

## Contribution Details

819

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*Format:* OS4: Lightning Talks

**Western Balkan Agriculture and Rural Areas Towards EU Integration**

*Submitted by:* **Prof. Aleksandra Martinovska Stojcheska**


**(Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, MK)**

, ID: 1206

Chair(s): Aleksandra Martinovska Stojcheska [amartinovska@gmail.com](mailto:amartinovska@gmail.com)

(Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia), Boban Ilic [boban.ilic@swg-seerural.org](mailto:boban.ilic@swg-seerural.org) (South East Europe Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group – SWG)

*Discussants (optional):* Natalija Bogdanov natalija@agrif.bg.ac.rs

(University of Belgrade, Faculty of Agriculture), Drini Imami dimami@ubt.edu.al  (Agricultural University of Tirana, University of Bologna)

*Topics:* Agricultural & Food Policies, Regional Economics & Rural Development

*Keywords:* EU approximation, agricultural policy, sustainable development, youth and women challenges, knowledge and innovation

*Time allocation (max. 200 words) and type of target audience (max. 100 words):* The 90-minute Lightning Talks session will be structured so to provide a balance between presentations and audience interaction. The session will begin with a 5-minute introduction, during which the moderators (chair) will welcome the audience, introduce the theme, and explain the format, followed by a brief introduction of the first speaker. The Lightning Talks segment will take 40 minutes in total, with each of the five speakers presenting for 7 minutes, allowing a 1-minute

transition between talks for smooth changes and next speaker short introduction. The speakers may use 3-4 slides with key points to better to better illustrate their arguments and support the clarity of their presentations. Following the presentations, the Q&A and Open Discussion will occupy the remaining 45 minutes. The first 15 minutes will feature invited discussants, who will open the discussion by providing their initial insights, reflections on the talks, and posing questions to the speakers. This will set the stage for the broader Q&A. The remaining 30 minutes will be dedicated to audience questions, where the moderator will facilitate questions directed at individual speakers or on the broader theme. Finally, the moderator (chair) will summarize the key takeaways with brief Closing Remarks.

This session is intended to bring together a diverse group of target audience to promote a comprehensive discussion: researchers and academics; policy-makers (especially those, but not limited to, interested in the EU integration of pre-accession countries, from DG Agri and DG Near); representatives of international development organizations (e.g. FAO, GIZ, SDC etc., that deliver various technical assistance in the countries of the Western Balkan); different non-governmental organizations working in regional cooperation (e.g. the South East Europe Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group – SWG, Balkan Rural Development Network, European NGO's etc.).

### Abstract

The Western Balkans (WB) region faces critical challenges and opportunities as it seeks to align its agricultural and rural sectors and policies with EU's CAP, particularly concerning sustainability, food security, and climate resilience (Volk et al., 2017; Pokrivcak et al., 2019; Erjavec et al., 2021; Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024; FAO, 2024). The dominant small-scale structure, fragmented land holdings, value chains inefficiencies, unfavorable age and education demographics, combined with climate change impacts and inadequate infrastructure, contribute to the sector's vulnerability, affecting both its productivity and long-term sustainability (Kvistgaard and Bogdanov, 2019; Todorović et al., 2020; Kotevska et al., 2024). This proposed session aims to provide a platform for discussing some of these crucial topics by addressing the current state-of-affairs of sectoral policies and EU approximation, while also adding layers on other underlying integration topics such as socio-demographic trends and increasingly pressuring environmental challenges. We explore these themes, highlighting how they affect the transition to sustainable agri-food systems, how they intersect with the region's shift towards EU, and the broader implications of WB countries' EU-accession, reflecting on what this means for both WB and EU.




As the WB navigates its path toward EU integration, aligning agri-food sectors with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is vital (Erjavec et al., 2021; Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024; Kotevska et al., 2024). The first talk addresses challenges of aligning domestic policies with the CAP, and necessary institutional and administrative reforms needed for successful integration. Some integration topics are deeply social and demographic, highlighting the region's unique challenges in achieving sustainable agri-food systems (FAO, 2024). The following talk emphasizes the role of young farmers in shaping the future of agriculture in the region, focusing on their opportunities, challenges, and contributions to sustainable farming practices (Tuna et al., 2025). Rural women in the Western Balkans continue to face numerous barriers, from limited access to land and resources, to traditional gender roles that restrict their economic participation (Bright et al., 2000; RDN, 2024) - additional contribution discusses gender equality in rural areas and how policies can better support the rural women empowerment, contributing to and benefiting from sustainable development initiatives.

Another crucial facet is the agricultural producers' ability to adopt new technologies and innovations (Knickel et al., 2018; Acevedo et al., 2020). This talk explores how the region can enhance its agricultural knowledge and innovation systems to promote sustainable rural development (Kasimis et al., 2023). Key aspects account of the role of research, education, and extension services in disseminating knowledge, as well as the potential for digital technologies to support farmers in adapting to changing conditions (FAO, 2025).

Finally, climate change presents one of the most significant threats to food security, agricultural productivity, and socio-economic stability in the WB. The region is experiencing the impacts of rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events (WB, 2024; SWG, 2024). This talk explores how climate change is affecting food systems and rural communities and identify potential solutions to help the region build resilience against future climate impacts.

### Presentations of the Symposium

#### How is the Agricultural and Rural Policy in the Western Balkans Navigating the Agri-food Sector towards EU Integration?

Ana Kotevska<sup></sup> (*Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food - Skopje*), Aleksandra Martinovska Stojcheska<sup></sup> (*Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia*), Emil Erjavec<sup></sup> (*University of Ljubljana, Biotechnical Faculty*)

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) continues to serve as a key benchmark for agricultural policies in the Western Balkan countries. A recent comparison of agricultural policies across these countries was conducted from 2010 to 2023 using the Agricultural Policy Measures Classification tool (APMC, Rednak and Volk, 2018), supplemented with qualitative assessments. The prolonged and uncertain EU accession process, along with persistent structural deficiencies in the agricultural sector and the limited functionality of institutional and administrative systems, have all influenced the pace at which CAP-like interventions are adopted and implemented. Although all WBC have developed new strategic frameworks that align with the EU CAP, focusing on improved competitiveness, environmental protection, and rural development, actual implementation often reflects domestic policy priorities, with direct payments being the main instrument in most countries (albeit to a lesser extent in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro). Competitiveness measures are prioritized, overshadowing commitments to a green transition and food system sustainability. An attempt using a five-colored scale approach is applied to benchmark the Western Balkan countries in light of possible EU accession, highlighting the main strengths and shortcomings across countries and policy elements, directing recommendations for policy makers towards imminent areas for improvement (Kotevska et al., 2024).

#### What is the Current State-of-affairs, Role and Prospect of Young Farmers in the Western Balkan Context?

Emelj Tuna  (Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food - Skopje)

Young farmers in the Western Balkans play a critical role in shaping the future of agriculture in the region. However, they face a range of challenges, including limited economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient access to education, healthcare, and financial resources. High unemployment rates, coupled with lack of training and career prospects, perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization, particularly for young farmers. The growing trend of migration, as young people seek better opportunities in urban areas or abroad, further depletes rural communities of the talent and innovation needed to drive agricultural progress.

Empowering young farmers is key to ensuring the future of agriculture in the Western Balkans is resilient, sustainable, and inclusive. Thus, to fully harness the potential of young farmers, policies must focus on addressing the barriers they face (access to education, training, financial resources, sustainable farming initiatives). Despite these challenges, Western Balkan young farmers have the potential to drive sustainable agricultural practices and contribute to rural development. Their involvement in agri-food systems, coupled with their innovative mindset, can promote adoption of environmentally friendly farming practices. As emerging leaders, young farmers are well-positioned to lead the transition to more sustainable farming methods and enhance food security in the region.



### **Is Rural Women's Empowerment in the Western Balkans Making Progress? Challenges and Opportunities**

Edvin Zhllima  (Agricultural University of Tirana)

Empowering rural women is vital for sustainable development in the Western Balkans. Women face barriers such as limited access to land, financial resources, education, and employment opportunities, compounded by traditional gender roles and inadequate rural infrastructure (Zhllima et al., 2023). Traditional gender roles, poor infrastructure, and inadequate support systems further restrict their contributions to agriculture and rural development (SWG, 2024).

Targeted instruments are crucial for aligning resources and delivering tailored support to rural women. This includes accessible financial services (low-interest loans and simplified processes), to stimulate economic activities. Decentralized, gender-sensitive education programs focusing on entrepreneurship, marketing, financial literacy, and technology can equip women with the skills needed to lead innovative ventures. Additionally, promoting new economic models like organic farming, agroforestry, rural tourism, and care farms offers diverse opportunities to enhance women's economic roles. Collaborative initiatives—peer learning, knowledge transfer, and experimental programs—are vital for fostering sustainable practices, building capacity, and strengthening rural resilience. Policies that address caregiving constraints will enhance women's participation, fostering greater trust and collaboration. A holistic approach that recognizes and values rural women's contributions is essential for building inclusive and resilient rural ecosystems.

### **Enhancing Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems in the Western Balkans: A prerequisite for sustainable development?**

Ana Simonovska  (Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Food, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje),  
Tilman Reinhardt  (Universität Bayreuth, Faculty of life sciences: Food Nutrition and Health), Charalambos Kasimis (Agricultural University of Athens)

The Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) are critical in fostering sustainable agricultural and rural development by enhancing knowledge dissemination, promoting technological innovation, and improving decision-making processes. In the context of the Western Balkans, AKIS faces significant challenges, including fragmented knowledge networks, limited access to resources, and insufficient co-innovation among key stakeholders such as farmers, researchers, policymakers, and advisory services. These challenges hinder the region's potential to achieve sustainability in agriculture and rural development (Kasimis et al., 2023).

This panel will provide an update on the current state and developments of AKIS in the Western Balkans and further explore strategies for strengthening this system to drive innovation and sustainability. It will bring together experts, practitioners, researchers, advisors, and policymakers to discuss the current state of AKIS, identify best practices, and propose solutions for improving knowledge flow and innovation uptake. Key topics include the role of digital platforms and social media in bridging knowledge gaps, the integration of youth and women in AKIS, and the potential of public-private partnerships to foster innovation. The dialogue will provide actionable recommendations for enhancing AKIS as a foundation for sustainable agricultural development in the Western Balkans, aligning with global sustainability goals and regional development priorities.

### **How is Climate Change Impacting the Western Balkans, and What are the Sectoral and Socio-economic Adaptive Capacities?**

Željko Vaško  (University of Banja Luka)

The Western Balkans, a region already vulnerable to environmental stresses, faces significant challenges from climate change. Rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, and more frequent extreme weather events such as droughts and floods disrupt agricultural productivity, which is central to the region's economy and food supply (WB, 2024). This jeopardizes food security, especially in rural areas where agriculture remains a primary livelihood. The shift in growing seasons, coupled with water scarcity and soil degradation, aggravates challenges for farmers, reducing crop yields and livestock production, and thereby threatening local food availability and access. The socio-economic impacts of climate change are equally concerning, as affected communities, particularly in rural and low-income areas, face heightened vulnerability to poverty and displacement (Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024; Vaško et al, 2024). The strain on agricultural production increases food prices and lowers income for rural populations, further deepening social inequalities. Regional solutions to these challenges include the promotion of climate-resilient agricultural practices, sustainable land and water management, and policies that integrate climate adaptation into national food systems. Additionally, strengthening regional cooperation is crucial for developing shared strategies to enhance food security, improve livelihoods, and mitigate the socio-economic impacts of climate change.

**Submitted File(s) for Final Version**

