



OPINION

Bx. № 420-1262 / 14.08.2025

By: *Prof. Dr. Marina Angelova Nikolova*
Tsenov Academy of Economics, Svishtov
Economics and Management (Agricultural Economics)

Subject: dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" in the field of higher education 3 "Social, Economic and Legal Sciences", professional field 3.8 "Economics", PhD program "Agricultural Business" at the University of Economics - Varna.

Author of the dissertation: *Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov*
Topic of the dissertation: *"The Impact of direct payments in agriculture on the socio-economic development of rural areas"*

Reason for submitting the opinion: participation in the scientific jury for the defense of the dissertation, according to Order No. RD-06-110/25.06.2025 of the Rector of the University of Economics- Varna.

1. Information about the dissertation candidate

The dissertation candidate studied under the doctoral program "Agricultural Business" at the Department of "Agricultural Economics", Faculty of Economics of the University of Economics - Varna according to the Order of the Rector of the University of Economics - Varna No. RD 17-1601/17.07.2020 . The training was carried out as a doctoral student on independent training (paid training) during the period 24.06.2020 - 24.06.2023. The doctoral student was discharged with the right to defend a dissertation, as of 26.06.2023 - Order of The Rector of the University of Applied Sciences - Varna No. RD 17-286/06.07.2023.

The personal characteristics of the candidate, evident from his CV for the current competition procedure, shows high expertise and proven management capacity. The rich professional and management experience acquired in various organizations is a logical result of continuous qualification, accumulation of knowledge, skills and competencies. The professional development of doctoral student Todorov is impressive and is expressed in holding various expert, management and management positions. He participated in the founding of an association of agricultural producers, manager and owner of a company and a company with the position of executive director. All this is a certificate of proven organizational, communicative and leadership skills in performing specific tasks, in managing and implementing projects, initiatives, numerous forums in the field of the agricultural sector.

In summary, there is a candidate for the ONS "Doctor" with extensive managerial and practical experience in the field of economics and agricultural management.

2. General characteristics of the presented dissertation work

The doctoral dissertation is a coherent, logically constructed and in-depth study with a volume of 242 standard pages and includes an introduction, a main presentation in 3 chapters (210 pages) and a conclusion (8 pages). The list of used literature covers a total of 127 sources, including internet sources. The bibliography includes diverse, authoritative and up-to-date sources, which are cited correctly, and the literature used is relevant to the topic of the dissertation. The text is illustrated with rich visualization - a total of 76 figures and 12 tables, for the purpose of greater clarity and overview.

The topic of the doctoral dissertation is relevant and significant for the theory and practice in the field of sustainable rural development in Bulgaria with a focus on the impacts of direct payments in the agricultural sector and the development of rural areas. The relevance of the topic is determined by the specificity and scope of the issue under consideration for the need to increase the effectiveness of rural development policy as a whole, including the common agricultural policy.

The structure of the dissertation is balanced and corresponds to the general standards for a comprehensive scientific study. There is a clearly formulated general objective of the study. 2 research hypotheses are set regarding the impact of direct payments to agricultural holdings on the socio-economic situation of rural areas and 7 research tasks. In terms of content, Ivaylo Todorov's study is characterized by precision of analysis, free interpretation, author's opinions, correctness of references and citations.

The general impression of the presented dissertation work of Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov shows in-depth theoretical knowledge, skills for independent research thinking and competence of the author in the specifically studied topic and its issues. Along with the above, a good impression in the study shows the use of numerous figures and tables, which illustrate the text and facilitate the formulation of systematized conclusions and a conclusion.

3. Evaluation of the obtained scientific and applied scientific results

An ambitious research goal has been set, namely to analyze the impact of direct payments on employment and socio-economic development of rural areas and to substantiate possible scenarios for changing the number of farms in Bulgaria. The author of the dissertation quite purposefully puts at the forefront plan the claim that the impact of direct payments on socio-economic development and employment in rural areas of Bulgaria is limited and ambiguous, and their effect is predetermined by the regional structure of land use, the characteristics of agricultural holdings, the mechanism and form of support. On this basis, synthesized recommendations are also derived for stakeholders.

The application of makes a good impression. the scenario analysis on the number of farms by 2030, which is based on the identified and analyzed trends and challenges in the development of rural areas and the search for solutions to achieve a higher degree of sustainability. This allows the author to skillfully synthesize practical recommendations for improving the socio-economic conditions in these areas.

The in-depth empirical analysis, as well as the study of a sufficient volume of literary sources, enable the doctoral student to critically analyze, correctly interpret, formulate substantiated conclusions and recommendations. All this speaks of Ivaylo Todorov's ability to present, analyze and verify existing, but also his own scientific ideas through scientific approaches, methods and appropriately selected tools. An essential merit of the dissertation is its clearly scientific and practical-applied focus.

The overall assessment of the proposed dissertation work categorically speaks of

the high preparation of the dissertation candidate, of his ability to purposefully pursue the implementation of complex scientific tasks. Despite the current and at the same time painful topic chosen for research related to the policy of support under the CAP for supporting agricultural production and development of rural areas, Todorov creatively comprehends the opportunities and challenges and successfully strives to reveal the directions for increasing the potential for their sustainable development in a territorial scope. In this regard, he categorically emphasizes the need to redirect the focus of the CAP - from a dominant agricultural to a balanced policy with a clear territorial dimension. As a merit of the entire dissertation research, I also define the author's aspiration for maximum objectivity of the analyses and the formation of the author's opinion.

4. Evaluation of scientific and applied scientific contributions

The dissertation and the publications with the scientific views and results of the research of doctoral student Ivaylo Dimitrov clearly demonstrate his aspiration to accumulate new knowledge and to build on what exists to date, related to the chosen topic. I fully support the scientific and applied scientific contributions made by the author.

5. Evaluation of dissertation publications

The report on the fulfillment of the minimum national requirements shows that the publications related to the topic of the dissertation exceed the required minimum of 30 points. A total of 5 scientific publications are presented - 3 independent and 2 co-authored - a total of 40 points. Of these, 2 articles in English language and 3 reports from scientific and practical conferences (2 independent and 1 co-authored). The publications are proof that important parts of the dissertation work have become public knowledge and have received scientific evaluation.

6. Evaluation of the abstract

The abstract of the dissertation within 51 pages is prepared according to generally accepted requirements and provides the necessary and clearly presented information about the structure, content and results of the dissertation research. It is accompanied by a reference to the contributions of the dissertation, as well as a list of publications.

7. Critical notes, recommendations and questions

I have no serious substantive critical remarks. The abstract states that "the main text contains 70 figures". In the dissertation on page 157 there is Fig. 3.5, which is repeated on page 158, which changes the numbering to the end. In reality, the total number of figures is 76. The positive aspects of the dissertation definitely dominate my overall assessment. My recommendation to the author is to increase his publication activity in refereed scientific journals with Impact Factor and Impact Rank (Web of Science & Scopus). I would like to ask 3 questions related to the doctoral student's statement that "despite the allocation of significant public resources under the CAP, territorial disparities persist, and rural municipalities remain with little progress":

Question 1. Do you think that improving the level of collaboration between institutions, local administration, businesses and local communities is likely to increase the level of sustainable development of rural areas?

Question 2. What is your personal opinion on the application of CLLD principles for economic revitalization and improvement of the quality of life in rural areas ? Do successful models prevail?

Question 3 . *Is the role of non-governmental structures important in cooperation with other stakeholders for sustainable local development towards social, economic and environmental sustainability?*

8. Conclusion

The presented dissertation on the topic: *“The Impact of direct payments in agriculture on the socio-economic development of rural areas”* possesses the necessary qualities and represents a conscientiously implemented, original and large-scale scientific and applied research in an area of significant relevance in contemporary conditions. It meets the requirements of the Law on Agricultural and Rural Development of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation. This gives me reason to give my categorically **positive assessment** of the dissertation work and to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award **Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov** the educational and scientific degree of **“doctor”** in the scientific specialty **“Economics and Management (Agricultural Business)”**.

10.08.2025, Svishtov

Signature:

/Prof. Marina Nikolova, PhD/

Заличена информация съгласно
ЗЗЛД и регламент (ЕС) 2016/ 679



OPINION

on

**the award of a doctoral degree in economics in accordance with the procedure
announced by the University of Economics – Varna in the professional field 3.8.
Economics**

by

Assoc. Prof. Gergana Georgieva Slavova-Stefanova, Department of Agricultural Economics
at the University of Economics – Varna

1. General information: This opinion is prepared in accordance with Article 4, paragraph 8 of the ZRASRB and Article 8, paragraph 2 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna, based on a meeting held on 27 June 2025 at the University of Economics – Varna and appointed by Order No. RD-06-110/25 June 2025, a jury for the public defense of the dissertation of doctoral student Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov, with a dissertation on the topic: THE IMPACT OF DIRECT PAYMENTS IN AGRICULTURE ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS.
2. Brief information about the candidate in the competition: The only candidate in the announced competition who meets the minimum national requirements for obtaining a doctoral degree is Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov. He holds two master's degrees, one from the University of Economics in Varna, Department of Agricultural Economics, and one from the University of Veliko Tarnovo. In addition, Ivaylo Todorov has extensive practical experience in the field of consulting and agribusiness, having worked in this field for more than 25 years. From 2013 to 2023, he was the executive director of the Association of Agricultural Producers in Bulgaria, briefly a member of its supervisory board, and executive director of the consulting firm Agribusiness Consulting Ltd. in Sofia. He is extremely active in the creation of forums, consulting seminars, business meetings, and symposiums related to agribusiness, rural development, direct payments, and the development of agriculture in Bulgaria and abroad, with the doctoral student personally organizing a large part of these events. For his participation in the competition, Ivaylo Todorov submitted a dissertation, an abstract, and five scientific publications—two articles and three reports.
3. General presentation of the dissertation. The dissertation is an in-depth scientific research dissertation on the topic of THE IMPACT OF DIRECT PAYMENTS IN AGRICULTURE ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS, which is structured in the standard three chapters, but with a very in-depth analysis in the second and third chapters and well-formulated conclusions, recommendations, and remarkable contributions. The main objective of the dissertation is to systematise the theoretical and methodological issues related to agricultural support and to analyse the impact of

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direct payments on employment and the socio-economic development of rural areas. The dissertation examines the relationship between the level of unemployment and the demand for labor in agriculture and, on this basis, substantiates possible scenarios for changes in the number of farms in Bulgaria in the future.

4. For the purposes of the dissertation, six tasks were set and completed: Based on a typology of rural areas, an analysis of their socio-economic development was carried out; The effects of the support policy, with an emphasis on direct payments, were identified and their impact on agricultural production and rural development was assessed; A regional analysis was applied to assess and classify the development of rural areas, comparing selected indicators with non-rural areas in Bulgaria; The influence of key internal and external factors on the development of rural areas in Bulgaria has been examined; The impact of direct payments on the socio-economic development of rural areas has been examined, analyzing regional differences, main dependencies, and effects on agriculture and the labor market; A classification of rural areas is made based on the impact of direct payments, overall agricultural support, and their socio-economic status. Possible scenarios for the dynamics of the number and structure of agricultural holdings by 2030 have been developed and assessed, taking into account the impact of the policy for the distribution of direct payments, the size and specialization of holdings at the local level. The main thesis of the dissertation, that the impact of direct payments on socio-economic development and employment in rural areas of Bulgaria is limited and ambiguous, is proven by the dissertation. The first hypothesis—that direct payments lead to a concentration of extensive agricultural production, which limits the creation of added value is not categorically confirmed. Although there is a concentration of resources in larger farms, this does not lead to a sustainable economic effect at the territorial level. The potential for economies of scale has not been realized, as the author of the dissertation shares in transformational growth, and smaller and medium-sized farms remain more vulnerable. The second hypothesis—that areas with a more even distribution of subsidies develop better socially and economically—also finds no empirical confirmation. The calculated coefficient of determination between the amount of subsidies received and socio-economic trends is weak, which shows that no causal relationship can be established between the volume of support and the degree of development of the regions. This weakness in the link can also be explained by the scale of the support, which is only around 1–1.5% of GDP—not enough to bring about lasting territorial transformation in the area. According to the author of the dissertation, Ivaylo Todorov, the transformation in the given area depends on the regional structure of land use and the characteristics of agricultural holdings, as well as the mechanism and form of support. The scientific study shows an in-depth analysis based on a good knowledge of agricultural practice, which is explained by the significant practical experience of the author of the dissertation. The broad scope of thinking and analysis stands out, not only from an administrative point of view, but also from a business point of view, in order to highlight the real problems outlined by the two different groups of respondents. The theoretical part of the dissertation develops a very good model of evolution towards different approaches to regional



development, as well as a conceptual framework of the essence of the local approach to regional development.

The second chapter provides an extremely comprehensive and detailed examination of the socio-economic development of rural areas in Bulgaria. This chapter also provides an excellent comparison based on various criteria, one of which is employment, changes in the labor force, and regional differences in the social development of the regions, while another is the development of the share of production from the crop and livestock sectors. The total number of beneficiaries authorized and receiving direct payments by year is analyzed, and the net farm income of specialized farms producing different types of products is compared. Chapter Three provides a comprehensive assessment and proposes possible scenarios for the development of rural areas in the context of the changes in the common agricultural policy and direct payments to farmers that affect their business. The analysis is based on the capacity of agricultural producers in relation to the agricultural land they cultivate. An exceptionally good analysis has been achieved, taking into account both the self-assessment of agricultural producers and the assessment of the administration that serves them. The conclusions reached are very well defined, the opinions expressed are well argued, and clear contributions stand out.

4. The number of publications related to the dissertation meets the minimum national requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree of "doctor," according to Article 2b, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. For his participation in the competition, Ivaylo Todorov presents five scientific publications, two articles, one co-authored, three reports, one of which is again co-authored with his scientific supervisor.
5. The dissertation fully complies with the requirements of Art. 35, para. 1, items 1-4 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna, and its structure and content comply with the requirements of Article 34, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna. The abstract is presented correctly and accurately reflects the achievements and work done by the doctoral student in the dissertation. The dissertation is distinguished by its excellent vocabulary and stylistic competence. The dissertation is a pleasure to read, and the analytical and practical parts presented in it are of very high practical value, which is rare for a doctoral dissertation.
6. Identification and evaluation of scientific and applied scientific contributions in the dissertation:

In his abstract, the doctoral student, with the support of his scientific supervisor, has extremely well formulated and presented his contributions, with which we fully agree:

- An integrated methodology for assessing the socio-economic development of rural areas has been developed, which takes into account the links between



- CAP support and the dynamics of socio-economic processes at the territorial level.
- A comprehensive analysis of the demographic and labor characteristics of rural areas in Bulgaria has been carried out, with an emphasis on employment, changes in the labor force, and regional differences in the social development of the areas.
 - The structure and dynamics of agricultural income have been studied, tracing key dependencies between the structure of agricultural activity, public support, and income sustainability.
 - The impact of direct payments on the structure and functioning of agricultural holdings was analyzed, with a view to the distribution of support, the degree of concentration, and the impact on economic efficiency and equality.
 - A methodology for researching the attitudes of agricultural producers and administrative structures has been designed and tested, identifying differences in perceptions of competitiveness, access to information, and institutional support.
 - A scenario analysis has been prepared for the future development of the number and structure of agricultural holdings until 2030.
 - To these we would add the high practical significance and applicability of the dissertation, which makes it stand out among the works of contemporary doctoral students.
7. No plagiarism has been found in the dissertation. None has been found in the abstract either.
8. Critical comments and recommendations: I have no critical comments on the dissertation. My only recommendation is that the figures in the dissertation be reviewed once more and that where there is a legend and title in English, these be translated into Bulgarian (e.g., Figure 12, p. 31 in the abstract). Where possible, their presentation should be refined for better visualization and to achieve the desired effect.

9. Questions for the doctoral student:

In your opinion, how does the European Union's "green" policy affect agriculture in Bulgaria and the development of rural areas in the country, and is it reflected in direct payments to farmers in Bulgaria?

10. Conclusion: Taking into account the dissertation, the abstract, the publications related to the dissertation, and the doctoral student's extensive professional experience, I strongly recommend that the distinguished jury award the educational and scientific degree of Doctor to the doctoral student Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov.

Date: 04.08.2025

Signature:...

/Assoc. Prof. Gergana Slavova/

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OPINION

Вх. № Р220-1139/29.07.2025

by Prof. DSc Julia Georgieva Dobрева – University of Insurance and Finance, member of the academic jury, for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" under the announced procedure by the University of Economics – Varna

Based on Order No. RD 06-110/25.06.2025 of the Rector of the University of Economics – Varna, I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury for the procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, doctoral program "Agrarian Business". The topic of the dissertation is: "**The Impact of Direct Payments in Agriculture on the Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas**".

1. General Overview of the Dissertation

The dissertation is dedicated to a current and socially significant topic in the context of Bulgaria's economic development as a member of the EU and the influence of funding provided through European support programs for the development of the agricultural sector and the social development of rural areas. The research comprises 242 pages. It follows a suitable structure, including an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The thesis and both hypotheses are substantiated through the analysis. The bibliography includes 127 sources in Bulgarian and English, demonstrating thorough analysis and familiarity with the academic literature.

The **first chapter** is devoted to the theoretical and methodological aspects of support in the agricultural sector and the socio-economic development of rural areas. It examines the regulatory and conceptual framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its specific implementation in Bulgaria.

The **second chapter** focuses on the socio-economic development of rural areas, examining in detail the demographic structure of the labor force, the income dynamics in agriculture, and the role and effects of direct payments on the incomes of agricultural holdings.

The **third chapter**, entitled "**Assessment and Possible Scenarios for the Development of Rural Areas in the Context of CAP Changes and Direct Payments**", presents empirical research that includes a cluster analysis of Bulgarian municipalities and their socio-economic differences, as well as a scenario analysis for changes in the number of agricultural holdings by 2030.

2. Publications and Participation in Scientific Forums

The doctoral candidate's publications meet the national minimum requirements for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" and comply with the quantitative criteria under Art. 35, para. 1, items 1–4 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna. Of the publications submitted for evaluation, I accept four – two co-authored and two sole-authored. All are related to the dissertation topic and accurately reflect the conducted research and conclusions.



3. Assessment of the Structure and Content of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured in accordance with the requirements of Art. 34, para. 2 and para. 3 of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna. The abstract is 54 pages and accurately reflects the content of the dissertation as well as the scientific and applied contributions.

4. Identification and Evaluation of Scientific and Applied Contributions

I accept the objectives and tasks as fulfilled and positively assess the scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation, namely:

1. An integrated methodology for assessing the socio-economic development of rural areas has been developed, accounting for the relationships between CAP support and the dynamics of socio-economic processes at the territorial level.
2. A comprehensive analysis of the demographic and labor characteristics of rural areas in Bulgaria has been conducted, with an emphasis on employment, changes in the labor force, and regional disparities in social development.
3. The structure and dynamics of agricultural incomes have been examined, identifying key dependencies between the structure of agricultural activity, public support, and income sustainability.
4. The impact of direct payments on the structure and functioning of agricultural holdings has been analyzed, focusing on support distribution, concentration levels, and effects on economic efficiency and equity.
5. A methodology for studying the attitudes of agricultural producers and administrative bodies has been designed and tested, identifying differences in perceptions regarding competitiveness, access to information, and institutional support.
6. A scenario analysis of the future development of the number and structure of agricultural holdings up to 2030 has been conducted, indicating a limited transformational effect of direct payments if the current support model remains unchanged.

5. Verification of Plagiarism in the Dissertation and Abstract

No plagiarism has been detected in the dissertation or the abstract.

6. Critical Remarks and Recommendations

I have no critical remarks. I recommend that the doctoral candidate publish a book based on the dissertation, to reach a broader audience, as it contains significant conclusions with socio-economic relevance.



7. Questions for the Doctoral Candidate

During the defense, the candidate could address the following questions:

1. To what extent does the CAP reform 2023–2027 contribute to a fairer distribution of subsidies between small and large agricultural producers in EU member states? Are the goals set out in the reform actually being achieved? Please provide examples.
2. How does the CAP reform affect employment and the standard of living in rural areas of EU member states? Does it contribute to reducing income inequalities? Please provide examples.

8. Conclusion

The documents and materials submitted by Ivaylo Todorov comply with all legal requirements and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the University of Economics – Varna. A sufficient number of scientific publications related to the dissertation topic have been presented. Original scientific contributions are clearly evident in both the publications and the dissertation.

In addition to the above, it should be noted that the practical experience brought into this work contributes significantly to shaping Ivaylo Todorov as a leading expert in the agricultural sector and enhances his ability to examine not only theoretical but also practical issues. His long-standing professional experience adds value to his development as a scholar by providing a perspective beyond the purely academic approach to the issues studied.

Based on the above, I find it fully justified to give my positive assessment and to recommend that the academic jury award Ivaylo Dimitrov Todorov the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.8 Economics, doctoral program "Agrarian Business".

26.07.2025

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Prof. DSc Julia Dobreva