
ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IPARD II PROGRAM IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

In Serbia, high expectations were focused on the IPARD Program, considering that in the entire transition period, there was a greater demand for favorable sources of financing for agriculture and rural development compared to their supply. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the implementation of the IPARD II program in Serbia, in the current period, that is, ending with the end of February 2024. The paper uses the following methods: desk research, method of descriptive statistics, as well as methods of analysis and synthesis. The authors conclude that there was a significant utilization of funds from the IPARD II Program in Serbia, ending on February 29, 2024, but also that less than half of the submitted projects met the set criteria. In order for this method of financing to have the best possible effect in Serbia, better education of the inhabitants of rural areas is needed for writing projects. Also, greater financial resources from the European Union are needed in future support programs.

Introduction

The majority of agricultural entities in Serbia do not make a profit in their production, which especially applies to the family farms. Therefore, these subjects do not have their own accumulation for self-financing of production, so there was a great demand for external sources of financing throughout the entire transition period. The subsidies paid from the agricultural budget were insufficient to meet the needs for favorable sources of financing, and there were high expectations from the pre-accession funds of the

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European Union, and especially from the IPARD II program. This program foresees the first significant financial support of the European Union for the financing of agriculture and rural development in Serbia, in the amount of 175 million euros. When mandatory funds from the “national contribution” are added to these funds, in the amount of 54.9 million euros, it can be concluded that the total budget of the IPARD II program, for the program 2014-2020 period amounts to 229.9 million euros.

The main purpose of the pre-accession programs is to finance the development of agriculture and rural development, but also to prepare candidate countries for membership in the European Union, in order to harmonize the measures of their agricultural policies with the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU after accession (Martinovska-Stojcheska et al., 2021). Some authors (Glušćević et al., 2017; 753) believe that, precisely, the IPARD program is the “first steps in the use of further more generous funds for agriculture and rural development EU“.

As some authors point out (Zekić et al., 2016; 171), in order to assess the potential importance of the IPARD program for financing agriculture and rural development in Serbia, it is necessary to analyze the contributions of similar pre-accession financial instruments. in other countries. In this regard, the cited authors state that in the period from 2007 to 2012, the following countries: Croatia 130 million euros, of which the largest part of the funds (39%) was used for investments in agricultural holdings; Macedonia 65 million euros, of which 26% was invested in the development of processing and marketing; Turkey 650 million euros, of which 20% was invested in the development and diversification of farms. A group of authors (Šestović et al., 2017; 516) based on their research concluded that “all three analyzed countries (Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey) have a positive correlation between the two factors: IPARD funds and export of agricultural products”. In order to implement this program in Serbia in better way, a group of authors (Martinovska-Stojcheska et al., 2021; 31) states “it is recommended to increase the minimum investment threshold for all measures and to redirect small applicants to national measures”.

The special importance of the IPARD program is that it encourages rural development. For this purpose, great effects are also expected from measure 5, which is accredited in Serbia within the IPARD III program (Paraušić & Bekić-Šarić, 2021). According to Ciani (Ciani, 2003; 7), the essence of modern rural development is characterized by: diversification, integration, innovation, product quality and certification, sustainability, pluralism of activities and multifunctionality. There are views in the literature that rural economies need integral rural development. The authors Pejanović and Tica (Pejanović & Tica, 2007; 148) believe that the integration of economic, social, institutional, demographic and ecological aspects of development is necessary for this development concept.

The development of rural tourism is of particular importance for rural development. According to some authors (Todorović & Štetić, 2009; 31-32), this activity is correlated with agriculture and can be, among other things, a factor in the development of agriculture, the market of agricultural products, but also in the overall “developmental

tendencies of rural areas”. The author Pejanović (Pejanović, 2013; 201) also indicates that this activity contributes to the “complete valorization of the natural and anthropogenic values of the rural area”. Rural tourism also affects the diversification of rural economies. According to Bogdanov (Bogdanov, 2007), there are three types of diversification of rural economies, of which, in our opinion, the most common is diversification, which the quoted author calls “flow - diversification”. As she explains, this diversification is characterized by the fact that the rural population’s primary occupation is in agriculture, and additionally in non-agricultural activities.

When we analyze the possibilities for the development of rural tourism, it can be said that Serbia has quality natural resources (Cvijanović et al., 2016; Đurić et al., 2019). In one research (Radović et al., 2018; 423) it was concluded that “rural tourism entities do not generate adequate profits that would allow them to self-finance their activities, and existing funding modalities are inadequate or insufficient”. A group of authors also believes that the IPARD program will provide the missing financial resources for the development of this activity (Jeločnik et al., 2018). In the recent research (Radović et al., 2023; 467), it was concluded that they are needed “greater available financial resources ...as well as better education of the inhabitants of rural areas for writing projects”.

The analysis of all the stated positions of the quoted authors confirms our opening position, that in Serbia there are great expectations from the financial support of the European Union, which is realized through the IPARD II program. However, it is clear that, in addition to the above, other ways of financing are also needed. According to some others (Ristić et al., 2021; 1124), these are the agricultural budget, as well as “bank loans adapted to the needs of agricultural and rural economy, as well as securities and similar financial instruments”. Certainly, in order to develop agriculture, it is also necessary to harmonize agricultural policy measures with the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU. According to the opinion of a group of authors (Ćurčić et al., 2021; 170) in Serbia, the concept of a new agrarian policy should be aimed at “the complete revival of agriculture, its revitalization, financial consolidation, innovation and affirmation of the intensification of the production framework”.

Materials and methods

The purpose of the paper is to analyze the implementation of the IPARD II program in Serbia, in the current period, that is, ending with the end of February 2024. The paper uses the method of descriptive statistics, desk research, as well as the method of analysis and synthesis. The sources of data are the literature that deals with the field related to the subject of research, documentation and reports of competent institutions - the Administration for Agrarian Payments and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia.

Results with Discussions

In order to analyze the current implementation of the IPARD II Program in Serbia, all important data related to this program have been briefly presented, as well as the basic characteristics and importance for the development of agriculture in Serbia of the pre-accession aid of the European Union that existed before the IPARD II Program.

The pre-accession aid program for the Republic of Serbia - IPARD II Program was adopted by the Decision of the European Commission on January 20, 2015. As part of this financial support, 175 million euros were allocated from the European Union budget for financing agriculture and rural development in Serbia in the 2014-2020 program period. According to the procedure of the European Union, financing is realized according to the principle of co-financing. This means that part of the funding for projects is provided from the IPARD II Program, and part from domestic funds. Regarding the part of the funds that needs to be provided from domestic sources, it is foreseen that the participation of the public sector can be a maximum of 50%, while the rest of the funds must be provided from the funds of the private sector (IPARD II Program).

Let us recall that the European Union, by adopting the Regulation of the European Council no. 1085/2006, on July 17, 2006, established the Instruments for Pre-accession Assistance - IPA, as financial support to potential candidate countries and candidate countries for EU membership. The main goal of the IPA component is to provide financial support to candidate countries.

The IPA pre-accession instrument includes five components: (1) support in the process of transition and institution building; (2) support for cross-border cooperation; (3) support for regional development; (4) support for the development of human resources; (5) support for agriculture and rural development (IPARD). Potential candidate states are entitled to financial support based on the first two components, and states that have received candidate status are entitled to financial support based on the 3rd, 4th and 5th components.

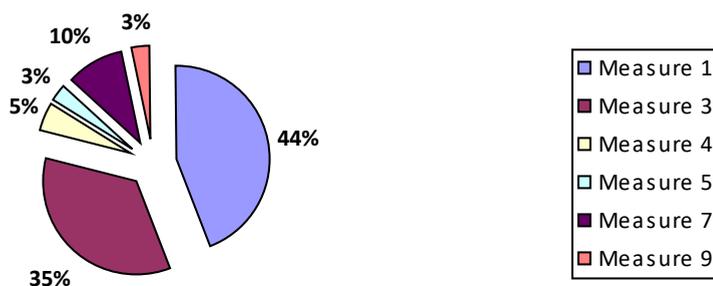
The Republic of Serbia, while it was in the status of a potential candidate for membership in the European Union, in the period from 2007 to 2012, was entitled to total financial support in the amount of 1,183.6 million euros, of which 1,113.46 million euros was for support for the transition and strengthening institution and 70.14 million euros based on financial support for cross-border cooperation, that is, for regional development. According to the data of the Ministry for European Integration, in the period from 2007 to 2013, the Republic of Serbia used over 95 percent of the funds available to it based on the IPA funds. The most funds were placed for the reform of the state administration (35.24%), for the development of human resources (18.12%), for environmental protection and energy (12.32%), for competitiveness (11.17%), for the development of the judicial system (8.08%), for traffic (6.25%), for development of civil society, media and culture was placed (4.54%). Only 4.28% of the total amount of funds of the first two IPA components was allocated for the development of agriculture and rural development. More precisely, the possibility of placing funds in rural development was only within the component related to cross-border cooperation. Part of these funds was

used for the development of multifunctional agriculture and its developmentally most significant segment - rural tourism (Radović, 2019).

By acquiring the status of a candidate for EU membership on March 1, 2012, Serbia acquired the right to use the remaining three IPA components. The fifth component – the IPARD Program, is the most important for financing agriculture and rural development. The goal of the IPARD Program is to prepare the future members of the European Union for the implementation of the measures of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

IPARD – Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development represents the most complex IPA component. It includes measures that are grouped into three axes. Measures within the 1st axis refer to the improvement of agricultural competitiveness, market efficiency and the implementation of EU standards. Measures within the 2nd axis refer to agro-ecological measures, environmental protection and support for good agricultural land management. Measures within the 3rd axis refer to the diversification of rural economies and the improvement of the quality of life of the rural population.

Figure 1. Participation of measures in the financial structure of the IPARD II in Serbia



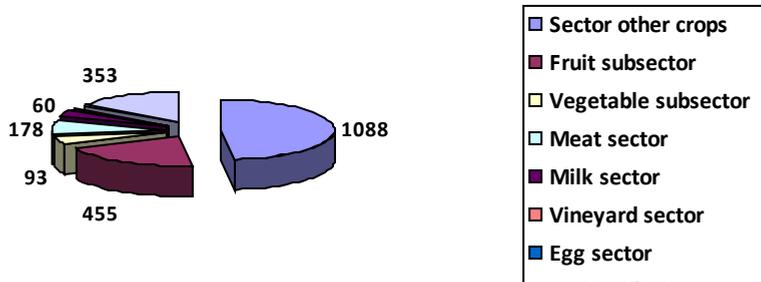
Source: IPARD II Program

The percentage of possible financial support for all accredited measures in the total financial resources available within the IPARD II program in Serbia is presented in Figure (Figure 1). By analyzing the graphic display, it can be concluded that more than half of the available financial resources of this fund are planned to be realized through Measure 1 and Measure 3. This paper analyzes the implementation of the IPARD II Program in Serbia from the beginning of implementation, from 2017, until February 29, 2024. In the mentioned period, Measure 1, Measure 3, Measure 7 and partly Measure 9 were implemented.

Measure 1 includes investments in the physical assets of agricultural holdings, namely investments in the sectors: milk, meat, fruits and vegetables, eggs, grapes, as well as in the sector of other crops (cereals, oilseeds, sugar beets). Beneficiaries of this support

can be persons who are registered in the Register of Agricultural Farms and who are in an active status: natural persons (owners of commercial family agricultural farms), entrepreneurs, economic companies and agricultural cooperatives (IPARD Rulebook, a).

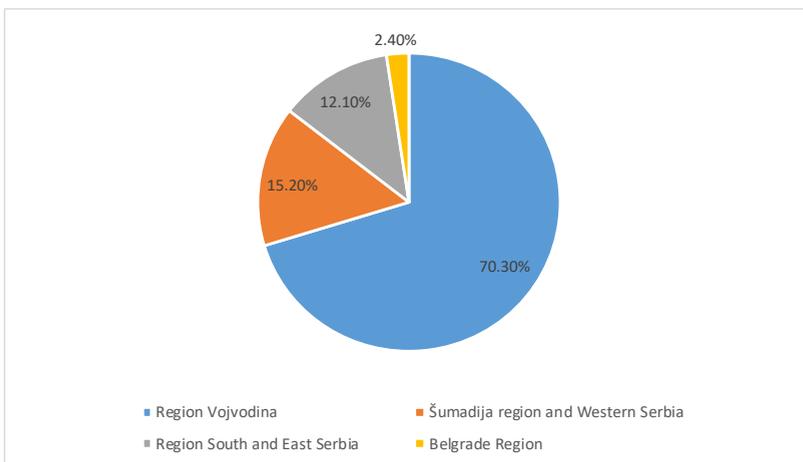
Figure 2. Structure of submitted requests - Measure 1 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 9.

As part of the implementation of Measure 1 of the IPARD II Program, ending on February 29, 2024, a total of seven calls were announced. The first invitation was published on February 26, 2018, and the last on April 22, 2022. A total of 2,260 requests for project funding were submitted. In their structure, projects in the sector of other crops had the largest share (48%). In second place are projects in the fruit sub-sector, which accounted for 1/5 of the total submitted requests for funding (Figure 2). When analyzing the structure of submitted requests for funding according to the applicant’s regional affiliation, it can be concluded that Vojvodina Region had a dominant share in the structure with 70.3% (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Structure of submitted requests by region - Measure 1 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 15.

As part of Measure 1, the total available funds of the European Union were 88.3 million euros, of which 85% were implemented, as of February 29, 2024. Of the total number of submitted projects, 46.5% met the criteria (*Table 1*).

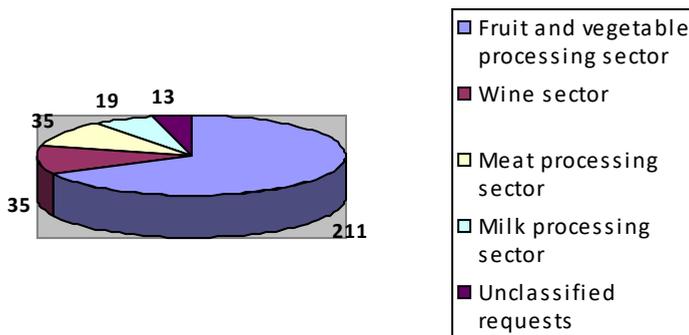
Table 1. Implementation of Measure 1 as of February 29, 2024.

Number of published calls (competitions)	Budget - EU contribution 2014-2020 (in €)	Submitted projects	Contracted projects	Realized budget contribution to the EU 2014-2020 (in €)	Realization of the available budget to the EU 2014-2020 (in %)
First call	6,276,676	85	32	2,079,782	33.14
Second call	3,490,023	393	143	3,132,048	89.74
The third call	19,126,808	151	54	8,583,155	44.88
The fourth call	7,710,539	437	265	7,435,984	96.44
The fifth call	24,777,548	169	84	12,926,664	52.17
The sixth call	41,212,499	369	244	32,395,306	78.61
The seventh call	8,622,028	656	228	8,520,019	98.82
Total	88,322,473	2,260	1,050	75,072,959	85.00

Source: <http://www.minpolj.gov.rs/download/29.2.2024.pdf>.

Measure 3 includes investments in physical assets, which concern the processing and marketing of agricultural and fishery products. These are investments in the following sectors: milk, meat, fruit and vegetables, eggs and grapes. Beneficiaries of this support can be agricultural entities: entrepreneurs, business companies and agricultural cooperatives, provided that they are registered in the Register of Agricultural Holdings or are registered in the Agency for Business Registers, and are in an active status (IPARD Rulebook, b).

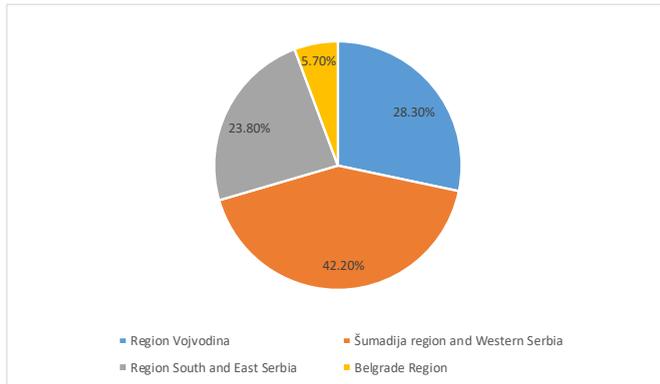
Figure 4. Structure of submitted requests - Measure 3 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 11.

As part of the implementation of Measure 3 of the IPARD II Program, four calls were announced. The first invitation was published on May 28, 2018, and the last on October 29, 2021. A total of 313 requests for project financing were submitted. In their structure, projects in the fruit and vegetable processing sector had the largest share, which accounted for 67% of the total number of submitted projects (*Figure 4*).

Figure 5. Structure of submitted requests by region - Measure 3 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 15.

When analyzing the structure of submitted requests for financing according to the applicant's regional affiliation, it can be concluded that the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia had the largest participation (*Figure 5*). The total available funds of the European Union, based on Measure 3 of the IPARD II Program, were 43.5 million euros and they were realized with 84.29%, as of February 29, 2024. Of the total number of submitted projects, 48.2% met the criteria (*Table 2*).

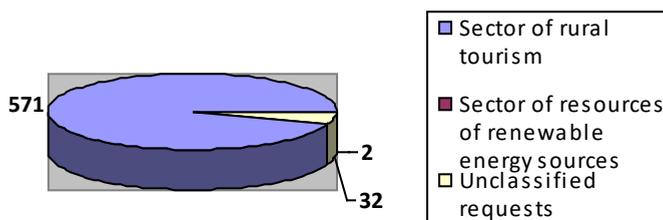
Table 2. Implementation of Measure 3 as of February 29, 2024.

Number of published calls (competitions)	Budget - EU contribution 2014-2020 (in €)	Submitted projects	Contracted projects	Realized budget contribution to the EU 2014-2020 (in €)	Realization of the available budget to the EU 2014-2020 (in %)
First call	5,554,284	26	12	1,324,160	23.84
Second call	22,312,225	81	34	7,563,794	33.90
The third call	34,529,501	95	45	10,725,065	31.06
The fourth call	19,142,564	111	60	17,023,016	88.93
Total	43,461,806	313	151	36,636,035	84.29

Source: <http://www.minpolj.gov.rs/download/29.2.2024.pdf>.

Measure 7 includes investments in the diversification of the activities of agricultural holdings and business development. This measure aims to encourage the creation of new jobs and a direct increase in the income of households in rural areas. The aim of this measure is to improve the quality of life in rural areas, which should have an impact on reducing migration from rural areas to urban areas. Beneficiaries of this support could be: physical persons (as holders of a family agricultural farm), entrepreneurs and companies, which are either registered in the Register of Agricultural Farms or registered in the Register of Business Entities and are in an active status (IPARD Rulebook, c).

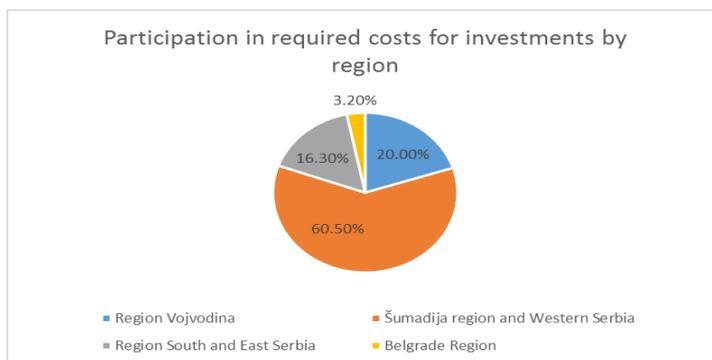
Figure 6. Structure of submitted requests - Measure 7 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 12-13.

As part of the implementation of Measure 7 of the IPARD II Program, two calls were announced. The first invitation was published on October 30, 2020, and the second on December 17, 2021. A total of 605 requests for project financing were submitted. In their structure, projects in the rural tourism sector had the largest share (94%). Only 2 projects were submitted in the resource sector in renewable energy sources (Figure 6). When analyzing the structure of submitted requests for financing according to the applicant's regional affiliation, it can be concluded that, both in Measure 7 and in Measure 3, the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia had the largest share (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Structure of submitted requests by region - Measure 7 ending on June 30, 2023.



Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, p. 15.

The total available funds of the European Union based on Measure 7 of the IPARD II Program were 26.2 million euros and they were realized with 82.59%, as of February 29, 2024. Of the total number of submitted projects, 28.9% met the criteria (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Implementation of Measure 7 as of February 29, 2024.

Number of published calls (competitions)	Budget - EU contribution 2014-2020 (in €)	Submitted projects	Contracted projects	Realized budget contribution to the EU 2014-2020 (in €)	Realization of the available budget to the EU 2014-2020 (in %)
First call	15,000,000 €	311	102	11,321,556	75.48
Second call	11,251,837 €	294	73	10,318,050	91.70
Total	26,200,000 €	605	175	21,639,605	82.59

Source: <http://www.minpolj.gov.rs/download/29.2.2024.pdf>.

In the past period of implementation of the IPARD II Program, two calls for Measure 9 - Technical assistance were published. This measure includes costs incurred for the purpose of implementation, monitoring of implementation, as well as possible changes to the IPARD II program (AAP MAFWM RS). The total available EU funds, within this measure, are 500,000 euros. In the period from the beginning of the implementation of Measure 9, and ending with February 29, 2024, two public calls were published. The invitations were published on December 30, 2022 and December 29, 2023, and data on the implementation of this measure are still being processed (<http://www.minpolj.gov.rs/download/29.2.2024.pdf>).

Table 4. Realization by all measures ending with June 30, 2023.

Submitted requests for project approval	Support Requested	Number of approved projects	Approved public support	Number of paid claims	Public support paid	Amount of EU contribution paid
3,179	407.6 mil €	1,490	186 mil €	808	71.4 mil €	53.5 mil €

Source: Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, pp. 4-6.

Based on the data shown in Table 4, it can be stated that as of June 30, 2023, only 25% of the total number of submitted projects under published public calls for all measures (including one project for Measure 9) was paid (*Table 4*). Paid public support amounts to 74.4 million euros, within which the EU contribution amounts to 53.5 million euros. The average value of public support paid per completed project was 80,632 euros, and the EU contribution was 60,474 euros (Report IPARD II, June 30, 2023, pp. 4-6).

Conclusions

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded the following:

- In the Republic of Serbia, there was significant utilization of EU funds for financing

agriculture and rural development, available within the IPARD II Program, ending on February 29, 2024, according to all implemented accredited measures;

- Less than half of the submitted projects met the set criteria;
- The residents of rural areas in Serbia need to be better educated for writing projects;
- More available EU funds are needed in the next support programs.

More precisely, as of February 29, 2024, the utilization of available EU funds was as follows: (a) for Measure 1 it was 85%; (b) for Measure 3 it was 84.29%; (c) for Measure 7 it was 82.59%.

When analyzing the total number of submitted projects based on published calls for individual measures and the total number of projects that met the set criteria of the IPARD II Program, and on the basis of which the investment contracts were concluded, the situation is analytically viewed as follows:

- For Measure 1, 46.5% of the total number of submitted projects met the criteria;
- For Measure 3, 48.2% of the total number of submitted projects met the set criteria;
- For Measure 7, only 28.9% of the total number of projects that participated in the published calls met the set criteria.

The above data point to the conclusion that agricultural entities in the Republic of Serbia were very interested in using financial resources from the IPARD II Program, but also they were not sufficiently familiar with the methodology for developing projects in accordance with EU requirements. Also, it can be concluded that the available funds for all the implemented accredited measures of the IPARD II Program would be insufficient in a situation where all submitted projects met the set criteria.

From an analytical point of view, the realization by measures is as follows:

- For Measure 1, a total of 88.3 million euros was available, a total of 2,260 projects were submitted, in the structure of which the largest share was the sector of other crops (48%) and the sub-sector of fruit (20%), the most submitted projects were from the Region of Vojvodina (70.3%);
- For Measure 3, a total of 43.5 million euros was available, a total of 313 projects were submitted, in their structure the sector of fruit and vegetable processing had the largest share (67%), the most submitted projects were from the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (42.2%);
- For Measure 7, a total of 26.2 million euros was available, a total of 605 projects were submitted, in their structure the sector of rural tourism had the largest share (94%), the most submitted projects were from the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (60.5 %).

Collectively, according to all the accredited measures of the IPARD 2 Program, a total of 3,179 projects were submitted in Serbia. As of June 30, 2023, 25% of the total number of submitted projects had been paid. The total disbursed funds of the European

Union amounted to 53.5 million euros, which is 31% of the total available funds within the IPARD 2 program in Serbia.

In further research, it would be useful to analyze the implementation of the IPARD 2 Program in Serbia, once the entire process of document processing based on submitted projects is completed.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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