

Review

# Direct Payments as a Factor of Agriculture Development in the Republic of Serbia

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**Abstract:** Agriculture, as a strategic economic activity, dependent on agro-ecological conditions, can function and develop exclusively with the intervention of the measures of agricultural policy. Measures to support agriculture in the Republic of Serbia in the period from 2015 to 2022 are the subject of research in this paper. Official data of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia published in annual reports were used. Using the method of analysis and comparison, the paper concluded that direct payments are the dominant form of subsidy in the agriculture of the Republic of Serbia, as well as that the agricultural budget is at the level of 5% concerning the total national budget. The existing structure of subsidies is assessed as adequate, with a significant increase in the volume of direct payments and other forms of subsidies being recommended in the coming period.

**Keywords:** Agriculture; agricultural policy; direct payments; subsidies; agricultural budget

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## 1. Introduction

As a strategic economic activity, agriculture holds special significance in all countries, regardless of their level of economic development. Although multifunctional [1], the primary task of agriculture is food production, providing essential human needs and enabling the survival, health, and productivity of the population [2,3]. The strategic importance of agriculture is particularly evident in the case of various socio-political, wartime, energy, and health crises, which cause disruptions in the global food market [4-6]. Hence, the need for every state to ensure the production of a sufficient quantity of food for its population is entirely justified [7].

Despite dynamic technological advancements, agriculture remains an activity whose production outcomes, namely yield and product quality, largely depend on agro-ecological factors. Human influence on these factors is still minor [8]. The specifics of the production process and the limited possibility of self-financing, as well as pronounced risks in production, necessitate a special set of support measures to be dedicated to agriculture [9]. These measures, primarily financial support, are implemented within the framework of agrarian policy.

To be effective and maintain farmers' income at the desired level, agricultural policy should have an appropriate institutional framework, consisting of legal regulations, sub-legal acts, such as decrees, and necessary institutions. Of particular importance for the success of the agricultural policy, and therefore the level of agricultural development, are strategic documents that define the objectives to be achieved at the national level, as well as an adequate set of measures whose implementation should lead to the achievement of these objectives [10]. Experience shows that successful agricultural policy requires setting realistic goals, aligned with existing available resources [11]. The choice of support mechanisms, or agricultural policy measures, is also of

paramount importance for maintaining the standard of living of producers at the desired level and their economic motivation to engage in agriculture. Furthermore, agricultural policy also influences the improvement of technology and the competitiveness of agriculture at the national level [12].

Due to the aforementioned reasons, this study will specifically focus on direct payments as the predominant form of agricultural policy measures in the Republic of Serbia. Therefore, the subject of research comprises agricultural policy measures within direct payments and their financial framework from 2014 to 2022. The primary aim of the research is to analyze changes in the agrarian budget during the specified eight-year period, with a particular focus on the structure and most prevalent forms of direct support to agriculture.

The paper is structured into several sections. First, the authors present the current institutional framework for creating and implementing agricultural policy in the Republic of Serbia, attempting to highlight the most significant advantages and existing limitations in this segment. In the second part of the paper, an analysis is conducted on the existing physiognomy of agricultural policy in our country, which, as a candidate for membership in the European Union, applies the so-called "CAP-like" policy. Finally, in the third part of the paper, the authors analyze the agrarian budget, changes in the amount of funds allocated to agriculture, and their share in the total budgetary funds. Additionally, the research focuses on direct incentives, as the most prevalent form of financial support for agriculture.

## 2. Framework for conducting agricultural policy in the Republic of Serbia

The success in achieving the goals of agricultural policy is largely conditioned by the institutional framework, which consists of legislative and legal regulations, development documents, as well as institutions in the field of agriculture and rural development. The three key institutions responsible for creating and implementing agricultural policy in the Republic of Serbia are the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia, the Ministry for Rural Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, the Secretariat for Agriculture, Water Management, and Forestry of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. In addition to these, a large number of institutions from the domains of science, education, advisory services, financing, and other fields, directly or indirectly contribute to the design and implementation of agricultural policy in our country.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management directs its work towards the functioning and development, primarily, of agriculture as a strategically important economic activity. The ministry is divided into seven departments or sectors. For agricultural policy matters, the most significant sectors are the Department for Agricultural Policy and the Department for Rural Development. Additionally, the Directorate for Agrarian Payments, operating within this ministry, is responsible for providing direct support to farmers.

The Department for Agricultural Policy is subdivided according to the responsibilities and areas of agriculture it deals with. Accordingly, there are groups for the production and market of arable crops, fruits, vegetables, and alcoholic beverages, as well as sections for statistics and analytics, organic production, monitoring the impact of climate change on agriculture, etc.

In the description of the activities of the Department for Rural Development, the implementation of the IPARD program is outlined, along with the creation of national development programs related to the improvement of rural areas.

The Secretariat for Agriculture, Water Management, and Forestry of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina is an institution divided into eight sectors. The Sector for the implementation of Agricultural Policy is responsible for the creation and implementation of agricultural policy. This sector carries out various tasks in the domains of agricultural and rural development policy, such as monitoring European integrations in the field of rural development and agricultural advisory services, analytical and statistical tasks related to the revitalization of rural areas, agricultural cooperatives, and data systematization for the creation of agricultural support policies.

The Ministry for Rural Affairs of the Republic of Serbia has been functioning since 2021. Improving the demographic structure of the rural population, enhancing living conditions in rural areas, preserving traditions, developing cooperatives, and modernizing agriculture are the main tasks of this ministry. The primary focus of this institution is educating farmers about the latest technical and technological advancements in agricultural practices. Additionally, the Ministry is involved in matters related to the revitalization and establishment of agricultural cooperatives. Since 2021, part of the budget allocated to this ministry has been directed towards purchasing rural houses for young people, aiming to improve the extremely unfavorable demographic structure of the rural population in our country.

In the current period, the development of agriculture and rural areas is defined in the document “Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2014-2024.” This development document outlines the goals, priorities, and frameworks of political and institutional reforms in the field of agriculture and rural development. The agricultural policy is defined under the principles of modern public policy management and the Republic of Serbia’s commitment to gradually adopting the model of European support for agriculture [13].

The legislative framework for agriculture and rural development in the Republic of Serbia consists of several laws and sub-legal acts, among which the most significant are:

- Law on Agriculture and Rural Development
- Law on Agricultural Land
- Law on Agricultural Advisory Service
- Law on Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development
- Regulation on the Allocation of Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development.

Given the subject and aim of the research, special attention will be devoted to the Law and Regulation on the Allocation of Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia. The Law on Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia was first adopted in 2013, with subsequent amendments and revisions made to this legal act on multiple occasions. In addition to the types of payments, this law also regulates the manner of their utilization, the incentive register, as well as the conditions for accessing the incentives.

The Regulation of the Allocation of Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development is adopted annually, depending on the available budgetary funds and priorities of the agricultural sector and rural areas.

In other words, the Regulation outlines, on an annual basis, a plan for the utilization of budgetary funds available to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management, specifying the purpose and specific measures of agricultural and rural development policy.

### **3. Types of payments in agriculture of the Republic of Serbia with special focus on direct payments**

The current agricultural policy in the Republic of Serbia can be characterized as a “CAP-like” policy. As a candidate for membership in the European Union, our country is obligated to gradually align its agricultural policy with the model of the Union’s agricultural policy. In this regard, since 2013, Serbia has been implementing a structure of incentives similar to that of EU member states. Available funds from the agrarian budget are allocated to four purposes of types of incentives in agriculture and rural development: direct payments, incentives for rural development measures, specific incentives, and credit support. However, it is important to note that the transition to the funding model practices in EU countries should still be adopted for domestic conditions and specificities.

Payments for rural development measures have the following objectives: enhancing competitiveness, preserving and improving the environment and natural resources, diversifying income, improving the quality of life in rural areas, preparing and implementing local rural development strategies, as well as enhancing knowledge creation and transfer systems [14]. To achieve these objectives, a wide range of measures is envisaged within the rural development policy,

as the second pillar of agricultural policy. According to legal provisions, payments for rural development measures are implemented in the form of reimbursing a portion of the costs, as a certain percentage of the value of each type of measure. The minimum incentive amount is 30% of the total value of each type of measure or 45% for areas with difficult agricultural working conditions.

The group of special payments in agriculture and rural development in the Republic of Serbia includes [14]:

- Incentives for marketing –information systems in agriculture,
- Incentives for establishing, developing, and operating accounting data systems on agricultural farms,
- Incentives for implementing breeding programs to achieve breeding goals in livestock farming,
- Incentives for promotional activities in agriculture and rural development, and
- Incentives for the production of planting material and certification and clonal selection.

The specificities of agriculture arising from its dependence on agroecological conditions, seasonality, and the biological nature of the production process result in slow capital turnover and limited self-financing capability. Therefore, in agriculture, more than in other economic activities, additional sources of financing are necessary. One of these sources is agricultural credit, which is used for both investment and current consumption. The specificity of agricultural credit lies in more favorable terms compared to other types of loans, such as lower interest rates and a grace period, i.e., a period of repayment suspension. The significance of agricultural credit as a source of financing necessitates the allocation of special funds from the agrarian budget for this purpose. In line with this, one of the four types of subsidies is precisely credit support. According to current regulations, legal and natural persons registered in the Register as holders of commercial agricultural farms are entitled to receive this type of incentive.

Direct payments represent the most prevalent form of subsidizing agriculture in the Republic of Serbia. According to data from the relevant ministry, an analysis of the structure of incentives from the national agrarian budget indicates that direct payments have the largest share, for over 50% [15]. Following the model of direct subsidies applied in European Union countries, subsidies for crop and livestock production are provided to farmers in our country. In the structure of our agrarian policy, direct support to agricultural production is provided in the form of premiums, production incentives, and refunds.

Direct payments are directed toward crop and livestock production. Regarding crop production, direct payments are divided into two categories: basic payments and product-related payments [14]. All natural and legal persons registered in the Register of Agricultural Holdings with cultivated land under certain crops have the right to basic direct payment in crop production. The maximum area for which this type of subsidy is paid is a hundred hectares of arable agricultural land. To be eligible for production-related direct subsidies, agricultural producers must achieve the minimum yield prescribed for a specific crop within the corresponding branch of crop production.

Direct payments in livestock farming are aimed at improving cattle farming, sheep farming, goat farming, and pig farming. In these branches of animal production, direct payments are made per head of livestock, and subsidies are granted to farms that have marked and registered their animals in the Central Animal Marking Database. Subsidies are provided for high-quality breeding dairy cows, high-quality breeding sheep and goats, high-quality breeding sows, beef cattle, fattening lambs, fattening kids, and fattening pigs. Additionally, special forms of direct support are also provided for poultry and fish farming.

In addition to direct payments for production, funds are also allocated from the agrarian budget for premiums and refunds. According to official data, approximately 20% of the subsidies allocated to agricultural production are earmarked for milk premiums [16]. Agricultural holdings registered in the Central Animal Marking Database, are eligible for these subsidies. For areas with difficult conditions for agriculture, such as mountainous regions above 500 meters above sea level, a higher amount of milk premiums is provided [17].

Refunds are a special type of direct payment in agricultural production aimed at reducing production costs and thereby increasing farmers' income. Typically, refunds represent a share of budgetary funds in the cost of inputs used in agriculture, most commonly referring to mineral fertilizers, seeds, and diesel fuel. By ensuring that farmers can purchase necessary inputs at prices lower than market prices, the state positively influences farmers' income levels through these agricultural policy measures. In addition to raw materials, refunds for insurance premiums in agriculture are also available in our country, aiming to increase the volume of production covered by insurance systems and thus reduce production and economic risks.

In addition to their undeniably positive impact on production and economic outcomes in agriculture, especially on the stability of farmers' income, the significance of direct payments, as the predominant form of subsidies in our country, is evident in the fact that producers are primarily interested in this form of financial support. Distrust towards bank loans, along with the persistently unfavorable lending conditions, distances farmers from such external financing. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge and insufficient awareness, as well as the readiness of a significant number of farmers to utilize funds from IPARD (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development), also contribute to their greater preference for direct payments as a form of financial support. Indeed, according to data from 2020, farmers' interest was highest for measures of direct support, accounting for up to 90% of the total funds disbursed in the agriculture sector [18].

For these reasons, the following section of this study will delve into the structure of direct payments in the Republic of Serbia from 2014 to 2022.

#### 4. Analysis of the structure of direct subsidies in agriculture of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2015 to 2022

From 2015 to 2022, the financial resources allocated from the national budget to the agricultural sector showed slight fluctuations (Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Agricultural budget of the Republic of Serbia from 2015 to 2022.

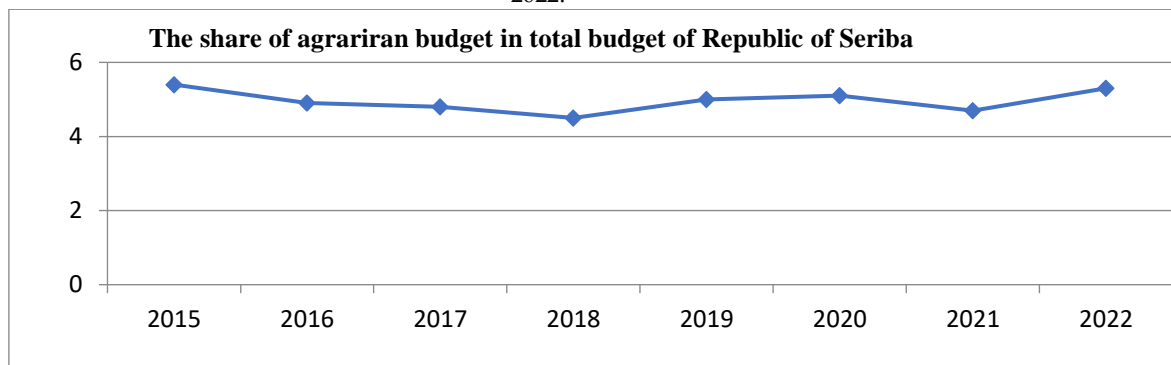
| Year | Agricultural budget<br>(in billion dinars) |
|------|--|
| 2015 | 40.1                                       |
| 2016 | 40.5                                       |
| 2017 | 43.8                                       |
| 2018 | 44.1                                       |
| 2019 | 54.6                                       |
| 2020 | 56.1                                       |
| 2021 | 60.2                                       |
| 2022 | 78.6                                       |

According to official data published in the Law of the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for the respective years, it can be observed that the absolute amount of the agricultural budget ranged from 40.5 billion dinars in 2016 to 78.6 billion dinars allocated for agriculture in 2022.

It is also important to note that in 2015, compared to the previous year 2014, the absolute amount of the agricultural budget decreased by as much as 8.8%. A reduction in the agricultural budget was also observed in 2016, while from 2017 onwards, there has been a consistent increase in the agricultural budget, as observed in billions of dinars (Table 1).

Aside from the perceptible reduction in 2018, when the share of the agrarian budget in the total budget reached its minimum of 4.4%, thus achieving the lowest amount in a decade [19], this share has been maintained at an average of 4.98%, or approximately 5% with minor fluctuations from 2015 to 2022.

**Figure 1.** The participation of the agrarian budget in the total budget of the Republic of Serbia from 2015 to 2022.



According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management, direct payments represent the most significant form of agricultural subsidies in the Republic of Serbia. Their share in the agrarian budget is dominant, covering around two-thirds of the available funds. Specifically, from 2015 to 2022, the share of direct payments in the agrarian budget averaged 72%. The lowest share of direct payments in the agrarian budget during the analyzed period was in 2017, amounting to 58%, while the highest share was achieved in 2015, reaching as much as 81% (Table 2).

During the analyzed eight-year period, the highest share in the structure of direct payments was held by subsidies for livestock production. Their proportion of the total funds allocated for direct support to agricultural production averaged 42%. Therefore, almost half of the funds earmarked for direct incentives were directed towards the revitalization and advancement of animal production in the Republic of Serbia. These subsidies were paid, as appropriate, per head of livestock, per kilogram, or a beehive. In livestock farming, the funds were allocated for the following purposes:

1. Subsidies for the acquisition of quality breeding stock (in cattle breeding, sheep farming, goat farming, pig farming, poultry farming, and fisheries)
2. Subsidies for fattening cattle, lambs, kids, and pigs
3. Subsidies for dairy cows
4. Subsidies for beehives
5. Subsidies for the production of consumable fish
6. Subsidies for cows for rearing calves for fattening.

**Table 2.** Direct payments in agriculture and rural development in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2015 to 2022.

| Year | The amount of direct payments (in RSD) | The share of direct payments in the agrarian budget (in %) |
|------|--|--|
| 2015 | 17.576.384.180                         | 81   |
| 2016 | 16.359.806.370                         | 70   |
| 2017 | 16.302.453.000                         | 58   |
| 2018 | 30.415.258.266                         | 69   |
| 2019 | 40.551.522.000                         | 74   |
| 2020 | 42.001.656.000                         | 75   |
| 2021 | 44.384.346.000                         | 75   |
| 2022 | 56.672.887.000                         | 72   |

The second most significant type of direct payments, in terms of their share in total funds, are subsidies for crop production. With an average participation rate of 25%, this type of subsidy absorbed a quarter of the budgetary funds allocated for direct support to agriculture. Of course, similar to livestock subsidies, subsidies for crop production also experience fluctuations in their share of the structure of direct payments from year to year. However, what remains consistent throughout the observed period is the fact that these two types of directive incentives are consistently present, consuming approximately 70% of the budgetary funds.

Premiums, as a form of direct payments to agricultural producers, have been continuously disbursed throughout the observed period from 2015 to 2022. During this time, the highest amount of funds have been allocated and realized as milk premiums. Their share of the total direct support funds ranges from 17% in 2015 to 27% in 2021. Although they are consistently present in the agrarian budget structure, and their share of total direct support funds to agricultural production over the observed eight-year period amounts to 23%, milk premiums do not appear to provide sufficient stimulation for production. The limitation of budgetary funds in general, and consequently funds allocated to agriculture, adversely affects the economic motivation of agricultural production in the Republic of Serbia. To overcome the existing unfavorable situation, particularly pronounced in the livestock sector, it seems necessary to increase budgetary direct support through all types of measures, including milk premiums.

In addition to direct payments, which are the subject of analysis in this study, funds from the agrarian budget are allocated for other forms of incentives in agriculture and rural development. These include incentives for rural development measures, special incentives, credit support, and IPARD incentives. Specifically, during the year 2020, special funds were allocated from the agrarian budget to support farmers who suffered income losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, around 2.5 billion dinars were allocated in 2020 [20]. Also, in 2022, funds from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management were allocated for COVID-19 interventions,

including 312,000,000 dinars for the emergency purchase of cattle, 353,558,000 dinars to support flour producers, and 2,600,000,000 dinars to support sunflower producers [20].

The authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

## 5. Conclusions

Natural indicators suggest that the level of production in both agricultural sectors, both in crop and livestock production, is significantly below the European average. Despite significant natural resources, particularly land and water resources, our agriculture lags in terms of production results and competitiveness compared to other European countries with similar agrarian structures. Moreover, rural areas are experiencing significant demographic decline, with villages being predominantly inhabited by non-working or non-development-driving populations. This is evidenced by data from the Population Census of 2011, as well as the one conducted in 2022 by the Republic Statistical Office.

To enhance primary agricultural production and ensure a higher level of competitiveness for domestic producers, the Law of Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia envisaged the allocation of budgetary funds for several purposes, with the majority directed towards direct payments of direct support. During the analyzed period from 2015 to 2022, according to official reports from the relevant ministry, the predominant portion, around two-thirds, of the agrarian budget funds were allocated specifically for direct payment.

The higher share of funds in direct incentives was allocated to subsidies for livestock production, followed by crop production. Additionally, milk premiums emerged as a consistently present form of support throughout the observed period. The proportion of subsidies, in the year when they were present in the structure of direct support, averaged around 17%.

The analysis indicates that, although their structure is established, certain types of direct payments, such as subsidies, are discontinued during specific periods. The primary reason for this structure of direct payments and the withdrawal of certain support measures from practice is cited as the need to align national agricultural policy with the Common Agricultural Policy. The authors argue that subsidies, especially for seeds, fuel, and mineral fertilizers, are significant agricultural policy measures that reduce production costs and thereby positively impact farmers' income levels, their competitiveness in the market, and their economic motivation to engage in this strategically important economic sector. This is precisely why continuity in the implementation of these direct support measures is recommended in the upcoming period.

Although budgetary funds allocated to agriculture increase in absolute terms from year to year, they have not exceeded 5% of the total national budget for a considerable period. The funds allocated to the agrarian budget are disproportionate to the significance of agriculture in the economic structure, primarily when considering its contribution to gross domestic product (GDP). In such a configuration, the conclusion arises that, in the upcoming period, in addition to an absolute increase in the agrarian budget, there should also be a relative increase in comparison to the existing level. Only in this way is there a possibility to improve the technological level of agricultural production and thereby ensure an increase in its competitiveness.

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