
RURAL POLICY OF SERBIA AND THE NETHERLANDS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The global trend of rural depopulation is a new challenge of the 21st century. As people migrate from rural areas to cities, the potential for growth in these areas diminishes. As the global population increases, the demand for food production relies heavily on agriculture, which is primarily carried out in rural areas. Serbia and the Netherlands share a common issue, but the circumstances surrounding it vary. The research methodology involves comparing data, followed by analysis and synthesis to draw meaningful conclusions. The criteria for comparison include demographic indicators, indicators of social well-being, and indicators of economic structure and performance. The results indicate that the Netherlands has more practical solutions for issues, a more content rural population, and better conditions for implementing rural policies. Regarding Serbia, the policy for rural areas is currently in the developmental phase.

Introduction

Rural areas in the Republic of Serbia are encountering numerous challenges. These challenges may result from the isolation of rural areas due to poor infrastructure, and certain regions may have fewer natural resources than other parts of the country, making them less of a priority for investment. Population aging and devastation are no longer just a problem for peripheral rural areas. These changes are now a challenge for all European countries and imply specific social distortions (Bogdanov, 2007). Serbia, along with other countries in transition, is confronted with similar challenges.

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After years of mistreatment of rural and agricultural resources, the objective now is to guarantee their sustainability. The rural areas of Europe are very diverse in their socio-economic conditions, physical features, and therefore also in the way we have to treat their problems and development (Baldock & Institute For European Environmental Policy, 2001). Because of this, rural development policy cannot single out one, universal problem to focus on. Until the 1970s, the problem of rural areas was identified as rural development, that is, to improve agriculture so that it raises the standard of rural areas (Baldock & Institute For European Environmental Policy, 2001). However, the approach has changed. Agricultural structures policy began to be shifted away from enhancing productivity to improvements in the quality of, and establishing new markets for, agricultural products (Baldock & Institute For European Environmental Policy, 2001). In the 1970s, the European Union acknowledged this issue by introducing LFA (Less Favored Areas) into its agricultural policy (Papić, 2021). The LFA policy initially aimed to address social issues in rural areas. LFAs are areas where agriculture is hampered by permanent natural handicaps (Schouten et al., 2008). The major objectives were to ensure the continuation of farming, thereby maintaining a minimum population level and preserving scenic landscapes and environmentally valuable habitats (Schouten et al., 2008; Šobić et al., 2023). In the Netherlands, the LFA measure is used as an additional payment, to compensate farmers for negative economic effects due to the conservation of these natural handicaps (Schouten et al., 2008). It was not implemented as a stand-alone policy, but is linked to measures aiming at active nature and landscape conservation management LFAs refer to areas where agriculture is hindered by permanent natural limitations (Schouten et al., 2008). The primary objectives of LFAs are to maintain the continuity of farming, preserve scenic landscapes, and protect environmentally valuable habitats, all while ensuring that the minimum population level is maintained. In the Netherlands, the LFA measure is utilized as an additional payment to compensate farmers for the negative economic effects caused by natural handicaps. This measure is not implemented as a standalone policy but is instead linked to other measures aimed at promoting active nature and landscape conservation management. After the year 2000, the focus of this policy shifted towards achieving environmental and sustainable development goals (Papić, 2021; Pantić et al., 2022; Luković et al., 2023). These policies aim to establish mechanisms for coordinating agriculture and other activities in rural areas, to enhance living standards for the rural population. (Bogdanov, 2007; Pantić & Milojević, 2023). The question that needs to be addressed is whether it would be appropriate to simply adopt the EU's policies in Serbia. Implementing rural policy in Serbia requires consideration of historical and cultural heritage, social structure, and level of development. Good practices can help improve the current situation. Rural policy in Serbia has fallen behind over the past three decades, leading to new problems such as the need for agricultural reform and reliance on other sources of income besides agriculture. It is crucial to prioritize the economic and social security of small rural households in the country as an inadequate choice of rural policy can jeopardize their survival. The objective should be to position such households as relevant economic subjects.

This paper aims to compare the rural policies of Serbia and the Netherlands, with a focus on identifying good practices that Serbia, as a candidate country for joining the European Union, can learn from the Netherlands.

Rural policies of the Netherlands and Serbia

The Netherlands has a national rural development strategy that is aligned with the common policy of the European Union. The focus of the national rural strategy of the Netherlands is on sustainability and competitiveness. In our work, we will cover the period from 2014 to 2022. The Ministry of Agriculture, Environmental Protection and Food Quality is in charge of financing, implementation, and supervision of rural policies, with the fact that every decision must be in accordance with the common policy of the European Union (OECD, 2020). The Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for the financing, implementation, and supervision of rural policies, as well as those policies whose focus is on population decline (OECD, 2020). At the sub-national level, rural policy is implemented by the provinces, 12 of them, and the Regiebureau POP (department in charge of rural development) (OECD, 2020).

In Table 1, we can see the indicative public support for the Dutch Rural Development Programme.

Table 1. The indicative public support for the Dutch Rural Development Programme

Target	Measure	€ Total public	%
Priority1: Knowledge transfer and innovation ⁴			
1A: Fostering innovation, coop, knowledge base 10.11% RDP expenditure	01 knowledge		
	16 cooperation		
1B: Strengthening links (with research etc.) 355 cooperation operations	16 cooperation		
1C: Training 30 000 training participants	01 knowledge		
Priority 2: Competitiveness		498 333 000	23.75%
2A: Farm performance <u>5.12%</u> farms with RDP support	01 knowledge	52 759 000	2.50%
	03 quality schemes	22 818 000	1.08%
	04 investments	266 507 000	12.60%
	16 cooperation	156 249 000	7.39%

4 No financial allocation shown for Priority 1 as the expenditure is distributed across other focus areas

Target	Measure	€ Total public	%
Priority 3: promoting food chain organisation, including processing and marketing of agricultural products, animal welfare and risk management in agriculture		103 280 000	4.88 %
3B: farm risk prevention and management 4.15% farms with RDP support	17 Risk Management	103 280 000	4.88 %
Priority 4: Ecosystems management ⁵		1 334 377 667	63.11 %
4A Biodiversity: 5.87% utilised agricultural area under contract	04 investments 10 AEC	693 154 000	32.78 %
4B Water management: 5.87% utilised agricultural area under contract		641 223 667	30.33%
4C Soil erosion and management: 0.48% utilised agricultural areas under contract			
Priority 6: Social inclusion and local development		123 144 339	5.82 %
6B LEADER: 64.86% rural population in local development strategy 250 jobs created (LEADER)	19 LEADER and CLLD	123 144 339	5.82 %
Technical Assistance		55 331 389	2.62 %
Total public expenditure €		2 114 466 395	100 %

Source: Factsheet on the 2014-2022 Rural Development Programme for the Netherlands, 2023.

To enhance the competitiveness of rural areas, these programs rely on innovation to improve production with a focus on small farms. The policy also includes weather insurance, policy will cover 4.15% of all farmers (Factsheet on the 2014-2022 Rural Development Programme for the Netherlands, 2023). Within this program, 30,000 farmers will undergo some form of training, while the ministry (The Ministry of Agriculture, Environmental Protection and Food Quality) will co-finance 365 projects. The goal is to create 250 types of new jobs, which would cover about 65% of the rural

⁵ Expenditure under Priority 4 is programmed for the priority as a whole, not for individual focus areas

population. Incomes in the agricultural sector are 40% lower than in other sectors, within the framework of the rural policy this problem would be solved by farmers receiving higher subsidies for the first 40 hectares (European Commission, 2023). The Netherlands has high agricultural production, but it has led to a drastic decrease in bird numbers. To improve the situation, the country is adopting an agricultural land management system that could potentially increase bird numbers in agricultural areas. As part of a rural development program, farmers will receive support for sustainable agricultural practices, including reducing pesticide and fertilizer runoff, better soil management, and adapting to a specialized market. The program will also invest 174 million euros in peatlands to combat climate change. (European Commission, 2023). Rural policy aims to promote social inclusion and local development of rural areas, creating new jobs through business, innovation, and cooperation. It aims to connect villages and cities while improving the living conditions of the rural population. The Rural Development Strategy recognizes the difficulties of starting a new farm and therefore offers subsidies to new and young farmers. The goal is to attract 3,000 new, young farmers with this strategy. In addition, each farmer will receive a voucher of 1,750 euros for further education and training.

In the early 2010s, Serbia's rural policy was in its infancy. The initial phase of collectivization under Yugoslav communist rule, from 1945 to 1953, stifled the transition from small-scale commodity production to a capitalist model. Funding was primarily directed toward the social sector, leaving agriculture and rural regions under-resourced, which impeded overall agricultural development. Although Serbia is striving to align its rural policy with EU standards, significant discrepancies in execution remain. Unfavorable circumstances such as rural-urban migration, lack of interest in agricultural work among youth, and inability to compete in the market have led to the rise of elderly households in rural areas (Supić, 2012). The trajectory of the newly admitted member states, formerly socialist nations, serves as a reference point for Serbia, given their ongoing transitional journey, which to varying degrees, Serbia will likely traverse in the foreseeable future (Zekic et al., 2017).

The difference between Serbia and the EU in terms of agricultural and rural development policy is reflected in the following:

1. Socio-economic structure: In the EU, 18% of the population lives in rural areas, where agriculture is not the sole source of income. However, in Serbia, agriculture is frequently the only source of income;
2. Rural infrastructure: EU countries have well-developed rural infrastructure. In Serbia, rural infrastructure is both underdeveloped and unsustainable, limiting the capacity for rapid integration;
3. Economic structure: In the EU the economy is diversified;
4. Agricultural production: Large-scale investments in agricultural production in rural areas of the European Union. Rural areas of Serbia lack investments in agriculture;

5. Human capital: In the EU, rural and agricultural populations have higher education levels compared to Serbia, where residents of rural areas have a lower level of education, especially compared to the rural regions of the EU.;
6. State of the environment: The EU's intensive agriculture caused significant pollution, while Serbia's less intensive agriculture resulted in less pollution. However, environmental awareness is low among Serbia's rural population, and state support for environmental initiatives is still nascent.;
7. Funds and financial resources: In the EU, funds are clearly defined, while in Serbia they are still very modest;
8. Local self-government: Clearly defined decentralization within EU member states, while in Serbia local self-government has little autonomy;
9. Production connectivity: Serbia has a high level of market monopolization compared to the EU countries, where competition-based market chains are prevalent.

In 2014, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy for the period 2014-2024. This document establishes six strategic development goals (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2014):

1. Production growth and producer income stability;
2. Growth of competitiveness with adaptation to the requirements of the domestic and foreign markets and technical-technological improvement of the agricultural sector;
3. Sustainable resource management and environmental protection;
4. Improving the quality of life in rural areas and reducing poverty;
5. Effective management of public policies and improvement of the institutional framework for the development of agriculture and rural areas;
6. Modernization of bodies and organizations and adaptation of agricultural policy to the EU Common Agricultural Policy model.

The Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy for Serbia (2014-2024) outlines 14 priority areas for agricultural policy, including stable income for farmers, infrastructure improvement, knowledge transfer and development, climate change adaptation, market chain development, environmental conservation, social structure improvement, and more. Serbia will be able to utilize EU subsidies for agriculture and rural development under the Instrument for Pre-Accession in Rural Development (IPARD) as a candidate for EU membership. The main aim of IPARD is to raise the competitiveness of rural areas in Serbia. Zekić and Matkovski (2015) point out that further economic decline can be avoided by further diversification of economic activities in rural areas. Diversifying income can improve rural households' standard of living. A national rural strategy aligned with EU policy is necessary. IPARD funds can provide substantial support for this reform.. Matkovski and Kleut (2015) present the importance of the IPARD program

in raising the competitiveness of rural areas, either by investing in the production or marketing of agricultural products. Table 2 shows the budget by measures after the Fifth Amendment of the IPARD II program:

Table 2. The budget by measures after the Fifth Amendment of the IPARD II program

Measure	Contributions EU, EUR(%)							
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2014-2020
Measure 1	-	7.535.248 (50,23%)	9.900.325 (49,50%)	9.663.583,04 (45,36%)	12.199.743 (40,67%)	18.902.434 (47,26%)	37.812.500 (84,03%)	96.013.833,04
Measure 3	-	7.464.752 (49,77%)	10.099.67550,50%	7.952.129,63 (37,33%)	9.162.757 (30,54%)	13.910.066 (34,78%)		48.589.379,63
Measure 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
Measure 5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,00
Measure 7	-	-	-	3.687.500 (17,31%)	8.637.500 (28,79%)	7.187.500 (17,97%)	6.687.500 (14,86%)	26,200,000
Measure 9	-	-	-	-	-	-	500.000 (1,11%)	500,00
Total	-	15.000.000	20.000.000	21.303.212,67	30.000.000	40.000.000	45.000.000	171.303.212,67

Source: Republika Srbija, Ministarstvo poljoprivrede, šumarstva i vodoprivrede, 2023, p63.

Key measures for rural development through the IPARD II program include investments in agricultural holdings (Measure 1), processing and marketing of agricultural and fishery products (Measure 3), farm diversification and business development (Measure 7), technical assistance (Measure 9), agricultural, environmental, climate, and organic production (Measure 4), and local development strategies through the LEADER approach (Measure 5). By the end of 2022, 3,179 requests were submitted across 14 calls: 2,260 for Measure 1, 313 for Measure 3, 605 for Measure 7, and one for Measure 9. The total public support requested was 490.7 million EUR: 218.7 million EUR for Measure 1, 96.7 million EUR for Measure 3, 175.3 million EUR for Measure 7, and 6,300 EUR for Measure 9 (Republika Srbija, Ministarstvo poljoprivrede, šumarstva i vodoprivrede, 2023).

Research methodology

Our work involved careful analysis and synthesis of relevant theoretical materials and previous research. We compared different approaches to sustainable rural development using the method of comparison and analogy. We also provided a detailed explanation of important facts using the method of description.

Results of research and discussion

Our assessment of rural policies will be based on four criteria: agricultural production, environmental protection, quality of life for rural residents, and land use conservation. We will analyze several development indicators to determine policy effectiveness, including demographic, social welfare, and economic performance indicators.

In terms of the first category, which is agricultural production, the goals are similar for both the Netherlands and Serbia. They both aim to improve their agriculture sector through the use of technological innovations while also taking care of the environment. However, there is a difference in the supply chain. The rural policy of the Netherlands is already aligned with that of the EU (European Commission, 2023), but Serbia, being a candidate country, still needs to align its policy with the EU's standards and regulations to increase and regulate competitiveness. One area where both countries share the same strategy is crop insurance against extreme weather events. Both the Dutch and the Serbian policies include this provision. Both the Serbian and Dutch rural development strategies aim to conserve biodiversity and resources in agriculture, forestry, and water. However, the Serbian strategy focuses on agrobiodiversity and forests, while the Dutch strategy prioritizes the conservation of underground and surface water (European Commission, 2023). These priorities are in line with each country's national strategies. The Netherlands, with its high levels of production and chemical usage, has a significant impact on water endangerment (European Commission, 2023), while Serbia faces different challenges related to agrobiodiversity and forests. Unfortunately, agrobiodiversity in Serbia has been on a decline since the 1950s, with highly productive varieties of plants and animals replacing indigenous varieties. Additionally, the forest cover in Serbia (29.1%) is close to the world level (30%) and much below the European level (estimated at 46%), (JP Srbijašume, 2023). Serbia's strategy lacks a focus on soil protection, while the Netherlands has dedicated funding for it in their strategy. Both Serbia and the Netherlands have rural development strategies that aim to improve rural life by diversifying jobs, improving technology, and encouraging youth to return to the countryside. However, the Dutch strategy prioritizes training young farmers, while Serbia focuses on infrastructure. Both strategies aim to connect villages and cities, but Serbia faces challenges in achieving its goals.

In this section of the project, we will evaluate the effectiveness of two strategies, Serbian and Dutch rural development strategy. We will begin by examining the demographic indicators. According to Humanitarian Data Exchange (2023), about 1.3 million people reside in rural areas of the Netherlands, which accounts for only a small portion of the total population of 17.53 million as reported by The World Bank (2023). Conversely, in Serbia, the percentage of people living in rural areas is higher, with 43.12% of the total population residing in such areas as reported by Trading Economics (2023). The population density in the Netherlands is comparatively high with 520 inhabitants per square kilometer, while Serbia has an average population density of 81 inhabitants per square kilometer (Trading Economics, 2023). In Serbia, the population density is lowest in the Bor region with 35.88 inhabitants per square kilometer, while the highest density is in the Danube region with 160.4 inhabitants per square kilometer (Josipović, 2019). The age structure of Serbia's rural population is cause for concern due to negative natural growth and emigration, leading to an increasingly pronounced rural exodus. The rural areas in both countries are dominated by an elderly population, resulting in an unfavorable aging index (Thissen & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2020). The demographic composition of the rural population in Serbia is a

cause for concern, especially the age structure. In the Vojvodina region, for every 100 inhabitants under the age of 14, there are 120 inhabitants over the age of 60. Similarly, the Šumadija and Western Serbia regions have 125 older inhabitants for every 100 young inhabitants, while the Southern and Eastern Serbia regions have an even higher ratio of 140 older inhabitants for every 100 young inhabitants. Only two rural areas, Pčinj and Raška, have an aging index below 100. Between the 2002 and 2011 censuses, there was a decrease in young people's participation and an increase in the elderly's participation, indicating an unfavorable trend (Josipović, 2019). Only two rural areas, Juznobačka and Raška Oblast, reported population growth between the two censuses. The Netherlands also recorded the same trend with about a 2% decrease in the number of rural inhabitants (The Global Economy, 2023). Rural areas with structural issues related to labor market performance are Pomoravska, Rasinska, Borska, Braničevska, Zaječarska, and Pirotka area. All labor market indicators (rates of dependent population, rates of social importance of the young population, rates of population rejuvenation, substitution rates of the able-bodied contingent, demographic index of the labor market (Josipović, 2019)) in these rural areas are worse than the national average. These regions have a higher proportion of dependent population, a lower proportion of population rejuvenation, and a lower rate of labor replacement, indicating a worse social importance for the young population. The unemployment rate in rural areas of the Netherlands has decreased due to the shift from villages to cities, indicating economic development. There are approximately 80 employees per 1000 inhabitants in rural areas, and this ratio has remained unchanged since 2011. As of 2017, wages in the agricultural sector are the lowest of the four sectors (construction, industry, and services) (European Commission, 2021).

Lastly, we will deal with indicators of social well-being. Indicators of social well-being include the availability of public services, which dictate the quality of life. We will exclude natural amenities from our analysis. Most districts are at the level of the national average, but Borski, Zaječarski, Pirotki, and Toplički are above the national average. The main problem is the lack of infrastructure. According to data from 2019, 500 villages do not have a shop in the village, 1000 do not have asphalt or an access road (RTS, 2019), 2,000 villages do not have a post office, and 73% of villages do not have a cultural center or a library (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). In 230 villages there is no primary school, in 2760 villages there is no kindergarten, in two-thirds, there is no hospital, and in 200 villages there are no inhabitants under the age of 20 (Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). On the other hand, rural populations in the Netherlands rate the availability of public services highly, with only 12% of respondents dissatisfied (Felix Johan Pot et al., 2023). It is interesting to note that the greatest dissatisfaction was expressed in road availability for private cars, while intercity transport showed the highest degree of satisfaction. In the rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, rural schools often have only one pupil, while the reform implemented in the Netherlands in 1994 enables the adaptation of the school to the environment in which it is located. In the case of the Netherlands, this means that schools in rural areas have between 62-101 students (OECD, 2021)

Conclusion

Rural populations are declining globally, impacting agriculture. Governments are focusing on rural development, including in Serbia where aligning policies with EU standards is a priority. Strategies include improving infrastructure and alternative job opportunities. IPA funds, particularly through IPARD, are vital for rural development, supporting projects like supply chain optimization and manufacturing. Integrating environmental sustainability into Serbia's rural policies is crucial for sustainable resource management.

Our objective was to compare two countries with different policies, outcomes, and conditions. As per our analysis, we have reached the following conclusions:

1. Rural development policies have a longer history in EU countries compared to Serbia. Due to its communist legacy, the upheavals of the 1990s, and the political instability of the early 2000s, Serbia only began to focus on rural policy in earnest around 2010;
2. In the Netherlands, rural-to-urban migration is often driven by career opportunities. In contrast, in Serbia, the exodus from rural areas is primarily a matter of survival.;
3. The Netherlands has a more robust system for monitoring rural development goals, with a strategy that includes specific objectives and actionable plans. In contrast, Serbia's strategy largely consists of listed goals without clear mechanisms for implementation and monitoring;
4. The Netherlands has a well-informed public, while Serbia lacks a national public information system to promote rural life improvement.

Future research in rural development should focus on enhancing local knowledge, boosting workforce productivity, fostering entrepreneurship, and improving information exchange among businesses to support small-scale enterprises and strengthen local communities.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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