ensures that local perspectives shape future agricultural and environmental policies.

Nature-Based and Cultural Tourism

Nature-based tourism, driven by increased interest in rural and eco-tourism, offers significant potential for economic and environmental benefits. The EU's emphasis on cultural heritage and sustainability aligns with RURACTIVE's goals of promoting locally driven tourism initiatives.

- **Cultural heritage initiatives:** Communities can leverage the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and Creative Europe program to fund sustainable tourism projects that celebrate local traditions and biodiversity.
- **Eco-tourism models:** Proposing innovative visitor management systems can position rural areas as leaders in sustainable tourism practices.
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Partnerships with EU agencies can enhance access to resources and amplify the impact of local tourism initiatives.

Culture and Cultural Innovation

Culture is a powerful driver of social cohesion and economic vitality, acting as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Cultural innovation can play a transformative role in education, local regeneration, and sustainable development.

- **Leveraging EU Cultural Policies for Local Development:** The New European Agenda for Culture (NEAC) emphasizes the role of culture in fostering inclusivity and economic vitality. Rural communities can align their cultural projects with NEAC priorities to secure funding and policy support. Participation in Creative Europe programs allows rural cultural actors to collaborate on cross-border projects that highlight regional artistic heritage.

- **Advocacy for Cultural and Creative Industries:** Rural stakeholders can advocate for enhanced funding for creative industries under EU cohesion policies, ensuring that rural artists and cultural entrepreneurs benefit from innovation funds.
- **Digital and Sustainable Cultural Innovation:** The EU's Digital Europe Programme supports cultural digitization efforts, providing rural communities with tools to preserve and promote intangible heritage through virtual and augmented reality platforms.

Sustainable Multimodal Mobility

Connectivity remains a critical challenge for rural areas. The EU's Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy prioritizes the development of innovative and sustainable transport solutions.

- **Advocacy for inclusive transport policies:** Highlighting the unique mobility needs of rural areas can influence the allocation of EU funds.
- **Pilot Projects in Shared Mobility:** Demonstrating the success of ride-sharing and multimodal systems can encourage wider adoption and funding.
- **Integration into TEN-T projects:** Rural communities can advocate for inclusion in major EU transport networks, enhancing accessibility and economic opportunities.

Energy Transition and Climate Neutrality

The shift towards renewable energy presents transformative opportunities for rural areas to lead in achieving climate neutrality.

- **Community-Led Renewable Projects:** Advocating for decentralized energy systems can align rural initiatives with EU goals, leveraging programs like the Clean Energy for EU Islands Initiative.
- **Accessing Climate Funds:** Demonstrating the socio-economic benefits of energy-efficient housing and infrastructure can secure funding from the Social Climate Fund.
- **Promoting circular economy practices:** Local actors can advocate for policies that integrate energy transitions with broader sustainability objectives.

Local Services

Equitable access to quality services is fundamental to the sustainability of rural communities. EU frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights emphasize the need to address service gaps in rural areas.

- **Innovative Service Delivery Models:** Communities can promote integrated approaches to healthcare, education, and digital connectivity.
- **Strengthening Rural Proofing:** Advocating robust rural proofing mechanisms ensures that policies consider the unique challenges of rural areas.
- **Engagement in EU Consultations:** Participating in stakeholder dialogues can shape service delivery frameworks to better address rural needs.

Health and Wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored disparities in healthcare access, particularly in rural areas. EU initiatives such as the EU4Health Program aim to bridge these gaps through targeted interventions.

- **Tele and digital medicine Expansion:** Proposing telemedicine and mobile health solutions can address accessibility challenges.
- **Health Equity Advocacy:** Highlighting the impact of social determinants on health can influence EU strategies to prioritize rural health equity.
- **Participation in Health Policy Dialogues:** Engaging in EU-level health consultations ensures that rural perspectives are considered in policymaking.

The evolving EU priorities present opportunities for rural communities to influence policies across RURACTIVE domains. By leveraging strategic **advocacy**, **evidence-based contributions**, and **collaborative partnerships**, rural actors can drive meaningful change. Empowering rural communities not only ensures their inclusion but also strengthens Europe's broader goals of sustainability, resilience, and equity. Rural engagement contributes to achieving the EU's Green Deal objectives by fostering

sustainable agricultural practices, promoting energy transitions, and enhancing ecosystem conservation. Moreover, integrating **rural perspectives into policy dialogues** ensures that infrastructure, mobility, and digitalization strategies address regional disparities, fostering territorial cohesion and inclusive growth. By participating in EU decision-making processes, rural communities can shape policies that directly impact their socio-economic future while reinforcing broader European sustainability ambitions. These efforts will be instrumental in building a more inclusive and sustainable European policy landscape.

RURACTIVE plays a role in informing and operationalizing of the evolving policy priorities. Its key pathways to impact lie in the developing and sharing new knowledge, raising awareness, facilitating cooperation and networking, building trust and promoting innovative anticipatory governance. Aiding the development of institutional capacity by local communities and the communities of interest and practice, as well as of third sector bodies, is also an important part of our work. It will ensure the adequate level of support for the evolution of collective action at the local level towards the improving of social capital in less advanced rural areas for 'leveling' them up.

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