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IMPLEMENTATION OF IPARD FUNDS IN SERBIA: ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE AND PERSPECTIVE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Abstract: The IPARD is a key financial mechanism of the European Union aimed at improving agriculture and rural development in candidate countries and potential candidates for EU membership. The aim of this work is to analyze the current implementation of IPARD funds in Serbia, with a special focus on the efficiency of using available funds, institutional capacities and obstacles in the implementation of the program. The research is based on the analysis of relevant strategies and reports on the implementation of IPARD measures. The results show that the key challenges in the implementation of IPARD in Serbia are complex administrative requirements, insufficient information of potential beneficiaries, and the slowness of the approval and disbursement procedures. On the other hand, IPARD funds enabled the modernization of agricultural holdings and the development of rural infrastructure, which indicates their significant potential for long-term sustainable rural development. The conclusions of the work provide recommendations for improving the efficiency of the IPARD program in Serbia, including simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening technical support for users and increasing the transparency of the funding allocation process. These steps are key to maximizing the benefits that IPARD funds can bring to Serbian agriculture and rural areas in the EU accession process.

Keywords: IPARD funds, rural development, agriculture, EU integration, Serbia

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of European integration in Serbia includes reforms in various sectors, where agriculture and rural development are of particular importance, given the large share of agriculture in the country's economy. According to Erjavec et al. (2021), the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) represents the benchmark for future policy of Serbia, so pressures of the EU accession negotiations, as well as EU pre-accession support will be the key elements in the process of adapting policies to the CAP. Looking at the time, the creators of the Rural Development Assistance (RDA) in EU are moving away from strict income support and agriculture towards supporting producers through environmental schemes and rural development measures. It is necessary to emphasize that the budget reduction for the EU's 2021-

2027 programming period will primarily affect the reduction of funds for the second pillar of the Rural Development Assistance (RDA), i.e. rural development measures, while the priority remains on direct income support (the first pillar of the Rural Development Assistance); with an increasingly significant role for agri-environment-climate schemes, whereby it will be possible to allocate certain funds from income support to environmental measures (Matthews, 2018). Rural development policy remains focused on three main axes, defined as: farm competitiveness, environmental protection and climate action, and improving infrastructure and quality of life in rural areas. The goal of the agricultural policy of Serbia in the future should be to increase the share of funds for rural development, which should have a dominant share of the agricultural budget after EU accession. Pre-accession assistance is important for candidate countries for membership, given that they are economically less developed than EU members. These funds are particularly important for countries that have a high relative importance of agriculture and rural areas in the overall economy, with the candidate country having to effectively establish and implement rural development strategies at national, regional and local levels.

One of the most important areas of agricultural policy in the EU accession process is the implementation of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development (IPARD). **The aim** of this work is to analyze the current implementation of IPARD funds in Serbia, with a special focus on the efficiency of using available funds, institutional capacities and obstacles in the implementation of the program. The research is based on the analysis of relevant strategies and reports on the implementation of IPARD measures in Serbia. IPARD funds are focused on the development of the agricultural sector and rural areas, i.e. the aim is to prepare the candidate country for the effective implementation of the programmes under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), after accession to the EU. Given that budget expenditures for the second pillar of support, i.e. for rural development, are still at a low level, the use of IPARD funds is extremely important for solving key problems of agriculture and rural development in Serbia. The European Commission (2020a) states that the spending of European funds from IPARD should be a priority to avoid the return of unused funds. That is, it is necessary to take advantage of the availability of these funds, primarily by establishing efficient institutions and directing them to as many beneficiaries as possible. The relevant institutions in Serbia responsible for the implementation of the IPARD program are: the Ministry of Finance in the function of the National Fund and the National Authorizing Officer; The Rural Development Sector of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management in the role of the Managing Authority and the Agricultural Payments Administration as a body within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management entrusted with the tasks of the IPARD Agency (Đurić, 2018).

The IPARD II Programme is the most important programme of pre-accession assistance for rural development and the first document in the field of agriculture and rural development of the Republic of Serbia approved by all European Union members in 2015. The main goal and purpose of this Programme is to support agricultural producers and processors, as well as population of rural areas in the Republic of Serbia, to gradually increase their capacities and potentials to prepare timely and properly for the fulfilment of the European standards in the field of agriculture, agri-food industry and environmental protection (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water management, 2024). The IPARD III in Serbia, for the period 2021-2027, was officially launched in 2023, when the first public calls for the allocation of funds were published. The program lasts until 2027 and brings improvements in administrative procedures and financial support, with the aim of more efficient modernization of Serbian agriculture and rural areas.

This scientific work is divided into several segments. After the introduction, a literature review is given, with a special focus on the importance and role of IPARD funds, as well as rural development strategies in EU countries. This is followed by the results, which show the success of the IPARD II in Serbia and identification of important factors of inefficiency in the use of these funds. Then, in the conclusion, list of the necessary steps for a more successful implementation of IPARD III is given.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Creating an appropriate rural policy in Serbia within the conditions of current European integration requires harmonization with the EU's CAP, which is one of Serbia's future priorities (Jurjević et al., 2021). According to Knickel et al. (2004), the European Commission describes the European agricultural model as: a modern and competitive agricultural sector, capable of taking a leading position in the world market, while maintaining domestic producers, living standards and income levels; a sustainable and efficient agricultural sector, which provides consumers with appropriate quality products, while protecting the environment; and a sector committed to preserving rural communities and maintaining their rich traditions and diversity. One of the future focuses of the CAP, as defined in the next programming period 2021-2027, will be on small farms and the environment by setting a target for small and medium-sized households to maintain a certain level of income in rural areas, together with sustainable resource management (Matthews, 2018). To achieve the targets, nine priorities have been set for the period 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2020a):

- Ensure income for farmers (reducing income disparities; reducing income variability; income sustainability in all sectors; contributing to territorial balance with a focus on areas with natural constraints).
- Improve market position and increase competitiveness (increased productivity, improved export/import of agri-food products).

- Improve farmers' position in the food supply chain (increased value added for primary producers in the food chain).
- Contribute to climate change mitigation with sustainable energy sources (reduced emissions from agriculture, increased soil organic carbon, increased renewable energy production).
- Sustainable development and efficient management of natural resources such as water, soil and air (reduced soil erosion, improved air and water quality).
- Protect biodiversity, improve ecosystems and preserve habitats and landscapes (increased bird populations (Farmland Bird Index), protection of biodiversity and ecosystem heterogeneity).
- Attracting young farmers to rural areas (generational renewal in rural areas).
- Promoting employment, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including sustainable forestry (creation of new jobs, poverty reduction, infrastructure development).
- Protecting food quality and safety, health and animal health (reducing the use of antibiotics in agriculture, sustainable use of pesticides, adequately responding to the increasing demand for safe food).

These nine specific objectives are aimed at achieving the economic, environmental and sociological sustainability of agriculture and rural areas in the EU. CAP for the programming period 2021-2027 focuses on the environment and is potentially compatible with the EU Green Deal. The European Green Deal aims primarily to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, i.e. the agreement seeks to protect the health and well-being of citizens from environmental risks (Haines and Scheelbeek, 2020). Accordingly, the European Commission and the European Parliament plan to finance EUR 387 billion over the next 7 years through CAP, so that farmers can meet the requirements defined under the EU Green Deal (European Commission, 2020b). In addition to a higher share of funds for environmental programmes, for the programming period 2001-2027 increased investments in knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture are foreseen, which will benefit farmers and rural communities (European Commission, 2020a). The new CAP reform also aims at increased flexibility and greater freedom in the allocation of funds for EU Member States, as well as simplified administration, where EU Member States will submit a single strategic plan, which is approved by the European Commission.

According to a study by the European Parliament, there are several rural development strategies: priority on measures to increase competitiveness (Axis 1), priority on environmental measures (Axis 2), a mixed approach of the first two axes with a greater focus on competitiveness, a mixed approach of the first two axes with a greater focus on the environment, a mix of the first two axes equally, a mixed approach with a focus on rural diversification (Axis 3); with a change in orientation in different EU countries between the two programming periods (2007-2013 and 2014-2020) (European Parliament, 2016). According to this study, the largest number of Member States that joined the EU before 2004 in both programming periods give priority to environmental measures, with several older Member States (Belgium, Germany, Denmark) with a mixed strategy from 2007-2013, but for the period of 2014-2020 they have moved to a strategy with more environmental protection measures. Southern countries (Spain and Portugal) have also given more priority to environmental measures, while Italy has changed its strategy in the opposite direction towards prioritizing measures to increase competitiveness (considering that Italy is a large country with regional disparities within the country). In large countries with regional disparities within the country, such as Italy, France, Germany, Spain, it is more appropriate to define the distribution of rural development funds at the regional level. Among the new EU Member States (accession after 2004), Poland has maintained a strategy that prioritizes the first axis (competitiveness), Slovakia has maintained a mixed approach of the first two axes with a stronger focus on the environment, and Estonia has maintained a mixed approach with a focus on rural diversification. Romania, Bulgaria and Latvia have switched from a mixed approach with a focus on rural diversification to a mixed approach with a focus on the environment, while Lithuania has switched from a priority on competitiveness to a mixed approach strategy with a stronger focus on rural diversification. The Czech Republic and Slovenia have chosen a strategy that prioritizes environmental measures for the 2014-2020 programming period.

The expansion of the EU to the east (to the CEE countries) has led to a deepening of regional differences, both in socio-economic issues and in agricultural models. All candidate countries for EU membership are entitled to financial assistance from Brussels to prepare for full membership in the Union as soon as possible (Janković, 2009). For example, for a more adequate accession of the CEE countries, the EU programs were launched in the late 1990s: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE), Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession (ISPA), and Special Accession Programme for Agricultural and Rural Development (SAPARD), with the aim of preparing future members for economic reform, Cohesion Policy, or the CAP (Gorzelać, 2020). Bachtler and Ferry (2020) point out the importance of using these funds when CEE countries join the EU, identifying several different strategies that are implemented in these countries after accession: most of the funds go to the main, capital regions and eastern regions, to the detriment of the more developed western regions (Hungary and Poland); funds are directed to poor, peripheral and most often eastern regions (Slovenia and the Czech Republic); funds are distributed to poorly developed regions, poorly to financing capital regions (Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria); funds are distributed evenly to regions with the capital city and other urban centres and peripheral, underdeveloped regions, i.e. across the entire territory (the Baltic model characteristic of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia).

The European Commission began implementing the first program (PHARE) for assistance to candidate countries in 1989, with all aid funds being merged into the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) from 2007 (Janković,

2009). IPA is a mechanism established to support democracy, the rule of law, public administration reform, economic reform, respect for human and minority rights, civil society, as well as regional and cross-border cooperation, with assistance being based on two groups of countries: candidate countries and potential candidate countries (Gjorgjević, 2008). IPA consists of 5 different components: Transition Assistance and Institution Building; Cross-Border Cooperation (with EU Member States and other countries eligible for the IPA programme); Regional Development (transport, environment, regional and economic development); Human Resources (strengthening human capacity and combating social exclusion) and Rural Development. The fifth component of IPA, IPARD aims to upgrade the agricultural sector and improve the quality of life in rural areas. Countries eligible for the IPARD program are required to prepare a national Rural Development Programme, which must include a description of the current situation, funding priorities, a presentation of financial resources and their sources, and a proposal for activities and measures within the projects (Janković, 2009). Recipient countries have the option of choosing measures, considering the specificities of the rural areas of each candidate country (Zekić, Matkovski, & Jurjević, 2016). IPARD is based on measures established by the European Commission (European Commission, 2020c):

- Investments in physical assets (facilities and machinery) in agricultural holdings (Measure 1).
- Support to agricultural associations (Measure 2).
- Investments in physical assets related to the processing and marketing of agricultural products, with the aim of achieving EU food safety and environmental protection standards (Measure 3).
- Agri-environment-climate measures and organic production (Measure 4).
- Implementation of local development strategies (LEADER approach) (Measure 5).
- Development of rural infrastructure (Measure 6).
- Diversification of agricultural holdings and business development (Measure 7).
- Training activity (Measure 8).
- Technical assistance in training, analysis, monitoring, capacity building and preparation of local action groups (Measure 9).

The financing of measures is defined depending on the program approved for a particular candidate country. For example, in early 2015, the European Commission adopted IPARD II for Serbia, with funds allocated to investments in physical assets of farms (Measure 1), investments in physical assets related to processing and marketing of agricultural products (Measure 3), diversification of agricultural farms and business development (Measure 7) and technical assistance (Zekić Matkovski, & Jurjević, 2016). Once the European Commission approves a particular program, it is further managed by national institutions (Managing Authority) responsible for writing the operational plan and selecting measures, and the national IPARD Agency, which is the most important institution in the use of funds, project implementation, and monitoring of the entire process (Vapa Tankosić & Stojšavljević, 2014).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before 2012, when Serbia became a candidate for membership, i.e. from 2011 to 2013, two pilot measures were defined within IPARD, with the aim of preparing for the IPARD Programme after becoming a candidate. It was not until 2016 that the IPARD Programme for the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014-2020 was adopted, i.e. IPARD II, with a total planned budget of EUR 230,096,080 (of which EUR 175,000,000 EU contribution and EUR 55,096,080 national contribution) within which, based on national priorities, objectives and sectoral analyses, six measures were selected from the set of available measures (Zekić Matkovski, & Jurjević, 2016):

1. **Measure 1** - Investments in physical assets of agricultural holdings (planned approximately 44% of the total IPARD II budget).
2. **Measure 3** - Investments in physical assets related to the processing and marketing of agricultural products (planned approximately 35% of the total IPARD II budget).
3. **Measure 4** - Agri-environmental-climate measures and organic production measures (planned approximately 5% of the total IPARD II budget).
4. **Measure 5** - Implementation of local rural development strategies - LEADER approach (planned around 3% of the total IPARD II budget).
5. **Measure 7** - Diversification of agricultural holdings and business development (planned around 10% of the total IPARD II budget).
6. **Measure 9** - Technical assistance (planned around 3% of the total IPARD II budget).

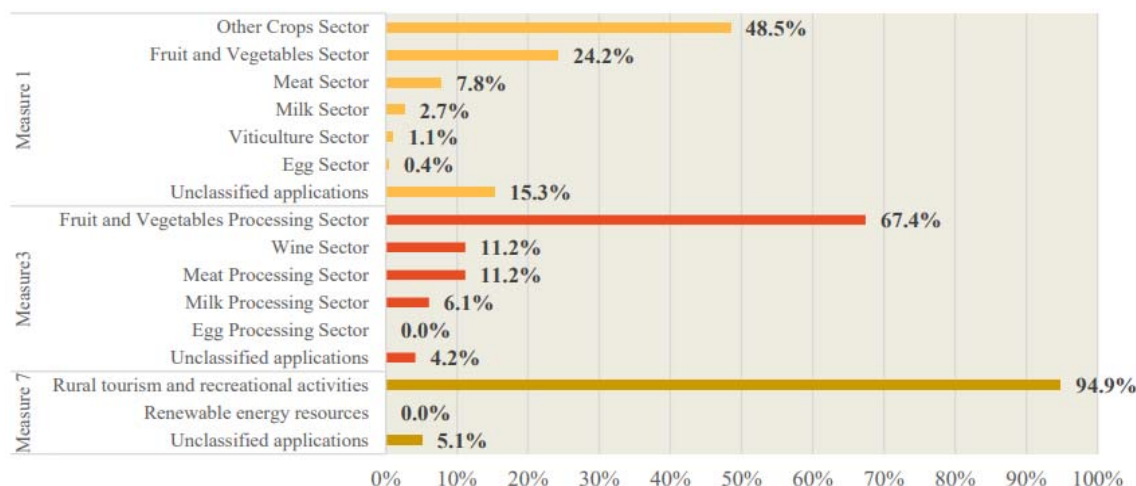
According to the financial plan of the IPARD (IPARD program za Republiku Srbiju za period 2014–2020. Godine, 2016) for the period 2014-2020 it is defined that for Measures 1 and 3 the EU contribution is 75% of the total funds, while the national contribution is 25%, with the following sectors eligible for Measure 1: the milk, meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables, viticulture and other crops (cereals, oilseeds and sugar beet) sectors; and for Measure 3: the milk, meat, eggs, fruit and vegetable processing sectors, as well as wine. According to the Annual Report on the Implementation of IPARD for the period 2018-2019, it is defined that (Sector for Rural Development, 2020):

- The largest number of applications submitted for Measure 1 is within the other crops sector, namely cereals, with the largest number of applications related to the procurement of tractors (69%), while other investment

groups have a smaller share (14% for equipment and mechanization excluding tractors, 7% construction of storage facilities).

- The largest number of applications submitted for Measure 3 is within the fruit and vegetable sector, with 36% of applications for the modernization of processing and packaging equipment and 25% of applications for the construction/reconstruction/modernization of processing facilities.

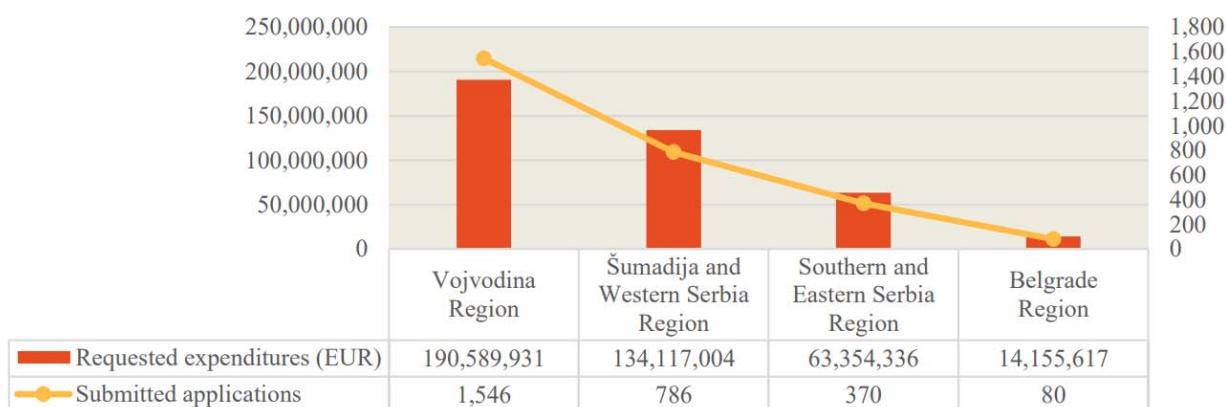
Until December 2023, 15 calls were published, namely: seven for Measure 1, with a total allocated EU contribution in the amount of EUR 111.2 million, four for Measure 3, with total allocated funds in the amount of EUR 81.5 million, two for Measure 7, with total allocated funds in the amount of EUR 26.3 million and two for non-investment Measure 9: Technical Assistance in the total amount of EUR 986,327 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water management, 2024).



Picture 1: Structure of submitted IPARD II applications per sector (%)

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water management, 2024

Regarding regional distribution, the Vojvodina Region is dominant both in terms of the number of submitted IPARD applications (1,546 applications, i.e. 55.6%), and in terms of requested public expenditures (EUR 190.6 million, i.e. 47.4%) (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Submitted IPARD applications and requested expenditures per region

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water management, 2024

Measure 4 and Measure 5, i.e. Agri-environmental-climate measures and organic production measures and Implementation of local rural development strategies, have been left for the next period of implementation of the IPARD. Harmonization of the agricultural policy of Serbia and the CAP should move towards increasing funds for agri-environmental measures. Within the framework of IPARD, a certain part of the funds will be financed for Measure 4, primarily aimed at organic production. Although there are noticeable changes in the framework of Serbia's rural development policy towards harmonization with the CAP, there is a lack of clear intention to reform the policy in line with support for Areas facing Natural Constraints (ANCs) and the LEADER approach (Volk et al., 2017). Accordingly, the importance of IPARD funds for Measure 5 - Implementation of local rural development strategies is highlighted. Activities on the implementation of LEADER in Serbia started in previous years, i.e. from 2011 to 2013, through the project "Capacity Building for the Establishment and Implementation of LEADER in Serbia", within which the creation of 24 potential Local Action Groups (LAGs) was supported (Bogdanov, 2018). Today, activities on the implementation

of this approach will initially be supported under Measure 9 - Technical Assistance, to acquire the skills of potential local action groups and develop local development strategies. Realization of IPARD supports records a continuous increasing tendency during Programme implementation on an annual basis. The lowest amount of support was paid in 2019 (EUR 4.6 million), and in each subsequent year a larger amount of total IPARD support was paid compared to the previous. The largest amount of EU support was paid in 2023, which represents an increase in the total amount of paid IPARD support compared to the previous year by 82.2% (Table 1).

Table 1: Execution of the Program budget for completed projects, cumulative

Measure	Realization of EU support (EUR)						Target value 2014-2020 (EUR)	Execution rate (%)
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023		
						a	b	c=(a/b)
Measure 1	0	4,577,520	6,645,922	15,581,227	24,808,136	49,074,599	88,322,473	55.6
Measure 3	0	0	3,043,987	6,221,997	10,628,933	14,903,271	43,461,806	34.3
Measure 7	0	0	0	0	0	586,282	26,200,000	2.2
Measure 9	0	0	0	0	0	0	500,000	0.0
Total	0	4,577,520	9,689,909	21,803,224	35,437,069	64,564,152	158,484,280	40.7

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water management, 2024

The European Commission in its reports most often states that the most common reasons for the underutilization of IPARD funds are the unpreparedness of local governments, both in terms of infrastructure and human resources (primarily advisory services), given that rural development policy is created at the national level, but implemented at the local level (Đurić, 2018). Also, Volk et al. (2017) state that rural development policy in the region (Western Balkans) has not taken root, despite the occasional adoption of certain projects and programs, primarily due to modest funds, as well as the direction of these funds towards investment in agriculture, in addition to the insufficient adaptation of IPARD to real needs in Serbia. Also, the experience gained in the IPARD II implementation will have a positive impact in the implementation of the IPARD for the programming period 2021-2027 (IPARD III).

4. CONCLUSION

The insufficient use of IPARD funds, even if a small share for financing the second pillar of support within the agricultural budget of Serbia, further hinders the development of rural areas in Serbia. In addition, within the framework of rural development measures, funds are mostly allocated for investment measures in the agricultural holdings, while agri-environmental measures, investment in rural infrastructure or diversification of activities are financed to a minimal extent. Of course, IPARD funds cannot solve all the problems of agriculture and rural areas in Serbia, because a systemic solution requires a national, long-term strategy for the development of these areas, with a significant increase in the funds of the national, agricultural budget. However, the IPARD project enables a more adequate harmonization of Serbia's agricultural policy with the CAP, whereby it should move in the direction of increasing funds for rural development, with a greater focus on the environment and natural resources being imposed as the future direction of agricultural policy.

Given its importance, in the future it is necessary to strengthen the institutions for implementing the IPARD fund programs for preparing documentation, implementation, assistance in applying for certain calls, etc. It is necessary to improve the efficiency of the IPARD Programme in Serbia, including simplifying administrative procedures, strengthening technical support for users and increasing the transparency of the funding allocation process. Given the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, it is difficult to expect a shift in Serbia's agricultural policy towards environmental protection programs, which are dominant in highly developed countries, whose agriculture is competitive and at an adequate technological level of development. Also, the EU's rural policy insists on supporting young people and their families, which aims to keep young people in rural areas. Large rural-urban migration in Serbia should indicate the need to change agricultural policy measures, i.e. to direct more funds towards young people in rural areas.

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