

BALKANS

Echoes of REVIVAL



From Albania to Serbia,
mountain communities are finding new purpose,
in trails, traditions, and local food.
Across the ridges, something is stirring.



CIHEAM
BARI

Feed

F I L E S

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The selection of the good practices was based solely on the nature and effectiveness of the solutions implemented, without prioritizing any specific country. This approach reflects a commitment to inclusivity and fairness, ensuring that all regions have the opportunity to contribute and benefit from the sharing of innovative solutions.

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Why the Mountains Matter



For centuries, the Balkans have been a historically complex region—a crossroads of civilizations, religions, and traditions. Today, the region is undergoing a profound transformation as its many countries, each with its own distinct identity and challenges, navigate varied paths at different paces toward EU integration.

However, while modernization efforts linked to this process primarily focus on urban areas, the vast mountainous landscapes that cover nearly two-thirds of the Balkans risk being left behind. A range of factors contribute to their increasing marginalization. Deforestation and intensive agricultural practices, worsened by climate change, are accelerating soil erosion and threatening the rich biodiversity that makes these mountains vital ecological corridors for Europe's environmental stability.

Beyond their ecological importance, these mountains have long been home to communities that safeguard traditional knowledge and unique cultural identities. From the transhumance of Albanian shepherds to the craftsmanship of Serbian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian artisans, these

practices represent an invaluable cultural heritage—one that is now rapidly fading. The exodus of younger generations in search of better job opportunities in cities or abroad is further accelerating this decline.

Yet, these mountain areas are not just historical or ecological relics; they hold strategic potential for sustainable economic development and can play a pivotal role in the Balkans' successful integration into the EU. Addressing the challenges they face requires urgent action. In line with the European Green Deal, development models must integrate environmental sustainability, innovation, and social inclusion—key pillars of a green and sustainable economy. To reverse the trend of depopulation, tailored strategies should create new opportunities for young people, including sustainable agriculture that strengthens local production, eco-friendly tourism that generates income while preserving traditions, and the modernization of farming through digitalization and innovation to open new job markets. However, these efforts will only be effective if mountain regions become truly livable. Investing in infrastructure, education, and

essential services is crucial to making these areas attractive once again and ensuring long-term sustainable development.

The future of the Balkans, therefore, is deeply tied to the fate of its mountains. Their revitalization, aligned with Green Deal policies, is essential for the region's renewal. A successful green transition could spark a true renaissance for the Balkan mountains—halting biodiversity loss, creating jobs, and improving the quality of life for local communities while safeguarding the environment. Achieving this requires the collective effort of local communities, public and private institutions, and international organizations.

This issue of *FEED Files* explores the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of the Balkan mountains, analyzing emerging best practices that bridge the ambitions of the Green Deal with local realities. Only an integrated approach—one that respects the unique character of these landscapes while fostering sustainable development—can transform the Balkan mountains into a vital asset for the future of the region and of Europe as a whole.

“
Mountains can play
a key role in the
Balkans' EU path.”

BALKANS Explained

The term **Balkans** comes from the **Turkish** word meaning “a chain of wooded mountains.” This rugged region stretches from **eastern Slovenia** to **southeastern Bulgaria**, with the **Balkan mountain range** proper running through **Bulgaria** and **eastern Serbia**. **Mountains cover about two-thirds** of the peninsula, with **Montenegro** and **Bosnia and**

Herzegovina being the most mountainous countries. The **average elevation** ranges from **700 to 1,200 meters**.

The region is home to over **55 million people**, and while exact figures vary, a significant share **lives in mountainous areas**. Many of these regions face **depopulation**, driven by **outmigration**, **aging populations**, and **limited access to services**.

As the Balkans move toward **European integration**, their mountain regions remain both a **challenge** and a **strategic opportunity**.



BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

FORGOTTEN WHEATS

Rediscovered during COVID-19 lockdown in rural Bosnia, Brkulja wheat blends tradition, resilience, and innovation thereby reviving local farming with roots in the future.



BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

BACK TO THE LAND

In a village facing depopulation, modern and affordable farm tools are helping young people imagine a future rooted in agriculture once again.



BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

CHEESE IN A SACK

A traditional cheese becomes the starting point for a story of heritage and resilience, reviving Batrac village traditions and helping Bosnia's rural identity.



ALBANIA

THE CAARs EXPERIENCE

Agricultural and Rural Assistance Centers (CAARs) are support hubs led by young experts, helping mountain farmers building trust and providing tools and training.

LEARN MORE

Scan the QR code to explore hundreds of stories organized by topic.



KOSOVO

VIA DINARICA REBORN

Kosovo's Dinaric Alps offer more than scenery: they're a symbol of renewal. The Via Dinarica connects communities, fostering tourism and regional cohesion.



SERBIA

MOUNTAINS GO TO SCHOOL

In Pirot, a dairy institute trains youth to carry on Serbia's cheese-making heritage. A step towards reviving rural traditions in the face of decline and demographic change.



CHAPTER 1 A BIODIVERSITY LAB

By Suzana Madžarić

Preserving biodiversity in the Balkan mountain regions is an urgent priority, especially as rural depopulation accelerates. The decrease in human activity risks disrupting a delicate balance shaped over centuries by traditional agriculture. Crop cultivation, medicinal plant harvesting, forest foraging, and above all, livestock grazing have long sustained both the land and its people, fostering an intricate relationship between nature and human life.

This natural wealth has been enriched by the deep-rooted knowledge of local communities, who have understood, used, and preserved plant and animal species. These mountains have functioned as living biodiversity laboratories, where ecosystems and human stewardship have coexisted, shaping each other in ways beneficial to both. Moreover, in a world threatened by pollution, the Balkan highlands remain among the few areas still relatively untouched. This gives them vast potential for sustainable food production and responsible use of plant and animal biodiversity.

The European Union has recognized the importance of mountain regions, embedding their protection into legislation and development policies. As the Western Balkans advance toward EU accession, funding for rural development will increase. However, financial support alone cannot overcome the challenges these areas face unless local governance acts swiftly to harness these opportunities. Depopulation, weak infrastructure, and limited economic incentives continue to undermine the social fabric of mountain communities, threatening not only human presence but also biodiversity, which has flourished under centuries of careful stewardship.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts among local communities, policymakers, researchers, and international partners. Preserving mountain biodiversity is not just about protecting species but also about documenting genetic resources, safeguarding native plants and livestock breeds, and exploring their benefits for human health. Research on their chemical and biological properties could reveal valuable applications in nutraceuticals, pharmaceuticals, or functional foods. However, conservation efforts must move beyond research and policy discussions: they must be rooted in the lives of those who depend on these landscapes.

The role of local communities is crucial. Farmers, cooperatives, youth and environmental associations, and even hunting groups must be engaged as active participants. Without improved market access, infrastructure, and equal social and educational opportunities, depopulation will continue, taking with it the knowledge and traditions that have long supported biodiversity.

A sustainable future for the Balkan mountains is within reach, but only if nature and people are valued together, and action is taken now.

COUNTRY: BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA



BRKULJA WHEAT: A FORGOTTEN TREASURE

Rediscovered during lockdown in rural Bosnia, Brkulja wheat blends tradition, resilience, and innovation: reviving local farming with roots in the future.



By Duška Delić

Everything started during the COVID-19 lockdown in Kneževu, a small mountain town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Surrounded by pristine rivers, deep canyons, and untouched forests, Kneževu is an area of breathtaking beauty—but also one of economic hardship, where rural depopulation threatens local traditions and agriculture. It was here, almost by chance, that we rediscovered

Brkulja wheat, a long-forgotten ancient grain preserved within a single farming family.

At first, we were intrigued by its resilience. Then, through research, we uncovered something even more remarkable: Brkulja is not only a hardy, low-input crop but also an exceptional source of plant protein, rich in antioxidants, and with a highly digestible gluten structure. It has a distinct, nutty flavor that makes it ideal for traditional breads, porridges, and even craft beer. This discovery marked the beginning of an ambitious journey—one that now connects sustainable farming, research, and food innovation.

What Makes Brkulja Wheat Special?

Unlike modern wheat hybrids bred for high yields, Brkulja is a landrace variety that has adapted over centuries to the challenging conditions of southeastern Europe. Its deep root system enables it to thrive in acidic, shallow soils, common in the Knežina Milan



Population

3,531,159

Average annual
income

\$ 15,000

Working in
agriculture17.57%
of the workforceAgricultural
workers by gender

M: 60%

F: 40%

of the workforce

Agricultural
area

44.2%

region near the Vlašić and Čemernica mountains. It is naturally resistant to pests and diseases such as rust and fusarium, reducing the need for chemical inputs and making it ideal for organic and regenerative farming.

Brkulja's resilience goes hand in hand with its nutritional benefits. It has a higher protein content, more dietary fiber, and greater mineral richness than conventional wheat. Crucially, its gluten structure is more digestible, making it a potential alternative for people sensitive to modern wheat.

From Fields to Craft Beer

With sustainability in mind, we sought to use Brkulja wheat beyond traditional food applications. This led to the creation of our own craft beer, brewed with mountain spring water that flows directly to our farm's production facilities—one of the rare breweries in the region using completely unfiltered spring water.

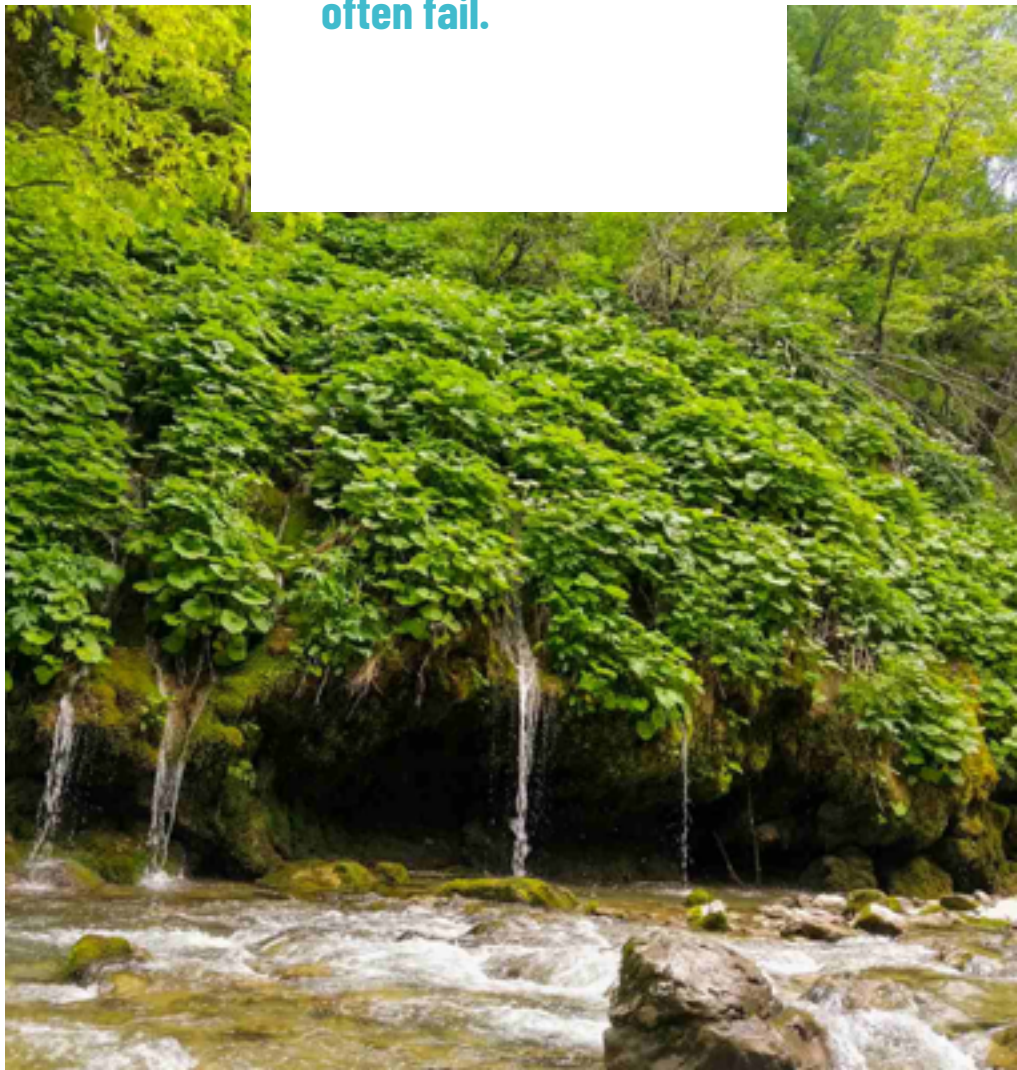
Our beers reflect this commitment to tradition and innovation. One is a classic alcoholic craft beer, while the other, Žitos, is a dark, non-alcoholic beer. The name Žitos originates from zythos, the Greek word for beer, which also appears in ancient Egyptian records where women brewed beer as an essential part of daily life. In a way, this tradition continues—I am, to my knowledge, the only female craft brewer in Bosnia-Herzegovina, bringing both heritage and innovation into a field still largely dominated by men. This connection to history and craftsmanship is something we deeply value.

Bringing Brkulja Back to the Market

Beyond research and brewing, we are committed to ensuring that Brkulja wheat reaches a wider audience. We now sell stone-milled Brkulja flour in the largest supermarket chain in the country, Bingo, while our beer is available in local venues in Banja Luka and in our newly opened taproom in Kneževo.



“
**Brkulja persists
where hybrids
often fail.**



Yet, our mission extends beyond commerce. Our goal is to foster a farm-to-fork ecosystem, collaborating with local producers and promoting Kneževo as a destination for sustainable agriculture and rural tourism. By proving that small-scale farming can be both viable and innovative, we hope to inspire younger generations to remain in the region and continue its agricultural legacy.

A Future Rooted in the Past

Reviving Brkulja wheat is about more than just preserving a grain—it is about rethinking agriculture for the future. Through national and international research projects, we are exploring new possibilities, from juice made from Brkulja grass to nutrient-rich sprouts derived from its seeds.

As the world faces challenges like climate change, soil degradation, and food insecurity, crops like Brkulja remind us that nature has already provided solutions. By embracing these resilient, locally adapted grains, we preserve not only biodiversity but also cultural heritage, while building a more sustainable and secure food future.

What Brkulja needs to thrive again

- **Seed conservation programs** to protect Brkulja's genetic diversity.
- **Field trials and breeding projects** to improve its adaptability and yields.
- **Education and outreach efforts** to reintroduce this forgotten grain into modern food systems.

Where are we?

Kneževo, a small mountain town in Bosnia and Herzegovina, faces rural depopulation, economic hardship, and the challenge of preserving local **agricultural traditions**.

What has been achieved?

The rediscovery and promotion of **Brkulja wheat**, along with the creation of new products, such as **craft beers**, through the development of sustainable agriculture in the region.

When?

The project started **during the lockdown** and is ongoing, with the wheat now being sold commercially and the craft beer being introduced to local markets.

Why?

The project aims to **preserve an ancient grain** and promote sustainable farming and food innovation that supports local agriculture.

By whom?

The project was led by **Prof Dr Duška Delić**, and involved **local farmers, researchers**, and **craft brewers**, along with support from national and international initiatives.

KEEPING A PROMISE: SAVING A VILLAGE'S SOUL

A story of heritage and resilience—starting with Cheese in a Sack and growing into a movement to revive Bratač and preserve Bosnia's rural identity.

Through their eyes

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA



By Slavica Samardžić

I was born in the village of Bratač, in East Herzegovina, to a family of hardworking peasants. From dawn until midnight, my parents labored in the fields and tended to livestock, their hands shaping the land that barely yielded enough to sustain us. Childhood in the countryside was not romanticized—it was portrayed as a fate to escape. “If you don’t study, you’ll end up in the village,” they would say. To many, rural life seemed like a punishment, the last resort for those with no other options.

Yet, even as a child, I made a promise to myself: I would study, complete every possible degree, but I would also find a way to give back to my village and the invisible people whose labor too often went unnoticed, their stories fading into oblivion. For centuries, Bratač was home to a rich cultural and natural heritage, shaped by Illyrians, Romans, and Ottomans. The village still holds traces of these past civilizations—Illyrian fortifications, a 600-meter stretch of Roman road (the longest in Bosnia and Herzegovina), and medieval stećci tombstones. The Ovčiji Brod bridge, a national monument, stands as a testament to Ottoman architecture, though it now faces the risk of complete destruction.

Yet, beyond its historical significance, Bratač is a place of living traditions: stone

masonry, lime kilns, weaving, and rope-making, once the pride of the community, are now disappearing. The same fate threatens its culinary heritage. Among the village’s renowned delicacies—dried meats, churned butter, cicvara (Ed.: a porridge-like dish), and sauerkraut (Ed.: fermented cabbage)—one product stood above the rest: Cheese in a Sack (Sir iz mijeha), an ancient cheese ripened in whole sheepskin, a tradition now at risk.

Depopulation, economic hardship, and the loss of traditional knowledge jeopardized not just the survival of this unique cheese but the very identity of Bratač. Without intervention, both the land and its cultural legacy risked fading into history.

The turning point came in 2006 when I connected with Slow Food International. That same year, after an expert visit to Herzegovina, Cheese in a Sack was awarded the Slow Food Presidium status, recognizing its cultural and gastronomic importance. This marked the beginning of a movement. By 2009, we formed Slow Food Trebinje Herzegovina, gathering a group of enthusiasts committed to preserving traditional dishes and local breeds. Over time, we successfully registered 19 products from East Herzegovina on the Slow Food Ark of Taste.

Recognition grew. In 2022, my sister Natalija and I submitted Bratač’s candidacy for The Most Beautiful Villages of Bosnia and Herzegovina, an initiative supported by USAID and The Federation of the Most Beautiful Villages of the Earth. After rigorous evaluation, Bratač was selected among the 17 most beautiful villages in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a title that brought national attention and rekindled local pride. Bratač’s story is not just about preserving a cheese—it’s about reviving an entire ecosystem of tradition, biodiversity, and community spirit. The village’s Nevesinje potato, another product with a Protected Geographical Indication, thrives in Bratački Lug, a fertile plain where traditional horse races and knightly competitions have been held for centuries.

continued ►



To honor both the Cheese in a Sack and The Nevesinje potato, we organized the first-ever event dedicated to these iconic products. We applied for and won a small grant from the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG). What started as a modest plan quickly gained momentum—USAID, Alterural, the EU Horizon Europe program (SMART ERA), the Tourist Board of Republic of Srpska, and the Ministry of Agriculture all stepped in to support us.

The event combined a guided village tour and a culinary competition, set against the historic backdrop of the Roman road and Ovčiji Brod bridge. Ten local producers and a women's association from Gacko competed to showcase the best cheese and potato dishes. Though we invited just 70 guests, more than

continued ►



400 visitors arrived, and the country's most prominent media outlets covered the event. We later turned the experience into a three-minute promotional film capturing the essence of Bratač.

“
Now, my fellow
villagers keep asking:
“What’s next?”

Inspired by the success, we submitted the project to the *A World for Travel international forum*, where it won first place in the “Societal Development” category on a global level. This recognition was beyond what we had ever imagined. Now, my fellow villagers keep asking: “What’s next?”

There is still much to do. While our efforts have brought visibility and revived pride, many traditional crafts and food practices remain fragile.

The younger generation must be engaged, new challenges must be addressed, and sustainable tourism must be carefully managed to avoid harming the very traditions we seek to preserve. I do not know if this achievement fulfills the childhood promise I made—to do something for the invisible people of my community. Or perhaps, it is just the beginning. Time will tell.



| | | |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Where are we? | In the village of Bratač, eastern Herzegovina , is one of the most beautiful villages in Bosnia and Herzegovina. |
| 2 | What has been achieved? | The revival of “ cheese in a sack ” and other local products from eastern Herzegovina and the recognition of Bratač as one of the most beautiful villages in Bosnia and Herzegovina. |
| 3 | When? | The movement began in 2006 in collaboration with Slow Food and led to the village's recognition by the organization in 2022 . |
| 4 | Why? | To preserve Bratač's cultural heritage , traditional food and local community identity. |
| 5 | By whom? | Led by Slavica Samardzic and the Slow Food Trebinje Herzegovina movement, with support from USAID and community involvement. |



INSIDE THE SACK: A Cheese Like No Other

ANCIENT TRADITION

Dating back to
1379,
this cheese originates from the
Dinara mountain
range and is still made using time-honored
techniques in Herzegovina.

The cheese ripens inside a whole
sheepskin bag
— a traditional container made from an intact,
cleaned sheepskin, which gives it a
distinctive
aroma and texture
unlike any other cheese in the world.

NATURAL
SHEEPSKIN AGING

PAIRED WITH TRADITION

Best enjoyed with
pole
(boiled unpeeled potatoes),
cicvara
(a cheesy, porridge-like dish),
homemade bread, or
priganice (fried dough balls),
often accompanied by local wines.

CULTURAL RECOGNITION

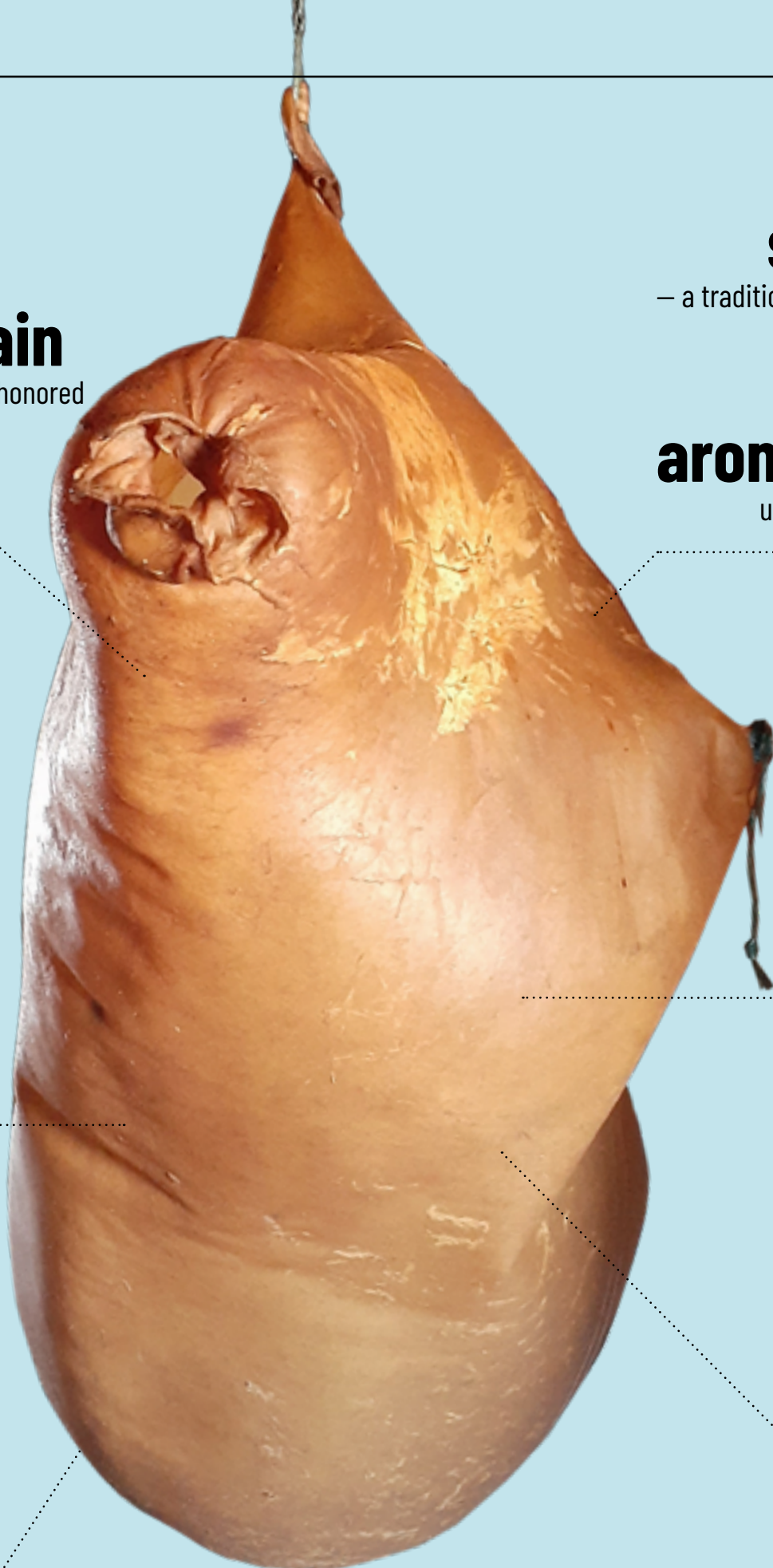
Recognized by
**Slow Food's
Ark of Taste**,
this cheese is also listed as part of Bosnia and
Herzegovina's
**UNESCO Intangible
Cultural Heritage**.

RAW MILK & PURE INGREDIENTS

Made from
**cow, sheep, or a mix
of raw milks**,
the cheese benefits from animals grazing on fresh
fodder, hay, and local cereals,
enhancing its rich flavor.

UNIQUE COMPOSITION

After
2 months
of aging, it has 39.5% fat,
31.7% protein, and 5.4% salt,
with a semi-hard texture and
a **pleasantly
smoky aroma**
from the sheepskin.



CHAPTER 2

UNLOCKING THE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

By Mladen Todorović

The Balkans, a region of deep cultural and historical complexity, is home to a rich mosaic of ethnicities, traditions, languages, and religions. A long chain of mountains defines the landscape, separating the peninsula from central Europe and shaping not only its geography but also the way of life in these highlands.

For centuries, the Balkan mountains have sustained communities through traditional practices such as animal husbandry, dairy production, and beekeeping. Life in these highlands was demanding yet deeply rooted in self-sufficiency, with families relying on time-honored techniques to produce cheese, cured ham (prosciutto), and bread—each leaving a distinctive mark on local cultures.

However, modernization and demographic shifts have profoundly altered these once-thriving rural economies. Urbanization is accelerating, drawing younger generations to cities or beyond regional borders in search of better opportunities. Changing perceptions of prosperity, alongside rural isolation and limited infrastructure, have intensified the depopulation of mountain villages, leaving behind predominantly elderly populations—a phenomenon often referred to as the “white plague.”

In response, international cooperation initiatives have sought to turn these vulnerabilities into opportunities. Programs promoting sustainable agriculture, agritourism, biodiversity conservation, and the preservation of traditional knowledge aim to revitalize rural economies.

Italian cooperation has played a crucial role in empowering women and young entrepreneurs to develop eco-innovative businesses in marginal rural areas. These initiatives focus on preserving unpolluted environments, protecting local biodiversity, safeguarding native livestock breeds and crop varieties, and reviving regional gastronomy. A striking example is Professor Duška Delić, who has successfully combined academic expertise with her highland roots to produce whole grain from an autochthonous wheat variety and Žitos beer brewed with pristine mountain spring water.

By recognizing and investing in this hidden potential, the Balkan mountains can transform from isolated highlands into models of resilient, sustainable rural development—ensuring prosperity while safeguarding the region’s natural and cultural wealth.



COUNTRY: ALBANIA



RURAL ALBANIA NEEDS MORE CAARs

Nothing to do with vehicles, the Agricultural and Rural Assistance Centers (CAARs) are support hubs—run by young experts—helping mountain farmers improve their skills by building trust and providing tools and training.



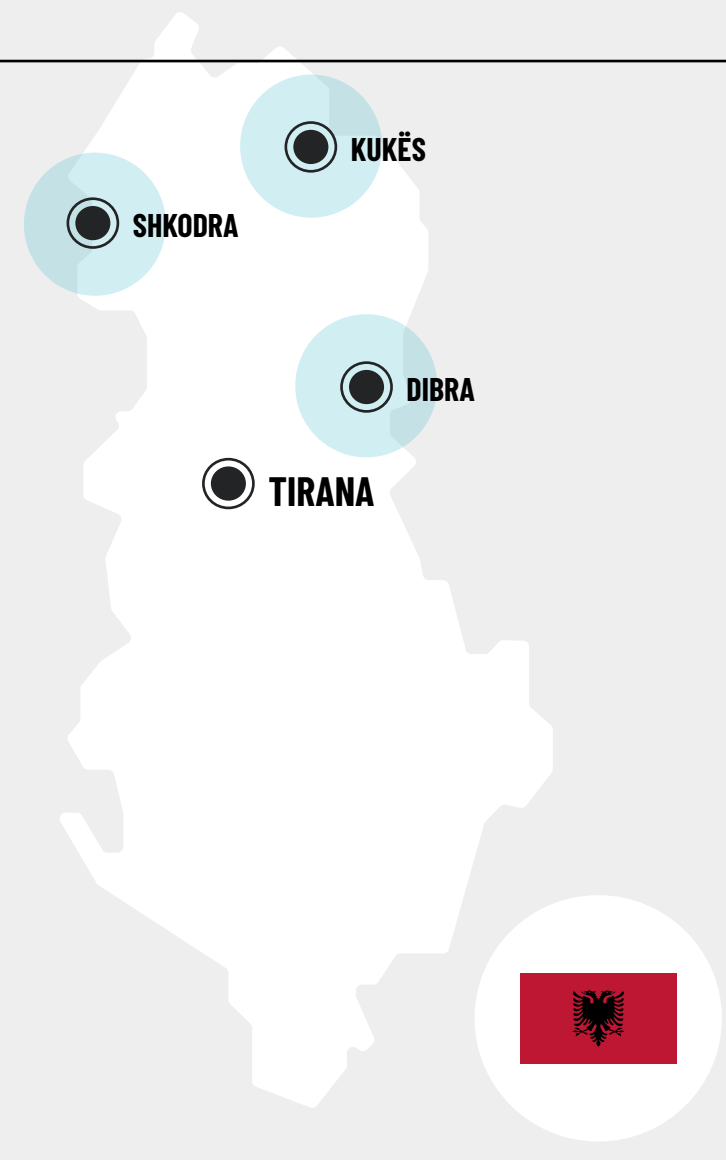
By Lavinia Sgammini

If you ever find yourself leaving Tirana for the northern town of Kukës, the journey will take you around two hours by car. Once you arrive, should you wish to buy locally produced goat cheese, a short drive of about another hour will bring you to Zahrisht, within the Municipality of Has. However, if your destination is the lush, high-altitude mountain pastures, you will need to travel a

further forty kilometers, following the trail of Muharrem, a local farmer. Each summer, he leads his goats to a mountain pasture that is devoid of running water or electricity.

Muharrem, like many small-scale farmers in Albania's mountainous regions, faces challenges related to agriculture and livestock. Support services are scarce, expensive, and often inefficient due to limited personnel and resources. Training is offered far from home, and families hesitate to invest in education when it reduces available labor. On top of that, machinery and essential farming tools are often unaffordable, making it hard to improve product quality or reach wider markets. Many producers still lack basic items such as milk tanks and containers, affecting both hygiene and income. Yet, the people of these mountains continue with determination. Among them are the young professionals at the Agricultural and Rural Assistance Centers (Centri di

ALBANIA



Population
2,746,000



Average annual
income
\$ 9,300



Working in
agriculture
34.89%
of the workforce



Agricultural
workers by gender
M: **40%**
F: **28.7%**
of the workforce



Agricultural
area
40.5%

Assistenza Agricola e Rurale – CAAR), established through the RURALBANIA project, promoted by Volontari nel Mondo RTM and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), with technical support from CIA – Confederazione Agricoltori Italiani.

Three CAARs are now active in Shkodra, Kukës, and Dibra—areas historically marginalized throughout Albania’s development. Growth has long centered around the coast and the capital, while rural northern areas have seen little investment and increasing emigration.

Each CAAR is staffed by a coordinator, a support officer, and an agronomist or livestock technician, selected from local NGOs ADAD Malore and AgroPuka. These young experts not only bring professional skills, but also a deep understanding of their communities. They are committed to improving rural life and promoting sustainable local resources. Muharrem receives regular assistance from the CAAR Kukës team, especially from operator Visar Mataj and livestock technician Edison Axhami. Edison has helped him improve animal health and productivity and attend specialized training. Visar supported him in drafting a three-year business plan — essential for applying for grants and investing in equipment and a small dairy facility.

This investment will allow Muharrem to produce cheese even during the summer pasture season, overcoming the logistical barriers of the terrain. “We’re satisfied with what we’ve achieved so far,” Muharrem says. “It may not be much yet, but it’s enough to support our family.” That’s why he is now involving his sons in the farm, believing that the new generation is key to continuing the work and preserving the family’s agricultural legacy. Thanks to the CAARs, farmers like Muharrem are not only surviving—they are building a future rooted in tradition, knowledge, and resilience.



“
Young experts bring
skills and local
insight alike.”



Where are we?

In the rural mountainous areas of northern Albania, specifically in **Kukës, Shkodra and Dibra**.

What has been achieved?

The establishment of **Agricultural and Rural Assistance Centres (CAARs)** to support farmers with training, tools and resources.

When?

The CAARs that are currently operational were established by the **RURALBANIA** project, which has been active for the last three years.

Why?

To help small-scale farmers improve their **productivity, sustainability** and **quality of life** through education and support.

By whom?

The CAARs are run by young professionals through the RURALBANIA project, promoted by **Volontari nel Mondo RTM** and funded by the **Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)**.

Kosovo's Dinaric Alps offer more than views—they are a symbol of recovery. Via Dinarica unites communities, driving tourism and regional integration.

WHERE THE HIGHLANDS BREATHE AGAIN

FIELD TRIP KOSOVO



By Brigida Mininni

Imagine a trail that weaves through breathtaking landscapes, each step telling a story of resilience, where the echoes of the past blend with the courage of those rebuilding their future. Welcome to the Kosovo stretch of the Via Dinarica. The path winds through towering mountains, deep green valleys, dense forests, and picturesque villages once scarred by conflict but now showing clear signs of renewal.

From the northwest, the hiking route crosses the municipalities of Peja, Deçan, and Junik, stretching 120 km through unspoiled landscapes. As we journey through these areas, the whispers of history linger in the air, blending with the present-day determination of the people who call this land home. Here, sustainable tourism is not just an idea but a reality, connecting local communities and creating new opportunities for young people and women to build futures rooted in their homeland. Stretching nearly 2,000 kilometers overlooking the Adriatic, the Via Dinarica is a transnational corridor spanning seven countries from Slovenia to Kosovo. More than just a hiking route, it represents a bridge between nature and local communities. In Kosovo, this model of tourism-driven community development is being realized through NaturKosovo, a project funded by AICS Tirana and implemented by Volontari nel Mondo RTM

and CELIM Milano, with contributions from key partners. This initiative enhances the local stretch of the Via Dinarica by bolstering natural, cultural, and historical resources, supporting micro-enterprises to create jobs, and strengthening local institutions in the governance of tourism.

A Family's Commitment to Sustainable Tourism

Our journey begins in the municipality of Peja, nestled between the Bjeshkët e Nemuna and Rugova Mountains. Known as "The Flower of Dukagjin," it is one of the oldest and most beautiful cities in Kosovo, rich in cultural and historical heritage. In the remote mountain village of Milishevc/ Milishevac, perched within the Bjeshkët e Nemuna National Park, Chalet Rusta tells a story of resilience and renewal.

Despite devastating losses, after the war Ganimete Mulaj, her husband Rustem, and their daughter Besarta resumed seasonal farming and welcomed passing hikers with free hospitality. In 2014, a chance meeting with a mountain guide introduced them to alpine tourism, and Chalet Rusta took shape. Surrounded by towering peaks and rolling meadows, the chalet embodies sustainable tourism. Solar panels help reduce energy consumption, and the food is sourced locally.

"We want to offer authentic, nature-based experiences," says Besarta. Although harsh winters present challenges, she remains hopeful: "This business and these mountains are our future."

Crafting a New Future in Peja

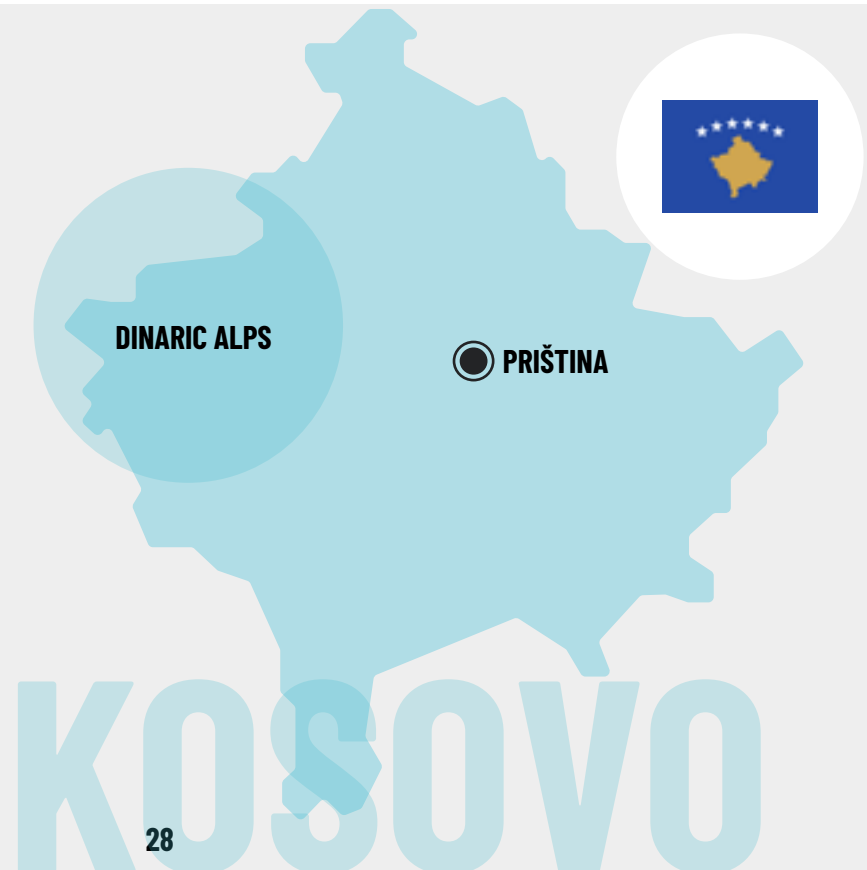
Further east, in the bustling city of Peja, we find a different kind of resilience at work. The old town of Çarshia, with its alleyways, small streets, and vibrant bazaar full of market stalls, is home to Nazljie Gorani, a skilled metalworker who has revived a family tradition that had nearly vanished. Before the 1990s conflict, Nazljie's family crafted tools for shepherds and mountain farmers. But the war left their workshop in ruins. After 25 years, her determination

continued ►



brought the trade back to life. Today, her shop, Profile Souvenir, produces traditional knives, handcrafted bags, and other souvenirs from local materials. Her innovation goes beyond the shopfront: “We thought it was exciting to bring our products to the mountains, directly to hikers and tourists.” Nazljie’s vision extends beyond commerce. “I want to create a network where women can learn the craft, build their businesses, and contribute to the region’s growth,” she explains. Through her efforts, the traditions of Peja are evolving into a force for sustainable economic development, breathing new life into the community.

continued ►



Population
1,756,366
Working in agriculture
23%
of the workforce
Average annual income
\$ 8,843,98
Agricultural area
50.1%



The Alpine Revival of Deçan

Continuing south into the heart of the Kosovo Alps, we reach Deçan, a mountain village at 550 meters above sea level, near the borders with Montenegro and Albania.

“
These mountains
and this work
are our future.”

Surrounded by dense forests and vast pastures, in the crisp air of the Albanian Alps, it has long been recognized as a destination for recreation and tourism. Its cultural heritage is reflected in the traditional stone towers, known as kullat. Amidst the mountains, Deçan is now embracing a new future, one shaped by the growing tourism sector.

Here, only 19 km from the UNESCO-listed Visoki Deçani Monastery, Gacaferri Guest House stands as a beacon of renewal. Managed by Albanik, his brother Adriatik, and their mother, it has transformed from a hub for livestock and natural resources into a year-round destination for hikers, skiers, and adventurers.

Inspired by his lifelong passion for the mountains, Adriatik has spearheaded multiple tourism initiatives, helping to turn the guesthouse into a model of sustainable tourism. The family's commitment to sustainability is reflected in their collaboration with local suppliers, ensuring that the community benefits from the influx of visitors.

However, challenges remain. “Attracting young workers for seasonal employment is tough,” admits Albanik. Despite these obstacles, the family looks ahead with ambition. As demand for their services grows, they plan to expand while preserving the pristine beauty of the region.



In **Kosovo's Dinaric Alps**, through **Peja, Deçan** and **Junik**, where mountain villages are embracing sustainable tourism amidst breathtaking natural beauty.

The **Via Dinarica**, once scarred by conflict, is promoting **ecotourism**, reviving **local crafts**, **empowering women**, **supporting micro-enterprises** and **reconnecting war-torn communities** through nature and heritage.

The Via Dinarica project was launched in **2010**, with structured support from the **NaturKosovo project**, starting more recently and continuing actively until **2025**.

Tourism drives **economic regeneration**, **preserves culture**, **empowers youth and women**, and builds a **peaceful, sustainable future** for Kosovo's mountain communities.

NaturKosovo, funded by **AICS Tirana** and led by **Volontari nel Mondo RTM**, and **CELIM Milano**, with local families, artisans and communities.





CHAPTER 3

YOUTH-LED RENEWAL

By Thomas Tamanini

The mountainous regions of the Balkans are key to the region's future, yet they face severe depopulation as young people migrate to cities or abroad. Many villages stand nearly empty, weakening local economies, resilience to climate change, and traditions. Scarce water, unpredictable weather, and a higher risk of wildfires and landslides add pressure, while economic struggles and environmental degradation increase vulnerability. Still, these challenges can become opportunities for sustainable development and repopulation.

Tourism initiatives like the Via Dinarica showcase the rising global interest in hiking trails and rural hospitality, encouraging entrepreneurs to open guesthouses, family-run enterprises, and craft shops. Meanwhile, pastoral communities are reviving traditional products like goat cheese, honey, and medicinal herbs. If managed responsibly, these activities protect fragile ecosystems while providing economic stability. Repopulating the mountains requires coordinated efforts. Grassroots associations, national and municipal authorities, and regional platforms play a key role in balancing economic growth with biodiversity conservation. International actors, including the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), support projects in remote areas of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

By funding small enterprises, providing training, and promoting eco-friendly tourism, AICS helps local communities create new opportunities that encourage young people to stay or return.

Through a participatory approach, communities reclaim ownership of their ancestral lands, proving that migration is not the only option. Stories of families and entrepreneurs choosing to settle in these areas demonstrate that repopulation is not just a dream but a feasible reality. These strategies align local governance with global climate resilience commitments while attracting travelers seeking authentic experiences in pristine environments.

The future of the Balkans' highlands depends on solidarity and long-term vision. When young people see real opportunities, these mountains become symbols of progress rather than isolation. Investing in responsible tourism, artisanal production, and community-led initiatives offers real hope of reversing decades of decline. These mountains are no longer relics of the past but renewed frontiers where tradition and innovation thrive. Changing the narrative means making rural life as attractive as the city—where freedom, nature, and heritage offer young people a fulfilling alternative to urban migration.

COUNTRY: SERBIA



MOUNTAINS GOING TO SCHOOL

A dairy institute in Pirot trains youth to keep Serbia's cheese-making tradition alive amid rural decline and demographic change.



By Sara Businaro

After the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia faced a significant rural exodus as people moved from villages to cities in search of better opportunities. This migration had a devastating effect on agriculture, particularly the dairy sector. Large state-owned dairies were privatized, but many of these efforts failed, leaving cattle

farmers without stable buyers for their milk. Among the products most threatened by these changes was "Pirotski kačkavalj," a renowned Serbian cheese with a rich history. In response to the crisis, Serbia's only technical school specializing in cheese processing—the Mlekarska škola sa domom učenika "Dr. Obren Pejić" in Pirot (Dairy School with Student Dormitory "Dr. Obren Pejić")—stepped in.

The Mlekarska škola is located in Pirot, near the Bulgarian border, in an area surrounded by several mountains, including Stara Planina, Vlaška Planina, Belava, and Suva Planina. The school is committed to purchasing a portion of the milk produced in the Pirot district and continuing its tradition of cheese production. Students and teachers at the school took responsibility for preserving the tradition, producing up to 200 kilograms of this specialty cheese every day. The Dairy School has long played a crucial

SERBIA

BELGRADE

PIROT REGION



Population

6,623,000



Average annual income

\$13,500



Working in agriculture

19.16%
of the workforce



Agricultural workers by gender

M: 72.2%

F: 22.8%

of the workforce



Agricultural area

41.25%

role in Serbia's dairy sector, training generations of milk processors through a three-year specialized program. The school offers four curricula: Veterinary technician, Food and Biotechnology technician (which had no student enrollment in the 2023-2024 academic year), Bakers, and Milk processors. From their very first year, depending on the Curriculum, students gain hands-on experience in the school's food processing plant, where they learn to treat pasteurized milk, yogurt, cheese, urda (Ed.: a traditional Balkan whey cheese similar to ricotta), and the famous Pirot cheese. This practical approach ensures that traditional cheese-making techniques are passed down from one generation to the next, preserving the authenticity of the local product and equipping students with skills essential for their future careers.

Keeping the tradition of Pirot cheese alive is particularly significant because it follows a traditional recipe dating back to 1882. Each step of the process, from milk selection to aging, adheres to methods developed over centuries.

The continuation of this tradition faces mounting obstacles. Securing a reliable supply of quality milk has become increasingly difficult as fewer farmers remain engaged in cattle breeding. Competition with market prices of industrialised cheeses leaves the school fighting for leverage with quality and traditional value. Fewer young people are choosing careers in agriculture and food production, leading to a decline in student enrollment at the Dairy School. Fewer students choose to start a family and settle in mountain areas such as Pirot, due to limited access to essential services and inadequate infrastructure.

School director Nenad Đorđević shares his personal history with the school in a bittersweet tone, acknowledging the significant challenges it faces while also recognizing its high potential and the opportunities that lie ahead.

"This migration trend poses a significant challenge to the sustainability of rural communities. Schools in the region help to mitigate this trend. The school has



“
Cheese-making skills
pass from old hands
to new.



adapted to changing circumstances by participating in international projects like Erasmus, allowing students to gain experience in various European countries. This international exposure broadens their perspectives while reinforcing the importance of local traditions and industries."

Mlekarska škola specializes in food technology, particularly dairy production. The school has faced significant declines in enrollment, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Currently, the school has 29 teachers and 60 students, spread across the curricula. While it primarily attracts students from the surrounding area, the number of new enrollees has decreased as more students opt for private schools or move to urban centers.

The school's curriculum ensures that graduates have a strong foundation to pursue careers in diverse fields, including medicine, law, and veterinary studies. Many students go on to work in the food industry, particularly in bakeries and dairy processing, where their specialized skills are highly valued. While the school has a solid reputation, the challenge remains in convincing more students to pursue education and careers in rural areas rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere. Despite these challenges, the school's impact on the dairy sector remains profound. Since its founding in 1945, it has trained over 5,000 milk processors, many of whom have gone on to work in dairies across Serbia. During the economic hardships of the 1990s, the school played a crucial role in preserving Pirotski kačkavalj, ensuring that production did not come to a halt. Today, it continues to uphold this legacy, demonstrating the effectiveness of hands-on education in both preserving cultural heritage and fostering economic resilience. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern training methods, the "Dr. Obren Pejić" Dairy School in Pirot remains a model for sustaining regional food production in the face of economic and demographic shifts.

Where
are we?

In **Pirot**, a mountainous region in **south-eastern Serbia**, a dairy school is preserving cheese-making traditions amid rural decline and youth migration.

What
has been
achieved?

The **Dairy School** is training new generations in artisanal cheese-making, reviving local dairy practices and helping to sustain the production of **Pirotski kačkavalj**.

When?

Founded in **1945**, the school continues its mission today, adapting to modern challenges while maintaining a strong legacy of vocational training in the dairy industry.

Why?

The school **preserves Serbia's cheese-making heritage**, supports **rural livelihoods** and counteracts youth migration by providing **skills, jobs** and a **future** in the mountains.

By whom?

The Dairy School "**Dr. Obren Pejić**" in Pirot, with the support of Director **Nenad Djordjević**, teachers, students and international programmes such as Erasmus, which facilitated student mobility across European countries.



New Generations in the Mountains:
Learning, Working...Staying?

The rural exodus is a well-known issue across the Balkans, and Serbia's mountainous regions are no exception. Young people often leave small towns for the opportunities of larger cities, leading to a decline in local economies and traditional trades. But some students at Mlekarska Skola in Pirot are charting a different path. Jovana, Luka, and Nemanja have each chosen vocational education to build careers closely tied to their hometowns and family traditions. Their studies in veterinary science, milk processing, and baking provide both practical skills and a strong connection to the region's cultural and economic fabric. While their aspirations differ—some dream of moving abroad, others of staying—they share a common challenge: how to balance tradition with modern opportunities in a region where job prospects are limited.

In this interview, they share their perspectives on life in the mountains, education, and their hopes for the future.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE (OR DISLIKE) ABOUT YOUR TOWN?

Jovana: I like that it's small—it's easy to know people and feel connected. But that can also be a downside because there aren't many places to go out.
Luka: I like that everyone knows each other. There's nothing I really dislike.
Nemanja: I enjoy the sense of community and being surrounded by hills and forests. But I hate how people don't take care of the environment—there's a lot of littering.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR CURRENT FIELD OF STUDY?

Jovana: I've always loved animals, and my father always had at least two dogs. Growing up with them made me realize I wanted to be a veterinarian.
Luka: I was interested in milk processing—I like making cheese, yogurt, and similar products.
Nemanja: My grandfather was a baker, and I always thought making bread looked fun. I want to continue his tradition.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR STUDIES SO FAR? ARE THEY WHAT YOU EXPECTED?

Jovana: I really enjoy both the classes and training. At first, I wasn't sure what to expect, but I like the program's structure. I thought we'd have more hands-on training throughout the year, but I appreciate that practical sessions are concentrated at the end.
Luka: It's exactly what I expected. The training is great, especially in the final year when we focus more on making dairy products like Kačkavalj.
Nemanja: It's been interesting! We're still learning the basics of bread-making, but I already enjoy the practical parts of the training.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PART OF STUDYING HERE?

Jovana: The friendships I've made. I love spending time with my classmates, and since we're the oldest class, younger students look up to us, which feels nice.
Luka: The practical training. I like actually making things rather than just learning theory.
Nemanja: I enjoy English class because it's entertaining. I'm not a fan of math, though—I'm not very good at it.

HAVE YOU HAD ANY SPECIAL EXPERIENCES THROUGH SCHOOL?

Jovana: Yes! I had the chance to go to Plovdiv, Bulgaria, for Tufa Fest. We participated in a business simulation project, which was a great opportunity to meet new people and experience another culture.
Luka: I joined an Erasmus program and spent 15 days in Portugal working in a supermarket's delicatessen section. It was an amazing experience!
Nemanja: I've done night shifts with my grandfather at the bakery. My first bread wasn't perfect, but at least it was bread!

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS AFTER GRADUATION?

Jovana: I haven't decided yet, but I want to keep working with animals.
Luka: I want to start my own business, possibly in marketing or cryptocurrency.
Nemanja: I'll probably start working immediately. You need a job to live!

DO YOU SEE YOURSELF STAYING IN PIROT OR MOVING ELSEWHERE?

Jovana: I'm open to different opportunities, but I haven't made a decision yet.
Luka: I want to move to a bigger city or another country, like the U.S., Switzerland, or Greece. But I'll start my business in Serbia first.
Nemanja: I want to stay in my hometown and work at the same bakery where my grandfather did. I already know the people there, and I feel like I belong.

FINAL THOUGHTS?

Jovana: I'm happy with my studies and everything I've experienced so far.
Luka: I'm excited about my future, wherever it takes me.
Nemanja: For me, baking isn't just a job—it's part of my family. I know this is the right path for me.

Conclusion

A Future in the Mountains?

Jovana, Luka, and Nemanja represent three different perspectives on education, career choices, and the future of rural life in the Balkans. Some see their hometowns as a stepping stone to bigger ambitions, while others feel a strong pull to stay and continue family traditions. As mountain communities across the region face depopulation and economic shifts, vocational schools like Mlekarska Skola are playing a crucial role—not just in training young professionals, but in offering real alternatives to urban migration. The question remains: can education and tradition be enough to keep the next generation in the mountains?

BEST PRACTICE



COUNTRY: BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA 

BACK TO THE LAND

In a village struggling with depopulation, modern and affordable farm machinery is making youth reconsider a future in the fields.



By Suzana Madžarić

Nestled 1,200 meters above sea level in southwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kupres RS is a small municipality with just 234 residents. For years, it has been on the brink of extinction—grappling with outward migration, an aging population (average age 54.5), and difficult agricultural conditions caused by rocky terrain, high altitude, and a short growing season. Traditional farming

methods, outdated machinery, and heavy physical labour have made agriculture unappealing, especially to younger generations. But something is changing.

To reverse the migration trend and bring new life to rural farming, the ANC BiH project introduced a simple yet transformative idea: make agriculture more efficient, collaborative, and rewarding. Funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and implemented by CIHEAM Bari, the project equipped farmers with modern agricultural machinery specifically adapted to the region's tough conditions—including a tractor tank and loader, a potato cultivator, a wheel sprayer, grain seeders, manure spreaders, and rotary millers. At the heart of the project is the “machinery ring” model: a shared-use system that allows farmers to access expensive agricultural equipment collectively, rather than purchasing it individually. Through the

local association “Poljane”, now counting 22 members, each farmer pays a small hourly fee when using the machines. These contributions cover maintenance, repairs, and future upgrades. This collaborative approach makes modern tools affordable and accessible, helping farmers improve productivity while also fostering cooperation and a strong sense of community. And now, younger generations are taking notice.

The project has made agriculture less labour-intensive and more economically viable, sparking renewed interest among young people who once saw no future in the fields. The cooperative model, rooted in shared responsibility and local engagement, offers not only practical support but also a sense of purpose and belonging which makes farming once again a career worth considering.

The impact has been recognized at the institutional level, too. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management of the Republic of Srpska donated an additional grain seeder and funded new farmer training programs, signaling public commitment to the community's revival.

But ANC BiH did not stop at agriculture. Recognizing that resilient communities require more than strong farms, the project also invested in social infrastructure. A new playground was built near the school, and the Ministry transformed an unused classroom into a multi-purpose social space where young residents can gather, learn, and play. This space also hosts training sessions and capacity-building activities, organized in collaboration with the extension service and international partners. These investments reflect a broader vision: agriculture is not just about food it is about people, identity, and the future of entire communities.

Today, the “machinery ring” model is seen as a best practice for rural development, showing that with smart investment,

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

 SARAJEVO





Farming is easier now,
and youth are taking
notice.



community-driven solutions, and support for the next generation, even the most remote areas can thrive.

The challenges of rural life remain, but the people of Kupres RS no longer feel forgotten. With younger families returning, new skills emerging, and a renewed sense of hope, this little village in the mountains has begun to write a new story—one of resilience, innovation, and homecoming.

Where are we?

In **Kupres RS**, a remote village in south-western **Bosnia and Herzegovina** facing depopulation and difficult farming conditions due to altitude and rocky terrain.

What has been achieved?

Modern agricultural machinery and a shared-use system have **improved farm productivity**, reduced labour requirements and stimulated young people's interest in farming and rural community life.

When?

The project started in **2021** under **ANC BiH** and is ongoing, with results already visible in increased youth engagement and local institutional support.

Why?

The 'machinery ring' is countering the migration trend, **making agriculture viable again** and **reviving a dying village** through efficient agriculture, social infrastructure and community renewal and resilience support.

By whom?

The project was implemented by **CIHEAM Bari** with the local farmers and the association **Poljane**, supported by the government and international partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS THE WAY FORWARD

By Matteo Donati

Potential & Challenges

The Balkan mountain regions hold untapped potential for sustainable development and social resilience. Their biodiversity, agri-food traditions, and cultural heritage can support value-added rural economies and attract investment. Traditional knowledge, from ancient grains like Brkulja to artisanal products like “Cheese in a Sack,” offers a competitive edge in global markets seeking authenticity and quality. The mountains also present opportunities for eco- and agri-tourism, aligned with the EU Green Deal and the growing demand for sustainable travel. Projects like the Via Dinarica show how tourism can preserve cultural landscapes and engage youth and women. To unlock this potential, investment is needed in skills, digital tools, and local capacity-building, empowering farmers, artisans, and entrepreneurs to innovate and adopt sustainable models. Inclusive, participatory approaches are key to strengthening ownership, cohesion, and long-term impact.

Research & Territory

Research and innovation have supported success stories in the Balkans, such as the rediscovery of Brkulja wheat and studies on biodiversity and endemic plants, revealing potential for sustainable agriculture, nutraceuticals, and eco-tourism. Yet, major gaps persist. Research on genetic resources, climate resilience, and sustainable land use remains limited or fragmented. Local producers often lack access to scientific knowledge and technologies that



could enhance production and market access. To address this, stronger collaboration is needed between research institutions, local actors, and international partners. Investment in applied research, field trials, and knowledge-sharing is key. Promoting digital tools, precision farming, and ecosystem-based approaches can help mountain communities become drivers of sustainable development instead of facing continued marginalization.

Public-Private Partnerships & Policies

To unlock the potential of the Balkan mountain regions, it is essential to strengthen public-private partnerships (PPPs) as drivers of local development. When businesses, communities, and institutions collaborate, new economies based on biodiversity, crafts, and sustainable tourism can emerge. PPPs should evolve into structured rural districts able to attract investment and access funding. Policies must also recognize the strategic

value of mountain areas, easing land access and financing for youth, women, and entrepreneurs. Simplified regulations should support tradition-innovation blends like short supply chains or endangered crafts, with targeted incentives. Local institutions need stronger capacities, supported through development cooperation, training, and participatory processes. Finally, aligning with EU programs like the Green Deal, CAP, and Next Generation EU will allow mountain communities to become labs of sustainable and inclusive development for the entire region.



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