

Escaping the Periphery Trap

*Voices on the futures of Europe's
remote rural and mountain regions*

An Issues Paper

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Executive Summary

Forty experts on European mountain and remote rural areas from eighteen European countries were asked seven structured questions about the next 10-20 years: the critical issues, the best and worst plausible futures, the changes required, the lessons of the past, the near-term priorities, and the one major change they would make with full authority. This paper presents their answers in their own words, under the Chatham House Rule, organised into ten themes.

A shared diagnosis. Contributors from the Alps to Anatolia and from the Nordic north to the Balkans describe the same interlocking system: youth out-migration and ageing erode services; service withdrawal accelerates departure; narrowing economies deepen dependence on single sectors; and the retreat of people from the land removes the stewardship on which landscapes, hazard control and biodiversity depend. Climate change compounds every element - through floods, landslides, drought, wildfires and the projected collapse of snow-dependent economies. This is the periphery trap described empirically, by those who study and govern it.

The direction is shared too. Seven points command broad agreement: the periphery trap must be treated as one system, not sector by sector; one-size-fits-all policy has failed and place-based, integrated, long-term approaches are the precondition for success; universal digital connectivity is now foundational infrastructure, but only delivers alongside skills, services and institutional capacity; a guaranteed floor of essential services is the most direct lever on demography; diversification (including payment for ecosystem services) is the key to resilience; communities must be agents, not objects, of development; and the narrative must shift from deficit and compensation to strategic asset and investment.

The choices are real. Beneath the consensus, contributors differ on seven genuine strategic options: (1) whether to retain existing residents or attract new ones; (2) whether fragile environments need protection from people or stewardship by them; (3) whether to build major infrastructure or restrain it; (4) whether to scale tourism or reduce dependence on it; (5) whether to support every settlement or concentrate resources on viable ones; (6) whether the green transition is the next income stream or the next extraction; and (7) how much local control to trade for external integration. These are political choices, not technical ones. Contributors argue they should be made explicitly, and negotiated with communities, rather than blurred.

One instrument recurs. Asked what single change they would make, contributors independently converge on variations of the same idea: a long-term, place-based, integrated territorial framework - combining multi-year flexible funding, guaranteed services, connectivity, ecosystem-service remuneration and legally anchored local co-decision - in place of today's fragmented, short-cycle, sectoral instruments. Proposals range from a binding law for mountain areas and a dedicated transition fund to a 'rural living guarantee', locally funded 'nature guardians' and a permanent mountain science-policy interface. For the reviews of the Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion policy and the Green Deal, the message is consistent. The barrier is not the absence of individual policies, but the absence of integration between them, and of local ownership of what is built.

1. About this Issues Paper

Europe's mountain areas cover almost 40% of the continent's land and are home to 17% of its people. They supply much of Europe's water, carbon storage, biodiversity, food, timber and energy - yet many remain locked in what MARGISTAR calls the "periphery trap": a self-reinforcing cycle of depopulation, service withdrawal, economic narrowing and environmental stress that conventional policy has so far failed to break.

To understand how those closest to these territories see the next two decades, MARGISTAR conducted a structured 7 Questions exercise, an established strategic-foresight interview technique. Contributors were asked seven open questions:

- Q1:** What are the critical strategic issues for the next 10-20 years?
- Q2:** What a positive and realistic 2040 would look like?
- Q3:** What would concern them most if things went badly?
- Q4:** What systemic and governance changes needed?
- Q5:** What are the lessons of the last 10-20 years?
- Q6:** What are the priorities for the next 3-5 years? and
- Q7:** What single major change they would make if they had the authority and resources to do so?

The paper is intended to support European, national, regional and local policy conversations on the future of remote rural and mountain regions. It is not a statistically representative survey; it is a structured qualitative synthesis designed to surface issues, tensions, choices and possible pathways.

This paper presents the results in the contributors' own words. Quotes have been lightly edited only for length, grammatical clarity across languages, and to remove details that could identify individual contributors; their substance is untouched. Following the issues-paper method, the quotes are organised by theme and grouped by correlation and, deliberately, by opposition of viewpoints. Where contributors disagree, that disagreement is the finding.

Who contributed

Forty experts responded, based in eighteen countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye and Ukraine. Their direct experience spans the Alps, the Apennines, the Balkans and Rhodopes, the Carpathians, the Nordic mountains and the Arctic north, the Iberian ranges (the Central System and Cantabrian Mountains), the Cretan mountains, the Bohemian Forest, the Atlantic uplands of Portugal and Ireland, and the Pontic, Taurus and Anatolian mountains of Türkiye.

Thirty-two of the forty have more than ten years' experience in the field, eighteen of them more than twenty. Most are researchers and academics working across agriculture and forestry, environment and biodiversity, climate adaptation, territorial development, tourism, governance and community development; the group also includes a public-authority policymaker and an independent researcher-designer. They work at every scale, from the local and cross-border to the national and European. Thirty-nine of the forty consented to being quoted anonymously; this

paper draws exclusively on their responses. Contributions were made in a personal capacity and do not represent the positions of contributors' organisations.

Data validation and limitations

All findings in this paper were validated directly against the response dataset. Every quotation was traced to its source response and checked against quotation consent; no material from the single non-consenting contributor is quoted. Theme-prevalence figures (Section 3 and Annex A) were produced by keyword-assisted coding of full responses and stress-tested with both broad and narrow keyword sets; the published figures are the conservative estimates, and coding sensitivity is reported alongside them. Two limitations should be kept in view: the panel is research-led and self-selected, so local stakeholders speak here mainly through those who study and work with them; and keyword counts indicate breadth of concern, not statistical significance.

How to read this paper

Sections 4 to 13 set out the ten issue themes in the contributors' own words; each closes with a short "Policy issue" note and the "Strategic choice" it poses for decision-makers. Quotations are evidence signals, not endorsements of any single position. Section 14 records the contributors' shared reframing of mountain regions as strategic assets, and Section 15 assembles their answers into two 2040 trajectories. Section 16 collects the boldest single interventions proposed. Sections 17 and 18 summarise the areas of agreement, the lessons of the last two decades, and the genuine strategic tensions on which contributors divide. Section 19 offers a short synthesis by the authors. These are the only editorial interpretations in the paper, clearly separated from the evidence. Annex A contains the validated respondent profile and theme coding.

A note on the evidence, anonymity and acknowledgements

The panel is expert but not representative. Thirty-eight of forty contributors are researchers, participation was self-selected, and mountain residents, businesses and local authorities speak here mainly through those who study and work with them. The findings should therefore be read as an expert scan, exactly what the 7 Questions method is designed to produce, and complementary evidence should be sought from the actor groups under-represented here: local authorities, young people, farmers, foresters, pastoralists, SMEs, tourism operators, protected-area managers and public-service providers.

Readers in policy institutions are invited to treat the quotes in this paper as an early-warning system. Forty experts with, collectively, several centuries of experience in Europe's mountains were asked what worries them and what they would change. Their answers agree on the diagnosis, converge on the direction, and disagree - productively - on what policy options and pathways policy-makers should choose.

The exercise was conducted under the Chatham House Rule: quotes may be used but are not attributed. All quotes in this paper come exclusively from the thirty-nine contributors who gave explicit consent to anonymous quotation. Thirty-four contributors consented to being acknowledged by name; those who provided their name are listed. Inclusion in this list implies no attribution of any particular quote, and the list includes contributors regardless of whether their words were quoted. Those who preferred not to be listed, or who did not provide a name,

are warmly thanked collectively. Contributions were personal expert views and do not represent contributors' organisations.

2. The Policy Challenge

Mountain areas are not simply disadvantaged territories seeking financial supports. They are social-ecological systems in which natural resources, biodiversity, cultural landscapes, services, governance capacity, livelihoods and identity interact. The responses empirically confirm the “periphery trap” dynamic at the centre of MARGISTAR’s analysis. Contributors repeatedly described the same self-reinforcing cycle: young people leave because services, housing, income and institutional voice are weak; services decline because populations fall; landscapes degrade because farming, forestry and pastoral systems lose continuity; and development then arrives, if at all, from outside. Short-term projects, seasonal tourism, resource extraction, centrally designed schemes may bring benefits but can also intensify marginalisation.

The strategic question that emerges from the responses is therefore not “how can mountains be helped?” but “how can mountain actors be enabled to shape Europe’s transitions?”. Green Deal implementation, nature restoration, climate adaptation, agricultural transition, energy security, territorial cohesion and digital transformation will all be experienced intensely in mountain areas. The same policies can either create new futures or reproduce the old geography of exclusion.

EU policy context

The issues raised by contributors sit directly within the existing EU policy architecture as summarise in **Table 1** below.

Table 1 High-level EU policy architecture

Policy frame	Relevance for mountain territories
Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas	The EU rural vision to 2040 is organised around stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas, supported by the Rural Pact and the EU Rural Action Plan.
Cohesion Policy	Cohesion Policy explicitly identifies remote, island, mountainous and sparsely populated areas as territories requiring specific investment tools, while also delivering Green Deal, digital, employment and innovation objectives.
CAP 2023-27	The CAP supports rural areas and landscapes, sustainable management of natural resources and rural jobs, with national Strategic Plans offering flexibility to adapt measures, including for areas facing natural constraints, to local conditions.
EU Biodiversity Strategy & Nature Restoration Regulation	The biodiversity agenda now requires transformative change and binding restoration targets, with Member States preparing National Restoration Plans, much of which will be delivered in mountain landscapes.

3. What the Data Says

The coding produced eight higher-order issue themes. The counts below are keyword-assisted and indicative rather than statistical. They show how widely each issue theme appears across the forty responses. The clusters are mutually reinforcing, not separate. Demography is tied to services, services to infrastructure, infrastructure to opportunity, opportunity to governance, and governance to how climate, biodiversity and resource decisions are made. For presentation, several themes are unpacked across more than one of the ten issue sections that follow, while the cultural heritage and local knowledge theme operates as a cross-cutting theme rather than a standalone section. The themes associated with individual issue sections are listed broadly in the order in which they appear in the paper, rather than by frequency.

Table 2 Higher-order coded themes from the response data (n=40)

Theme	Respondents referencing it (of 40)
Demographic decline and youth retention	37 - near-universal; population viability is the cross-cutting test of policy success.
Services, digital and physical connectivity	33 (33-36) - access is the precondition for staying, returning and investing.
Climate, hazards and ecological resilience	26 (26-28) - treated as a development issue, not an environmental add-on.
Economic diversification and local value capture	23 (23-39, most sensitive to coding) - multifunctional economies over single-sector dependence.
Conservation, extraction and tourism pressure	28 (28-29) - opportunity and risk intertwined in protected areas, tourism, resources and energy.
Governance, decentralisation and place-based policy	32 (32-37) - a strongly contested theme centred on coordination, local agency, and institutional capacity.
Geopolitics, security and isolation	5 (5-7) - a minority but pointed strand: war, borders and geopolitical shocks.
Cultural heritage and local knowledge	21 (21-27) - living knowledge and cultural continuity as strategic assets.

4. The Demographic Spiral

No issue was raised by more contributors than depopulation, and almost never as a single trend. It was described as a self-reinforcing cycle in which the loss of young people, services, jobs and land care feed on one another, with consequences that reach far beyond demography.

- *“The worst-case trajectory is irreversible demographic decline. Depopulation would trigger cascading service withdrawal - the closure of schools, health centres and local administrations. Local economies risk becoming residual rather than developmental.”*
- *“If things go badly, the main risk is a reinforcing cycle of depopulation, ageing, service decline, economic weakening and environmental stress.”*
- *“The process of generational renewal could collapse entirely: sustained youth out-migration would leave behind ageing populations and increasingly abandoned settlements, unable to sustain even basic local economies.”*
- *“The greatest risk is not that a single problem will arise, but that these regions enter a ‘vicious circle’ in which several crises feed off one another - a decline in both economic production and ecological resilience; a ‘vacuum’ where neither food can be produced nor nature protected, leaving only elderly and isolated communities behind.”*
- *“When populations decline, it is not only people who leave, but also knowledge, production culture, local solidarity, and generations of experience tied to the land.”*
- *“Out-migration leads not only to population decline but also to a loss of innovation and development capacity in production systems.”*
- *“Depopulation means the loss of stewardship and care.”*
- *“The political invisibility of these regions, caused by insufficient demographic mass, structurally prevents adequate representation in national and European policy processes.”*
- *“The one truly bad outcome is depopulation. Without people, what remains is the ‘museumisation’ of the mountains: a full exhibition of all the socio-economic features of mountain regions - but without population.”*

Several contributors challenged the assumption that decline is destiny, pointing to counter-flows and to the returnable nature of much youth migration:

- *“The circular mobility of young people is not permanent emigration but an adaptive survival strategy. There is a genuine basis for return, provided that accessible employment and appropriate financial mechanisms are in place.”*
- *“While out-migration is dominant, some regions may attract amenity migrants, remote workers and climate migrants.”*
- *“A key issue for the coming decades will be the influx of people seeking climate refugia from the bottomlands.”*

Policy issue. Many policies still treat population loss as a demographic trend to be observed rather than as the outcome of interacting failures in services, housing, employment, education

and governance. A credible mountain policy needs a ‘living territories’ lens in which schools, childcare, health, housing, transport, digital access, local jobs and civic voice are considered together.

Strategic policy choice. *What combination of retaining existing residents, enabling return and attracting new residents is appropriate in different territories, and what early investments in services, housing, employment and civic capacity are needed to sustain viable communities?*

5. Services, Infrastructure and Connectivity

Contributors returned again and again to the same causal chain: services decide whether people can stay, and connectivity, both physical and digital, decides whether services and livelihoods are possible. They differ, however, on the scale, type and location of new infrastructure, and on how its benefits should be weighed against environmental costs.

- “The closure or centralisation of essential services - schools, health centres, public transport - has had a clear negative impact, often triggering further depopulation. Maintaining a minimum level of accessible services is critical for territorial cohesion and quality of life.”
- “The State cannot withdraw. It must guarantee a minimum level of public services - health and elderly care, education, as well as post offices and support for small shops - so that people can live in the region.”
- “I would keep basic services open in the small villages to create a net of distributed services, so people would not leave. Schools are key.”
- “As the population declines, the per-capita cost of services such as hospitals, schools and transport increases. Instead of traditional public transport, on-demand autonomous vehicles or shared mobility solutions could become a strategic necessity.”
- “Rather than centralising services in the name of efficiency, they should be delivered locally using digital and mobile tools - and the countryside should be redefined not as a nostalgic agricultural area, but as a modern living laboratory that meets the social and professional needs of young people.”

Digital connectivity as the decisive lever

- “Addressing the digital gap is the most critical lever for change. By securing robust connectivity, remote regions can pivot from decline toward resilience.”
- “Regions that invested early in broadband and digital skills have been better able to retain population, attract new residents and diversify their economies - especially with the rise of remote work.”
- “It is not just about internet speed: ensuring that telemedicine, digital education and precision-farming technologies actually reach these regions appears to be the only way to bring living standards on a par with those in cities.”

But infrastructure is not enough - and can even harm

- *“Infrastructure investment is necessary but not sufficient. Without parallel investment in human capital, entrepreneurship and innovation, infrastructure alone cannot reverse decline.”*
- *“Roads and broadband only create lasting benefits when combined with service access, local jobs, institutional capacity and community participation.”*
- *“Bring these areas closer to the major corridors - first physically, by building the infrastructure: ambitious roads with tunnels leading to a high-speed rail network built in parallel. That’s a fantasy - but it is what would change everything.”*
- *“Comprehensive spatial planning must prevent the uncontrolled expansion of infrastructure - in particular, limiting the construction of new roads that fragment ecosystems and prioritise unrestricted car access over sustainability.”*

Policy issue. Service withdrawal is not neutral: once a school, health centre, transport link or local administration disappears, it changes household and business decisions and the attractiveness of a place. Contributors call for distributed service networks, rural service hubs, mobile and digital provision, and an explicit guarantee that mountain citizens will not fall below a basic access threshold. The challenge is to determine how that threshold can be delivered across territories with very different populations, geographies and service needs.

Strategic policy choice. *What combination of physical, digital and service infrastructure is needed in different territories, where should it be provided, and how should its social, economic and environmental outcomes determine investment decisions?*

6. Climate Change and Compounding Hazards

For most contributors, climate change is not one issue among many. It is the accelerant that turns every other vulnerability (e.g., demographic, economic, institutional) into a compound risk. Mountain systems were repeatedly described as Europe’s early-warning zone.

- *“Mountainous regions are the places that feel the effects of climate change most severely and most rapidly. Due to the rising snowline, the economy reliant on winter tourism in ranges such as the Alps and the Pyrenees could collapse entirely within ten years. And the melting of glaciers and decline in snowfall threaten not only these regions but also agriculture and hydroelectric power generation in the valleys below.”*
- *“Climate change and compound hazards - floods, landslides, drought and ecosystem degradation - are among the most important strategic issues of the next two decades.”*
- *“Climate adaptation, ecosystem protection and hazard prevention must be treated as core development priorities, not secondary environmental issues.”*
- *“Drought is no longer a future risk, but a current reality.”*
- *“The increased frequency of floods and landslides, combined with forest ecosystem stress, illustrates growing vulnerability.”*

- *“If things go badly we face multiple simultaneous crises: a distorted housing market, wildlife-human conflicts, and more and more emergencies after large extreme-weather events - windthrow and bark-beetle outbreaks with no sanitation felling, because forest roads are badly maintained and there is no workforce.”*
- *“Rising temperatures and altered precipitation would stress newly established forests, increasing susceptibility to pests, drought-induced dieback and large-scale disturbances - potentially triggering abrupt ecosystem shifts.”*
- *“Climate impacts decrease tourism and reindeer herding; continuing geopolitical tensions lead to isolation and economic decline.”*
- *“Climate-related events have revealed the high cost of reactive policies - proactive adaptation and ecosystem management are far cheaper than repair.”*

Policy issue. The environmental role of mountain regions can become a new source of marginalisation if communities carry conservation, restoration, carbon management, water management, and landscape stewardship without fair compensation or meaningful agency. Conversely, adaptation and restoration can become a positive condition for development if they fund skilled local work, reinforce viable land-use systems and reduce disaster risk.

Strategic policy choice. Under what governance, funding and benefit-sharing arrangements can climate adaptation and nature restoration reduce risk while strengthening local livelihoods, agency and long-term resilience?

7. Land Abandonment, Rewilding and Cultural Landscapes

A distinctive strand of the responses treats the land itself as the ledger on which depopulation is written. Contributors described spontaneous reforestation of abandoned farmland as simultaneously a carbon opportunity, a wildfire hazard, a biodiversity paradox and a cultural loss, and disagreed on whether the answer is protection, active stewardship, or a combination of both.

- *“Large areas of former agricultural and pastoral land are undergoing spontaneous forest regrowth. While this passive rewilding can enhance carbon sequestration, it often produces structurally uniform forests, loss of open habitats and declining landscape heterogeneity - with implications for biodiversity, wildfire regimes and the erosion of cultural landscapes shaped by centuries of agro-pastoral practice.”*
- *“In Mediterranean contexts, unmanaged vegetation growth increases fuel loads, intensifying wildfire frequency and severity. The strategic challenge is determining when passive rewilding is sufficient and when active intervention is required.”*
- *“The worst outcome would be generalised environmental degradation driven by large wildfires and the associated land-degradation processes.”*
- *“Depopulation and land abandonment are not merely social or economic issues; they are drivers of coupled social-ecological degradation. Ecological restoration efforts risk occurring in a governance vacuum - environmentally unstable and socially unsustainable.”*
- *“If things go badly, we will lose some fifty % of the country’s area in terms of functional land.”*

- *“An important but often overlooked issue is the gradual loss of traditional land-use practices, such as seasonal transhumance, which leads to the decline of mountain cultural landscapes and their associated biodiversity.”*
- *“Controlled grazing can help maintain open landscapes, limit shrub encroachment and preserve cultural heritage, while also supporting local economies - but this requires coordinated policy and incentives to keep pastoral systems viable in regions already losing people.”*
- *“The lack of effective spatial planning has allowed uncontrolled construction, replacing traditional rural architecture with incompatible multi-storey concrete buildings - eroding cultural landscapes and local character.”*
- *“The greatest concern is the loss of mountain livelihood knowledge, local ecological knowledge and biodiversity.”*

Contributors differ on the appropriate balance between conservation restrictions, active land use and community stewardship:

- *“Conservation measures should be prioritised: these regions need to be protected so that they can remain in their natural state for future generations.”*
- *“Restrictions on agricultural activity in the name of nature conservation - the extreme proliferation of wolves and the impossibility of local livestock farming - are among the developments that most concern local communities.”*
- *“Conservation models that exclude local people fail inevitably on the ground.”*

Policy issue. Land abandonment, rewilding and cultural-landscape change have ecological, economic and social consequences that cannot be addressed through separate conservation, heritage and rural-development policies. Pastoralism, transhumance, forestry, small-scale agriculture and other traditional land uses can support biodiversity, reduce hazard risk, sustain cultural landscapes and provide livelihoods, but their value and appropriateness vary by place. Policy therefore needs to consider protection, passive restoration and active stewardship as part of the same landscape-management system. Where active stewardship remains appropriate, supporting cultural landscapes means supporting the people, skills, markets and services that keep them functioning as living systems rather than conserving them only after decline.

Strategic policy choice. *What balance of protection, passive restoration and active stewardship is appropriate in different mountain landscapes, and what support is needed to sustain the people, knowledge and land-use systems on which active management depends?*

8. Beyond Single-sector Economies

Contributors converged on the diagnosis i.e., dependence on one or two sectors is the economic signature of the periphery trap. They offered a wide repertoire of remedies including the bioeconomy, ecosystem-service markets, remote work, cooperatives, and new economic contracts between mountains and cities.

- *“Regions heavily reliant on one sector - whether agriculture, extractive industries or seasonal tourism - have proven more vulnerable to economic shocks and external crises. Diversification has emerged as the key resilience factor.”*

- *“Thriving regions would move beyond dependence on a few traditional sectors and develop multi-functional local economies: ecotourism, value-added agriculture and forestry, the bioeconomy and ecosystem-services markets.”*
- *“Forests and non-wood forest products are key economic and ecological assets, yet they face pressures from informal use, weak monitoring and limited value addition at the local level.”*
- *“Short-term subsidies may help farmers survive, but they do not create structural transformation. Successful cases demonstrate the importance of local product branding, strong cooperatives, and the development of rural tourism and nature-based economic activities.”*
- *“Cooperative systems should be reformed and professionalised - moving away from poorly managed structures towards transparent, scientifically guided and market-integrated organisations operating at national and international level.”*

Paying for what mountains provide

- *“Under the Green Deal, rural areas are now viewed not merely as a food source but as carbon sinks and biodiversity reserves. Direct payments to landowners who protect forests or enhance biodiversity - such as carbon farming - could become one of the key economic models of the next decade.”*
- *“Farmers would earn income not only from crops but directly from nature-based services - carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation - through an ‘ecosystem income’ model.”*
- *“I would establish a comprehensive European framework for recognising and financially supporting the ecosystem services provided by remote rural and mountain regions - shifting their economic model away from dependency on extractive or seasonal activities.”*

New work, new residents, new rural-urban contracts

- *“A network of well-equipped remote-work hubs, innovation centres and training facilities embedded within local communities would enable residents to access high-quality jobs without needing to migrate to urban centres.”*
- *“Brain circulation between urban and rural and mountain areas can enhance socio-economic development and talent attraction and retention.”*
- *“What is needed is an economically sustainable ‘co-location’ model that allows affordable mobility for residents between rural areas and nearby urban areas - flexible enough to cater for accessing culture, accessing work, accessing education.”*
- *“The single change I would make is an economic alliance with cities - economic, social and environmental.”*
- *“What needs to change is economic diversification, sufficiency economic thinking, and ‘nature-cultural’ pride.”*

Policy issue. Diversification must not become a slogan or simply mean adding more activities to already fragile local economies. Contributors name concrete building blocks, including local processing, cooperatives, product branding, smart agriculture, sustainable forestry and pastoralism, ecosystem restoration, digital work, and small enterprise. The common thread is whether diversification increases local value capture, strengthens year-round livelihoods, and reduces dependence on externally controlled or highly seasonal activities.

Strategic policy choice. *What combination of sectors, ownership models and rural-urban linkages can build more diversified mountain economies while increasing local value capture, resilience and year-round livelihoods?*

9. Tourism

Contributors assign very different roles to tourism in the future of mountain regions. Some see strategically planned nature-based tourism as an important source of growth, employment and landscape value. Others emphasise the risks of overdependence, particularly where tourism is seasonal, construction-driven, externally controlled or displaces local residents and activities.

- *“Nature-based tourism with a strategic growth plan can be key to success.”*
- *“Sustainable tourism can be integrated with landscape-management objectives, generating income while reinforcing environmental stewardship - but this requires regulation that controls overdevelopment and internalises environmental costs.”*
- *“The ‘albergo diffuso’ model - dispersed hospitality in existing village buildings - is promising for the revitalisation of rural areas, and a case for supporting small businesses.”*
- *“Tourism in rural and mountain regions mostly happens in protected natural areas. There is an enormous production of accommodation facilities. It is questionable to what extent tourism has a positive strategic impact on mountain regions.”*
- *“Poorly planned, construction-driven tourism has led to environmental degradation and loss of local identity. Development has prioritised concrete-based, large-scale infrastructure, while genuinely sustainable, community-based ecotourism has been either neglected or misapplied.”*
- *“The clearest failure of the past decades has been attention to short-term profit activities with no future and a high potential to generate inequality - skiing, for example.”*
- *“Tourists want things ‘for free’, but locals lack the funds to provide the services tourists demand - waste management, toilets, year-round operations. We need systemic change in how tourism in protected areas is financed, and economic stability even without tourism.”*
- *“Over-reliance on tourism-oriented development can displace local populations and undermine long-term territorial sustainability.”*
- *“Uncontrolled tourism results in environmental degradation and reduced quality of life for residents - while less touristic areas depopulate, other areas suffer overtourism and overexploitation.”*
- *“Priorities should include reducing dependence on tourism-based economies by strengthening the primary sector - agriculture, forestry and pastoralism - alongside robust biodiversity conservation.”*

Policy issue. Tourism can generate employment, markets and investment, but its territorial effects depend on its scale, form, ownership and relationship with the wider economy. Contributors identify particular problems where visitor demand imposes costs on communities, development is construction-led, or tourism crowds out housing, primary production and other year-round activities. Policy therefore needs financing and regulatory models that recover the costs of hosting visitors, retain more value locally and distinguish forms of tourism that strengthen diversified regional economies from those that deepen dependence.

Strategic policy choice. *What role should tourism play in different mountain economies, where is further growth appropriate, where should dependence on tourism be reduced, and what conditions are needed to ensure that tourism creates durable local value?*

10. Who Benefits?

Among the most forceful passages in the exercise were warnings that the green transition could reproduce, in new forms, the extractive relationship between centre and periphery that contributed to marginalisation in the first place. Contributors repeatedly questioned who controls transition investments, who bears their environmental and social costs, and who ultimately captures their value.

- *“Colonial resource-use patterns must be avoided - otherwise a new wave of ‘green colonialism’ becomes a reality.”*
- *“These regions face the risk of being reduced to ‘extractive zones’, where natural resources and renewable-energy potential are exploited by external actors without generating local wealth or ensuring community participation in decision-making.”*
- *“Resource extraction, renewable-energy expansion and land-use intensification could proceed without proportional institutional voice, reinforcing structural asymmetries rather than correcting them.”*
- *“Mountain regions often carry environmental responsibilities without equivalent institutional voice.”*
- *“Although mountain regions are central to carbon sequestration and ecosystem services, local communities often benefit only marginally from emerging green-finance mechanisms. Ensuring the fair distribution of benefits from carbon markets and nature-based solutions is a key policy challenge.”*
- *“‘Wild capitalism’ has resulted in the exploitation of local natural resources without reinvestment into communities. What is lacking is solely the political will to stop treating the periphery as a resource reserve for the centre.”*
- *“The worst outcome would be the transformation of rural areas into large-scale industrial megaprojects that extract and erode nature and culture.”*
- *“The environmental impacts of hydropower plants on river systems should be urgently reassessed; poorly planned and excessive installations should be rehabilitated or, where necessary, decommissioned - and the allocation of natural areas for uncontrolled mining must be strictly limited.”*
- *“Demographically emptied, marginalised regions near external borders have already become areas of illegal waste dumping from more developed member states, and are particularly vulnerable to criminal interests. This is not only an environmental failure but a governance failure at both national and European level.”*

Policy issue. EU and national policy need clearer safeguards and benefit-sharing requirements for development in mountain regions. Renewable energy, tourism and bioeconomy and nature-based investment can serve climate and territorial goals, but their local effects depend on how

projects are governed. Cumulative impacts need to be assessed, communities need meaningful bargaining and decision-making power, and a fair share of revenues and other benefits needs to support local livelihoods, services and ecological resilience.

Strategic policy choice. *Under what ownership, governance and benefit-sharing arrangements can green-transition investment create durable local value while meeting wider climate and energy objectives?*

11. Governance

Governance was among the most extensively discussed themes. Contributors repeatedly identified three failures recur: (i) one-size-fits-all policy design, (ii) sectoral and institutional fragmentation, and (iii) weak local administrative capacity. Across different contexts, they converge on a broad direction: place-based, multi-level and participatory governance in which local actors have meaningful decision-making roles, sufficient capacity and access to resources, while remaining connected to regional, national and European institutions.

- *“One-size-fits-all policies do not work. Uniform, centrally designed policies fail to address the specific needs of remote and mountain areas; place-based approaches, tailored to local assets, challenges and cultural contexts, deliver more sustainable results.”*
- *“Standardised and centralised policies are insufficient in these regions. Success comes from approaches that are tailored to local needs, participatory, climate-resilient and service-enhancing; failure has come from economic monoculture, poor infrastructure and fragmented governance.”*
- *“Remote regions often suffer from fragmented governance, limited administrative capacity and insufficient representation in national decision-making.”*
- *“Even when funding opportunities exist, many remote regions struggle to absorb and use them effectively because of limited institutional capacity.”*
- *“Governance is the major issue. If all the priorities and initiatives already planned had been put into practice, we would have much more developed regions. Political will comes first.”*
- *“Centralised, fragmented policies that attempt to sustain rural areas solely through state support have failed. Integrated models - supported by digital connectivity and empowering local people with legal guarantees and a real role in governance - have brought real success.”*
- *“What is needed is integrated governance reform that reconciles traditional usage rights with modern ownership, breaks the service trap with digital infrastructure, and places local people at the centre of governance as ‘ecosystem protectors’ - while resolving the legal paralysis created by inter-agency conflicts of authority.”*
- *“Initiatives that actively involve local communities in planning and implementation show stronger ownership, better adaptation to local realities and more sustainable outcomes than top-down interventions.”*
- *“Legitimacy matters: sustainability transitions succeed when trade-offs are openly negotiated and communities are meaningfully involved in shaping their own development pathways. Institutional relationships should move from occasional consultation to sustained co-creation.”*

- *“A legislative framework specific to mountain and sparsely populated areas is essential - one that institutionalises a neo-endogenous approach: bottom-up initiative balanced with top-down institutional support.”*
- *“Build capacity among local communities - not through education alone, but by forming local action groups and integrating them into communities of practice that develop strategic plans together, including the measures and the distribution of finance.”*
- *“A combination of national policies and local, municipal policies: the success factor is usually the combination of both.”*
- *“Make it a regular practice - and an obligation - for research institutes to report to and advise policymakers.”*
- *“Anticipatory and adaptive governance is needed in a time of large uncertainties. Futures exercises should be seen as an essential part of such governance.”*

Policy issue. Contributors repeatedly criticise fragmented, reactive, top-down policy and call for a shift from short-term project calls towards long-term, place-based arrangements with flexible funding, financed local capacity, monitoring, and a formal role for communities, municipalities, cooperatives, SMEs and researchers. Effective local agency, however, also depends on coordination with regional, national and European institutions able to provide resources, expertise, infrastructure and policy coherence.

Strategic policy choice. *Which decisions should be controlled locally, which require coordination or action at higher levels, and what institutional, financial and capacity arrangements are needed to make multi-level governance work in practice?*

12. Funding and Policy Instruments under Scrutiny

While some contributors called for greater investment, the dominant critique concerned the design of funding rather than its existence: short cycles, symptom-chasing measures, allocation biased towards larger actors and larger settlements, and administrative burdens that exclude many of the small local actors the funds are intended to serve.

- *“Funds are not distributed reasonably or fairly. A lot of money is wasted on measures with little, no, or only short-term effect. No endeavour is made to go deeper into the reasons behind the problems - we tackle only the symptoms.”*
- *“Subsidies for farming in less-favoured areas were not motivating for small or organic farmers; they were disadvantaged compared with big companies. EU and national funding has been misallocated or poorly coordinated, excluding small local actors.”*
- *“Relocate the subsidies: support small local farmers and entrepreneurs instead of big agro-companies and developers.”*
- *“Funding must be spent in the small settlements, not the bigger cities - with money ring-fenced for rural and mountain regions just as it is for less-developed regions at NUTS level.”*

- *“Short-term funding cycles and inconsistent policy commitment have limited long-term impact. Sustained investment, stable governance frameworks and better coordination across policy levels are critical to move beyond pilot projects.”*
- *“Regions need multi-year, flexible funding envelopes tied to locally designed strategies, with embedded expert teams to strengthen municipal capacity and project implementation.”*
- *“EU and national funding instruments should be simplified and made more accessible to local actors. Reducing administrative burdens and increasing technical support would improve absorption capacity and the effectiveness of investment.”*
- *“Demographic incentive measures without accompanying social infrastructure have proven ineffective.”*
- *“The support of EU policies and funding is not effective enough. These regions do not have the demographic and economic strength to overcome their problems alone; they depend on external investment, policies and subsidies - and the impact of those is not always positive, nor sustainable in the long term.”*
- *“The EU should invest much more in rural areas and the countryside - including tax exemptions for young families in these regions.”*

Policy issue. The effectiveness of funding depends not only on how much is available, but on its duration, accessibility, coordination and territorial targeting. Short funding cycles, fragmented sectoral instruments, administrative burdens and allocation mechanisms that favour larger actors can prevent remote communities from developing the institutional capacity and integrated strategies needed for long-term change. Contributors therefore call for simpler access, multi-year commitment, financed local capacity and accountability focused on long-term territorial outcomes as well as programme compliance.

Strategic policy choice. *What mix of territorial and sector-specific funding instruments is needed, which investments should be integrated into multi-year place-based envelopes, and how can access, local capacity and accountability be designed so that smaller and more remote actors can use them effectively?*

13. Risk, Security and Geopolitics

A small number of contributors, six of forty, from border, Balkan, Carpathian and Nordic contexts, widened the resilience agenda beyond climate to war, geopolitical tension and the vulnerability of demographically depleted territories.

- *“It is of the utmost importance to avoid war: war is a sweeper of rural population.”*
- *“Climate impacts decrease tourism and reindeer herding; continuing geopolitical tensions lead to isolation and economic decline - we must enhance preparedness for both.”*
- *“The depletion of population and the resulting property chaos trigger service desertification, leaving these strategic areas unprotected and vulnerable to ecological collapse and external exploitation.”*

- *“Demographically emptied regions near external borders are structurally exposed - to illegal dumping, to criminal interests, to uses no one chose.”*

Policy issue. In border and geopolitically exposed mountain regions, resilience extends beyond climate adaptation and biodiversity to emergency management, food and energy security, cross-border cooperation, strategic transport links, digital redundancy and the capacity of local institutions to respond to shocks. The relevance and intensity of these risks vary substantially by territory, but where they coincide with demographic decline and weak institutional capacity they can compound existing marginalisation.

Strategic policy choice. *Which ecological, economic, demographic and geopolitical risks need to be incorporated into resilience planning in different mountain territories, and what local and wider-system capabilities are needed to prepare for and respond to them?*

14. From Periphery to Strategic Asset

Perhaps the strongest single point of convergence across all forty responses is agreement that the framing of the policy challenges relating to remote rural and mountain areas must change. Contributors from every region rejected the deficit lens through which mountain areas are seen and offered, in strikingly similar language, an alternative.

- *“Remote rural and mountain regions should not be viewed through a deficit lens, but as strategic assets for Europe’s future. Policy frameworks should move beyond compensatory approaches and adopt investment-oriented strategies that unlock their full potential.”*
- *“The strategic issue is ensuring these regions are not just policy targets, but active contributors to - and beneficiaries of - Europe’s sustainability transitions.”*
- *“By 2040 the mountain region would no longer be a deprived, abandoned area, but a ‘strategic hub’ with a high quality of life, where Europe’s water, air and energy are produced.”*
- *“The strategic priority is to reposition the countryside not as an area in need of assistance, but as a ‘resilience hub’ that secures Europe’s food, water and energy.”*
- *“Defining mountain areas as marginal territories to be supported - rather than as sources of benefits to be promoted - has been the defining failure of the past two decades.”*
- *“I would transform these areas from mere outposts dependent on the city into the continent’s strategic and technological ‘lungs’ - not a nostalgic retreat, but a prestige area and a sustainability laboratory where cutting-edge technology merges with the purest nature: a place where modern people would long to live.”*
- *“Success would not mean uniform growth, but territorially just integration, where ecological responsibility, social cohesion and institutional voice reinforce each other.”*
- *“Policy must enable digital leapfrogging through decentralised service hubs and telemedicine - ensuring equitable access to essential services and upholding the ‘right to stay’.”*

- *“The future of these regions will depend on a broader shift in perspective - from marginalisation to opportunity, from fragmentation to integration, and from short-term interventions to long-term, systemic transformation.”*

15. The 2040 Choice

Two trajectories are assembled from the contributors' answers on the best and worst realistic outcomes by 2040. Neither trajectory is a forecast, however together they mark out the corridor within which policy choices and actions will land.

A positive but realistic 2040

Contributors do not imagine uniform growth or a return to the past. They describe a selective but credible stabilisation: demographic decline slowed or stabilised through services, housing, jobs, remote work and youth opportunity; economies combining sustainable agriculture, forestry, pastoralism, restoration, cooperatives, local branding, digital work and carefully managed tourism; essential services delivered through distributed hubs, mobile provision, tele-services and maintained local anchors such as schools; environmental responsibilities matched by financing, benefit-sharing and local jobs; and governance that is place-based, with local actors influencing decisions before implementation.

- *“Remote rural and mountain regions would no longer be seen as peripheral or disadvantaged, but as strategic assets for Europe - contributing to sustainability, cultural diversity, food security and territorial cohesion.”*
- *“The most successful regions would have halted severe population decline and achieved partial demographic renewal - with basic services maintained through innovation rather than traditional scale.”*

A negative 2040

The negative trajectory is a chain, not a single risk: youth leave; schools and health services close; economies narrow; traditional practices disappear; land is abandoned or exploited; hazards intensify; and communities lose voice over decisions made in the name of conservation, energy, tourism or growth - becoming governance peripheries within the green transition, responsible for environmental outcomes but under-represented in the decisions.

- *“In a negative trajectory these regions become increasingly marginalised ‘left-behind’ territories - demographic collapse, economic stagnation and environmental vulnerability - undermining Europe’s goals of cohesion, sustainability and balanced territorial development.”*
- *“The most concerning outcome is a coupled social-ecological collapse: simplified, disturbance-prone ecosystems alongside depopulated territories lacking the capacity to manage or adapt to accelerating environmental change.”*

16. One Major Change

The final question asked contributors what single major change they would make with full authority and resources. The answers converge on one architectural idea - integration of what is currently fragmented, expressed through concrete institutional proposals.

- **An integrated smart territories programme.** *“Combine universal digital connectivity, essential service provision and local economic activation into a single, coordinated, place-based intervention, operating through territorial packages tailored to each region’s needs. The key barrier is not the lack of individual policies, but the lack of coordination and integration between them.”*
- **A permanent rural resilience and innovation platform.** *“A single coordinated system under the EU giving regions multi-year, flexible funding envelopes tied to locally designed strategies, with embedded expert teams strengthening municipal capacity - and a mandate for community participation and local value capture, preventing extractive development.”*
- **A European mountain and remote regions transition fund.** *“Financing integrated local solutions rather than isolated projects: digital access, mobile services, climate adaptation, the circular bioeconomy and locally owned businesses through one flexible territorial model - rewarding regions for the ecosystem services they provide.”*
- **A binding law for mountain areas.** *“A mandatory law on the neo-endogenous development of mountain and sparsely populated areas: institutionalising the right of local communities to co-decide on their own resources, guaranteeing targeted use of structural funds for local employment, and establishing protection against the extractive model.”*
- **A ‘rural living guarantee’.** *“Universal access to essential services - healthcare, education, housing support - combined with tax reductions, start-up grants and livelihood support, to make staying in, or returning to, these regions a viable and attractive choice. Population is the foundation of all other development.”*
- **Local people funded as ‘nature guardians’.** *“An ecosystem management system that resolves ownership ambiguities through local conservation agreements, brings services to the mountaintop with digital infrastructure, and directly funds local people as nature guardians - uniting people and nature on the same legal and economic plane.”*
- **A permanent science-policy interface for mountain regions.** *“Embedded within EU climate, cohesion and energy governance, giving these regions structured influence before decisions are finalised, not after implementation begins - correcting the imbalance between environmental responsibility and institutional voice.”*
- **A distributed work and innovation network.** *“Universal high-speed connectivity plus a network of remote-work hubs, innovation centres and training facilities embedded in local communities, with incentives for firms in digital, green and creative sectors - linking connectivity, employment and local development in one coherent system.”*
- **Rural resilience and living centres.** *“Integrated hubs going beyond agricultural advice: water management, climate adaptation, cooperative development, digital marketing, youth entrepreneurship, local branding and education - connecting production, people and future opportunities within a shared development vision.”*

- **A territorially embedded knowledge system.** *“Decentralised higher-education hubs and applied research centres located within mountain areas, acting as permanent interfaces between science, policy and local actors - creating pathways for young people to stay or return, and making policy anticipatory rather than reactive.”*
- **Decentralisation of investment.** *“Force central government to decentralise investment towards these regions”* - echoed by calls for polycentric development, for connecting mountain areas physically to major corridors, and for new economic alliances and co-location arrangements between mountains and cities.
- **A reformed strategic-planning system.** *“I would reform the current system of strategic planning itself”* - grounding priorities in local needs, targeted research and continuous monitoring that actually feeds decision-making.

17. Where Contributors Broadly Agree and Lessons Learnt

Across eighteen countries and very different remote rural and mountain areas, the responses converge on seven propositions:

1. Depopulation, service decline, economic narrowing and environmental degradation form one interlocking system, a periphery trap, and must be addressed as such, not sector by sector.
2. One-size-fits-all policy has failed. Place-based, integrated, long-term approaches tailored to each territory's assets and constraints are the precondition for everything else.
3. Universal digital connectivity is now foundational infrastructure but only delivers when paired with skills, services and local institutional capacity.
4. A guaranteed floor of essential services (health, education, mobility, emergency response) is the single most direct lever on demographic outcomes.
5. Economic diversification beyond mono-sector dependence, including remuneration for ecosystem services, is the key to resilience.
6. Local communities must be agents, not objects: participation, co-decision and local value capture determine both legitimacy and results.
7. The narrative must shift from deficit and compensation to strategic asset and investment - these regions produce Europe's water, carbon storage, biodiversity, food and energy security.

The lessons of the last two decades in the contributors' words

Asked what the last 10-20 years should teach policy-makers, contributors repeatedly offered the same hard-won conclusions:

- *“Infrastructure alone is not enough: roads and broadband create lasting benefit only when combined with services, jobs, institutional capacity and participation.”*
- *“Policies have been mostly reactive - and reaction is the most expensive form of policy.”*
- *“Exogenous investment projects that did not respect local social structures have consistently failed.”*

- *“Financial support alone is not sufficient; sustainable, long-term living conditions must be established.”*
- *“Service withdrawal accelerates decline: closing the school is how a village learns it has no future.”*
- *“Over-reliance on a single sector - tourism above all - has been punished by every shock: financial crisis, pandemic, climate.”*
- *“Community-led, participatory approaches have outperformed top-down interventions wherever they were genuinely tried.”*
- *“Successes exist - regions that provide ‘local’ or ‘near-to-home’ economic opportunities can sustain populations - and they provide lessons that can enable other areas to survive and grow.”*
- *“Valuable lessons from past initiatives are rarely captured or scaled: monitoring, evaluation and structured learning across regions remain the weakest link in the policy cycle.”*

18. Strategic choices, trade-offs and differentiated policy responses

Beneath the areas of agreement, the exercise surfaced differences in priorities, emphasis and preferred policy responses. Some represent genuine trade-offs while others concern the appropriate policy mix the conditions under which an intervention works, or where different approaches should apply. A credible framework for remote rural and mountain regions should make these choices explicit rather than assume that one model will work everywhere.

1. Population strategy: retain, return, attract or combine?

Some contributors emphasise “keeping the people who are there” while others place greater weight on enabling return migration or attracting remote workers, new residents, digital nomads, and potentially climate migrants as the demographic engine. These approaches require different combinations of housing, services, employment opportunities and incentives, and may compete for the scarce resources. They are not necessarily alternatives, however. The strategic question is what balance of retention, return and attraction is appropriate in different territories and at different stages of demographic decline.

2. Landscape management: what should be protected, what should be actively stewarded, and where?

Contributors differ over the role of human activity in maintaining mountain landscapes. Some emphasise strict protection of fragile environments; others argue that abandonment itself can create ecological risks and that grazing, forestry and other forms of active stewardship can support biodiversity, cultural landscapes and hazard management. These approaches need not apply uniformly. The strategic question is where strict protection is required, where active stewardship is beneficial, and how policy should respond to changing conditions such as wildfire risk, rewilding and human-wildlife interaction.

3. Connectivity: what infrastructure is needed, where, and at what environmental cost?

Contributors share the objective of improving accessibility but differ substantially over the infrastructure required to achieve it. Proposals range from tunnels, major roads and high-speed-rail connections to Europe's economic corridors to explicit calls to restrict new roads where they fragment ecosystems or encourage unsustainable development. The choice is therefore not simply whether to build infrastructure, but what forms of physical and digital connectivity are needed in particular places, what outcomes they should deliver, and what environmental costs are acceptable.

4. Tourism: where should it grow, and where should dependence on it be reduced?

Contributors assign different roles to tourism in future mountain economies. Some see strategically planned, nature- and culture-based tourism as an important source of employment and income while others place greater emphasis on reducing tourism dependence and rebuilding agriculture, forestry and other productive sectors. These positions can coexist. Tourism may expand in some places and market segments while its dominance within the wider economy is reduced through diversification. Contributors are more consistently critical of construction-led, highly seasonal models that generate limited local value.

5. Territorial equity: what should be guaranteed everywhere, and what should be concentrated where?

This is a genuine distributive tension. Some contributors argue that the state “cannot withdraw” and that all citizens should have access to a minimum floor of essential services regardless of location. Others warn that refusing to recognise that some settlements may not sustain existing population levels can spread scarce investment too thinly to achieve meaningful results. These positions are not wholly incompatible. For example, policy can guarantee a universal threshold of essential services while concentrating specialised services, infrastructure or development investment in selected locations. The strategic choice concerns where that threshold should lie and what forms of concentration remain compatible with territorial equity.

6. Green transition: under what ownership and benefit-sharing arrangements does it create local value?

Carbon farming, ecosystem income and renewable energy are proposed as potential new sources of income for mountain regions, including by contributors who also warn of ‘green colonialism’ and the creation of new “extractive zones”. The distinction lies less in the technologies themselves than in how they are governed i.e., who owns the assets, who captures the value, how benefits are distributed, and whether local actors have meaningful influence over project design and implementation. The strategic question is how the green transition can generate durable local value rather than reproduce existing patterns of external extraction.

7. Governance: what should be controlled locally, and what requires wider integration?

Calls for legally guaranteed local co-decision over resources sit alongside calls for economic alliances with cities, co-location models and integration into national and European networks. These are complementary requirements as much as competing ones. Local agency can prevent development being imposed on communities from outside, while wider integration provides access to markets, infrastructure, expertise and institutions that small territories cannot reproduce alone. The strategic question is therefore which decisions should sit at which level

and how local authority can be combined with effective regional, national and European integration.

19. Synthesis and Implications for Policy

This section is the project team's interpretation, offered to help policy readers act on the evidence. Everything before it is the contributors' testimony; nothing here should be read back into their words.

First, the periphery trap exists. The exercise was not designed to test MARGISTAR's central concept, yet the responses reconstructed it: demography, services, economy, governance and ecology failing together, each failure re-enforcing and precipitating the next. The policy consequence is direct. Instruments that act on one variable at a time - a broadband scheme here, a farm subsidy there, a tourism grant elsewhere - are defeated by the system they enter. Several contributors state this as the central lesson of twenty years of intervention: infrastructure without services, subsidies without social infrastructure, and funding without local capacity have each failed on their own terms. Integration is not an aspiration of good administration; in these territories it is the minimum condition of effectiveness.

Second, the delivery gap matters more than the policy gap. Contributors rarely asked for new objectives; they asked for existing ones to reach the ground. The recurring complaints - short funding cycles, allocation biased to larger actors and larger settlements, administrative burdens that exclude small municipalities, plans that are 'good but not put into practice' - all point at the machinery between Brussels or the capital and the mountain valley. The convergent Q7 proposals (Section 16: One major change) are best read as a single design brief for that system:

- multi-year flexible territorial envelopes;
- embedded technical capacity for small administrations;
- a guaranteed service floor; connectivity as a right;
- ecosystem-service remuneration as a stable income line; and,
- legally anchored community co-decision.

Elements of this brief map directly onto the instruments now under review e.g., CAP Pillar II and its treatment of areas facing natural constraints, cohesion policy's territorial tools, the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Rural Pact, could be tested against them explicitly.

Third, ownership is the design variable of the green transition in mountain areas. The same contributors who propose carbon farming, ecosystem income and renewable energy as the next mountain economy are those who warn of 'green colonialism' and 'extractive zones'. These are not contradictory positions; they describe two futures separated by one variable - who holds the assets, captures the value and sits at the table when projects are designed. Benefit-sharing rules, local equity stakes, community energy models and institutional voice in siting decisions will determine whether the Green Deal is experienced in the mountains as revitalisation or as a new round of extraction.

Fourth, the strategic choices and trade-offs in Section 18 are ultimately political as well as technical. Some involve genuine trade-offs over values, distribution and acceptable risk while others

concern policy mix and territorial differentiation. Evidence can clarify the consequences of different choices, but it cannot determine whose interests should prevail or what trade-offs are acceptable. The contributors' governance findings point to the way forward: legitimacy depends on making these choices explicit and negotiating them with affected communities and across levels of government. A policy framework that provides the fora, evidence base, institutional capacity and meaningful decision rights for territories to shape these choices, within clear national and European guardrails, would turn them into the substance of place-based strategy rather than sources of policy paralysis.

Design options consistent with the evidence. Two instruments, editorial constructions, not respondent proposals, would give practical form to the convergent asks:

- **A 'Mountain Territorial Compact':** a voluntary but structured multi-year agreement between EU institutions, Member States, regions and local partnerships for selected mountain territories, bundling relevant funds behind a locally co-produced strategy, with a local partnership (municipalities, SMEs, cooperatives, civil society, land managers, researchers, youth) and annual reporting against service, demographic, ecological and participation indicators.
- **'Mountain Proofing':** a discipline extending the logic of rural proofing. Before major policies or investments proceed, decision-makers would assess whether they improve or weaken service access and community viability; create local jobs and retain value, or primarily extract it; reinforce or undermine local knowledge and cultural landscapes; account for hazard exposure and delivery cost; involve local actors early enough to influence the decision; and distribute benefits, risks and responsibilities fairly.

Annex A - Respondent Profile and Thematic Coding

All figures below were recomputed directly from the response dataset. Categories are self-declared; country names are normalised where spelling variants were used.

Dimension	Profile
Responses	40
Countries represented	18: Türkiye (9), Italy (5), Albania (3), Finland (3), Serbia (3), Portugal (2), Bulgaria (2), Slovenia (2), Czech Republic (2), and one each from Croatia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Kosovo, Romania, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine.
Roles	Researcher / academic (38); policy-maker / public authority (1); independent researcher and designer (1).
Geographical level of work	Regional (14); national (14); European / international (5); local (4); cross-border (3).
Experience	More than 20 years (18); 11-20 years (14); 6-10 years (6); 0-5 years (2).
Anonymous quotation permission	Yes (39); No (1). No material from the non-consenting respondent is quoted in this paper.
Acknowledgement by name	Yes (33); No (7)

Theme coding: Method and validation

Theme prevalence (Section 3) was produced by keyword-assisted coding of each respondent's full set of answers. To test sensitivity, every theme was recounted with a narrow keyword set (theme-specific terms only) and a broad set (including adjacent vocabulary); the published figure is the conservative estimate and the bracketed range spans the two variants. Word-boundary matching was enforced to prevent false positives (for example, 'war' within 'warming', or 'security' within 'food security' inflating the geopolitics count). Counts indicate how many of the forty respondents touched a theme anywhere in their response; they measure breadth of concern, not intensity, and should not be read as statistical findings. Coding sensitivity is greatest for economic diversification (range 23-39 depending on whether general economic vocabulary is included) and smallest for climate and hazards (26-28) and conservation-extraction-tourism (28-29). The geopolitics and security theme is genuinely small (5-7 respondents); earlier keyword-based estimates that placed it above ten reflected unanchored matching and were corrected during validation.

Contributor Acknowledgements

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